



Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens

Vol. (2025)

ISSN 2183-7198 (electrónico/online)

DOI (volume): <https://doi.org/10.34619/nzc0-f1bq>

Homepage: <https://revistas.fcsh.unl.pt/index.php/rci>

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Como Citar | How to cite:

Laranjeiro, C., & Sapeta Dias, I. (2025). *Somos sempre a vida póstuma dos outros: mapa para uma pró-memória*. *Revista De Comunicação E Linguagens*, (62), 7-23. <https://doi.org/10.34619/blta-jx41>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34619/blta-jx41>

Editor | Publisher:

ICNOVA - Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA

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We are always the posthumous life of others: a map for a pro-memory

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Between 2021 and 2023, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) presented the temporary exhibition *Critical Fabulations*, a group show that brought together works by contemporary artists whose practices explore and respond to the colonial legacies inscribed on their bodies. Their works were articulated with enigmatic photographs from the early twentieth century, of unknown authorship and amateur character, composed, for the most part, of portraits of black people — both in formal poses and in scenes from everyday life.

The title of the exhibition, borrowed from Saidiya Hartman’s essay “Venus in Two Acts” (2008), published in the magazine *Small Axe*, refers to a speculative and tactile method of writing, tried out to reach where the archive and history do not. In the introduction to this essay, which is more concise but methodologically as innovative as the first volume of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* [1976 (1994)], Hartman outlines the pillars of a writing method that seeks to give back and flesh out the words absent from official documents, opening up space and existence for bodies and stories that find no place in the traditional parameters of historiography.

This experimental writing finds in fiction a way of dealing with absence and with what has been obliterated, taking as its object the untold stories of people trafficked while enslaved. It is not a method driven by the desire to recover, but a practice that avoids perpetuating the violence-now discursive-imposed on those who were (are) enslaved. Inspired by this approach, Hartman bases his method on the question “what could have been?”, initiating a writing in which past, present and future are intertwined. “*Critical Fabulations*” thus emerges as a practice that challenges the boundaries between history

and fiction, opening up ways of representing silenced experiences and reconfiguring the possibilities of historiographical writing. As the author states:

The intention of this practice is not to give the enslaved person a voice, but to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience that lies between two zones of death — social death and bodily death — and to confront the precarious lives that are only visible when they disappear. It is an impossible writing that tries to say what resists being said (since the dead girls cannot speak). It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what could have been or what may have been; it is a history written with and against the archive (2008, 33).

The method has clear affinities with Foucauldian archaeology, and Hartman bases his argument precisely on Michel Foucault's unfinished project, *La vie des hommes infâmes* [The Lives of Infamous Men] (1999). This is writing anchored in the practice of articulating what has been said and written, seeking, in this articulation, what persists, what becomes hegemonic—the “record of the encounter between lives and power” (Foucault, *apud* Hartman 2008, 14). The aim is to bring visibility and legibility to what was hidden (unconscious) in the shapeless mass of what was written or said (of the archive, therefore). Hartman calls this approach “recombinative narrative”, quoting Stan Douglas (2008, 35). However, despite starting from the same methodological root, the horizon of the investigation is different: it is another specific form of persistence — the persistence of absence — of which the absence of the names of enslaved women in the narratives of white men is an example.

In this movement and in this way, and in a critique of the more stable ethical position of so-called post-colonial studies, Hartman proposes to expose and think no longer about the horror wrought on those who were commercialized in the territories colonized by the European powers, but about what is heir to that horror and barbarism today. The horizon of the investigation is then no longer the past, nor the desire for recovery, reconstitution or historical reparation, nor even the appeasement of horror. The horizon is the present and the future: what will it be like to see with these eyes blinded by the archive, and what will it be like to write history with these violently silenced voices? By not answering, the impossibility of an answer is pointed out and the choice is made to install chaos in the order of the official archive — this is his strategy for dealing with the insurmountable absences of history. Through fiction, Hartman shows the fictionalization that the archive is. In his words:

I longed to write a new history, a history that was not subject to the constraints of official documents and that went beyond the reformulations and transpositions that constituted the strategy of disordering and transgressing the protocols of the archive and the authority of its statements, allowing me to argue with and intensify its fictions (2008, 28).

The dossier we are proposing here — We are always the posthumous lives of others: a map for a pro-memory — was born out of attempts (in two projects we have been working

on) to name a set of practices and objects that find in imagination (or fiction) a way of approaching the blind spots of memory.

Between 2016 and 2020, the TRAÇA project [Arquivo Municipal de Lisboa — Videoteca] distributed the orphaned films from its family film archive among various film and performing arts creators. What emerged from this meeting revealed recurring strategies which, in turn, were close to the strategies of the depositors of the family films themselves (those which, unlike the orphans, have their origins known), who, when asked to comment on the projection of these images, either failed to remember — sometimes because they did not remember, sometimes because they did not want to — or varied, producing discrepant accounts of the same films.

We can make a brief map of these recurring strategies here, as some of them will be found again in various works in this dossier. In the images of a homogeneous (the children dressed alike) and happy (apparently) family, a man from that family commented, at the end of the projection, on the sadness, conflict and anger that were not visible in the projected images — or that perhaps resided in their interstices. Through description, which made perceptible what was hidden by the speed of the projection, or by paying attention to what escaped the pose, some artists recovered what would otherwise have remained unnoticeable: a blind field of the films that was nevertheless there. At another screening that was commented on, a woman jumped up to the screen and asked for the projection to be paused when she saw the faces and bodies of her now-dead friends, who were dancing to inaudible music in the films. She brought the record that was playing at the time and was visibly frustrated when she saw the movie made from her images, where a director, through fiction and editing, tried to imagine the unrecoverable. The attempt to reconstruct the context, to fill in the gaps left by silent family films with no history through fiction, proved to be another recurring strategy. When a depositor entrusted his films to the Video Library, he made a specific request: that they only be seen if they were mixed and reassembled with others. He saw montage, the merging of his archive with others, as a way of preserving his intimacy. When handling the intimate images deposited, some artists chose to present their own personal archives and their own private images, moved by the shame of interfering in other people's memories. This gesture sometimes resulted in a gradual, almost imperceptible transition from speech in the third person singular ("she") to the first ("I"). Others, on the other hand, intertwined private images with fragments of official and collective history, as if they were trying to make history pass through the tiny eye of a needle — a personal history. The aim varied: either to make previously invisible and nameless characters visible, or to reveal how the history of cinema and visual culture invades the images that each of us creates of our intimacy.

The FILMASPORA project shares with the TRAÇA project the practice of collecting amateur films, although not necessarily family films. These films are made by immigrants and Afro-descendants on the outskirts of the Lisbon metropolitan area and are part of their own distribution circuit. A preliminary analysis of these works reveals that, although they were filmed in the Lisbon metropolitan area, they tend to portray the directors' country

of origin. An example of this is the work of João Pereira (a.k.a. Ticaí), whose films, shot in Zambujal de Loures, represent the place of Santa Catarina, on the island of Santiago, Cape Verde. What is curious is that, rather than portraying the past (when they still lived there), these films represent an imagined return, as if they were projecting a future reality, when they return to live in that place. Although their main objective is entertainment, these works also reveal in their interstices and gaps post-colonial tensions which, when re-signified in the context of the diaspora, expose the persistent practices of segregation and exclusion that have survived the end of colonialism.

Faced with these practices and these objects, we realized that, although extremely powerful, the proposal that Marianne Hirsch formulates as “post-memory” was not enough to fully encompass and describe these dynamics. We quote the author’s definition:

Post-memory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or origin is mediated, not by recollection, but through imaginative investment and creation. This does not mean that memory itself is not mediated, but rather that it is more directly linked to the past [...] Postmemory — often obsessive and persistent — need not be absent or empty: it is as full and as empty as it is constructed, just like memory itself (2012, 22-23).

If “post-memory” describes a relationship with the past that, even without having been directly experienced, is reformulated as memory, “pro-memory”, as proposed here, seeks to account for the reformulation operated by projection — of oneself, of space or of the present — in the constitution of memory. Although the former shares affinities with the method explored by Saidiya Hartman, the distance between the horrors underpinning the two authors’ approaches is decisive: while post-memory is formulated on the basis of the “Final Solution” and the indirect memories of the descendants of the few who survived, Hartman’s “critical fabulation” emerges from the impossibility of a direct memory of slavery (and, consequently, of its legacy). It is precisely the movement of this memory and the strategies that attempt to respond to this void that we propose to address in this issue.

The idea of an “over-memory” — an addition or a memory constituted by excess — is also useful for thinking about this movement of “projecting memory” onto others, in space and in the present. The aim is to understand the extent to which working with the memories of others interferes with the very constitution and definition of the memorial process. This thematic dossier thus proposes to debate the inaugural concept of pro-memory, understood as a variation of post-memory, by seeking to capture the effect of projection — a process made concrete by cinema and the moving image — on the construction of memory. We propose this discussion with the conviction that innovative methodologies and practices for investigating and working with memory can emerge from it.

It’s important to note that, faced with the proposed concept, a significant number of authors have found a way to respond to it in the form of the visual essay. In these visual essays, the images not only illustrate, but, above all, open up ways to operationalize a

projection of memory in research with and about images. And make visible the omissions and gaps in the written text.

Nevertheless, texts also speak to us through their own absences. Absences that indelibly mark violent political transitions and their echoes in audiovisual representations. This is evident in the first essay of the dossier, “Memória e Ausência na Trilogia do Chile (2010-2019) de Patricio Guzmán” [Memory and Absence in Patricio Guzmán’s Chile Trilogy (2010-2019)], by Susana Viegas. Based on an analysis of the director’s series of three films known as the “Chile Trilogy”, the text explores the impossibility of filmic representations of death through a philosophical approach to thanatopolitics, suggesting that moving images offer a glimpse into forgotten and vanished eras, while at the same time revealing their potential to challenge death, oblivion and absence in a tangible way.

The second article in this dossier, “Toda pedra pode ser oceano: experimentos sobre o ‘fetichismo’ enquanto arquivo” [Every stone can be an ocean: experiments on ‘fetishism’ as archive], by Lior Zisman Zalis, invites us to explore the field of forces in which memory is formed. In dialogue with the multiple meanings of the concept of “fetishism”, the essay investigates how historicity can be reconstituted from ruin and the possibilities opened up by archiving, expanding the ways of reinscribing the past. Through a historical-linguistic approach, this text proposes a re-reading of fetishism and its relationship with historical memory, recalling the extent to which we do not speak, but are spoken to. The operationalization of the archive through “lines” and “dialectical machines” makes it a mechanism capable of reconfiguring history, highlighting fractures and tensions and challenging the apparent stability of memory.

The third article “Haunted Home Movies — Dialectical Image and the Archive Fever in Contemporary Found Footage Films”, by Bárbara Bergamaschi Novaes, delves deeper into the notion of haunting, as the title suggests, exploring the possibilities of *found footage*. Here, archive material is not only the medium, but also the material that allows private records to be mobilized to question official history. Based on the analysis of the films *Happy End* (1996) by Peter Tscherkassky, and *Private Footage* (2022) by Janaina Nagata, and supported by a wide-ranging theoretical review, this essay stands out in its investigation of the intersection between memory and imagination. By revisiting the original layers of these films, it reveals how the past persists latently, silenced and repressed, and can be reactivated and given new meaning through the artistic gesture of *détournement*. In this way, she reflects on the rescue of neglected narratives and the potential of *found footage* to operate as a form of “pro-memory”.

The written section of this dossier concludes with the article “Tempo, natureza e memórias intergeracionais em *A Metamorfose dos Pássaros*” [Time, nature and intergenerational memories in *The Metamorphosis of the Birds*], by Laura Caballero-Rabanal. Based on the film by Catarina Vasconcelos, the text offers a sensitive analysis of family dynamics, gender roles and the care economy during the Estado Novo. The text dissects the multiple temporalities that the film incorporates and how they reveal the relativity of time: linear times, which situate the narration through references to historical and political events; cyclical times, associated

with the repetition of natural cycles and care tasks; and fragmented times, materialized in the variability of memories and in events that interrupt biography and identity, such as the experience of orphanhood. By filling in the gaps in memory, this text illustrates how artistic creation can be a therapeutic way of dealing with mourning and loss, transforming the reconstruction of family history into a gesture that goes beyond the limits of intimacy to become part of collective memory and the history of several generations.

Marking the beginning of the section devoted to visual essays, we are introduced to “Laryssa Machada e o Membro Fantasma: Sintoma de uma Amputação Ancestral” [Laryssa Machada and the Phantom Limb: Symptom of an Ancestral Amputation], by Larissa Lewandoski, which establishes a parallel between the absence of pre-invasion representations of the Amerindian territories of the Global South and the “Phantom Limb”, a symptom experienced by those who still feel the missing amputated limb. This comparison is drawn through a sequence of images by Laryssa Machada, which render the gaps in the archive perceptible, incorporating them as sensory absences.

The essay that follows “Memória Fóssil: A Fotografia como Agente Fossilizador da História” [Fossil Memory: Photography as a Fossilizing Agent of History], by Ricardo Geraldes, explores the agency of the image manifests itself. Based on the photographic device’s ability to suspend historical linearity, this essay brings together fossils and industrial objects — the latter, transformed by erosion and the aggregation of substances, already appear as human protofossils in formation — all collected on the west coast of Portugal. Mediated by the visual language of photography, these traces instigate an ontological reflection on a common destiny, in which both fossils and traces of human presence crystallize as fossilized memory.

The dossier concludes with the visual essay ‘Ainda,’ by Eduardo Brito, which situates the archive within the personal sphere. The essay explores the creation of new images that give shape to the author’s memory, understood as an interweaving of influences and reminiscences from trips and stays in the city of Bruges. Inspired by Georges Rodenbach’s book *Bruges-La-Morte* — considered the first to incorporate photographs as part of the narrative — this essay dialogues with its resonances, transforming the experience of the city into an exercise in visual and literary memory. Thus, we are doubly haunted: by the images of *Bruges-La-Morte*, which are reconfigured in the images of Brito’s memorial experience.

The works featured in this issue show how the image — cinematographic, photographic or performative — operates as a field of mediation between absence and presence, forgetting and reinscription. By making the silences and gaps in the archive visible, the texts and visual essays presented here are not just intended to fill voids, but to recognize and inhabit them, transforming them into spaces for questioning and invention.

It remains to be seen that the proposal for this issue relied, at a preliminary stage, on the watchful eye of Margarida Medeiros, who told us to “go ahead”. This is what we will do, projecting her thoughts (and the memory we have of her) on the image and its phantasmagorias into the construction of new concepts and visual territories — challenging established narratives and expanding the field of possible representations.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

To cite this article

Laranjeiro, Catarina, and Inês Sapeta Dias. 2025. "Introduction. We are always the posthumous life of others: a map for a pro-memory." *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens* (62): 7-14.
<https://doi.org/10.34619/blta-jx41>

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