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DODGING NOSTALGIA: FILMING AND DEALING WITH FACTS IN INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE SITES

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Abstract

Documentary film is commonly seen and defined as a genre with social engagement ambitions. In fact, many directors and critics view it as a form of social history by giving central roles to individuals or communities that tend to be rendered invisible or voiceless by mainstream media. This perspective gains relevance when one considers films which deal with labour relations in manufacturing plants which, often, expose forms of psychological violence inflicted by those in power positions towards the underprivileged. Filmmakers such as Luc Decaster, Michael Moore as well as Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, to mention but a few, have all worked on film narratives that explore the process of deindustrialization in their countries of origin. While exposing the complexity and disturbing effects of the dismantling of an industrial order, the adopted stance is one that refuses to glorify the outgoing paradigm.

Inspired by the work of the aforementioned directors, the authors of this paper have seized the opportunity to work on a film about the extinction of a paper producing industrial node in Tomar (Portugal) and on the repercussions for the region. During the course of filming, however, they felt the need to produce a theoretical reflection on the negotiating process adopted to reach a balance between the perspectives of elements of former managerial and technical staff. With that in mind, this proposal aims at sharing their musings as well as the difficulties found during the research and shooting periods to distance themselves from an industrial sublime nostalgic narrative that effaces the complexity of class conflicts, along with the violence of manually assembled work, by focusing on the grandeur of the buildings and of the machinery. Special emphasis will be placed on the difficulties of dodging a nostalgic industrial sublime narrative. Firstly, because this narrative is still very much ingrained in a prevailing industrial heritage protection discursive trend and, secondly, because it was a narrative shared by white and blue collar-workers alike. Hence, the sanitizing and violent features of the dominant nostalgic discourse will be analyzed by resorting to a work still in progress.

INTRODUCTION

The documentary film *Watermark* is being developed within the context of an international project, entitled *PAPER TRAILS: Post-industrial histories, technical memories and art practices in Tomar*, that results from a research partnership between the R&D unit TECHN&ART, which is based at the Polytechnic Institute of Tomar (Portugal) and the Valais School of Art – EDHEA (Switzerland). This project aims at establishing a set of dialogues with similar European initiatives concerned with conceiving reconversion and reconfiguration solutions for obsolete industrial settings by analysing their potential for hosting cultural activities. Likewise, it envisions to reflect upon the role of art practices in reconversion ventures.

Projects such as this have been triggered by the deindustrialization process that has been afflicting the Western world since the 1960s. Variables attached to the construct of certainty, such as job security, employee rights and community identity have been called into question in these transitional times. Therefore, it is no wonder that the past keeps being revisited as a sight of comfort and safety. Nostalgia is, then, summoned as a way to fill the void, to ward off the anxiety of uncertainty and to hold on to an idealized recollection of things past. This is particularly true in small cities, such as Tomar, where the closing down of long-established industries has had a severe impact on the livelihood of the population and has pushed the city towards an urgent reinvention process.

Focused on Tomar's paper industry, once a notorious industrial node in Portugal, *Watermark* ties together footage from home videos, interviews, photographs and b-roll to tell a number of stories that mirror the effects of deindustrialization in the region. Having decided to adopt a cinematic stance akin to that of Luc Decaster as well as Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert that favours people over machinery, *Watermark* intends to give the lead role to those who have witnessed and endured the effects of deindustrialization in Tomar. However, with the filming process already under way, the film crew is realizing just how hard it is to curb the social actors' urge to narrate accounts of pleasant remembrances while neglecting to expose the grievances of blue-collar tasks. A propensity that is also manifested by sponsors and collaborators of the project alike, since the industrial heritage label that graces sights such as these is filled with nostalgic sublime undertones that somehow interfere with a more factual approach. In the pages that follow, the authors of this paper, which accumulate the roles of director (Luz) and producer (Sol), will describe the negotiation processes in which they are engaged in order to be true to the stories *Watermark* wants to tell while simultaneously avoid betraying the other actors' involved expectations.

SEARCHING FOR A VIEWPOINT

Given that the main focus of PAPER TRAILS project is Tomar's, now extinct, paper industry, it was clear from the beginning that this should also be the theme of the documentary. Despite the fact that the paper industry in Tomar goes back to the 18th century -- due to the existence of an abundance of raw materials at hand as well as water supplies in the shape of the river Nabão (Barbosa & Genin, 2019, p. 586) --, it started to crumble in the second half of the 20th century. A symptom of the gradual collapse of the industrialization paradigm initiated in the 1960s and felt more intensely in the Western world. The closing of the last plant of the compound, *Fábrica do Prado*, took place in 2017 and signalled the end of the paper industry in Tomar. However, its massive and unoccupied industrial structures which, in some cases, were quickly taken over by nature, bear witness to the industry's ghostly presence.

In recent times, several artists have taken an interest in the remnants of industrial heritage as they embody a sense of resilience while complying with an aesthetics of decay that glorifies the industrial past and is very much in vogue in the urban explorer movement (Strangleman, 2013, p. 24). Photographers such as Edward Burtynsky, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre as well as the duo Bernd and Hiller Becher have all developed

artistic projects based on industrial landscapes, with the vast majority adopting an ironic and critical stance towards their topic of interest.

At the same time, deindustrialization has also caught the eye of prestigious American publishing houses which have decided to capitalize on the public's nostalgic cravings for smokestack industrial America by publishing long-format "past and present"-type books. The fact that they "make extensive use of the high-quality corporate photography that documents the industrial heyday of the post-war period" (Strangleman, 2013, p. 26) makes for their bestseller status. While most readers tend to see these publications as a quick fix for dealing with the uncertainty of the present and, simultaneously, holding on to an extinct reality that needs to be memorialised for old time's sake, there are others that regard it with suspicion arguing that such books tend to present a sanitised and idealised version of the impact of industrial dynamics in people's lives (Arnold, 2015; Strangleman, 2013; Strangleman, Rhodes & Linkon, 2013). As observed by Strangleman, they do so by presenting an uncritical version of the past "where tensions of gender and race, if not always class, go unnoticed, one where the destructive impacts of industry on health and environment are obscured" (2013, p. 33). Moreover, in many cases, it is also possible to witness an erasure of the human element in the photographs, thus giving full prominence to machines and, as a result, to the crude capitalist system in which they emerged without ever revealing the length of its crudeness and traumatizing effects in war contexts (Strangleman, 2013, p. 25; Soyez, 2013). In addition, this nostalgia filled and "urban decay imagery" is also pernicious in the sense that its "emphasis of the decay of the city negates the many positive efforts and reformative measures that work towards sustaining and improving the experiences of those in residence" (Arnold, 2015, p. 328). In other words, due to its highly fetishized yet alluring aesthetics, this type of imagery becomes the prevalent discourse while alternative viewpoints tend to be disregarded as they disturb the industrial mystique.

While engaged in the research process, the decision to not follow a nostalgic framework in the film was not an easy one to make as the authors were aware that the vast majority of those which are cooperating in the making of the film are rooting for that kind of approach. Including former workers as they aspire at returning to a period of certainty in their lives through the film. As one of them mentioned during the interviews "this [the paper factory] provided for us and our families. It put food on our tables and paid for our children's education".

At the same time, it must be stated that this nostalgic attitude that finds expression in the industrial sublime is far reaching. It pervades local and national administration policies and even mainstream heritage preservation outlooks and practices which tend to regard industrial heritage as a political asset and/or as a fun fair opportunity. In a way, it seems to be a means to stop the course of ruination. Yet, this strategy presents deindustrialization through the lens of place. However, both the director and the producer have decided to take on an approach that incorporates those who worked in the now abandoned premises and that is revealing of their contribution and illustrative of the complexity of class and gender relations in an industrial plant [fig. 1]. In order to better understand the complexity of the labour relations that the authors seek to display they have had to populate an already depopulated industrial site. In other words, the social actors were invited to meet the film crew at the plant where part of the shootings took place.



Figure 1. Former worker being interviewed at what was once his working place, 2021.
© Hugo Malainho

METHODOLOGY

This film project resorts to *in loco* interviews so as to collect real-life experiences of those who were directly involved with the paper industry in Tomar. By adopting an oral history approach, the authors wish to promote the perspective of those who have witnessed facts first-hand, but that history tends to neglect. At the same time, by including first-person narrations they expect to trigger empathy and a better understanding of the magnitude of the gradual erosion of this industry in the region. As observed by Andrew Hatcher, narrative-sharing fosters emotional connection and makes the past tangible and relatable enough for the public to sympathize with the memories being told (2015, p. 287). As the film crew is made up of outsiders to the focus community, it has decided to work closely with a former community leader who has been working as mediator between the director and producer to make it easier for them to gain the trust of those that are being interviewed.

Concurrently, in-depth research on paper industry and on paper technology is also being done in order to have a better grasp of the subject but also to better convey it in the narrative. As such, besides spending time at the library and at special archives, the authors have been regularly consulting paper technicians and a paper historian under whose guidance they have been developing the more technical aspects of the storyline [Fig. 2].

A photographer is also documenting the whole of the film process as the photographs are also helpful in analysing details that may be included in the film. Besides the photographs being taken during the multiple shooting sessions, personal photographs present in family albums of the interviewees will also be included in the narrative. With this in mind, a call for locals to come forward with memorabilia, mementos, home-

videos, personal histories and anecdotes from the heyday of the industry in Tomar was posted using social media and the Town Hall's newsletter.

Being a project that deliberately started without a predetermined script, it largely depends on the stories that are going to be narrated by the social actors. The collection of raw data – video, audio, and photographic material – entails its recurrent analysis through the viewing and annotation of segments which, as a whole, are going to shape the film's narrative structure.

As far as interviews go, a decision was made to trust the immediacy of the first take as it better conveys the first-time-on-camera impact. Meaning, the social actors' reaction to a new-found agency as historical sources is more spontaneous. Moreover, their propensity towards digression and contradiction is finer captured, thus allowing for the emergence of a film structure laden with facts and subjectivities alike. This filming method will make for a truer characterisation of the deindustrialization story being told while also contributing for a quicker rapport between the public and the social actors during the close-viewing experience.



Figure 2. Paper-making session with paper historian Maria José Santos, 2021.

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DISCUSSION

The idea of doing a documentary on the decline of the paper industry in Tomar emerged out of the need to fill a gap as far as film narratives on the topic are concerned. Mention must be made to two previous cinematic ventures on the topic of the paper industry undertaken by two Portuguese directors Faria de Almeida (*Como se faz o papel*, 1968 [trans. *How paper is made*]) and António Ruano (*Árvore – Papel*, 1970

[trans.*Tree – Paper*]). These, however, fall into the genre of industrial documentaries given their overall instructional mission, easily discernible in the titles given (Martins, 2011, p. 351-2).

The recent closure of the last plant still standing along with the existence of a large number of living witnesses were decisive cues to set the documentary into motion. The work of filmmakers like Luc Decaster (*Rêve d'usine*, 2003), Michael Moore (*Roger & Me*, 1989), Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert (*American Factory*, 2019) on deindustrialization narratives served as reference. However, the realities portrayed are quite different from the one that *Watermark* is to disclose. For instance, contrary to *Rêve d'usine*, the public does not get to witness the closing process. Instead, the industry depicted in *Watermark* has already been pronounced dead and the story will be told in *media res* by those who have observed the end of its life cycle. None of the plants is working and there are no plans for them to ever going back to work as paper factories again. They are empty industrial spaces whose only hope is reconversion. In other words, and using other European cases as example, the adoption of a set of post-industrial practices seems to be a good way to surpass obsolescence and avoid ruination.

Moreover, their mark in the region is undeletable as they position themselves solemnly along the river Nabão, given that water is an essential resource for paper production. While reflecting upon the relation of paper and water the authors began to realize that this industrial compound is itself a symbolic watermark, in the sense that it stubbornly defies invisibility and stands as an industrial fingerprint to the region.

Having summoned several workers to the premisses where some worked their whole lives, the film crew was able to witness their reaction to the place. In bodily terms this return to home testified to the experience of a double discomfort. On the one hand they were undergoing a trip to a place and time of harshness. Yet, on the other hand, this same trip also took them back to a time of certainty and of industrial grandeur of which they can claim a piece. This was plainly perceived in the mementos they have chosen to share with the film crew. Paper samples and fountain pens are just a few examples of the objects that surrounded them daily and that are now material evidence of the work they once produced (Strangleman, 2013, p. 32) [fig. 3].



*Figure 3. Former worker sharing paper samples with the film crew, 2021.
© Hugo Malainho*

As the shooting of the former-workers' testimonies progressed, it was possible to sense the emergence of two discursive lines: 1) one on camera very much based on the good memories of the good-old labouring days at the plant; and 2) another one off-camera, most likely out of decorum, where labour accidents, difficulties as well as funny episodes were mentioned. This led the authors to recognise that their control over the narrative was limited not only due to ethical reasons as they cannot manipulate the content of the interviews, but also because they could not force the social actors into disclosing information that they were not comfortable unveiling before a camera. Therefore, they established that the best course of action would be to respect what every single actor presented his or her memories and try to find a common denominator when revisiting the totality of the interviews. While this is still a work in progress, it is already possible to infer that the nostalgic discourse prevails. Overall, the past is a good place for both managerial and working staff because it is a memento itself of "an industrial culture built on, and out of, the illusion of permanence" (Strangleman, Rhodes & Linkon, 2014, p. 10).

CONCLUSION

Faced with the dismantling of a way of life they had taken for granted, social actors tend to put aside the hardships resulting from the strictness of class relations and hierarchy in favour of the illusion of stability. With this in mind, and wanting to pursue a narrative line that dodges nostalgia and challenges the dominant tropes of industrial pasts in the West, the authors will probably have to intertwine the social actors' testimonies with context regarding the problem of relying too much on memory as it tends to be selective. Nonetheless, and not wishing to betray the documentary's goal of contributing to working-class history

heritage and history in Tomar, blue and white-collar workers will be given the same amount of relevance in a story that does not have a happy ending and where certainty is championed over reality.

Moreover, and as a way of further exploring documentary film's capacity for social engagement, a Janus-faced approach will be adopted as far as Tomar's industrial past is concerned. Hence, while allowing screen time to the past, the future will also be given some consideration for its reformatory potential. Rather than focussing on loss, *Watermark* aspires at pointing towards regeneration, for cities and communities are dynamic and as such they tend to adapt and create their own resolves. In other words, they move on!

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