THE FORKING PATHS: an interactive cinema experience

Bruno Mendes da Silva

CIAC – Centro de Investigação em Artes e Comunicação , Portugal

ABSTRACT

The project *The Forking Paths* aims to create a set of interactive cinematographic narratives, within an applied research that seeks to transfer the spectator from an extradiegetic level to an intradiegetic level, creating a metalepsis. The intention is, above all, to analyze the possibilities of the spectator's identification as the main character, by the manipulation of the idea of time in Cinema. We aim to reach this proposal through the use of specific narrative resources, as well as through the possibility of choice between alternative image flows. The project *The forking paths* is intended to be available in different media and supports such as the Internet, touch sensitive screen devices and conventional cinemas.

Keywords: digital art, cinema, Interactivity, time, narrative

INTRODUCTION

The forking paths is intended to continue the investigation started in PhD thesis *Eterno Presente, o tempo na contemporaneidade* (Eternal Present, time in contemporaneity), resulting in the publication of the book *A máquina Encravada: a questão do tempo nas relações entre cinema, banda desenhada e contemporaneidade* (The jammed machine, the issue of time in relations between cinema, comics and contemporary), (Silva, 2010). This primary research is the starting point for the present project that aims to cross applied investigation and experimental development. In this new phase, we are trying a new approach, more practical, more iterative and more reflexive on the issue of time in cinema and in cyberspace. Through the exhaustive repetition of the images along the narrative, the intention is to reach different levels of filmic interpretation, where the spectator's identification with the main character could be complete. Through the immersion in the interactive narrative, we look forward to creating a mirror effect, where the spectator and the protagonist share the same identity, becoming the spectator-protagonist. The narrative is pre-defined, because its structure can't be changed, however the way it is experienced depends directly on the spectator-protagonist choices. The exhaustive repetition of the images tries to interfere with the temporal perception of the spectator-protagonist, which may result in three kinds of understanding or reactions:

1. the emptying of the image meaning, by loosing the seduction of the first look;
2. the image valorization, through the discovery of details that have not been perceived in the early screenings;
3. the addition of details that didn't exist in the first views, by image manipulation.

This last hypothesis plays with the spectator's memory that will be tested by the impossibility to check the previous existence of the added details in the image repetition. The repetition of the images will run until the third generation, meaning that only the last three images will be able to be repeated. Thus, as the new images appear, those which were already repeated three times will no longer be shown, as we will demonstrate below.


IMPLEMENTATION

In the context of the project, an application, available online, is being created to split the visualization of the narrative in three different image flows (see storyboard in Figure 1, 2 and 3). Therefore, we offer the spectator the possibility of choosing a specific interpretation inside each story, so that a higher identification with the protagonist can be achieved. The image flows will be exposed and available in a horizontal perspective. This way the user will be able to choose between the central flow and the alternative flows (on the right and on the left of the central flow). This choice can be made with the cursor control, if the visualization is made in a conventional computer, or by touch, in the specific case of sensitive screens, like tablets or smartphones. However, we are also previewing the visualization of the project in cinemas. In this case the alternative flows can be seen with the assistance of touch-sensitive devices. The online application will offer three different narratives (discussed below) that can be seen independently or in a continuous way. Given the need of a higher immersion level in the narrative, the voice-over is introduced as a morphologic resource. Aside from speaking directly with the spectator-protagonist, giving advice, hints and opinions, the voice-over also works as a "polish narrator" by doing the dubbing of the cues for all characters. The "polish narrator" concept is based in the traditional method of translating foreign films in Poland, where the narrator dubs the dialogues from all characters in the narrative. The first narrative *Haze* is already been filmed. It was used a camera Canon EOS to ensure excellent image quality. The recordings were made in a black room to ensure the absence of spatial references (see Figure 4,5 and 6). The illumination was made with only two or three light sources depending on the scene. The contrast with the black background emphasizes the relationship between shadows and light. It was also used a machine smoke that created an artificial fog, a device that emits a dense vapor and helped create a mysterious atmosphere. It was intended that the environment of the filming was informal and friendly. Altogether, the film crew, including actors, had fewer than 20 people. This allowed assertiveness and faster production process. Currently we are in post-production (editing), the most complex stage in the preparation of *Haze*, taking into account that all shots have at least three different versions (as mentioned in the introduction). In addition, this triple repetition of each shot makes the relationship between images and voice-over quite complicated (see Figure 7). In this sense, the editing became a mathematical exercise, where the duration of the shots is thought to be both rational and aesthetics. The images are edited in slow motion, which gives a certain degree of drama to the story. However, to ensure an even better visual effect, the next narrative of *The forking paths* will be shot with a camera Phantom. This camera allows shooting 3600 frames per second, bringing the dramatic and aesthetic potential.

Uma noite de inverno (Storyboard/Prancha 1)

Genérico/Planos 1 (exteriores)
Som ambiente: Estação ferroviária.
Voz off 1: O filme Os Caminhos que se Bifurcam está a começar. Descontrai-te. Concentra-te. Afasta todos os outros pensamentos. Deixa que o mundo que te rodeia se esfumace no indistinto. Concentra-te na escuridão do ecrã e aumenta o volume do som. Experimenta a imagem da esquerda...agora a da direita. Arranja a posição mais cómoda: enroscado, recostado, de perna cruzada, de cabeça para traz, em posição de yoga, de pernas estendidas. É claro que nunca se consegue ficar na posição ideal, pelo menos durante muito tempo. Também podes descalçar os sapatos se estiver muito calor ou se te apertam os pés. Tenta prever agora tudo o que puder evitar-te a interrupção do visionamento. Principalmente, tira o som do telemóvel. Pensa bem. Fizeste xixi? De qualquer modo, agora já é tarde demais.
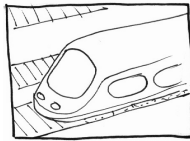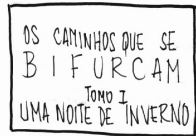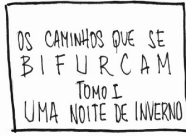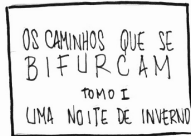
Plano 1 A (PM): Comboio na estação.
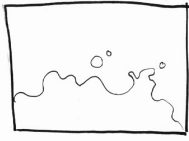
Plano 1 B (PM): Fumo da estação.

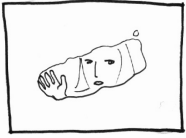Plano 1 C (GP): Placa da estação.

Título/Planos 2

Planos 3 (exteriores)

Plano 3 A (PP): Mão limpa vidro embaciado.

Plano 3 B (PM): Mão, de alguém que olha, limpa vidro embaciado.

Plano 1 C (PP): Pormenor de alguém que olha.

Figure 1 – First page from the storyboard. Every shot has 3 versions: A, B and C. Voice over 1: The film The forking paths is about to begin. Relax. Focus. Block all other thoughts. Let the world around you be indistinct in blur. Focus on the darkness of the screen and increase the sound volume. Try the left image... now the one on the right side. Get the most comfortable position: snuggled up, reclined, cross-legged, head laid back, in yoga position, with the legs extended. Of course you can never be in an ideal position, at least for a long time. You can also take off your shoes, if it gets too hot or if they clench your feet. Now try to predict everything that can avoid the interruption of the viewing. Think about it: did you pee? Anyway, now it is too late.

Planos 4 (2ª visualização)

Plano 4 A (PP): Mão limpa vidro embaciado.

Plano 4 B (PM): Mão, de alguém que olha, limpa vidro embaciado.

Plano 4 C (PP): Pormenor de alguém que olha.

Planos 5 (interiores)
No café da estação. Névoa (out of focus).

Plano 5 A (PM): Personagem A

Plano 5 B (PMC): Personagens A,B e C param de jogar e olham sérios.

Plano 5 C (PM): personagem C.

Planos 6 (2ª visualização)

Plano 6 A (PP): Mão limpa vidro embaciado.

Plano 6 B (PM): Mão, de alguém que olha, limpa vidro embaciado.

Plano 6 C (PP): Pormenor de alguém que olha.

Figure 2 – Second page from the storyboard. Every shot reappear 3 times.

Planos 7 (2ª visualização)
No café da estação. Névoa (out of focus).

Plano 7 A (PM):
Personagem A

Plano 7 (PMC): Ao
contrário da 1visualização,
a personagem B (central)
sorri.

Plano 7 C (PM):
personagem C.

Planos 8
Som ambiente: Máquina de café e apito do comboio.

Plano 8 A (PP):
Pormenor da máquina.

Plano 8 B (GP): Máquina de
café aquece chávena.

Plano 8 C (PP): Chávena a
ser aquecida.

Planos 9 (interiores)
No café da estação. Névoa (out of focus).

Plano 9 A (PM):
Personagem A

Plano 9 B (PMC):
Personagens A,B e C param
de jogar e olham sérios.

Plano 9 C (PM):
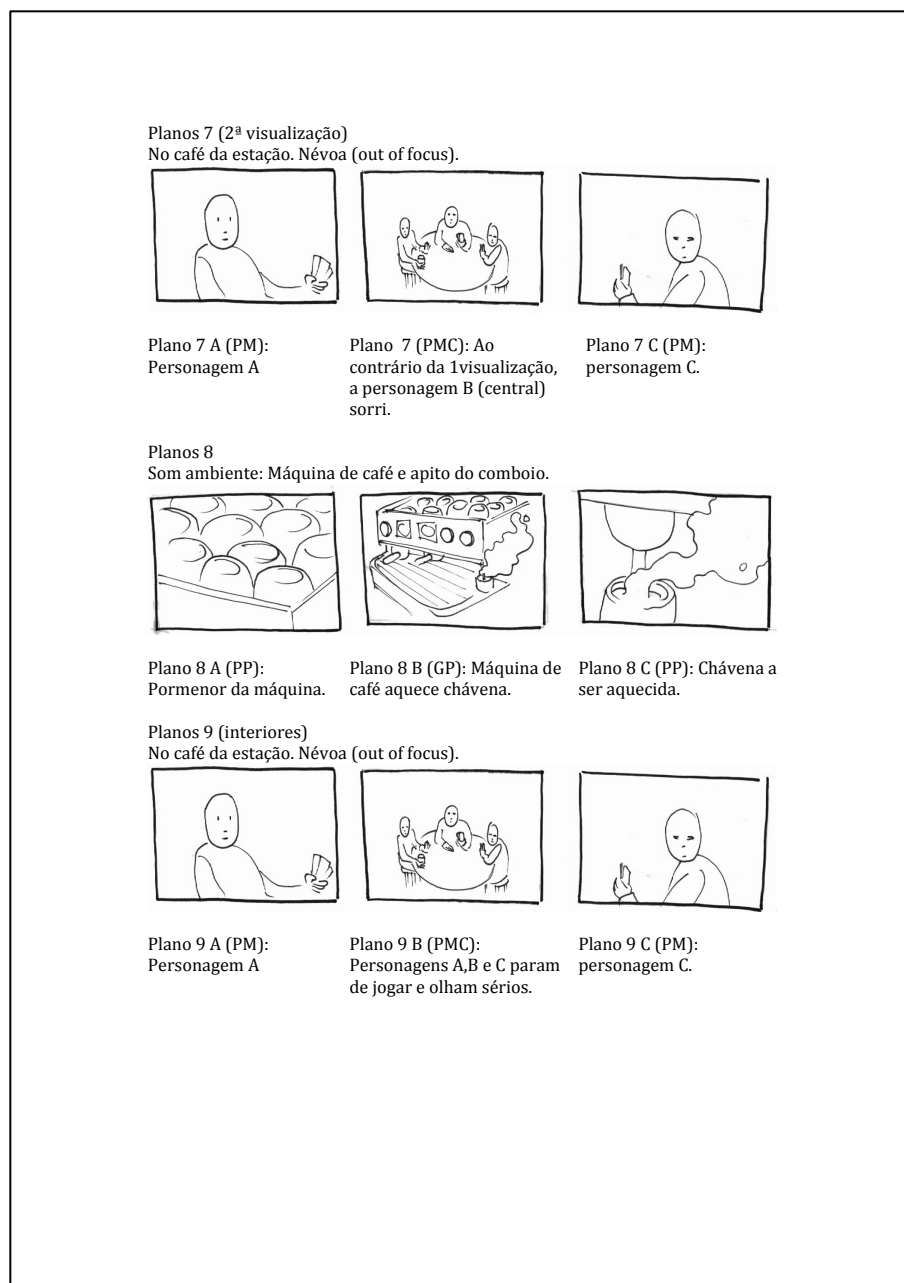personagem C.

Figure 3 – Third page from the storyboard. Some shots shows details that didn't exist in the first views as it happens in 7-B and 9-B C (the character B smiles in shot 7-B but he is serious in shot 9-B).

IMMERSION

Through these technical and conceptual resources, we will try to pass the spectator from an extradiegetic level to an intradiegetic level, creating a metalepsis. It doesn't exist therefore any physical or psychological reference pre-defined to the protagonist. The spectator can fill those characteristics, virtually, through its references. After all, imagination, memory, knowledge, and

religion are vectors of virtualization that led us to abandon the physical presence long before computerization and digital networks (Lévy, 1995). As in the case of first person genre. videogames, the different flows of images will be based in subjective shot that overlaps the protagonist point of view, replacing it by the spectator's point of view. This solution will enhance a "discorporation" of the look. The eye´s body is abolished. As it is never felt or revealed it is technologically neutralized. Thus, the body becomes an excess of baggage to the traveller of the narrative "The forking paths". It is intented that this situation enables the spectator-protagonist to live the problems and the conquests, involved in the filmic narrative, without real, physical or moral consequences. Thereby the cyberspatial journey, possible in this project, can be understood as a possibility of technological evolution of film. This achievement of this project is based on the production of three narratives forming "The forking paths", even though they can be watched separately. In July 2014, will be made the first public screenings of *Haze*. Through the testimonies of the public we will have the first clues about the level of immersion given by the film.

TRANSPOSITION

For this purpose the tale, as a narrative gender where time is concentrated, seems to be the perfect form of adaptation to cinema. The concision, the precision and the density are ideal structural features. That is why we can find in Italo Calvino (Calvino, 2002), Jorge Luis Borges (Borges, 2000) and Julio Cortázar (Cortázar, 2004) the specified qualities, considering the form and the subject (time) for potential adaptation. Although there are formal and contextual guidelines, the choice of the authors is personal. The first tale *If on a winter's night a traveller* (*Haze* in the adapted version) from Italo Calvino will set the three short film morphologic guidelines: the narrative is fragmented, it has no beginning or end, there isn't spatial or temporal unity; the ostensive presence of the narrator that identifies the narratee, trying to transform it in the protagonist; the use of subjective shot in regard to the protagonist's point of view, to accomplish the narratee immersion in the narrative; and finally the multiple identities offered to the narratee. The question of parallel time that crystalizes in the present, where past, present and future converge, is transversal in the works of the selected authors. As noted, *Haze* will be the first short movie in the project *The garden of forking path*. The production is concluded and it looks forward to describing the morphologic specificities of this project, specially the time fragmentation, the three different flows of the narrative (see figure 4, 5 and 6) and the use of an intimist and revealing voice over.
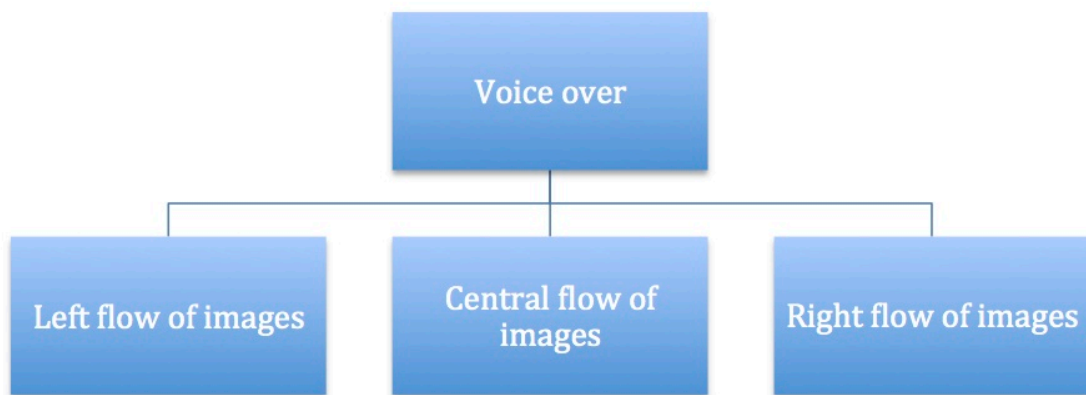
Figure 4 - frame shot 36 B (right flow).

Figure 5 - frame shot 36 A (central flow).

Figure 6 - frame shot 36 C (left flow).

Figure 7 - the user will choose which flow(s) want to watch.

IMAGE REPETITION

As has already been mentioned in the introduction, the exhaustive repetition of images will be made until the third generation. So each image of each flow will be exhibited three times to the spectator-protagonist (see Figure 1,2 and 3). It is estimated that the viewer can react in three different ways while watching the image repetitions. The first expectable reaction is related to

the emptying of the meaning of the image. By loosing the allure of the first look, the spectator-protagonist may lose interest in the image. After all, the image interpretation was previously made and it seems that nothing new and stimulating is showed in the image repetition. However the spectator-protagonist can also find in the composition of complex images particularities that weren't found in the first or in the second view. This possibility can bring a bigger intensity to the comprehension and the immersion of the narrative. The third possibility is related to image manipulation. In this case the possibilities are potentially unlimited. In the field of image interpretation, the emergence of elements that weren't present in the first view can be very stimulating to the spectator-protagonist. The viewer won't be easily able to distinguish which the new or the old elements are. This variant will play with the spectator-protagonist memory, which will be questioned permanently. In any of the cases there is the possibility of reaching a different interpretation degree that can be more or less intense. In the three-mentioned variants the question of time is also common, namely the perception of time provided by the exhaustive repetition of images. The spectator-protagonist will be challenged with the triple experience of each moment of the narrative. This continuous coming back to the previous moment will be able to reinforce the time condition, usually assigned to the filmic narrative (regardless of the existence of analepsis): the present.

TEMPORALITY

In what concerns the time perception, the movement-image, the time-image and the crystal-image notions, proposed by Deleuze (DELEUZE, 1990), does already show an appeal to the spectator's projection into the narrative, against a compliant and passive attitude. The transition from the movement-image to the crystal-image implies a new reality perception, no longer based on the movement, nor in a temporal linear sequence of past, present and future. So as referred above, the sensory-motor sensations, time indirect representations, tend to be replaced by exclusively visual and audible conjunctures, namely the opsign and sonsign, time direct representations. In this regard, we intend to use visual situations through the subjective shot and the exhaustive image repetition, looking forward to meeting the idea of opsign. Simultaneously we will try to find a match in the sonsign idea in situations where the voice over appears without any correspondent images, speaking directly to the spectator-protagonist, explaining to the viewer how to understand what is being watched, giving comforting advice to transform the film viewing in the most pleasant experience, at psychological and physical levels.

CONCLUSION

The spectator-protagonist interacts with the narrative at the level of the image reception. The images may lead to a bigger or lower immersion degree. However this interactivity can't produce contents by itself, and this fact can result in a lower communicational exchange between the work and the user. This situation is directly connected to the fact that the narrative is linear and closed; there is no space for the direct interference in the course of the narratives. The opsign idea, as an optical description, where the spectator (the one who watches) replaces the protagonist (the one who acts), and the sonsign idea, as an audible description, both referring to Deleuze's time-image concept, will be the structural basis of "The forking path". It is on that basis that the deconstruction of the temporal narrative will lie, built by the exhaustive image repetition and expectable in three aspects: image emptiness, valorization and manipulation. In

turn the opsign concept is reinforced by the spectator-protagonist idea, which tries to move the narratee to an intradiegetic level. Trying to immerse the spectator and let him reflect on the protagonist figure may enable a less slumbering and stagnated relation, between audience and work. Here the distance between male and female gender, subject and predicate, reality and fiction will tend to disappear. Finally, through the relationship between cinema and technology we seek the evolution of the audiovisual language and the possible paths to postcinema.

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