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Brazil's International Disability Film Festival Assim Vivemos

Ana Gilbert

I am I and my circumstance. – José Ortega y Gasset¹

A blind person and her companion proceed to the information desk at the festival center and request audio description equipment. A sighted person also gets one. Entering the screening hall, the employee in charge of collecting tickets instructs me to do the same. Curious, I turn and approach the information desk. The employee says, 'Yes, it's audio description equipment, don't you want to try it?'



Fig. 1: 6th International Disability Film Festival, Brazil

I am at the 6th edition of Brazil's International Disability Film Festival *Assim Vivemos* (The Way We Live).² The festival is hosted at the Bank of Brazil Cultural Centre (Centro Cultural do Banco do Brasil – CCBB) in Rio de Janeiro in a magnificent neoclassical building designed in 1906 by Francisco Joaquim Bethencourt da Silva, architect of the Brazilian Imperial House. The building was renovated in the 1980s to house the cultural centre and it offers a harmonious balance between a sophisticated atmosphere and a setting for technological resources – which configures it as a multimedia centre and a forum for debating a wide range of topics. The coexistence of tradition and innovation makes it the ideal space to host a festival with the aim to stimulate new perspectives for looking at disability.

Back to the information desk. I accept the employee's suggestion and put the headphones on. Wheelchair users are accommodated in the theater just before the screening starts. Throughout the organised debates sign language translators are in place enabling effective communication for people with hearing impairments. During breaks, while walking around the festival spaces, I ask myself what normal is, and I see the answer materialise right in front of me. Among the spectators are people with and without disabilities, teenagers and adults, groups of students and teachers, militants and professionals, all in some way related to the subject of disability. What I see is not a sole model of the human body or a sole definition of normal but rather various definitions. Surrounded by this multiplicity of forms of being and ways of living the distinction between 'us' and 'them' does not make sense.

Assim Vivemos began in 2003 as a pioneering event in Brazil. The festival is biennial and takes place in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. It is sponsored by the Bank of Brazil, a bank controlled by the Brazilian government through its cultural institution CCBB. In 2010 and 2012 itinerant editions were conducted in Belo Horizonte and three other cities of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, sponsored by the semi-public multinational energy company Petrobrás and the Ministry of Culture.

Despite being a Brazilian event the festival has an international dimension in aiming to compare different ways of dealing with disability in different countries. According to the curators and producers, Lara Valentina Pozzobon and Gustavo Acioli from *Lavoro Produções*,³ a company facilitating accessibility for cultural products and projects in Brazil, the event began with the purpose of stimulating debate on issues related to accessible entertainment for people with disabilities. Beyond this initial interest *Assim Vivemos* and other disability film festivals share the aim to question or defy stereotyped labels which serve to demarcate difference. Its purpose is not only to display disability on the screen but also to give people with disabilities the role of protagonists in their own stories, using art to produce narratives about their lives.

The launch of the festival's first edition was contemporaneous with Brazilian public policies concerning people with disabilities (e.g. the National Policy for the

Integration of People with Disability in 1999 and the National Policy on Health Care for People with Disability in 2002), which followed an international movement led by the United Nations and the World Health Organization. Moreover, it was closely associated with the strength of socially-disseminated discourses of difference and diversity as an alternative to normality patterns, which serve as grounds for the 'scenography' of the inclusion of disability – that is to say gatherings of people involved in processes of thinking, discussing, enacting, imagining, and representing disability.

In this sixth edition 26 films are exhibited in 12 programmes of approximately 90 minutes each, alternating between two screening rooms. The majority of the films are short and mid-length documentaries of varying technical quality about several genetic and non-genetic conditions such as Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, stroke and aphasia, visual and hearing impairments, and dwarfism, among others. At every edition a jury comprising individuals from the spheres of arts, health, journalism, and disability activism is invited to award the best films. After the screening of a specific film or group of films debates are organised to investigate correlated issues (e.g. autism and its challenges or the institutionalisation of people with disabilities) and proposals for specific actions, bringing together the discourses of both people with disabilities and specialists (many of them with some kind of disability) such as speech therapists, psychoanalysts, researchers, teachers, physicians, and public administrators.

Disability film festivals are considered to be 'social concern festivals',⁴ as political activism predominates. They aim to provide a depathologising context⁵ distant from the biomedical domain, a space to think and feel outside of pre-established conceptual and normative frames, a space to question aesthetic ideals about what are considered healthy and able bodies. Nevertheless, as particular somatic realities are present it is not possible to radically break with that domain, even acknowledging that those realities are inadequately grouped under the same homogenised category 'disability', which is unable to reflect the complex variety of human beings. The discourses that permeate these events are a mixture of biomedical and lay knowledge which intertwine to shape meanings about people with conditions which involve specific biological aspects and diagnostic categories; these conditions are susceptible to mechanisms of intervention and decisive in identity construction processes.

It can be observed that there is a correspondence between films and videos about disability and theoretical studies on the subject. The medical model of disability has been prevalent since the 19th century when medical definitions and classifications replaced superstitious and religious beliefs and practices; it produced the polarity 'disabled' versus 'able-bodied' and gave rise to medical narratives where disability is something to be eliminated, cured, or rehabilitated. In the 1970s a shift

of perspective occurred and a social model appeared to question the previous one. A difference was made between impairment (an individualised pre-social reality) and disability (a socially-constructed and disembodied phenomenon) and narratives of overcoming prevailed. This was part of a political movement associated with the slogan ‘nothing about us without us’ created by the disability rights group. However, in the late 1980s and 1990s critical studies of disability developed an important critique of both models. Their intention is to question the biological essentialist determinism but also the social constructivism, since overcoming (which carries a notion that ‘people with disability are like everyone else’) might lead to the invisibility of limitations and ultimately of disability.⁶

Documentaries on disability often intend to be visible evidence of the realities of people whose marks (be they visible as in paraplegia, visual impairment, and cognitive deficit; or not visible at a glance as in deafness; or invisible to the naked eye as in chromosomal disorders) make them different from a pattern. In doing so they mirror what people with disabilities are like and how they manage their lives. The documentaries screened at this festival follow the same tendency, which is summarised by the name of the festival – ‘The Way We Live’ – after the German festival *Wie wir leben*,⁷ which was a source of inspiration for the Brazilian event. In those films long shots abound with the purpose of taking the spectators on the characters’ daily journey. This strategy of representation blurs the notion that a documentary film is not real life but is about real life.⁸ As a result the filmmakers decision to use cinematic language to narrate the lives of ‘real’ individuals are made invisible due to the dramatic element in such narratives.

Most of the films in this sixth edition assemble narratives which reflect the critical studies of disability and make explicit how some elements of the three models coexist. Beyond the ‘nothing about us without us’ slogan those films question practices of inclusion but reinforce difference and multiplicity; they discuss how disability is a social issue but keep it embodied. In addition, they explore a search for new meanings by people faced with inexorable situations, proposing possible creative strategies from the elements and limitations one has in life (as in Ortega y Gasset’s circumstance). Diagnostic categories (visible and material) are starting points from which to depart in search not of cure or rehabilitation but of different models of bodies, different perspectives, a variety of potential projects for an uncertain and uncontrollable future. Interestingly, in the Brazilian productions selected for screening there was a predominance of narratives of overcoming, suggesting a cultural difficulty in dealing with the non-normative corporeality of such bodies and thus activating mechanisms of compensation.

The festival carries what can be understood as a clear signature of the curators: a perspective from ‘within’ to talk about disability, focusing on the characters’ affect and visibility, which appears as a common element in the films. Assim

Vivemos is only possible because of the efforts of its curators who also function as screening committee. As a result, the selection of films involves a dose of personal choice as well as a concession to the preferences of the audience which they have learned to recognise since the festival's first edition, even at the risk of transmitting an ambiguous message. They exert an influence on what images of disability are disseminated and ultimately forge concepts, values, and practices on disability.

Technological resources such as audio description, closed caption, sign language, booklets in braille, and adapted access for wheelchair users are offered at the festival to guarantee the access of people with disabilities to films and debates during the ten-day event. This practice values them as an audience and it is being replicated in other cultural events. However, the use of technology in the field of disability is not just a practice of giving access to entertainment to a certain group. Technological mediation is a fundamental aspect in reshaping a sense of personhood for people with disabilities with new technologies of the self⁹ which determine the way individuals act upon themselves, based on specific discourses of truth; it can be understood not only as a tool for optimising and enhancing the body but also relationships. Communicability then is a key word represented on the 2013 edition catalogue cover, created from a painting by Antônio Bokel.¹⁰ Showing the realities of different life forms is not enough; it is necessary to interact, to build bridges of communication which supplant the binary and reductive categories of normality and disability. Furthermore, it urges us to understand that communication is always a two-way street, requiring an effort from all of us.

The Bank of Brazil has sponsored the festival since its first edition via a grant application form. However, similar to other film festivals, funding opportunities are always a difficult matter. Film production on disability grows, the space the festival occupies in the national cultural arena expands, but the budget reduces. The search for new partners, especially in the private sector, has met with little success. Does this mean that disability, as human diversity and not as a 'problem', has no proper place in society in which it can be discussed?

Returning to the screening room, I close my eyes. The information that comes through the sense of sight is temporarily cancelled. With this action it is easier to embark on the parallel narrative that comes from the audio description. I realise how difficult it is to change perspectives and to leave one's comfort zone. I ponder the idea that we perceive the world framed and that we make use of these frames to select what is to be viewed and how, such as the image of a normal body or a body we consider inadequate because it seems to lack something. The festival tackles this question. As a heterotopic space,¹¹ an 'other' space where a new utopia different from the one that prioritises a sole model of the human body can increase in strength, Assim Vivemos stimulates us to experience new perspectives. To a certain extent its ambition is to teach the audience how to 'see' disability and people

with disabilities. In doing so it exerts a governmentality¹² or a way of governing the viewer's conduct by stimulating new practices of looking that can destabilise certainties, question polarities, and make us reflect on whether the definition of personhood we share is comprehensive enough to include human variability.

Notes

1. José Ortega y Gasset's (2007) statement about individual and collective human life (*Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia*), which means that human beings cannot be detached from the world or their circumstance (when talking about disability: their life conditions, limitations, and capacities).
2. www.assimvivemos.com.br/2013
3. www.lavoroproducoes.com.br
4. Iordanova 2009, p. 31.
5. Snyder & Mitchell 2008.
6. Goodley & Hughes & Davis 2012.
7. www.abm-mediien.de
8. Aufderheide 2007.
9. Foucault 2003.
10. <http://www.antoniobokel.com.br>
11. Foucault 1984.
12. Foucault 2009.

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