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The dialectical relationship between the authorial and the collaborative in contemporary documentary: Perspectives from three case studies

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the intersections between authorial and collaborative work in the scope of ethnographic documentary departing from three case studies: two research projects and one citizen collective of participatory media. All case studies were developed in Porto, Portugal, between 2013 and 2020, focusing on the city's invisibilities and everyday experiences, searching for alternative narratives to the mainstream media when portraying its people and places. This article aims

KEYWORDS

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cultural and artistic studies

to reflect on how authorial documentary work, followed by self-criticism and self-reflection, can be incorporated into participatory media frameworks in productive ways. The challenges faced by the three cases are intrinsically related and have influenced each other throughout this period, addressing issues related to the representational crisis; the legitimization of subjectivity and the exploration of different styles within documentary; as well as the relationships between the filmmaker, the camera, the subject/character portrayed and the audience. These themes are explored through a series of first-person field reports and the study of authors and directors in the field of documentary filmmaking.

1. All translation of the original titles from Portuguese to English are by Ana Clara Roberti: *Fixed in the Transitory* and *Island City*.

INTRODUCTION

Cities have never been only about buildings and media have never been only about symbolic transaction.

(Krajina and Stevenson 2020: 9)

The central axis of this article is the potential dialogues between authorial ethnographic documentary and participatory video in constructing narratives to portray the invisibilities of a city in transformation in the social, political, tourist and architectural spheres. It is based on the experience account and reflection on the role of the participatory media collective *Citadocs: Documentaries about, for and by Citizens* (Citadocs 2015) in the context of two scientific projects: *Fixos no Transitório* (Roberti 2015b) and *Cidade Ilha*¹ (Roberti 2020), both developed within the scope of cultural and artistic studies. Besides the thematic convergence and approach that will be presented later in this article, the three projects have in common the participation of the same researcher and an interest in contributing to the creation of alternative narratives to mainstream media and political agendas (Atton 2015) in the city of Porto, Portugal. All projects share, in their particular way, values that are academically close to a family of concepts that include alternative media, participatory media and citizens' media (Couldry 2015; Rodríguez 2008).

Cidade Ilha is the extension and further development of *Fixos no Transitório*. They are both academic projects and use authorial ethnographic documentary not only as a tool but also as a way of thinking, approaching and relating to their subject of study (MacDougall 2022a). Thus, both projects approached rooted, historically stigmatized and socio-economically vulnerable populations in Porto and produced audio works aired on a community radio station, photo series and exhibitions, and films.

In these two cases, despite exploring the collaborative aspects of video and photography with the communities addressed, the researcher produced and worked on this content in an independent and authorial way, reducing the team and the sound- and image-capturing material as much as possible. This is a working style and a strategy to approach the subject in this case – rooted communities in private environments, going through delicate situations, as will be described further on. That is, it was intended to minimize the discomfort of the participants – some of them had never been interviewed before – and to create a familiar and relaxed environment in which people felt safe to talk about different topics and their own life stories, in addition to being able to provide wider availability for scheduling for filming and audio capturing according to the agendas of the participants.

Within Rodríguez's (2008) classification, these projects can be framed as 'alternative media' as they emphasize the media's potential to work with

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and change the social world in which they are embedded and seek to move away from the need to produce a profit from the content or to follow specific aesthetic and formal standards predefined by the market or general political agendas. The Citadocs collective, on the other hand, fits better within the scope of 'participatory media' and 'citizen's media' (Rodríguez 2008) as it is open to all community members who want to participate and create or present their own media narratives about their city, resulting in symbolic processes and aesthetically free and adapted formats. It was coordinated not only by the same researcher of the other two academic projects but by a group of three other people. The period of most activity of the collective spans the end of *Fixos no Transitório* (2013–15) and the beginning of *Cidade Ilha* (2015–20) and had much influence on both projects, contributing precisely to the maturation of the former and its continuity and new approaches through the latter, as will be presented below.

It is no coincidence that Citadocs is described as a 'collective that uses audio-visual narratives to document communities historically rooted in the city of Porto' (Futureplaces n.d.: n.pag.). This collectiveness of the group, contrasting with the methods of the other two projects, was fundamental in the critical thinking of the ongoing research at the time, providing contact with distinct people, ideas, opinions and ways of creating. In the same way, the practical work carried out in the Citadocs workshops also suffered the influence of the unfolding of both research projects in a transdisciplinary and essentially dialectical process (Pink et al. 2022; Uygun 2020). As pointed out by Hall about the communication of a work, 'a statement in the course of elaboration can only be imperfectly formulated in writing, remaining partly and often essentially hidden in the mind of its author' (1986: 9), but the author often does not realize this, because involuntarily and automatically they completed the meaning of the text as they read it. This article aims to explore these dialogues and reflect on how authorial documentary work, followed by self-criticism and self-reflection, can be incorporated into participatory media frameworks in productive ways.

The fieldwork was the core of these three case studies. It was characterized by its immersive and collaborative nature, carried out carefully and patiently and combined with image and sound production. From this ethnographic work, field diaries were also developed to follow the influence of Citadocs as a platform for collective and citizen media creation in the referenced scientific projects. These texts describe situations and reflections on the different experiences of this work. They are composed with the same degree of importance and relevance by objective descriptions and subjective interpretations without compromising scientific rigour and ethics with the people involved as the subject of study. As emphasized by Luís Fernandes, 'these type of notes enables to record the researcher's learning experiences' (2002: 34). Thus, by presenting and articulating part of these field diaries, this article discusses this complementary dialectical relationship between the participatory media collective Citadocs and the research projects. This article will be divided into three main sections. In the first section, the three cases will be detailed and the roles of the participants and authors in each of them will be identified. Then, the potential relationship between the participatory media collective and academic projects will be described and explored. We will conclude by reflecting on experiencing media in an authorial and collaborative way.

2. Original title: '*Fixos no Transitório: A decifração da permeabilidade entre o público e o privado nas escadarias do centro do Porto por meio de um estudo imagético e sonoro*'.

CASE STUDIES

Participants, authors, participant-authors

Given the different roles of the people involved in the three case studies, explaining these relationships more clearly is important before moving on to a more detailed description of the cases.

The first author, Ana Clara Roberti, was the researcher responsible for the two academic projects mentioned here: *Fixos no transitório*, a master's project, and *Cidade Ilha*, a doctoral project. She is also a member of the Citadocs collective. After joining the collective in 2014 as a workshop participant, she became one of the group's coordinators (2015). The same researcher being involved in such different documentary models is a fundamental element in our reflection. The second and third authors, Helena Santos and Daniel Brandão, were supervisors of the *Cidade Ilha* project, closely following and actively contributing to its development and evolution. Brandão was also involved in the master's project and is one of the coordinators and founders of Citadocs.

The four Citadocs workshops highlighted in this article were public and open to anyone interested. Many of the participants were young bachelor's or master's students from different areas. Still, there were also people of other ages and participants with no experience in video narratives. Although the majority lived in Porto, people from other countries and cities who were seeking to get to know Porto closely and from different perspectives were also included. The topics covered in each workshop varied according to the ongoing experience throughout the project. Nevertheless, we can say that the main theme was the changing urban context of the city of Porto and its invisible everyday experiences. One of the objectives maintained in all the workshops was to end the activity with a co-created narrative in video format, ready to be shared with other audiences.

The research projects *Fixos no Transitório* and *Cidade Ilha* were also based on immersive ethnographic work, which closely followed the residents of the case studies and the situations they were going through. In both cases, however, this work was led by one researcher/director. In some cases, the residents produced image and sound content that would later be incorporated into the project's documentary pieces (especially children). Still, the researcher was ultimately responsible for the final productions. In both cases, the participants belonged to specific groups, namely residents of historically stigmatized and socio-economically vulnerable areas and neighbourhoods of the city, which were undergoing a major transformation process, largely driven by gentrification.

The three case studies, their participants, contexts and purposes will be presented and characterized in more detail below.

Fixos no Transitório: The staircases

The project 'Fixed in the Transitory: Deciphering the Permeability between Public and Private in the Staircases of Downtown Porto through an Imagery and Sound Study'² (2015, translation added) addressed the Codeçal and Verdades staircases, in the parish of Sé, in the historic centre. Located precisely under the D. Luís I bridge, the most admired and popular bridge in the city, the first thing that drew my attention to the place was the significant change of environment concerning what surrounded it – streets full of cars and public transport, commerce and tourists. It was like entering a large backyard created

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in the historic centre of a city, increasingly crowded and effervescent. The way the residents inhabited that space, specifically the steps – the area beyond the door of their houses – differed abruptly from everything else around it.

The scene found on these staircases looked like a microcosm, possibly also motivated by its own spatial morphology, as it has been found during the research. The steps prevent cars, motorbikes or other types of motorized vehicles from passing there (Figure 1). This contributes to children playing safely in the space, even without parental supervision. There are many stairs, which means that only some passers-by use them as a passage from a practical point of view; except for the residents, those who pass there are tourists or curious onlookers. Although the stairs are uncomfortable to climb up and down, they seem inviting to sit on, and so suddenly some residents gather there to chat.

Our work began with an interest in a characteristic way of life, resulting in a fine line between public and private spaces (Roberti and Brandão 2016). From the beginning of the study, walking these stairs showed that the presence of someone who was not a resident or a tourist caused strangeness and mistrust. The tactics used to immerse ourselves in this place and get to know its inhabitants were, therefore, cautious, patient and constantly reassessed and redesigned.

Aiming to make an image and sound portrait of this way of life, rooted and located in the peculiarity of isolation in the middle of the urban fabric, the work turned out to be a witness of a population at risk of disappearing due to the typical chain of events and consequences of gentrification processes (Fernandes et al. 2018). In this case, the process was aggravated



Figure 1: *Codeçal and Verdade Stairs, 2014. Digital photograph. Portugal. © Ana Clara Roberti.*

(with irremediable results) by the gradual intensification of the development of urbanization systems, such as the metro (since 2005), which started to circulate on the bridge and, therefore, literally above the houses; and of the external interest that turned, during the very period of development of the research, to the city centre as a place for housing or tourist investment, for a long time avoided by those who had a choice (Fernandes et al. 2018). The isolation of the staircases from the rhythm of the city that surrounded it gradually ceased to exist, and the consequences deeply disturbed its inhabitants.

The interaction and growing intimacy with the residents allowed the research to include some details and peculiarities that characterized that daily life, but also the moments of tension such as the visits of foreigners, and potential buyers, to their homes. The dilemma of not bearing the dust, the noise and the torrents of water caused by the metro structure and, simultaneously, dreading the day when one would go to a new house, quieter but possibly further away from the stairs. The researchers were confronted with the surprisingly light-hearted reports of bodies falling into backyards and balconies after throwing themselves off the bridge; the residents' feelings about the progressive emptying of the houses and their demolition; the removal of the children's handwriting from the walls (Figure 2) that had been painted white; the growing discomfort in the face of tourists who were increasing in number and visiting the place more frequently.

The accelerating pace of change significantly increased the relevance of the image and sound study that was being carried out. The recordings were

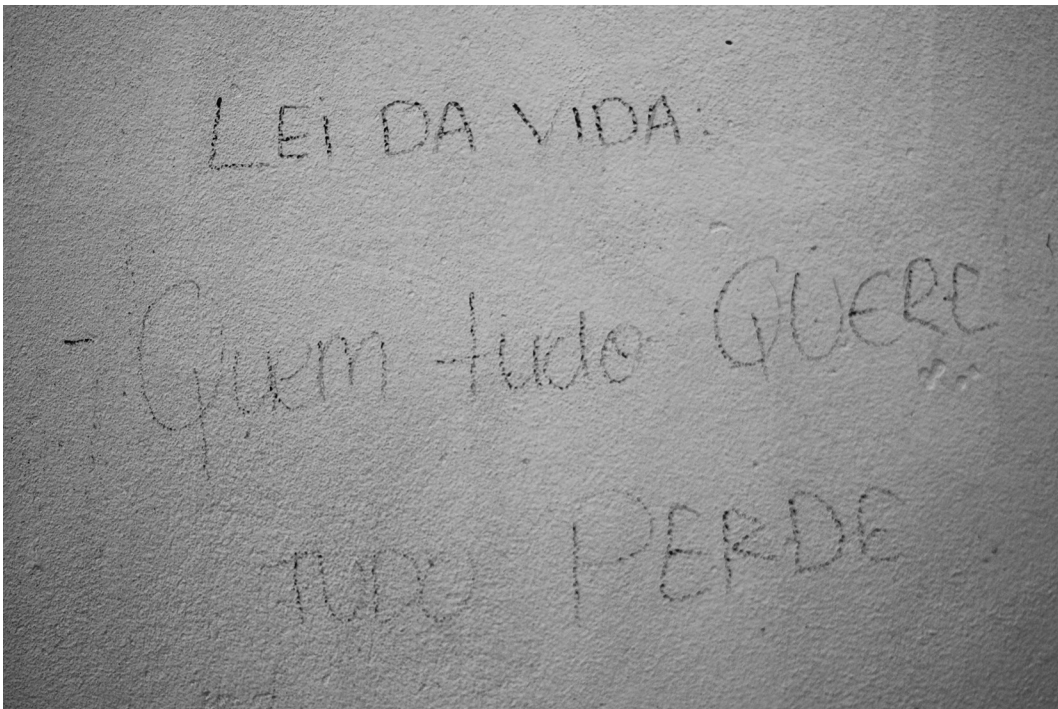


Figure 2: Walls of the Escadas das Verdades, 'The rule of life: those who "want" everything will lose everything' (translation added), 2014. Digital photograph. Portugal. © Ana Clara Roberti.

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increasingly unique since the scene portrayed was rapidly being transformed, either by the absence of the old residents or by the new architectural configuration of the space. Visually documenting these changes from the perspective of those who are most affected by them is also a way of creating memory in urban contexts, as is captured by the words: 'The city is a framework for memories that are often collective, involving public life, social interaction, and group identities' (Bakshi 2020: 353).

The new dynamics that made up the city's socio-economic scenario penetrated the isolation of the staircases and beyond. Accompanying the intensity of the changes that altered the daily life of this population through ethnographic documentary³ motivated the search for other scenarios in similar contexts in the city. With this goal, I found a participatory citizenship workshop, *Rescuing Oral Memory* (2014), that would later give rise to the Citadocs collective – aiming to address the *ilhas* of Porto.

The *ilhas* are residential configurations that emerged in the nineteenth century to meet a migratory flow of a strong industrial period in the city of Porto. They housed the workers of the factories, often located in the backyard of a larger house, which contributed to an entirely unique spatial morphology (usually a corridor with small houses side by side). Currently, there are 957 (Breda-Vázquez and Conceição 2015), some in the process of desertification, others in poor conditions of sanitation and structure, and there are still those that are inhabited by old residents and have a strong community sense among them (Figure 3). Apart from these, some *ilhas* are being rehabilitated for tourism purposes or higher-value housing.

3. Documentary available at <https://vimeo.com/242312536/737133c6e2?share=copy>. Accessed 13 May 2024.



Figure 3: Ilha of Rua de São Vítor, 2015. Digital photograph. Portugal. © Ana Clara Roberti.

4. Original title: '*Cidade Ilha: O documentário etnográfico autoral como alternativa à exotização, a partir da cidade do Porto*'.

As will be detailed later on, the workshop consisted of a visit to an *Ilha* undergoing rehabilitation, interviews with its residents and the creation of mini-documentaries about the experience. Participating in this activity and the consequent knowledge of the reality of the *ilhas* of Porto allowed for evidence of a more comprehensive universe, quite close to the context experienced by the staircases. It was the information and the impetus needed to give continuity and complexity to the work of *Fixos no Transitório* through the *Cidade Ilha* Ph.D. project.

Cidade Ilha

Through ethnographic documentary, the valorization of daily life is a premise of the research 'Island City: The Authorial Ethnographic Documentary as an Alternative to Exoticisation, in the City of Porto' (2020, translation added).⁴ Following on from previous research – *Fixos no Transitório* – the interest is to look at historically stigmatized populations that are somehow isolated and are becoming islands by the very city they inhabit. In Porto, several 'social neighbourhoods' and *ilhas* are being requalified and repopulated, as well as the one described in the case of the stairs, driven by external agents, in a complex process of change for its traditional residents, with little or no control over it.

This study has accompanied some of these transformation processes through the prism of the residents, following a view that emphasizes the little things in life: the small details present in these rooted ways of life that make up the big pictures of meaning in the face of the changes underway (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Inside One of the Homes in Bairro Rainha Dona Leonor, 2018. Digital photograph. Portugal.
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The (filmmaking) camera is, as in *Fixos no Transitório* and as encouraged in some of the Citadocs workshops, not only a means or tool for capturing images but an intrinsic element to the way of problematizing and approaching the subject of study (Colusso 2017). Through the camera, a dialogic and immersive approach emerges in various urban spaces, contributing to identifying and understanding the meanings built by its residents over time. This principle is, therefore, a strategy to avoid approaching the *other* as an object of consumption (often exoticized) and, in this sense, to move away from (yet another) contribution to their stigmatization (Roberti et al. 2023).

The work of the Citadocs collective contributed not only to problematization and critical thinking in the face of these issues but also to the very transition of the project *Fixos no Transitório* to *Cidade Ilha*, as will be described in the ethnographic reports that follow.

Citadocs: Documentaries about, for and by citizens

Launched in 2014, within the Future Places Media Lab,⁵ Citadocs was formally constituted in 2015 as a collective aiming at developing oral and visual narratives through 'documentary about, for and by citizens' (Citadocs 2015). The basic methodology is to hold short workshops, open to all citizens, that result in jointly created audio and video documentary works. Citadocs has effectively become a collective platform for discussing and experimenting new research paths.

The listing of Citadocs's objectives helps to clarify this relationship: to identify and explore new ways of documenting through collectivity by encouraging the use of accessible mobile devices; to challenge citizens to essay new ways of looking at the city through audio and visual recording; to document the city, its transformations and invisibilities; and to produce documentary creations as a result of the work developed.

The initiatives carried out between 2014 and 2017, within the scope of *Future Places*, are of special interest to *Fixos no Transitório* and, especially, to *Cidade Ilha*. These provoked and tested questions related to the development of the projects and the gradual improvement of self-criticism, emphasizing and legitimizing issues related to the exoticization of socio-economically fragile (and stigmatized) populations through documentary. Three workshops will be detailed: *Rescuing Oral Memory* (two editions: Roberti et al. 2014 and 2015), *An Uncertain Film* (2016) and *Doc under the Block* (2017).

ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORTS AND REFLECTIONS

The first Ilha

The first workshop of what would later become Citadocs was held in 2014, then named Doc4citizens, coordinated by Daniel Brandão (Brandão 2011) and Vanessa Rodrigues. After participating in this initiative, I joined and we formed the collective Citadocs. In its first edition, *Rescuing Oral Memory*, the participants were asked to make documentary records about the Ilha Bela Vista and its residents. Bela Vista is property of the Porto city hall and was about to undergo an intense rehabilitation process.

I was working on the project *Fixos no Transitório*, and I noticed, upon entering Bela Vista, evidence that brought it closer to the space I was studying at the time – the stairs were protected from the traffic and bustle that surrounded them because of their many steps; the *Ilha* was protected by the

5. Curated by Heitor Alvelos, 'FUTUREPLACES has been addressing the dynamics between new media and the sociocultural fabric since 2008. A multitude of workshops, projects, talks, creative events and think-tanks has woven itself onto a wide network of local and international resonance' (Futureplaces 2008: n.pag).

entrance gate and the corridors. Moreover, when talking to the residents of Bela Vista, I realized that they had lived there for generations. It was possible to notice, in both spaces, a distinct and rooted way of life, created and customized by the inhabitants of these places from their own dynamics, highlighting a kind of social authority by them towards the space they inhabited (Lefebvre 2000; Schmid 2022).

The similarities – and particularities – such as the case of the staircases identified during the workshop made the interest in this type of housing instantaneous. The microcosm created in the corridors of Bela Vista set precedents for the project to follow. Still raw, the notion of the Island City concept was beginning to be reinforced. Isolation, rooted living and transformations from external interventions established affinities with the stairs and pointed to a larger context beyond Bela Vista's corridors.

The portrait and the narratives gathered during the workshop could not be done at any other time. The *Ilha* was going to change radically in a short time, either by architecture or by residents. Of the 43 houses in Bela Vista, only 12 were inhabited. The idea was to improve the housing conditions and build 35 new ones, which would contemplate the old and the new residents (2015). Therefore, Bela Vista was being transformed into a completely different microcosm compared to the one we had found: new infrastructures, new people and new social interactivity.

As a result of the workshop, six works were produced by the participants. The documentary I most actively participated in was *Manuel e Júlia* (Roberti et al. 2014), about a couple who used to live in the *Ilha*. The production of this material exposed and reinforced something that was beginning, still without much awareness, to be explored in *Fixos no Transitório*: the recording of rooted populations in transformation. In the case of Bela Vista, this was an evident purpose: the *Ilha*, as it had been lived by the residents, through a long process of appropriation, was about to undergo changes and become completely different from what we saw in the pre-works moment (Figure 5).

Most residents living on the *Ilha* were elderly. Their children no longer lived there, which leads us to believe that, in a few years, the families of the former residents would no longer inhabit Bela Vista. A consequence of this fact is the extinction of the sources of knowledge we had at the time. The stories and the experiences cultivated by these families, and the relationships between neighbours, cease to exist to give way to new social dynamics that would arrive with future residents. This sense of urgency and imminent change, which was also evident in *Fixos no Transitório* with all due differences and particularities, motivated the emergence of the *Cidade Ilha* project.

A street of ilhas

The second edition of the *Rescuing Oral Memory* media lab (2015), which followed that of *Ilha da Bela Vista*, addressed not one but a cluster of *ilhas*. The research *Fixos no Transitório* had already been concluded at this time, and *Cidade Ilha* had recently started.

São Vítor Street, in the parish of Bonfim, was the space chosen for the collective's work because of the concentration of *ilhas* along the street. It would be possible to leave the participants of the media lab free to find the *ilhas* and the stories they would like to document. This was a different model from the one applied in Bela Vista, where the groups did not select the residents to be interviewed. This time we had a more diverse range of participants



Figure 5: Ilha da Bela Vista before the Construction Work, 2014. Digital photograph. Portugal.
© Ana Clara Roberti.

regarding age, previous knowledge in the audio-visual field, nationalities and interests. Most of the participants had learnt about the workshop and the collective through the Future Places Festival programme.

A set of technical and procedural recommendations was developed and distributed to the participants to facilitate field work. This input came from the experience of the previous workshop, seeking to overcome possible doubts that could arise throughout the work in the absence of tutors, and also to address those who had no practice in the audio-visual field.

Weeks before the workshop, the tutors carried out exploratory fieldwork. We visited some *ilhas* to gauge the locals' availability regarding our project, as well as to get to know the space and local history. Throughout informal conversations, we searched for possible themes to be approached by the participants, to get familiar with that universe, and mainly to try to obtain acceptance for the project from the residents. This preparation seemed consensual and made us comfortable to proceed with the workshop.

However, just after starting the workshop, we realized that most participants were completely unaware of the idea of the *ilha* as a dwelling. A historical contextualization was provided in situ so that the participants might decide by their own where and how to portray their oral memories. They spent two days collecting and editing the material under the supervision of the coordinators. As a result, eight works were produced: seven videos and one audio piece.⁶

At the same time, *Cidade Ilha* research sought to define its subject of study, still unsure about what and how it should be portrayed, but maintaining the

6. Two examples of the work produced by the workshop participants on the *ilhas* and their dwellers, both of which demonstrate the variety of approaches and styles of the participants (CitaDocs Documentários sobre, para, por cidadãos 2015a and 2015b).

intention to approach the universe of *ilhas* of Porto. The realization of the workshop fitted as fieldwork: entering different *ilhas*, talking to the residents, creating a narrative as a practical output about the experience and observing the reactions and the interests of the participants of the media lab. The latter point revealed how participants with different backgrounds, repertoires and ages responded to the information and the encounter with these spaces and their residents. The workshop functioned as a gauge of the impact that the islands had on a heterogeneous group, where most people were born or lived in Porto, but had never been aware of the *ilhas*'s reality. Listening to the discourses and issues that arose from this contact and how the participants documented this *other* contributed to a better understanding of the theme and the elaboration of future strategies to be employed in the fieldwork of *Cidade Ilha*.

After the workshop, a reflexive and self-critical crisis began to integrate the research. What kind of work would I be doing? If I were to work with the assumedly authorial documentary, what kind of portrait would I make about these places and people? Could the research itself fall into the trap of exoticizing them? Would there be the pretence of explaining to the *intellectualized* and *cultured* world what and *who* they are? Would entering, without being asked, these private places also be *invading them*?

The slogan created for Citadocs was, as mentioned, 'documentaries about, for, and by citizens'. We, as tutors, realized that, until then, we were only covering the 'about', which is, of course, an essential part of the purpose, but does not constitute the whole. We noticed a tendency to work with this one-third. The 'for' and the 'by' had no place in the collective's initiatives. And would they have a place in the research I was doing?

These are uncomfortable yet beneficial and common questions in the construction of collaborative projects and research in the arts, design and anthropology scope. Jay Ruby (2008; Friedman 2020) is one of the authors who discusses these questions that permeated both the Citadocs workshops and the research strategies underway at the time, mainly by reflecting on questions of voice, authority and authorship as a genuine concern among documentary filmmakers: 'Who can represent someone else, with what intention, in what "language", and in what environment is a conundrum that characterises the postmodern era' (Ruby 2008: 50).

Documentary is a field with porous characteristics and boundaries, which oscillate and adapt according to the context, the director's intentions and his/her relationship with the subject addressed, thus assuming *distinct voices* (Nichols 2010: 135; Önen 2021). Therefore, the question about the subject's active participation in the construction of the ethnographic film, and in the documentary in general, cannot follow a generalized or not very malleable set of actions; quite the contrary – it must adapt to the needs of each case addressed. Citadocs assumed, since its creation, a position suitable for discussion and re-adaptation according to the realities intended to be portrayed and the relationship with the participants of the media labs. The research projects cited in this article benefit from this dialectical dynamic and follow the same line of action.

In this context, it is important to clarify the use of the term citizens. We have always referred to the media lab participants as such. However, we understood that our group of 'citizens' was usually people with similar access to (high) education, housing and work and similar financial conditions. We had been working on the theme of the *ilhas*, but never with their residents

actively participating in the production of the videos. Moreover, they were portrayed but had never seen the results produced, as these were only shared with the workshop participants themselves and in conferences and seminars on various subjects (design, visual arts).

This network of questions and critiques permeated the collective environment and, increasingly more intensely, my own research. The fieldwork could not advance while these doubts remained suspended. It was necessary to rethink these questions and discuss them. The idea of *ilha* as a concept, and not only as a designation for the phenomenon of the *ilhas* of Porto, and the role of research concerning these spaces were still being constructed and polished. It was necessary to understand the complexity of the object of study as a real and live subject. The residents of the *ilhas* actively engaged in the research by giving interviews, allowing the participants in the Citadocs to enter their *ilhas* and their homes and telling them part of their life stories.

Return and validation strategies

Some months after the workshop in São Vítor Street, Citadocs, in partnership with the Sporting Clube de São Vítor, organized an evening to show the material produced to the residents. Returning the results to where the work took place was one of Citadocs's objectives from the beginning that had until then not been achieved. The intention was to begin to experience the 'for citizens' project's dimension and to value and highlight the experience of the participants and community members involved in the activity, in line with the concept of citizen's media.

The event was carefully planned, and the choice of the venue was crucial. The exhibition could not be held outside São Vítor Street. It was not about inviting the residents to a place far from their homes, but about bringing the results to them. The football club's headquarters was a safe choice, as the residents were used to frequenting the place. They felt at ease there; it was their place, not ours.

Posters and leaflets (Figure 6) were distributed house to house. On the day of the exhibition, we went to remind people who had participated in the films about the event, which was part of the karaoke night programmed by the club. It was a strategy that drew an audience for both activities.

The screening and karaoke room was full, comprising residents who were part of the films as well as their family members and friends, and workshop participants who had never been to the club. The space was full of interest and curiosity: the material shown seemed to spark interest, if only for the audience's laughter or the post-screening conversations between the participants who made the films and the residents. Everyone stayed for the evening of karaoke and dancing.

During the screening, residents and their family and friends who saw or recognized someone in the projection reacted immediately, greeting each other, saying, 'Look, my mother!', pointing 'It's us over there' in an environment that was much more interactive than just one of audience. The conversations went on, and we could observe, on the one hand, moments of amusement and emotion at seeing themselves portrayed and the filmmakers' relief and satisfaction at realizing that their portrait had been well received by those who had opened the doors of their homes to them. The films showed very different stories: an ordinary, humorous conversation with older people in the neighbourhood, which got a good laugh from their children and grandchildren;



20 FEV
Sábado, 21h

Sede do Sporting Clube de S. Vitor

**Projeção de 8 mini-documentários
sobre moradores das ilhas de São Vitor.**

Realizados no âmbito do workshop de áudio e vídeo documental,
"Rescuing Oral Memories: Citadocs @ São Vitor",
um Citizen Lab do Futureplaces 2015.

A média de duração de cada vídeo é de 4 minutos.

Rua de São Vitor, 120-122, Porto.
e-mail: citadocs@gmail.com
<https://citadocsblog.wordpress.com>
<http://futureplaces.org/labs/rescuing-oral-memory-2/>



Figure 6: Leaflet of the Citadocs Screening at São Vitor, 2016. Portugal.
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the love story of a couple who met on the *ilhas* and have been together for decades, which left people emotional at the screening; stories of curious and comical incidents from other times that were recognized by the audience of residents, among others.

This process is part of the encounter with the *other* (MacDougall 2022b), as well as a way of recognizing the meaning and value the work has for those who have allowed it to happen (Castañeda 2006). Organizing and witnessing the event drove another type of motivation for the project *Cidade Ilha*, which was driven by questions about ethics concerning the subject of study, in the

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fear of exoticizing, of consuming populations undergoing intense and time-sensitive transformations.

The screening, of course, did not resolve all the impasses, but it reminded us of an important and indispensable objective since the emergence of *Fixos no Transítório*: celebration. It does not mean ignoring and covering up the problems of the places addressed, which is an important part of why they were chosen. Nor does it contribute to the romanticism and fantasy of the typical person who lives well and happily playing their role as a piece of an open museum in a historic city. However, delving into and analysing the dangers of consumption and the exoticization of the *other* dragged the research into dark purposelessness in a more solitary process. On the other hand, celebrating together and valuing the stories and people of these places, sometimes on the margins, sometimes in dangerous prominence, is a fundamental aim of the kind of documentary intended to be made. As highlighted by Anita Bakshi:

Important means for expressing citizenship can be found in practices that document neighborhood histories and projects of community remembrance. While projects of remembrance will likely be less vocal than protests or political action campaigns, they nonetheless play an important role in claiming the right to the city and can be especially powerful means for counter-posing vernacular conceptions of the past and present of the city with dominant state-authored.

(2020: 355)

Thus, it is not enough to take the material produced and interpret it in the academic and artistic environment, respecting its own (original) integrity. It is also necessary to return the results to those who provide them (Castañeda 2006). The feedback, the appreciation, and the commitment to the return of the results and their possible approval have an irreplaceable place in the projects presented here. The first viewers of the film of the Sé stairs, *Caiu um Homem Ali no Quintal* (Roberti 2015a), were the residents themselves, in a private screening at the site itself. Only after that did the film screen in film festivals and other kinds of dissemination.

In this sense, the ethical triad of the documentary proposed by Michael Renov (Bonotto and Sotomaior 2008; Terry 2020) is consistent with the argument presented: the documentary maker, the subject to be filmed and the audience. In the case in question, this last element turns to the initial relationship between the first two.

[E]thics is always about the one on one side, and the one on the other side, so that if a documentary was not interested in subjectivity, I don't think it could really get to ethics, because it would only be about the subject, it would only be about the one which is on the other side of the camera lens, and not about this engagement, this dialogue [...]. And ethics also introduces the third dimension, which is the audience.

(Bonotto and Sotomaior 2008: 173)

Returning the work to its protagonists contributes to consolidating the commitment established between the *self* – with the camera – and the *other*, in front of it. The audiences that may arise after this encounter cannot always be controlled, and probably they should not be controlled. Any work, once completed, no longer belongs completely to its author, or authors, who are freed from the notion of when it will be watched or experienced and by whom (Eco 1989).

Space to explore uncertainties

Within the Citadocs's team, new proposals were discussed, different from those we had already executed for preparing a new workshop. The most intense phase of drifts – together with the study of movements, works and authors related to documentary, the encounter with the *other* and ethnography in the scope of the *Cidade Ilha* project – also directly influenced the decision of what would become the media lab *An Uncertain Film* (2016).

Instead of portraying the universe of the *other* – as in the case of the *ilha* dwellers – we chose to turn the documentary into the experience of the documentary maker himself. It was about the exposure of the interaction with the camera, the situations and the spaces recorded. Below is the description of the media lab:

The lab within the lab. A camera wanders off, registering the fragmented reality through several points of view of the ephemeral spontaneous. This lab will challenge participants to get lost and stumble upon what's surrounding them, where curiosity emerges as a *leitmotiv*, having the moving camera as a tool for direct experience.

(Roberti et al. 2016: n.pag.)

The references used in the workshop, to contextualize the participants with the proposed theme, are all compatible and important for *Cidade Ilha*: Jean Rouch's *Cinéma Vérité*, its purposes, objectives and works (Wintonick 2000; Henley 2020); classic examples of documentary history such as Dziga Vertov (Hicks 2007) and current ones such as the *Life in Day* project in 2010 (Macdonald and Scott 2021), to talk about the portrayal of everyday life and city dynamics; Marshall McLuhan and the notions that discuss 'the media as an extension of man' (McLuhan 1994) and the understanding of the 'medium' itself 'as a message' (McLuhan et al. 1967); and Guy Debord's appreciation of the practice of *drifting* (Debord 1958; Trier 2019).

Each participant was free to make their filmed drifts around Porto, with the commitment to bring the material back for viewing the next day and talk about the experience together. As tutors, we would edit the 70 gigabytes of material produced by the 42 workshop participants to create an approximately three-minute teaser (Citadocs 2016). Departing from different backgrounds and areas of expertise, the participants, aged between 18 and 40 years, made very different choices for representing what a day in Porto would be like from different perspectives and experiences.

This experiment interested both the collective – 'documentaries about and by citizens' – and the *Cidade Ilha* project. *Cidade Ilha* found its way in valuing the authorial ethnographic documentary and recognizing subjectivity as an essential tool in searching for ethics within and outside the field-work. Assuming that the action of the documentarist and what it provokes is the primary guarantee of freedom and unblocking acknowledged the need to explore subjectivity (by the collective and by the research).

Documentary and fiction

While in the media lab *An Uncertain Film* the idea was to widen the theme and envision the city as a field of infinite possibilities for interaction with the documentarists – the workshop participants – the following proposal of Citadocs

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narrows the possibilities. This time it would not be *ilhas* but dwellings created as an *alternative* to them: the Bloco Duque de Saldanha. Built in 1940, it is the oldest social housing estate in Porto. It appeared as an alternative to the *ilhas*, at a stage when these were already considered *problematic*:

Over the past 150 years, the city has coexisted poorly with the *ilhas*. [...] Most of them were precariously built, taking advantage of every inch of land [...] at a certain point the drama of housing in Porto reached such proportions that private and public initiatives multiplied in response. This spirit of initiative gave rise to working-class neighbourhoods, groups of low-cost housing, and the first generation of collective housing districts (Duque de Saldanha, S. Vicente de Paulo, Pereiró, and Rainha D. Leonor).

(Breda-Vázquez and Conceição 2015: 2)

From the point of view of the *Cidade Ilha* project, it was of interest to explore dwellings with other types of spatial configurations, which were not formally classified as *ilhas*, but that could contribute to the construction of a substantive concept of islands as places that have been isolated from the city to which they belong. The fact that the Duque de Saldanha block was created as an alternative to the *ilhas* establishes this link beforehand. As such, this exercise would be valid both for developing new approaches to the collective and for the ongoing research.

The neighbourhood's architecture, unusual in the city, caught my attention from the first visit to the site. The block has only one entrance – just like the *ilhas* – it is U-shaped and at the time had a considerable number of dwellings (117), according to data from the Porto City Hall (Câmara Municipal do Porto 1937–71). The Citadocs workshop proposed to explore the space, from a physical and historical point of view, as well as the possibilities of the boundaries between documentary and fiction (Ellis 2021). Contrary to the previous workshops, we intended to create a final video without using recorded interviews.

A solid base about the chosen subject was created through the consultation with the Municipal Archive of the City Hall; the research of contents related to the place in social networks, such as posts of the residents themselves describing old parties taking place in the courtyard of the neighbourhood, personal photos of the building and reports about the proliferation of beehives in the block's premises; and the fieldwork previously carried out with the residents, made by us, tutors, to check their availability and acceptance regarding the activity. From this preparation phase, the idea was to make the content pliable enough to create fictionalized narratives.

In the first session with the participants, we exposed all the data collected in the research work described. We clarified that to make a documentary with the intended characteristics, we first needed contextualization. The material derived from this research was the basis that would serve as support to create, as presented in the workshop description:

[w]hat stories lie underneath Bloco Duque de Saldanha which are so unexpected that could turn into a film? We've started to unveil dozens of stories that we've found on social media about this block and we want the camera to witness the boundary between reality and cinema in a hybrid approach. A film will be edited and produced as a final outcome.

(Roberti et al. 2017: n.pag.)

The participants, this time predominantly design and multimedia students, were divided into groups with specific themes for collecting images and surrounding sound: windows; gardens; pets; movement of people in the courtyard; stairs; among other elements corresponding to the structural part of the building. This strategy would bring the material closer to fiction, combining the unpredictable nature of the documentary with the need to search for more predefined images, which would serve to illustrate and meet a script.

The script was collectively developed, getting inspiration from one of the stories found on social networks and confirmed by some people in the neighbourhood: the proliferation of beehives. In a tone almost of denunciation and displeasure, some residents expressed concern about the beehives that appeared on the block. From this *motto*, the participants created an extreme situation in which a swarm of bees had taken over the block, so residents could no longer leave their homes. With this story as a backdrop, the intention was to explore the spatial morphology of the block, in its most literal sense: one piece, full of windows, few exposed doors and only one direct connection to the street. The fact that it was built during the Portuguese dictatorship, which partly justifies its architecture (Figure 7), also served as material to create a narrative with an atmosphere of tension, suspense and deprivation.

The final video, *Doc under the Block* (Citadocs 2017), consistent with the collective's archive, does not exceed five minutes. The way the title is inserted at the beginning of the film, the close-up of the reflection of the block in a pool of water waiting for someone to cross it, the mixed soundtrack and the dialogues created in voice-over, were options for its fictional nature. Stylistic details give the dubious tone of a fictionalized documentary or vice versa. Looking at Bill Nichols's definitions (Nichols 2010; Bradbury and Guadagno 2020), it is possible to understand the results of Citadocs's audio-visual works as experiences that move between different types of documentary. For



Figure 7: Frame from the video *Doc under the Block*, at *Bloco Duque de Saldanha*, 2017. Digital photograph. Portugal. © Citadocs.

example, *Doc under the Block* is close to the characteristics of the poetic and performative form:

The poetic form sacrifices the conventions of continuity editing, and the very specific idea of location in time and space derived from it, to explore associations and patterns involving temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions [...]. Performative films put even more emphasis on the subjective characteristics of experience and memory, which move away from objective reporting [...]. Real events are amplified by the imaginary events.

(Nichols 2010: 138)

This had already been essayed in the previous workshop, *An Uncertain Film*: along with the proximity to the poetic style, the collaborative mode is an intrinsic element. The proposal was to make explicit, in a more incisive way, the interaction of the cameraman with his/her subject: a day in the city, from morning until dawn, having the camera as an extension of the body, in a cine-eye logic (Vertov 1929). The filming was about an experience, about the relationship of the participants, in this case, documentarists, with the city on that day, at that moment. The result was a fragmented construction of this interaction, not a filmic object intended to say what and how the city of Porto is.

This combination of styles, through the collective experience of *Citadocs*, aided in understanding different approaches to be explored in *Cidade Ilha* and opened up a range of viable options that were ethically coherent with the research objectives. The very understanding of these documentary classifications, not only through theoretical study but also in practice, was more diverse and profound than if it had been done individually. Likewise, drifting through the streets of Porto and visiting the *ilhas* and social neighbourhoods have contributed to the observation and immersion in the contemporary context of the city, that is, to a particular method of participation and field-work experience.

CONCLUSIONS: EXPERIENCING MEDIA IN AN AUTHORIAL AND COLLABORATIVE WAY

This article reflects on how the researcher's contribution to a participatory media collective (*Citadocs: documentários sobre para e por cidadãos*) influenced a long-term, in-depth, imagetic and sound research. *Fixos no Transitório* and *Cidade Ilha* developed the values, actions and approaches of the three cases discussed here. They all directly relate to the concepts of alternative media, participatory media and citizens' media. These cases have organically sought ways to move away from mainstream media and political agendas of consumption and exoticization, sometimes seeking direct and immersive contact with the communities addressed, sometimes involving people willing to create their own media narratives.

In the research work presented, most of the processes were guided by the perspective of authorial ethnographic documentary. They were coordinated and carried out by the same person, meaning self-criticism and self-reflection were fundamental constants. However, the over-immersive view brought at times the risk of the dissolution of its purpose and doubts in the evaluation not only of the fieldwork but also of its communication. For these reasons, *Citadocs's* moments of collective creation played an important role in the

distancing and plural character of the *Cidade Ilha* project. Citadocs served as a participatory platform to test styles and discuss ethical issues on sensitive topics such as approaches and feedback to socio-economically vulnerable and historically stigmatized populations in the city of Porto.

We reinforce that recognizing the importance of reducing the action team (image and audio capturing) according to the theme approach does not invalidate other types of collective exercises. These could benefit the research, directly and indirectly, without interfering with the aspects that prioritize the individuality of an authorial work, as described in this article. In short, ‘researchers and development practitioners are, in effect, communication actors facilitating the recognition and voicing of community interests’ (Pettit et al. 2009: 450).

Back to the initial question – how can the authorial documentary work, anchored in self-criticism and self-reflection, be incorporated into participatory media frameworks in productive ways – we demonstrated in this article that having been a member and tutor of a participatory project (Citadocs), co-responsible for workshops on documentary video about the city of Porto, has been crucial for the development of an authorial project. The choice of themes for the workshops; the analysis of the type of reaction these provoked in those who worked as documentarists and in those who were portrayed; the interaction of the participants with more isolated and vulnerable spaces in the city; the ponderings around the results produced; and the ethical issues that this set of actions raised are examples of contributions that could only be revealed through working and reflecting together. These items highlight the importance of participatory media experiences, which allowed practical encounters with a diversity of others. Citizen’s media and participatory approaches help recognize that ‘voice is not the practice of individuals in isolation’ (Couldry 2015: 45), and that a narrative, however authorial, needs sharing and different forms of participation to become more complex and multi-layered.

This article also emphasizes the importance and legitimacy of ethnographic field reports for an in-depth understanding of the scientific work in the artistic and cultural fields.

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