

THE PASSING OF TIME IN A BELL TOWER

The Sound of Bells documentary film is a poetic representation of religious experience in everyday life. We made a film that moves across nine former colonial Brazilian mining towns in the state of Minas Gerais. These towns were greatly controlled by the Catholic Church. The bell ringers and bell towers of the region tell a story that combines faith with music transformation as a form of cultural resistance from an Afro-Brazilian perspective, as one can hear even today that African drums rhythm were incorporated in the playing of the bells. Ultimately, bell towers became a site of resignification, with the use of corporal techniques to transform sound practices assigned to the European Catholicism into a local voice that presents itself as a form of resistance to internal social disaggregation and external pressures of acculturation.

The film presents the realm of bell ringing as a complex social experience and speaks about the results of a series of contingencies through a sonic narrative. Time, from this perspective, is related to a historical experience that is intertwined with the sound of bells, because the performative action of playing them shifted from a symbol of a hegemonic presence of the Church to the production of a collective local knowledge, which is today becoming a shared memory amongst the dwellers. Although this process of resignification happened over centuries, it is all at once condensed and audible in the Brazilian tools, which became very different than what was heard in the bell towers of the Portuguese colonizers.

The bells of the Catholic churches in Minas Gerais set the pace for social life and have played an important role in the state



Nilson ringing the bells in São João Del Rei, 2014.



Marina films the bell ringer, 2014.

over the last three centuries. Most of the bells in the region were cast and hung during the XVI–XVIII centuries, in the context of the region’s colonization and slavery. Therefore, these villages were built in a time where the Church propagated and enlarged its power, so rings would be heard far away from the chapels, fostering a specific articulation of politics, time, and space. The elderly still remember how everything was regulated by the bell tolls and bell ringers address the responsibility to be heard all over the villages. Thus, bell tolls were particularly important when portable and domestic devices to measure time did not exist, and also communicated community events, such as masses, and occurrences, such as deaths, which they still do. They distinguish living existence with their rhythm and intervals, they mark the passing of a lifetime. Their beats mark the social and spiritual duties as well as everyday time, ringing daily at 6am, noon, and 6pm plus announcing deaths, births, and celebrations.¹

Historically, bells have shaped the areas that are within their audible range by regulating institutional and social time. On the one hand, we perceived that this regimentation of time is also commonly associated with time-labour, the hegemony of the Catholic Church, and the silencing of African spiritual knowledge and rituals. On the other hand, for some celebrations bell ringers reshaped melody and rhythm into sounds of cultural resistance against the prohibition of their own musical expressions, incorporating them to the official ringing and thus acoustically recreating aural symbols of religious/political power over time—we learnt this in our experience of the making of the film, recording the sounds, and filming them play (Gaultier 2014).

We had been filming the bell tolls of day-to-day life announcing masses, sacred times, and the regular 6am-noon-6pm rings for a couple of weeks when we finally had the opportunity to participate in a procession from the bell tower in

São João Del Rei city. What we listened to that day was absolutely different from everything we had experienced in the cities of Minas Gerais so far! For these celebrations, bell ringers transformed the centuries-old cadences of the rings and mixed them with the strong African heritage of Brazil. The rhythm resembles various Afro-Brazilian musical expressions such as *capoeira* and *maracatu*. Our aural experience and observation of their body movements were a moment of ethnographic insight on how music and time combined can express social relations and cultural tensions.

The way the bell ringers dance in order to play the notes and the rhythm was then closely observed by the photographer, who would dance with the bells to dive into the depth of the movements as a way to apprehend all that is embedded in the swings. We filmed around 100 hours, most of which were passed in the bell towers.² In order to explore the subtleness of this sonic experience and concordant historic conflicts, we decided to allow ourselves to document all that refers to the passing of time in a bell tower, spending long hours there with our interlocutors, waiting for the exact time bells would ring and, most of all, observing its silence. The rhythmic and historical dimensions elicited through bell ringing became the very essence of the photography and the montage. For example, we present local religious festivities that use indigenous and African artifacts, myths, and chants, being celebrated in and around Catholic Churches with the participation of frenetic bell rings. One of these sequences was edited as a trance and while the procession goes by we hear the sound of the body of a clay bell being struck as if it were a percussion drum. Besides being a reference to Afro-Brazilian rituals of trance and possession that have been banished from the Catholic colonization, the trance in the editing is also related to when we filmed those

‘reinvented bell rings’ in São João Del Rei. We ended the shoot vibrating and aware that we had been ‘through a powerful experience’—as Jean Rouch once described his experience of shooting the film *Les Tambours d’avant* (Henley 2009: 274).

The passage of time encapsulated a context of relations that made it possible for the bell rings to be shaped as we hear them today. When we edited the film we were challenged and moved by the question of how to represent this, not only as seeing the bells as obvious time keepers but reframing them as cinematographic sites of encounters of disparate experiences and histories that, through a painful process of appropriation, mixture, and hybridity, coalesce into a unique voice. The rhythm and melodies played by the bells are the musical expression of Brazilian religious syncretism, conveying the ability of Afro-Brazilian peoples to challenge the oppressive system while incorporating Christianity into their own voice.

NOTES

- 1 In 2009, the work of the bell ringers and over 40 types of bell ringing were nominated as intangible cultural heritage by the *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional - IPHAN*, the Brazilian federal institute for the safeguarding of cultural heritage.
- 2 We spread this content in multiplatforms, choosing the most suitable documentary content for interfaces such as mobile phones, art galleries, computers, cinema, TV, and public screenings. For each one of them we crafted a particular script, editing, and distribution plan. The result of the project is the feature film, an online multimedia platform with sound cartography and participative features (www.somdossinos.com.br), an interactive documentary for the web (webdoc.somdossinos.com.br), public interventions on churches’ façades, a video installation for galleries, and an open air audio guide app for mobile devices narrated by the bell ringers. Each one of these products has a distinct target audience

and approach. The app is more didactic and uses locative features, the interactive documentary invites the user for a more immersive experience, the multimedia platform focuses on sonic landscapes, and so forth.

REFERENCES

Henley, Paul 2009. *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema*. The University of Chicago Press.

Gautier, Ana Maria Ochoa 2014. *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-century Colombia*. Duke University Press.

Links to the multiplatform documentary project

Interactive documentary:
<http://webdoc.somdossinos.com.br/?lang=en>.

Multimedia Platform:
<http://somdossinos.com.br/?lang=en>.

App: <http://somdossinos.com.br/aplicativo/?lang=en>.
Public interventions on churches' facades:
<https://vimeo.com/128952933>.

Feature film trailer: <https://vimeo.com/204105371>.

Film: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/thesoundofbells>.

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