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VIDEOGAMES: THE EMPTINESS AS NARRATIVE (CINEMATOGRAPHIC)

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Abstract: Contemporary videogames, particularly after the influence of Japanese designer Hideo Kojima, repeatedly use the emptiness in their narratives. We can observe this both plastically, in scenes that refer us to the traditional Japanese visual arts (which in turn have their origin in the Shinto emptiness), and conceptually, in scenes where there is a great amount of visual information but there is no vision of the "enemy". Mainly in the second case, the exploitation of extradiegetic space is common. Although both have their origin in the theater, the issues of the emptiness (plastic and conceptual) and the use of extradiegetical information, when we talk about video games, need to be thought coming from the cinema point of view.

Keywords: Videogames, narrative, cinematographic, emptiness.

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

In search of an aesthetic coherence that unites the object of research of this article and its own construction, I chose to present it on a surface, to the detriment of the line. Obviously, I'm talking about *surface* and *line* here, according to the meaning of Vilém Flusser, particularly in his book: *O mundo codificado: por uma filosofia do design e da comunicação: Vilém Flusser* (Cosac Naify, 2013).

VIDEOGAMES AND THE EMPTINESS

The latest video games [1], particularly after the influence of Japanese designer Hideo Kojima, they repeatedly use emptiness in their narratives.

We can plastically observe this in scenes that remind us of traditional Japanese visual arts, which in turn have their origin in the Shinto emptiness.

> The Japanese people devised a mechanism to make some point of contact with the gods dwelling in nature, who were impossible to touch. They put up four thin stakes in four corners and stretch a single rope around them all, creating an empty unit or space. Because empty equals the possibility of being filled, the gods may then find it and enter. (...) This square, empty unit bound with rope is called shiro. When a yane (roof) is attached to this shiro, a yashiro is made. Enclosed by a hedge or fence, it becomes the basic Shinto shrine. With this, the possibility that gods may enter this empty space takes structural form. The nucleus of a shrine is emptiness, and it is to this possibility that we pray [1].

Hayao Miyazaki (1941) uses emptiness, silence and pause almost as characters. In: *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), the empty space goes along with the pause in the frantic action and gives the viewer an opportunity for reflection. The *Ma* (empty, in Japanese) in Miyazaki has purpose and meaning, but it has nothing to do with enemies, terror or threats. It's a poetic and cinematographic purpose.

In the voip: *Darling in the Franxx* (CloverWorks; Studio Trigger, 2018), the emptiness is an existential reflection of the characters and therefore also poetic.

The band Pink Floyd also uses emptiness in their music videos for this purpose, as can be seen even in the film: *The Wall* (1982).

The existential emptiness is the easiest to understand, since, unfortunately, it reflects an almost atavistic feeling of being so human and common.

For Eastern culture, emptiness is a possibility. For Western culture, which fills every possible silence and emptiness with third-party products or content, this idea is a

1. It is understood by being *recent*, the games that emerged after the open-world concept. Not so much chronologically, but in terms of impact on the market, it is considered: *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) as the great starting point for open-world games. Open-world games aren't the only type available on the market today, but their technological and storytelling innovations make their relevance to the issue worthy of note.

stepping stone to terror. We fill media silences with music, sound effects, there are no silences on television or radio. There are no breaks in magazines or newspapers. Emptiness and silence are not allowed by consumerism.

Although the issues of emptiness (plastic and conceptual) have their origin in theatre, when we talk about video games they need to be thought of from the perspective of cinema. Talking about cinema, both *live action* and animation or computer graphics, necessarily means talking about persistence of visionão[2] and diegesis.

Persistence of vision is the ability of the human eye to retain the image that forms on the retina for approximately 1/24 of a second after the interruption of the visual stimulus. In 1826, the English physician and philologist Peter Mark Roget (1779-1869) published a study on the persistence of vision and is considered the first researcher on the subject. The whole rationale of cinema is that small differences in image repetition generate the sensation of movement. Belgian physicist Joseph-Antoine Plateau (1801-1883) was the first to measure the minimum necessary to create the illusion of movement, reaching the result of 10 images per second. This is an important measure for experimental animations and for those drawn frame by frame. However, with these exceptions, any pattern less than 24 frames per second is no longer used. The greater the number of frames per second, the more continuous is the perception of motion.

Diegesis is the space where fiction happens [3], the dimension of the narrative. In other words, it is what happens in the fictional world and what is shown in this space. Extradiegetic information is that which occurs outside this spatial cut (frame) but is perceived by the spectator. A classic example of extradiegesis is a noise of unknown origin that causes the

character to react (protect yourself from the noise of a gunshot, run when you hear the tyrannosaurus' footsteps approaching, etc.). In a way, Plato's cave allegory is the first occurrence of extradiegetic content. The concept is quite old, therefore. Only change the technology.

Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) introduces doubt into its emptiness/space, placing many different points of view and removing the subject's clarity. Example: the priest and the woodcutter, in the movie: *Rashomon* (1950), that narrate what was said to a third person. Kurosawa disperses the narrator and breaks with narrative authority in a way that will only actually be fully realized in video games a few years later.

We can observe the emptiness as part of the narrative in scenes where there is a large amount of visual information but there is no vision of whoever promotes the action, that is, the narrative takes place in extradiegesis.

This is a very common feature in video games, with a lack of vision of the enemy or danger, for example.

The persistence of vision is widely explored as a narrative element, both in cinema and in video games, through its interruption. It can be an unexpected flash that blinds us temporarily, the difficulty of focusing on something etc.

Of course, the video game did not "invent" emptiness or silence. In the field of plastic arts, I quote Xu Wei (1521-1593), Hasegawa Tohaku (1539-1610) and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) as some of the artists who understand the emptiness as a space full of meanings.

Contemporary video games mix the permanence of emptiness with the exclusion of silence, mainly with extradiegetic sounds. That is, they use the filled silence space as the narrative element that warns the player of

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2. Also known as: *retinal persistence or retinal retention*.

3. Despite being less common, the term can also be used in documentary narratives.

imminent danger.

The emptiness is full of information and exchanges, and that means the impossibility of reducing it. Silence is made with sounds, as the composer John Cage (1912-1992) has already shown us in his work 4'33". Silence is perceived not by the absence of sounds, but by their opposition: it is made with the noises of the environment and the audience. In the case of video games, silence is made with the sound tracks of the enemy, of NPCs (*non playing characters*), or of imminent danger.

We cannot speak of a sonic emptiness without mentioning Charles Chaplin and his silent films. Chaplin's resistance to the sound film is legendary. Not without reason, he thought his films depended on pantomime and that sound would destroy that language.

A great contemporary master of emptiness as a tensional element is filmmaker Quentin Tarantino (1963). The movie: *The hateful eight* (2015), for example, it has as an important part of the narrative the sequence shots in the large empty spaces filled with snow. Tarantino's soundtracks are a signature of the director, and also provide extradiegetic narrative information.

There is, therefore, a construction by layers, both of information and of meanings, in emptiness and silence. Almost like a palimpsest of itself, emptiness is built with residues. Again, we have countless artists prior to Kojima using this poetic resource. Anselm Kiefer (1945-), with his memory remnants, is certainly a good example.

The concept of the terrifying emptiness in religions is also undeniable. It is the absence of *feeling a feeling* that instigates mythological explanations of always *having that feeling*. The lack of knowledge of the beginning (origin of the Earth, of man, etc.) and the end (death) causes an anguish that, for most, becomes a weight that is impossible to live with. Thus, supernatural explanations of the world are created as palliatives to the intrinsic solitude of all of us.

Capitalism repeats the religious mechanism, both of filling this primordial emptiness and providing a sense of belonging.

> This is how religion represents a convenient way to meet certain emotional needs. It can inculcate moral discipline, strengthen social order, and bring a degree of ceremonial formality, aesthetic resonance, and spiritual depth to shallow lives. This is a blatant case of intellectual duplicity. It reflects the same reliance on enabling fiction and redemptive lie that we find at such different latitudes, from Nietzsche and Ibsen to Conrad, Vaihinger and JM Synge. Liberal-capitalist societies, as we have seen, often go in search of a judicious dose of community spirit to compensate for their spontaneously reproductive nature. [2].

We can't – and never will – fulfill all our yearnings, so we fill the shelves.

We can't stand loneliness, so we use brands or products that identify us as part of a group.

There is yet another social terror that appears in the emptiness: that of the abdication of power. To remain silent is to give up controlling and/or determining what fills the emptiness. However, it is in this emptiness that the only possibility for creation and growth resides. As all teenagers know, growing up hurts. The terror of growing up, which happens only in a vacuum, is one of the emotional connections that connects this age group, more than others, to video games.

The fear of what we don't see is atavistic and for a long time it protected us from the lion in the savanna, the snake in the thicket, etc. Knowing that danger is on our side, seeing the lion (metaphorical or real, it doesn't matter) is always better than not seeing it. The threat of the unknown, real or imagined, has been with us since the time we ran after the bison. Not by chance, we started inside caves. Caves have visible boundaries, it is a space under control with the frequent advantage of few

entry possibilities. The need to limit access to our *habitat* lasts until today: houses and buildings usually have at most two or three access points.

Emptiness (invisible and/or silent) is also the soldier's method of attack in a war. Military strategy relies on the enemy's unpreparedness and uses the element of surprise as a tactic or as a threat (or both). If the enemy knows the attack *a priori*, it will react preemptively, even if that reaction is escape. The knowledge and/or visibility of the action leads to the failure of the attack.

All these stratagems are known to us and we recognize them constantly, both over time and space. In other words, it is something repeated at all times in history and in all places where humans live.

We are language beings, language defines us. Emptiness, in its etymology, is both *emptied, desert*, and: *free* (free as in vacant and free as in: *freed, be free*). This is a fundamental piece for understanding how we function, from filling the absence with television and the like or the discomfort of silence in moments of socialization to totalitarian regimes, this is something scary.

To be free, remaining silent, accepting the emptiness and understanding the loneliness of birth and death are issues that underlie every piece of communication, advertising or art aimed at horror. And, dare I say, they are at the base of all our deepest fears. They are, however, fundamental for understanding the *Self*.

> It is the silence between words that gives meaning to speech, and so does thought. The question of knowing and not knowing, says Paul Valéry, "seems to me eternally suspended in front of my silence". And it is from the silence, which seems to establish a balance between man and man's spirit, that Valery can still say: *I don't know everything I know*. But here it is not a question of an "inner silence", psychological, which seeks to deafly penetrate the world of feelings; nor is

it about the "silence of ideas" in search of the essence that is different from the sensible; it is about the silence that is part of man, the "phenomena" and the very phenomenon of speech. Let us take into account what remains, around us, of the most silent, invisible and not apparent, "mute opinions implied in our life", as Merleau-Ponty writes [3].

It is wonderful to see the coincidence of the suspension of the question of knowing and not knowing what Valéry mentions (*apud* NOVAES) and of the *suspension of disbelief* that both cinema and video games need. However, I don't believe in coincidences. It is actually the same concept. By suspending the doubt of (not) knowing, we are able to suspend disbelief. And so we believe. We believe in movies, video games, the legal system, a god, etc. We repeat this process until it becomes, for us, an unquestionable truth.

> Illusions are driven by the "principle of et cetera"; when viewing the elements of a series, we gladly assume that we have seen the whole [4].

We learn, then, from an early age, that emptiness is frightening. It's something passed, if not genetically, behaviorally from generation to generation. We come to believe that, at any moment, the lion will attack us. Even though there is no real lion, we keep the unconscious one alive.

We are egocentric and perceive the absence of the human as emptiness. Uninhabited places can cause us both a sense of peace and tranquility and fear and terror, depending almost exclusively on ambient lighting and sounds (that is, information "extradiegetic" to our field of vision). A deserted beach at dawn is seen as a pleasant place. The same beach at night and with sounds strange to the context is perceived as a dangerous place.

P.T. Silent Hills (Konami, 2014) is a first-person horror video game directed by Kojima (1963) in collaboration with film

director Guillermo del Toro (1964). Initially released as an interactive teaser (*P.T.* – means: playable teaser) to the *Silent Hills* videogame, which was cancelled. In one of the opening scenes, the player follows empty corridors and always returns to the same place. There is the setting itself and the initial absence of other characters, but mainly there are: *Silent Hills P.T.,* the emptiness of meaning, breaking the spatial logic and removing the player's traditional narrative authority.

The *Soma* videogame (Frictional Games, 2015) is built almost entirely from uninhabited settings. The same happens with: *Deadlight* (Tequila Works, 2012). *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010) presents yet another issue of absence/emptiness, the absence of sanity. As in many games, there is a health (or lives) indicator for the character. In *Amnesia*, there is also one of sanity. The main character is in a dark, ruined castle and suffers from hallucinations. One of the options given to the player is to hide in the shadows, necessarily costing him points in sanity.

The videogame *Dark Souls III* (From Software, 2016) in addition to its devastated and empty scenarios, it uses the color palette to indicate the action. Wherever the player and the enemy are, there is brightness and saturated colors. The surrounding terrain tends towards neutral tones, low saturation and low brightness. With that, there is, here, another cinematographic element of the emptiness.

Limbo, produced by Playdead in 2010, has a clear influence of the *noir* movies, and its somber, dark and empty aesthetic is a reference when talking about video games as art. It is about a boy who wakes up alone in a forest and looks for his missing sister. This beginning of the narrative – waking up alone in an empty space – is recurrent in video games.

Kojima understands, perhaps better than any other video game producer/director, that unconscious fears are infinitely more frightening than palpable ones. His game: *Death Strandin,* its narrative beginning is someone who finds himself alone. Of course, sprinklings of supernatural apparitions and disappearances add flavor to terror, but it is loneliness that is first noticed.

As I said above, we are beings of language. We use terms like "to be in trouble" as a synonym for ignoring, not knowing. Agambem speaks of contemporary art, but I believe that the concept can be extrapolated to all contemporary intellectual production, including video games:

> Isn't the dark perhaps an anonymous experience and, by definition, impenetrable, something that is not directed at us and cannot, therefore, concern us? On the contrary, the contemporary is the one who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him and does not cease to challenge him, something that, more than all light, is directed directly and singularly to him. Contemporary is the one who receives in full face the beam of darkness that comes from his time. (…)

> To perceive in the dark of the present this light that seeks to reach us and cannot do so, this means being contemporary. That's why contemporaries are rare. And that is why being contemporary is, above all, a matter of courage: because it means being able not only to keep one's gaze fixed on the darkness of the time, but also to perceive in that darkness a light that, directed at us, distances itself infinitely of us. Or: be punctual in an appointment you can only miss [5].

Perhaps it is this ability to challenge the darkness of our time that makes geniuses geniuses. Confronting this darkness is what makes Tarantino a tarantino and Kojima a kojima.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As Slavoj Žižek states (1949), in his document: *The pervert's guide to cinema* (2006), our problem is not whether our desires are satisfied or not, but how to know what to want. In other words, the great question of the human psyche is always with emptiness and how to deal with it. How to fill it, how to satisfy it, how to live with the absence.

Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) famously alerted us to the issues of the Cultural Industry and it is obvious that the video game is part of this context, even if: *avant la lettre*. What Adorno had no way of knowing is that the video game, even the fruit of capitalism and its infinite responses to the existential emptiness of all of us, by returning narrative authority and presenting this emptiness in such a raw and naked way, anarchically instruments the player, and becomes a: *pièce de résistance*.

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