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The weight of the past: Trauma and testimony in *Que bom te ver viva*

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Abstract

This article examines representations of trauma in Lúcia Murat's *Que bom te ver viva* (*How Nice to See You Alive*, 1989), a semi-documentary focusing on the experiences of former political militants who, like the director herself, were arrested and tortured under Brazil's military dictatorship. Despite having limited distribution at the time of release, the film has since gained status as one of the most significant representations of State-sanctioned violence during the 1960s and 1970s. It has received renewed attention more recently as Brazil enters a new period of reckoning with human rights crimes committed during the military regime. I first consider elements of trauma theory and their potential for better understanding the ways in which the film establishes connections between individual suffering and the wider socio-political realm. Essential to the film's understanding of historical trauma are processes of 'acting out' and 'working through' which I explore along with the need, partially fulfilled in *Que bom te ver viva*, to create a witness to traumatic events. This is combined with an examination of stylistic strategies. I argue that the film's flexible and unconventional aesthetics is a crucial means through which it can represent certain experiences associated with trauma and perform a radical re-envisioning of history.

Keywords

Lúcia Murat

Brazilian cinema

military dictatorship

trauma

torture

testimony

Brazilians will likely remember 2014 as the year that their country hosted and failed to win the World Cup. Some of them might also remember the year as marking another, more sombre event: the 50th anniversary of the military *coup d'état* that overthrew President João Goulart on 1 April 1964 and began one of the country's most repressive periods, a military dictatorship that lasted 21 years. Despite the Brazilian media's focus on the protests and controversies associated with the upcoming football championship¹, considerable attention was also given to public remembrance of the dictatorship and its aftermath. An unprecedented review of the period in television and the press was accompanied by news coverage of a National Truth Commission established in 2012 to investigate the crimes and human rights abuses committed by former military governments.² This renewed interest represented a radical change in the way Brazilians deal with their dictatorial past, a process which historian Nina Schneider has described as a shift from 'a politics of silence' to a new 'politics of memory' (2011: 199, see also Atencio 2014).

Amongst the many victims of the regime who were invited to give their testimony to the National Truth Commission was film director, screenwriter and producer Lúcia Murat. One

of the most prominent names in Brazilian auteur cinema, Murat was arrested in 1971 and tortured for her participation in the guerrilla group MR-8 (Revolutionary Movement 8th of October) which carried out clandestine operations to overthrow the dictatorship, including, most famously, the kidnapping of American ambassador Charles Burke Elbrick in September 1969. Murat was imprisoned for three and a half years. I interviewed her in 2013, a month after she testified to the Commission and during the release of *A memória que me contam* (*Memories They Told Me*, 2013) made as a tribute to one of her militant friends.

All of Murat's films can be read as survivor narratives that respond, in some form or other, to the political persecution that she suffered in the 1970s and to systemic State violence manifested in incarcerations, torture, assassinations, forced disappearances, exile, censorship and the curtailing of personal freedom. These forms of violence are addressed to varying degrees in *Que bom te ver viva* (*How Nice to See you Alive*, 1989), *Quase dois irmãos* (*Almost Brothers*) (Murat, 2004), *Uma longa viagem* (*A Long Journey*) (Murat, 2011) and *A memória que me contam* (Murat, 2013b). Other of her films allude to the dictatorship more subtly by, for instance, focusing on its aftermath (poverty and social inequality in *Maré, nossa história de amor* (*Another Love Story*) (Murat, 2007) and political corruption in *Doces poderes* (*Sweet Powers*) (Murat, 1997), or by tracing a genealogy of State repression and authoritarianism, such as the oppression of indigenous populations in *Brava gente brasileira* (*Brave New Land*) (Murat, 2000) and in the more recent *A nação que não esperou por Deus* (*The Nation That Didn't Wait for God*) (Murat, 2015).

Murat describes her filmmaking as a means of her understanding her personal history in the light of the wider social and political realities of Brazil.³ In *A memória que me contam*, for instance, a group of former left-wing militants revisit their Utopian ideals and revolutionary commitments of 1968 against the backdrop of the social and political realities that they live in the present. The award-winning *Quase dois irmãos* is also structured around an event

experienced by Murat in the 1970s: the building of a wall to separate political detainees from common criminals in military prisons. As suggested in the film's climactic sequence, the wall symbolized the deepening of social inequalities and the final blow against the revolutionary Left's dream to unite Brazil's diverse social and racial groups. Finally, a more distanced yet strongly personal view of the period emerges from *Uma longa viagem*, in which family albums, present-day interviews and letters written by Murat's brother while she was in prison are used to reconstruct the 1970's from the perspective of exile and counterculture.

If an autobiographical resonance can be traced in most of her films, none is more profoundly marked by the director's own experiences than her first feature, *Que bom te ver viva*. Winner of multiple awards including the jury, audience and critics' award at the 1989 Brasília Film Festival, this 'semi-documentary', as Murat describes it, focuses on the experiences of former political militants who, like the director herself, were arrested and tortured under the military dictatorship.⁴ Despite having limited distribution at the time of its release, subsequent festival screenings at home and abroad contributed to the film's status as one of the most significant representations of State-sanctioned violence during the 1960s and 1970s. The film received a special mention in the 2014 Festival 'Mostra Cinema e Direitos Humanos no Hemisfério Sul' (Cinema and Human Rights in the Southern Hemisphere), which focused on remembrance of the victims of the Brazilian dictatorship and celebrated Murat's key role in reconstructing memories of the dictatorial period.⁵ The screening of *Que bom te ver viva* at the opening ceremony of this prestigious festival suggests the importance of the film at a time when, as Atencio (2014) observes, Brazil has finally turned its attention to the dark past of the military dictatorship after decades of ignoring, or only partially acknowledging, the human rights crimes committed by the State. When I asked Murat about the significance of *Que bom te ver viva* for today's audiences, the director described her surprise at the number of people who contacted her after hearing her statement for the National Truth Commission to say that this

had been the first time they had learnt about state-sanctioned torture in Brazil. In her view, the importance of *Que bom te ver viva* lies in it confronting a serious historical issue that is still ignored by many. Indeed, over twenty years after its release, *Que bom te ver viva* remains one of the rare Brazilian films to employ first-person testimony in denouncing torture under the dictatorship.⁶

In what follows I shall first consider some elements of recent trauma theory and their potential for better understanding the cinematic and political strategies central to *Que bom te ver viva*. This leads into a discussion of the mixed modes of representation, realist and non-realist, adopted by Murat, and to an examination of how those modes contribute to a re-envisioning of this traumatic history. Essential to the film's understanding of historical trauma are the processes of 'acting out' and 'working through' that I shall explore along with the requirement, in part fulfilled by *Que bom te ver viva*, to create a witness to traumatic experiences. Finally, it is also my aim to contribute to the scarce scholarship on a director whose films are so significant for Brazil's cultural memory.⁷

Trauma theory

Echoing the concerns of other scholars, including Radstone (2011), Butler (2009) and Kabir (2014), Craps (2013, 2014) has called for a reconsideration of what he sees as trauma theory's Eurocentric biases. He claims that the privileging of Euro-American experiences of collective trauma, most prominently the Holocaust and, more recently, 9/11, has led to a marginalization of traumatic experiences in other parts of the globe and to a tendency to assume that the definitions of trauma and recovery developed in the West are universal. One of the problems that he sees in this traditional model of trauma is that its methods of treatment tend to privilege psychological recovery over the transformation of political, social or economic systems.

By narrowly focusing on the level of the individual psyche, one tends to leave unquestioned the conditions that enabled traumatic abuse, such as racism, economic domination, or political oppression. Problems that are essentially political or economic are medicalised, and the people affected by them are pathologized as victims without agency, sufferers from an illness that can only be cured through psychological counselling. (Craps 2014: 50)

He concludes that, insofar as 'it negates the need for taking collective action towards systemic change, the hegemonic trauma discourse can serve as a political palliative to the socially disempowered' (Craps 2014: 50). By investigating the representation of trauma in a Brazilian film which makes clear connections between individual suffering and the country's socio-political history, I aim to contribute to the project of widening trauma theory's scope beyond Europe and the United States, as have a number of recent articles and monographs on Latin American post-dictatorship culture.⁸

As for the challenge of breaking free from a psychological model of trauma, I hope to demonstrate that, at least in the case of *Que bom te ver viva*, the psychological and the socio-political realms are not necessarily disconnected, and certainly not mutually exclusive.

LaCapra has pointed out that trauma theory's appeal to Freudian-derived concepts such as melancholia and mourning, acting out and working through, adds a necessary dimension to social and political analyses, but does not constitute a substitute for them (2001: ix). In his own work he reconceives these psychoanalytical concepts in such a way as to highlight their articulation with both historical analysis and political critique. Moreover, I agree with his and Jelin's (2003) assertions that in the substantial corpus of work about the Holocaust there is a

vast array of arguments and lines of debate that are significant for research into other areas. Some of these arguments find expression in *Que bom te ver viva*, which not only includes its own comparisons between survivor experiences in Nazi concentration camps and in Latin America's illegal prisons, but is also rife with allusions to Freudian psychoanalysis.

For LaCapra (2001), the challenge is not that we should direct attention away from the Holocaust when discussing trauma, but that we should apply the theoretical frameworks that derive from its study to other historical events in which these frameworks might prove useful. Accordingly, I will use his reformulation of the concepts of 'acting out' and 'working through' to demonstrate that, although Murat's film relies on one of the central tenets of trauma theory (individual testimony as a path towards psychological recovery), this concern with psychological processes is closely tied to a political project. Specifically, that of reconstructing memories of a period that had, until recently, been obliterated from the country's history. Furthermore, rather than cast its subjects as victims or distract us from the need to take collective action towards change, as suggested in Craps' criticism of trauma theory quoted above, the film highlights the continuing political engagement of witnesses and invites us to reflect on how secrecy around human rights violations in the 1970s has paved the way for structural forms of violence experienced by Brazilians in the contemporary period.

Representing trauma

The question of how a woman survives prolonged periods of torture and sexual abuse without undergoing a mental collapse is the crux of *Que bom te ver viva*, verbalized in the opening sequence by the voice-over of an anonymous fictional character. This character is played by Irene Ravache, a well-known Brazilian actor who bears some physical resemblance to Murat and who functions as the director's alter ego.⁹ This character's dramatized monologues are

intercut with individually shot testimonies of eight women who were political prisoners during the dictatorship. Each woman is introduced in the film by means of a still image emulating an ID card with information such as profession, number of children, political activities, militant organization and number of years spent in prison. By means of this brief introduction, the interviewees' involvement in a range of roles is established from the outset.

The order in which their testimonies appear is seemingly unstructured. The film alternates continuously between the witnesses and the fictional character as they discuss topics in no particular order. They reflect on their participation in guerrilla operations, their capture, time spent in prison and the strategies they found to cope with traumatic memories in the present.

The testimonies are shot on video and framed in tight close-up, in a manner that resembles an identification photograph. These 'talking-head' sequences are intercut with sequences shot in observational mode that show us the same women performing their everyday activities such as going to work, socializing, playing with their children and so forth. This editing technique reinforces the film's argument that whilst the lives of ex-militants are forever marked by trauma, they are nevertheless able to work through their painful memories and move on with their lives. The natural light and real locations used in these scenes are in contrast to the artificially lit, studio-shot dramatized passages. Ravache's exaggerated acting style and raw outbursts of emotion further invite us to differentiate the fictional character from the interviewees, all of whom behave naturalistically, and with some measure of emotional restraint. Counterpoised with these naturalistic performances, Ravache's direct address to the camera and constant interpellation of the spectator further help us to distinguish between the film's two modes of address, the documentary/realist and the fictional/non-realist.

Asked about this strategy of juxtaposing fiction and documentary, the director states that her main goal was to overcome the difficulty of representing torture and the traumatic memories that it engenders.

There was something I used to talk about a lot in therapy: the impossibility of defining torture, and how this impossibility of communicating creates an unbridgeable rift between those who suffered and those who didn't. So I decided to overcome this difficulty by using cinema and all the strategies that cinema allows, in both fiction and documentary.¹⁰

Murat's observation touches on one of the central concerns of trauma theory, the 'unrepresentability' or 'unspeakability' of trauma and the consequent isolation of victims (Caruth 1996; Felman and Laub 1992; Jelin 2003). Aware of the limits of verbal language and symbolic apparatus to express subjective processes associated with trauma, Murat opted for a more flexible and, at that time at least, unconventional aesthetic that allows her film to better represent certain experiences. To put it in her own terms, a documentary mode was advantageous in offering the 'weight of the truth'. After all, one of her central goals was to bring to light historical events which had, until then, remained hidden. As Jelin observes, 'first-person testimonies are fundamental when it comes to formulating judicial proof or attempts to find out the "truth" of what happened' (2012: 347). Yet, in Murat's view, a documentary form alone could not adequately represent something that she was equally eager to communicate: the hazy line between sanity and madness, which, she claims, most victims of torture must tread.¹¹ While the film's testimonial and observational sequences represent those aspects of history that can be verbalized and seen, the dramatizations represent what lies beneath the surface and cannot always be captured by means of interviews and visual observation: internal negotiations, fantasies, delirium and the constant oscillation between lucidity and insanity.

Murat's preference for a mosaic style and her decision to mix realist and non-realist modes of narration calls to mind White's (1992) observation in relation to representations of the Holocaust that it is not events or experiences themselves that are unrepresentable but, rather, that they are unrepresentable in a realist style. In the case of *Que bom te ver viva*, as indeed in many films dealing with historical trauma, the decision to move beyond documentary realism opens up a whole range of possibilities. The experimental strategies adopted in *Que bom te ver viva* locate it in the corpus of work identified by Walker as being particularly effective in their representation of past abuse in that, rather than simply attempting to represent realistic character stories in fictional or nonfictional form, they manage to portray 'the traumatic past as meaningful yet fragmentary, virtually unspeakable, and striated with fantasy constructions' (1997: 809).

The non-linear and fragmentary structure of *Que bom te ver viva* not only facilitates the representation of processes that are non-linear and fragmentary by nature, such as dreams and memory, but it is also one of the mechanisms through which the film invites us to make the connection between individual stories of trauma and the wider social-historical context in which they take place. This can be better understood if we compare *Que bom te ver viva* with the more stylistically orthodox *Mulheres em luta (Women in the Armed Struggle)* (2014), a television programme produced by GNT satellite channel and broadcast as part of the commemorations around the anniversary of the coup. The programme centres on the experience of ten female interviewees, including Lúcia Murat herself and two of the women previously interviewed in *Que bom te ver viva*. Each of the programme's five chapters focuses on two interviewees; although there is some cross-cutting between the two women's stories, the programme follows a linear pattern which begins with the women's general views on the dictatorship, progresses through their experiences in armed resistance and in prison and concludes by inviting them to talk about their present lives. The individualization of the

narratives is further reinforced by the decision to interview women from visibly distinct racial and professional backgrounds.

By contrast, *Que bom te ver viva* fractures individual testimonies into short segments and then pieces them back together to create a circular, mosaic structure that invites us to receive the stories as originating from a collective source rather than an individual one. For instance, rather than allowing us to follow the narrative of witness 'A' from beginning to end, as *Mulheres em luta* more or less does, the film introduces one segment of 'A's story, followed by a segment of 'B's, followed by 'C's, then back to 'A' and so forth, alternating continuously between the eight women to such an extent that, at a first viewing at least, it becomes difficult to completely distinguish which part of the story belongs to whom. There is no temporal or causal link between the segments and the stories blur as if in a group conversation. Hence, despite having been filmed individually, the editing structure of the film invites us to perceive them as expressions of a social experience, as if each individual story were a building block in the construction of collective memory.

This sense of a collective, unified voice becomes stronger as the testimonies are woven together by the combination of dramatization and voice-over commentary that draws our attention to the communality of concerns, sentiments and experiences shared by the witnesses. For example, in one of these sketches we find the fictional character wondering anxiously about why her lover has not called. This develops into a monologue about the difficulty that torture victims have in developing intimate relationships. We subsequently learn that this problem is central to the lives of the witnesses, many of whom have separated or divorced multiple times. Ex-militant Estrella Bohadana admits that for a long period she felt compelled to repeat her traumatic experience by attempting to maintain relationships with men who, in her words, 'performed the role of torturers' by being violent and abusive towards her. Another witness, Maria do Carmo, suggests how the numerous humiliations that

she suffered in prison translated into a generalized hatred and contempt for men. These examples, in combination with the fictional character's observations, confirm that certain experiences, although experienced individually, are common to all victims of torture.

Short interviews with the witnesses' work colleagues, relatives and acquaintances also help to widen the film's scope and frame post-dictatorship trauma as a phenomenon that has a larger social impact. These secondary subjects express feelings of shame and guilt associated, first, with their ignorance about torture during the dictatorship, and second, with their inability or unwillingness to learn more about it. One man who befriended a former militant after she was released from prison admits that despite working with her in a political organization, he has never discussed the subject with her: 'It's a topic that embarrasses everyone, those who talk and those who listen. So it's very difficult to talk about it. In fact, when she mentioned this movie, I asked her, "But who is going to watch a film about torture?"'. The self-reflexive question is echoed by the fictional character who then asks, 'Who is going to watch a film about us?', further framing the experience of torture victims in collective terms.

The film thus creates space and time for stories to be shared not just amongst victims and their families, but also with others who are invited to express their curiosity, perplexity, empathy and compassion. Through this form of collective memorialization, the film further articulates the status of traumatic memories as social and political, as well as individual.

Re-envisioning history

I have argued that the fictional and non-fictional sequences are differentiated in *Que bom te ver viva* by means of cinematic strategies such as setting, framing, lighting and performance. This is not to say, however, that they are kept separate. The most obvious connection occurs on the soundtrack in the many scenes in which the fictional character's voice carries over to comment on the testimonies. This voice-over commentary assumes a similar role to that

which Saul Friedlander identifies in Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985): a disruptive, questioning role that breaks the progression of the narration, introduces alternate interpretations, doubts any partial conclusions and withstands the need for closure (Friedlander 1992: 53).

As observed by Bruzzi (2006), the use of voice-over narration in documentary has been extensively criticized due to its associations with an omniscient, disembodied and predominantly male 'voice of God' that imposes meaning over the images and prevents alternative interpretations. She points to Nichol's (1991) 'expository' mode as contributing to cement this view of voice-overs as inherently conservative and authoritarian. Bruzzi problematizes this idea by drawing our attention to certain documentaries in which voice-over is used to promote ambivalence and uncertainty (2006: 64–66). She argues that female narration has been used to enhance this subversive potential of the voice-over, particularly when the voice is associated with that of the woman behind the camera. In contrast to the disembodied male voice that purports to convey objectivity and universality, female commentary can be 'an overt tool for exposing the untenability of documentary's belief in its capacity for imparting "generalised truths" faithfully and unproblematically' (Bruzzi 2006: 66). This is indeed the case with *Que bom te ver viva*, in which voice-over commentary by the fictional character can be understood to be relaying the director's own thoughts and observations.

For the most part, this voice-over adopts a supportive role that emphasizes the interviewees' resilience and celebrates their achievements. In some passages, however, it could be interpreted as contradicting what the images suggest or what the witnesses tell us. One example occurs during the testimony of Maria do Carmo, who lost her husband during a shoot-out and suffered from survivor's guilt for many years. Maria tells us that it was during her pregnancy that she finally found a reconciliation of sorts: 'Through my first pregnancy I

discovered that being a woman was the best thing in the world'. The voice-over then comments: 'Through pregnancy Maria claims to have recaptured the possibility of life. But does that explain or finalize everything?' A partial answer is given by the witness' mother who tells us that, at first, Maria life's was very difficult due to persistent nightmares and hallucinations, but that eventually her daughter was able to overcome it all. The voice-over's doubtful but respectful questioning persists: 'In the mother's pride, a visceral affirmation that all is well. It doesn't really matter if it's true or not. In the course of things, her daughter survived and that's the only answer that the world needs to hear'. In this particular example, the voice-over may appear to be somewhat controlling as it casts doubt over the interviewee's statement. Yet it never actually contradicts the mother's belief that her daughter has fully healed; it raises the question and leaves it unanswered.

Hence, rather than impose the director's view as the ultimate 'truth', the commentary in *Que bom te ver viva* has the opposite effect: it points to the frailty of the documentary itself to represent reality in an accurate and exhaustive way, in a manner that Bruzzi (2006) observes in relation to other documentaries. The images of Maria performing everyday tasks seem to confirm the mother's opinion that she has 'overcome it all'. What the voice-over reminds us, however, is that images can never tell us the whole story, particularly when it comes to psychological experiences. Hence, in this and other passages, the voice-over opens up a different interpretation of what is being said or shown, draws our attention to what is not, and leaves the possibilities open.

In addition to the voice-over commentary, another way in which *Que bom te ver viva* links together its multiple narratives is through a recurring criticism of the media manipulation orchestrated by the military regime.¹² With politically charged headlines such as 'Now You will Know All the Secrets of Terror', 'The Nation Threatened by Subversives' and 'Hijackers Sentenced to Death', black-and-white reproductions of the front pages of the country's

mainstream newspapers from the late 1960s and early 1970s punctuate the film. Some of these headlines can be read as a means of anchoring the narrative in the historical period, particularly as they relate to specific events which the witnesses recount. Most of them, however, are marked by a sensationalist quality that helps to emphasize the distance between a mainstream media discourse that supported the regime and how militants themselves remember the past. The sensationalism and distortion are deconstructed and undermined in the testimonies as the women describe, in rich detail and with formidable expressiveness, their determination to fight for a fairer society, their belief in the possibility of change, their awareness of risk and their complex ethical position in the struggle against the dictatorship. The criticism of the media continues in more direct form in some of the dramatized sketches where the fictional character mocks and disparages the stories that she finds in the newspapers.

By highlighting the absurdity of media manipulation and by contrasting the discourse propagated in the press with the witnesses' recollections, the film promotes a radical revision of history. Spectators themselves are invited to participate in this revision as the fictional character accuses the film's intended audience, the Brazilian middle-classes, of complicity in the 'pact of silence' that kept the crimes of the dictatorship a secret. The fictional character points to the hypocrisy of the educated, Left-Wing elites who call themselves liberal and yet shy away from any discussion about human rights violations: 'For how long will I have to keep lowering my eyes when the word "torture" is mentioned? I can't send anybody to Hell, after all, no one is responsible. Only the torturer'. She then turns to address the viewer in frontal close-up: 'Not you of course. You were at home, looking after your kids. Or maybe you were sorting your head out in Paris. The one place where you certainly were not was in the DOI-CODI' (the headquarters of the military police where political prisoners were tortured).

This rewriting of history suggests that the considerable numbers of middle-class Brazilians who watched the dictatorship from a safe distance, and who benefitted from the economic growth that it promoted in the early 1970s, should see themselves as ‘implicated subjects’ rather than innocent bystanders (Rothberg 2014). In his call to pluralize definitions of trauma in order to encompass structural forms of violence, Rothberg suggests ‘implicated subject’ as an appropriate term to describe those who are neither simply perpetrators nor victims, but ‘beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and uneven experiences of trauma and wellbeing simultaneously’ (2014: xv). The fictional character in *Que bom te ver viva* is well aware that middle-class viewers cannot be held responsible for the dictatorship’s crimes: ‘Not you’, she says. Yet, through her sarcastic comment and direct address she reminds them that, by virtue of their silence and aloofness, they are nevertheless complicit, even if only partially.

Acting out and working through

In his writings on the Holocaust, LaCapra (1994, 1998, 2001) redevelops the Freudian-derived concepts of ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ in such ways as to forge a more obvious connection between psychological phenomena and socio-historical processes. In these terms, acting out is a compulsive repetition or reliving of traumatic occurrences in which the past and the present collapse; in other words, the victim lives the present as if he or she were still fully in the past, with no distance from it (LaCapra 2001: 142–43). Working through is a countervailing force in which the victim tries to gain critical distance from a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future, thus allowing him or her to regain an interest in life and the possibility of being an ethical and political agent. These two concepts are useful in helping us understand the representation of survival strategies in *Que bom te ver viva*. The sequence in which the fictional character re-enacts a conversation with her ex-husband, for example, is illustrative of acting out as a repetitive process whereby the past ‘is repeated as if it were fully enacted, fully literalized’ (LaCapra 2001: 148). Seated on

her bed wearing a white jumpsuit that resembles a straitjacket, the character furiously accuses her 'ex' of using her phobia of cockroaches as a way of torturing her. A previous scene has informed us that her phobia derived from a real experience of having been sexually tortured that way. She then becomes aware of her own confusion and returns to the present: 'Oh shit! Will I ever be able to stop turning every man into a torturer?'

Picking up on the same theme of sexual torture, one interviewee analyses her phobia of lizards: 'It's not because I believe that they might turn into crocodiles, it's because of what that image evokes in me. It brings back the same terror, not only of that specific act, but of everything else I lived in prison'. As this example suggests, the witness's critical reflection on her own pathological response presupposes a more distanced stance that characterizes processes of working through. In this testimony, as indeed in all other testimonies apart from one, there is no collapse between the present and the past. The representation of acting out is, for the most part, reserved for the dramatizations, as exemplified in the 'fear of cockroaches' scene described above.

There is only one sequence in which an actual witness's recollection of her time in prison makes her inadvertently relive the painful experience as if it were happening in the present. The temporal collapse becomes apparent as Jesse Jane admits that seeing her sister and companions being tortured provokes stronger emotions in her now than it did at the time of its occurrence.

They took me to the sick bay ... of the DOI CODI... to see Heraldo, but he was... absolutely unconscious... and they knew that he was going to die, he had been machine gunned in the spine ... They wanted... They thought that by making me see Heraldo they would get more out of me... So I watched him die, but I thought that we were all

going to die, it wasn't such a strong emotion as it is today, particularly because we were all being repeatedly tortured... so seeing one companion die and another slung on the pole wasn't so different in terms of emotion.

Jesse's testimony is evocative of Caruth's well-known definition of trauma as 'a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes place in the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event' (1995: 4). Jesse's unexpected 'possession' by the return of traumatic events is evident in the affective quality of her testimony, marked by a constant stream of tears, pauses, confusion and difficulty in verbal expression. Yet, in line with the rest of the film that favours the representation of working through in the testimonies, her acting out is immediately followed by a sequence which invites us to return to the present and see her painful recollections in a larger context. A cut takes us to a scene shot on a São Paulo street as she steps into a car with her husband. On the soundtrack, the voice-over is directed at both us and Jesse: 'Jesse spent another nine years in prison after that. Difficult calculations: three months being tortured, one year in isolation in a ward for the mentally ill and the rest with the political prisoners. But they couldn't break you, remember?'

By the end of the sequence we learn that, like many witnesses in the film, Jesse's engagement with politics is now stronger than ever. In her work as a historian she has specialized in tracing documents and information that help her to denounce human rights violations that took place during the dictatorship. Hence, like the film itself, rather than using memory as a way of dwelling in the pure remembrance of traumatic events, she uses it as a means to accomplish a political project in the present.¹³

The film's emphasis on working through is yet another means by which it connects subjective memory and the wider social, political and historical context. This is better understood in light of LaCapra's account of working through as one of the crucial means of becoming an ethical and political agent. He argues that working through involves simultaneously remembering and taking leave of the past, 'thereby allowing for critical judgement and a reinvestment in life, notably social and civic life with its demands, responsibilities, and norms' (LaCapra 2001: 70). Accordingly, in *Que bom te ver viva* the witnesses' various political roles as members of the group Tortura Nunca Mais (Torture Never More)¹⁴, as leaders of organizations to protect women against violence, as historians or university teachers are highlighted as a fundamental means through which they are able to continue with their lives without necessarily taking leave of the past – which, as the film stresses throughout, is neither possible nor desirable.

The emphasis on working through is also used to suggest that, far from being a historically specific event that affected a relatively small number of victims, the systematic use of torture by the State and the impunity of perpetrators have paved the way for a wider structural problem that permeates Brazilian society in the contemporary period: the acceptance of violence, and in particular police violence, as 'normal'. Over the images of former militant Regina Toscano leading a meeting in an organization that she created to support women in one of the most impoverished areas of Rio de Janeiro, the voice-over says: 'Here in the Baixada Fluminense we find the worst kind of violence, that which is so impregnated in women's lives that no one even talks about it'. This view is confirmed in a brief interview with a local resident who states: 'The violence here is greater than what happened during the dictatorship. A few metres from here there is a place where they dump the bodies. Our children see this everyday'.

The comparison between torture in the military prisons and the violence of everyday life in the Baixada Fluminense is reinforced by Maria Luisa, another ex-militant also engaged with grassroots movements. She tells us: ‘Life here is a kind of torture, so much so that when I tell somebody about what I suffered in prison they show little reaction. They look at me as if it’s kind of normal’.

Creating the witness

As discussed by Schneider (2011), a ‘politics of silence’ was the strategy adopted by the State to evade responsibility for the crimes committed during the dictatorship and promote a discourse of reconciliation.¹⁵ For many of the victims, this collective denial has had catastrophic consequences as it annulled the possibility of understanding events that marked their lives and of working through traumatic memories. It has also, as suggested by witness Rosalinda Cruz, deepened their social isolation and stigmatized anyone who felt compelled to speak out:

[t]orture is something ugly, unheroic, therefore people are unwilling to come closer. They’re frightened of taking up this banner. So it’s the victims and the families who have to raise the banner, and who, in a way, remain isolated, rather like witch hunters, like those hunters of the Nazis. We unwillingly become identified with this, and it’s a struggle to keep up the denunciations.

In some ways, the politics of silence that affected victims of Latin American dictatorships can be understood in similar terms as Felman and Laub’s description of the Holocaust as ‘an event without a witness’ (1992: xvii). As argued by Laub, the act of witnessing requires an

addressable other, that is, an empathic listener who can hear the witnesses' memories and thus affirm and recognize their reality (1992a: 68). Elaborating on this, Jelin explains that the possibility of witnessing can only arise in the presence of 'others' with the ability to ask and express curiosity about a painful past (2003: 65). In order to speak out, she stresses elsewhere, one needs 'a space of confidence, a space where being listened to is central' (Jelin 2012: 347). Similarly, Kaplan defines the act of witnessing as implying a larger ethical framework that makes possible the public recognition of atrocities (2005: 122).

As suggested in *Que bom te ver viva*, it was precisely the lack of addressable others and the refusal of the Brazilian government, and large parts of the population, to acknowledge State crimes committed in the military period that made the act of witnessing impossible for a long period after the dictatorship's end. Akin to what happened in Chile and to a lesser extent in Argentina, Brazil's democratic transition depended on a series of negotiations and compromises, of which the 1979 Amnesty Law is the most telling example, which deemed any attempt to denounce human rights violations and bring perpetrators to justice as retrograde, anti-nationalist and, in the terminology adopted by the Brazilian Right, 'revanchista' (revengeful).¹⁶ It can be argued, then, that by generating a 'space of confidence' (Jelin 2012: 347) and convening survivors to articulate their memories, *Que bom te ver viva* has succeeded in 'creating a witness where there was none' to use the terminology employed by Laub (1992b) in relation to the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. The film's attempt to broaden understanding of what has been done to victims has the potential to prompt an ethical response from 'empathic others' and transform the way viewers see the world or think about injustice, as Kaplan (2005) has argued in relation to testimonial texts more generally.¹⁷

Indeed, in one of the few academic essays on *Que bom te ver viva*, Calegari (2013) highlights the importance of the film as a tool for reconstructing personal and social identities through

testimony. He argues that, if one of the intended consequences of torture is the fracturing of a person's individual and social identities, the film does exactly the opposite: it invites subjects to reconnect with their painful past, as well as with the goals, values and victories that they held as militants, and by doing so encourages them to suture their broken identities. From a socio-political perspective, the importance of restoring these identities lies in the possibility of counterbalancing hegemonic discourses with a new history, 'the history of the marginalised, excluded and persecuted' (Calegari 2013: 7).

A significant example of such empowerment through the act of testimony is introduced towards the end of the film, when former militant Regina Toscano reconciles herself with the fact that her torturers will likely never be punished.

[I] might be overestimating myself, but I think that I'm stronger than those guys. [...] In terms of being human, of having feelings, I feel stronger than them. Today I can say that I had victories, but they can't say the same. They had personal defeats. So I can say that, and it's not just me, it's us, we are far superior to them.

Given the lack of a complete account of the violations under dictatorship and the corresponding punishment of perpetrators, Toscano here creates her own public trial through the act of witnessing on film. And that surely is the larger goal of *Que bom te ver viva*, to serve as a public forum for remembering and sharing experiences that, up until very recently, the Brazilian State and large sectors of society have made every effort to forget.

Conclusion

With its strong emphasis on individual testimonies and repeated allusions to psychoanalysis, *Que bom te ver viva*'s prevailing framework for representing trauma does seem, initially at least, to be a psychological one. Yet, as I have attempted to show, the film's focus on how trauma irrupts in the individual does not exclude or override an interest in the socio-political conditions that give rise to it. On the contrary, the representation of subjective memories and strategies of survival are here closely allied to an examination of the social, cultural and political context of the Brazilian dictatorship. I have argued that there are three main ways through which the film invites us to understand the traumatic effects of torture in socio-political terms, as well as individual ones. First, it does so by adopting a fragmented, circular structure that encourages us to read first-person testimonies as pieces in the construction of a larger social memory of that particular historical period. Second, the film suggests that the repression and abuse that took place during that period are not confined to the past. By turning our gaze from the dictatorship's victims to the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro's impoverished outskirts, *Que bom te ver viva* draws a connection between the culture of violence established during the military regime and the ongoing, systematic forms of abuse in the contemporary period, when Brazilians supposedly find themselves under democratic rule. Finally, and in line with this critique, the film focuses attention on the importance of taking collective action towards systemic change, as suggested in the numerous scenes accompanying women in their contemporary political activities and in the testimonies where they stress their continued engagement with politics. Hence, rather than privileging psychological recovery over the transformation of socio-economic and political systems, or leaving unquestioned the conditions that enabled traumatic abuse (two potential risks identified by Craps [2014]), *Que bom te ver viva* combines a concern with individual psychology with the need for social, political and juridical responses to traumatic events. This runs parallel to Murat's own experience in simultaneously leaving and giving continuation to

her psychoanalytic treatment in the shape of a continued, life-long engagement with political filmmaking, which she herself interprets as a form of working through her painful memories.¹⁸

As argued by LaCapra (2001), processes of working through are not simply therapeutic for the individual but have political and ethical implications. Working through enables victimized groups to disengage from the past in order to take action in the present. By limiting representations of processes of acting out almost entirely to the fictional part of the film, *Que bom te ver viva* does not deny the witnesses' victimhood. Rather, it moves our attention away from it and favours the construction of female militants as individuals who have paid, and who continue to pay, a high price for their rebelliousness and militancy, but whose extraordinary commitment to their own ideals has helped them to survive and to continue their political activities in the present.

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Notes

¹ The wave of protests against the FIFA 2014 World Cup happened between June 2013 and July 2014 and became known as ‘Não Vai Ter Copa’ (‘There Will Be No Cup’). Protestors argued that the government’s heavy investment in infra-structure for the games was misdirecting money that should be spent on health care, education and public transport. The protests were extensively covered by the country’s major newspapers, including Folha de São Paulo, O Estado de São Paulo and O Globo. For an overview in English, see the survey ‘Brazilian Discontent Ahead of World Cup’ conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International, available at: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/06/03/brazilian-discontent-ahead-of-world-cup/>, accessed 29 March 2016.

² For detailed discussions of the National Truth Commission in Brazil, including the controversies and debates it has engendered, see Reginaldo B. Dias (2013: 71–95) and Nina Schneider (2011: 198–212). Rebecca J. Atencio’s blog Transitional Justice in Brazil includes entries about the Commission’s recent developments, including a link to its final report: <http://transitionaljusticeinbrazil.com/>, accessed 15 July 2015. See also Atencio’s (2014) *Memory’s Turn: Reckoning with Dictatorship in Brazil*.

³ Personal communication with author.

⁴ Murat used the term ‘semi-documentary’ in our personal communication to emphasize her decision to combine fiction and non-fiction methods in the film. The terminology may appear outdated since, as Bruzzi (2006) and others have observed, dramatization and re-enactment have become increasingly accepted as part of the documentary tradition. I have maintained

Murat's terminology here as a means of drawing attention to the ways in which this film's fiction and non-fiction strategies serve different purposes and are clearly signalled to the viewer as distinct.

⁵ Information about the film festival and its homage to Lucia Murat can be found online: <http://www.mostracinemaedireitoshumanos.sdh.gov.br/2014/>, accessed 15 July 2015.

⁶ There has been a boom of post-dictatorship films in Brazil after the mid-1990s yet, in contrast to *Que Bom Te Ver Viva*, where the problem of torture is central to the narrative, the majority of these films approach torture indirectly or marginally.

⁷ English-language bibliography on Murat is particularly scarce. Leslie Marsh (2012) includes a brief analysis of the director's film and career in *Brazilian Women's Filmmaking: From Dictatorship to Democracy*. In Portuguese, amongst the handful of scholarly articles on Murat two merit attention: Lizandro Carlos Calegari's (2013: 70–95), 'Testemunho, trauma e identidade em Quem bom te Ver Viva', and Fernanda Andrade do Nascimento Alves (2010: 105–20) 'A Morte e a Donzela e Que Bom Te Ver Viva: O Teor Testemunhal'.

⁸ See, for example, the special editions of two journals focusing on the politics of memory and trauma in Latin America: *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia*; and *Latin American Perspectives*, 2013, 40:5. See also Antonio Traverso's (2010: 179–91) 'Dictatorship memories: Working through trauma in Chilean post-dictatorship documentary', Antonius Robben (2005: 120–64).

⁹ The use of a fictional character as Murat's alter-ego appears again in *A memória que me contam*. This character is also played by actress Irene Ravache.

¹⁰ Personal communication with author. All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

¹¹ Personal communication with author.

¹² Beatriz Kushnir's (2004) *Cães de Guarda: Jornalistas e Censores do AI-5 à Constituição de 1988*, offers detailed analyses of how the Brazilian mainstream press colluded with the military dictatorship.

¹³ The greater emphasis on working through is a trend that *Que bom te ver viva* anticipates in relation to Latin American post-dictatorship cinema. Writing on Chilean documentaries made during and after the 1990s, Traverso (2010: 180) suggests that rather than repetitively acting out fixed traumatic memories, which he sees as the mark of trauma cinema, Chilean documentaries encourage strategies of representation 'that work through the memory of the damage and suffering caused by the military regime'.

¹⁴ Tortura Nunca Mais is a grassroots group initiated clandestinely in 1976 by the families of individuals who were tortured and/or disappeared in military prisons. In 1985 the group was legalized and registered as a non-profit organisation. More information available at: <http://www.torturanuncamais-sp.org/>, accessed 14 July 2015.

¹⁵ Atencio (2014:14) describes this process as 'reconciliation by institutionalized forgetting'. As the author points out, institutionalized forgetting was supported by parts of the Brazilian left, including victims of the dictatorship, see *Memory's Turn*, Chapter 1.

¹⁶ Schneider (2011: 206–07) aptly explains *revanchismo* as 'a politically biased term commonly used by military officials to refute punishment or criticism of violent actions, including torture, which occurred during the regime'. The term suggests that demands to prosecute torturers are pursued for personal vengeance.

¹⁷ After democratic transition, testimonial writing became the preferred means for former militants to share their recollections. Fernando Gabeira's best-seller *O que é isso, companheiro (What's Up, Comrade?)* (1979) is a famous example. However, as argued by Atencio (2014: 28–58), part of this memory work was not entirely inconsistent with the military regime's politics of reconciliation through institutionalised forgetting.

¹⁸ Personal communication with author.