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Resisting Brazilian Neofascism Through Drone Imagery in (New) Hegemonic Media: The Case of Petra Costa's *The Edge of Democracy* (2019)

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Article abstract

In *The Edge of Democracy* (2019, Brazil), Petra Costa denounces the weakening of democracy and the rise of neofascism in Brazil—a crisis that is difficult to understand, as it is instigated, in part, by local hegemonic mass media vehicles and sophisticated virtual arsenals on social media. This intermedial analysis will focus on the filmmaker's poetic gesture of transforming drone-captured images into a personal, reflexive, and structural gaze at the power relations that permeate the plot—an act of subversion of this military-originating device, whose growing role as a mechanism of resistance will be explored. The study also points out the film's paradoxical trajectory through hegemonic institutions of the moving image—Netflix (new) and The Oscars (traditional)—which resulted in a counter-hegemonic discourse being brought into the mainstream and therefore functioning as an artifact of resistance within the plurimedial cyberwar of information surrounding the Brazilian political crisis.

Resisting Brazilian Neofascism Through Drone Imagery in (New) Hegemonic Media: The Case of Petra Costa's *The Edge of Democracy* (2019)

PAULO T. GONÇALVES PINTO

INTRODUCTION: TELLING THE STORY OF BRAZILIAN TRAUMA

The documentary *The Edge of Democracy* (2019),¹ directed by Petra Costa, presents a narrative about the weakening of Brazilian democracy and the threat of an imminent return to the totalitarianism of the military dictatorships that plagued the country between 1964 and 1985. Following the rise to power and the fall of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—known as Lula—and his successor Dilma Rousseff, the film denounces two legally-groundless cases² orchestrated with the support of mass and social media apparatuses that manipulated public opinion,³ and which culminated in the country's polarization and the rise of neofascism. The result was the impeachment of the first female Brazilian president (2016), followed by the condemnation and consequent electoral ineligibility (2018) of the first chief of the executive ever coming from the working class.⁴ Presided over by a federal judge that was later considered *biased* by the Supreme

1. *The Edge of Democracy* (original title in Portuguese *Democracia em Vertigem*), directed by Petra Costa, 2019, distribution by Netflix, 2h1m.

2. Tony Rosenberg, "Collusion in Brazil's Judiciary Brings Curtain down on Rule of Law," *Green Left Weekly*, no. 1234, 2019, p. 17.

3. Rafael Böcker Zavaro, "Impeachment, lawfare y fake news en Brasil. Un espejo latinoamericano," *Revista Internacional de Organizaciones*, nos. 25–26, 2020, p. 7–26, https://www.revista-rio.org/index.php/revista_rio/issue/view/27 (accessed 1 December 2021).

4. Juliana Neuenschwander & Marcus Giraldes, "Capture of popular sovereignty, state of exception and juridicism" Carol Proner, Gisele Cittadino, Gisele Ricobom & João Ricardo Dornelles (eds.), *Comments on a notorious verdict: the trial of Lula*, 2017, Clacso, p. 112–116, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvn96gjp.23> (accessed 1 December 2021).

Court,⁵ the ruling that led to Lula's incarceration not only removed from the ballot the candidate who was then leading the polls, but also promoted a mass media anti-corruption spectacle that far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro would capitalize on to win the Planalto Palace in January 2019—the historic moment where Petra Costa's film ends.

The Edge of Democracy mixes facts and poetic reflections regarding public and private spheres, which gain sense as the filmmaker looks at Brazilian young democracy as a projection of her own personal maturation process: "Brazilian democracy and I are the same age (...) and I thought in our thirties, we would be standing on solid ground."⁶ The filmmaker proposes an intimate and personal journey on the history of democracy in Brazil, one that begins at the end of the military dictatorship period (1964–1985) and coincides with her own birth. Granddaughter of a big civil construction entrepreneur who supported and saw his business growing during the totalitarian governments, Costa is also the daughter of revolutionary insurgents who happened to be held political prisoners of the regime—carrying within herself an antagonism of values around *democracy* that splits the country until today. Instead of seeking distance or aiming to establish an agreement of constant impartiality with the viewer, Costa places her story, as well as her family's, at the service of building up a personal narrative about the direction Brazilian democracy has taken.

Contested by some of the characters denounced in the film (as will be further discussed), who often labeled it as "fictional," Costa's narrative grounds its reliability on an intermedial concatenation of factual content in the form of both audio and visual footage from TV and radio broadcasts, as well as printed and digital magazines and newspapers.

Following a certain tradition in political documentary filmmaking, *The Edge of Democracy* recycles mass media archives with the goal of narrating history through a distant and supposedly-unbiased speech. Such a reproduction could be

5. After condemning Lula and therefore making him ineligible for the 2018 elections, federal Judge Sergio Moro would abandon his magistracy to become the first Minister of Justice of the Bolsonaro administration. By the 16th month in office, he would resign the seat and accuse the President of manipulating investigation forces to protect his clan. Moro's off the record collaboration and articulation with the prosecutors in Lula's condemnation process (later revealed through leaked conversations) have led Brazil's Supreme Federal Court to declare him biased and cancel his judgement over Lula (who was freed after 580 days of incarceration). For more information, please refer to Rosenberg, 2019.

6. *The Edge of Democracy*, Petra Costa, 2019.

seen to conflict with the film's own critique of the contribution of local hegemonic mass media conglomerates to the degradation of Brazilian democracy and rise of neofascism. Local mass media has in general "helped strengthen the conservatism, the agenda Bolsonaro represents"⁷—and has "normalized" his candidacy.⁸ To address issues relating to the national mass media's trustworthiness, Costa distances her view by resorting to (supposedly less biased) content from the overseas press—which, unlike the national one, portrayed Bolsonaro as a threat to democracy.⁹

Through filmed interviews carried out by the documentary filmmaker, characters are depicted in a factual and organic way, as when Jair Bolsonaro, while still a congressman, praised the Brazil's military dictatorships (1964–1985) right in front of Costa's cameras—hence obviating the need of explanatory narration around the President's orientation towards totalitarianism.

But *The Edge of Democracy* (2019) not only adopts a purely rational and factual path, intercalating events and characters, for constructing a specific perspective. Its truth compromise with the viewer is grounded in mediating a state of mind: the psychoanalytic experience of *vertigo* faced by an individual as a result of political and social degradation, which is made explicit in the film's original title in Portuguese, *Democracia em Vertigem*, and is observed by Dunker.¹⁰ In the enterprise of describing such an emotional state, Costa takes an intermedial approach—in opposition to a verbally grounded one—by articulating through film editing, sound, and visual stimuli, her own style of audiovisual poetry.

Super smooth shots made with drones (and also with other stabilized cameras) serve as visual matter for meditative journeys—backgrounded by somber music and accompanied by personal reflections narrated with her own voice,¹¹ other audio from mass media archives, and even a revealing leaked conversation (that will be

7. Media Ownership Monitor Brazil, *The Media, The Far Right Growth and The Rise of Bolsonaro to The Power*, report from April 2019, <https://brazil.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/bolsonaro-and-the-media/> (accessed 1 December 2021).

8. Bruno Araújo & Hélder Prior, "Framing Political Populism: The Role of Media in Framing the Election of Jair Bolsonaro," *Journalism Practice*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2021, p. 226–242, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2019.1709881> (accessed 1 December 2021).

9. Media Ownership Monitor Brazil, *The Media*, 2019.

10. *Democracia em Vertigem | Desejo em cena*, Christian Dunker, 2020, video, <https://youtu.be/BqXuRlXCsQg> (accessed 1 December 2021), 18 min.

11. Petra Costa narrates *The Edge of Democracy* in Portuguese and English versions. The French, German and Italian versions bring another feminine voice on the top of Costa's narration (August 2021 figures).

later analyzed). In Costa's endeavor to mediate an abstract trauma through a sensory audiovisual poetics, the unique photographic capabilities of drones—expressed in seventeen shots totaling more than nine minutes, or approximately eight percent of the film's runtime¹²—are employed to provide distancing and geographical organization of such an architectural narrative, rolled out as it is between the neighboring highest houses of the legislative, judiciary, and executive powers.¹³ Such imagery provides reflective and meditative points,¹⁴ as well as relief from such a suffocating narrative: one of polarization, hate, discrimination, tear gas, and mainly white male politicians in claustrophobic environments.

The Edge of Democracy resorts to new technologies and media, to elucidate a reality that is, as Dunker¹⁵ argues, exceedingly difficult to understand, and to overcome barriers to funding and distribution that such a counter-hegemonic film would face from institutions that are either subordinated to the state or to greater economic interests. Presenting a version of the facts that is contrary to the one given by the Bolsonaro administration, the movie escapes censorship by the state's audiovisual development agencies to reach, from night to day, the catalogs of nearly two hundred million users¹⁶ of Netflix, the most popular monthly-subscription streaming service. And it is from the inside of this new capitalist mass media empire that the filmmaker denounces the manipulation of public opinion that occurs in her country with the support of elites and local hegemonic mass media vehicles—culminating in the degradation of both democratic and social values.

According to Netflix's business model, Costa's documentary is available to its subscribers free of a per-viewing fee and comes with a sort of curating signature that characterizes "Netflix original" products—indicating that the relation between film and platform has moved from mere licensing towards cooperation in its creation.

Taking part in the creation of *The Edge of Democracy* could be understood as an editorial positioning by Netflix in regard to Brazil's political crisis—or even a turn, if placed into perspective with its preceding stance expressed in the (also original

12. Excluding initial and end credits from total film runtime.

13. Petra Costa, quoted from an exclusive interview carried out by Paulo T G Pinto on 29 September 2020.

14. Ibid.

15. Dunker, 2020.

16. Statista, "Number of Netflix paying streaming subscribers worldwide from 3rd quarter 2011 to 2nd quarter 2020".

product) *The Mechanism* (2018).¹⁷ Under the pretense of fiction, this TV series about the investigation known as “Car Wash” (*Lava Jato*) misrepresents Lula, making the character who most resembles him enunciate a notorious expression that was in fact uttered by one of his political opponents. In real life, this statement revealed a corruption scheme behind the ousting of then President Dilma Rousseff, but in *The Mechanism* it was used instead to incriminate her political mentor Lula. Recorded from a leaked telephone conversation, the dialogue offers such a clear illustration of the degradation of Brazilian democracy that *The Edge of Democracy* reproduces it twice in a row in tandem with drone footage, as discussed below. The manipulation of reality based on a notion of artistic freedom in *The Mechanism* has not only caused Netflix to suffer a boycott (organized through social media),¹⁸ but also made it liable to lawsuits and public embarrassment—thus making it an important political issue in Brazil.¹⁹

Being a series that has “frightened the left-wing electorate,”²⁰ *The Mechanism* was exalted by one of Bolsonaro’s sons to reveal supposed plans by Netflix to create a series about his father—a claim soon denied by the company with a dose of irony (see Twitter posts in Figure 1).

Indirectly expressing an appreciation for Netflix (in line with the Bolsonaro clan’s²¹ demonstrated fascination with the USA), senator Flávio Bolsonaro places the giant streaming platform as a quality benchmark—and even suggests that a Netflix

17. *The Mechanism*, written by Elena Soares and José Padilha, 2018–2019, Streaming TV Series, Netflix.

18. Gustavo Fioratti, “Netflix and Director Padilha are Criticized and Boycotted for Series about Car Wash Investigation” *Folha de São Paulo*, 2018, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/culture/2018/03/1962408-netflix-and-director-padilha-are-criticized-and-boycotted-for-series-about-car-wash-investigation.shtml> (accessed 20 September 2021)

19. Vincent Bevins, “Netflix Is Suddenly a Huge Political Issue in Brazil,” *The Atlantic*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/netflix-has-a-brazil-problem/557969/> (accessed 20 September 2021).

20. Flávio Bolsonaro, quoted from Twitter post from 27 March 2018 (our translation). See reproduction in Figure 1.

21. “Bolsonaro clan” is how part of the mass media refers to the group formed by Jair Bolsonaro and his three sons who hold political positions: Flávio Bolsonaro (born in 1981, elected senator for Rio de Janeiro simultaneously with his father’s triumph in the presidential race in the 2018 elections, after a career as a state deputy in the state of Rio de Janeiro that began in 2003), Carlos Bolsonaro (born in 1982, since 2000 a Rio de Janeiro city councilman, pointed as head of the so-called “Office of Hate”) and Eduardo Bolsonaro (born in 1984, reelected federal deputy in the 2018 elections with a record number of votes in history).

original label could possibly aid in the penetration and reception of a product by their electorate.



Fig. 1. Netflix denies the claim made by Bolsonaro's eldest son, the senator Flavio, that it is planning a TV series about his father. Reproduction: Twitter. 27 March 2018.

But while Netflix seems to have learned from the trouble caused by such a controversial relation with truth adopted in *The Mechanism*, one of its main competitors—Amazon Prime Video—makes room for a depiction of the Brazilian political crisis by the MBL collective (acronym for *Free Brazil Movement*), an organization that manipulates public opinion through the dissemination of fake news on social media.²² The MBL collective, which prominently acted in the articulation of Rousseff's impeachment, has launched *March for Freedom* (2019)²³ as a declared

22. Ivanilce Santos Oliveira & Tamiris Artico, "Motivações das Fake News e a manipulação da opinião pública: análise das notícias compartilhadas em julho/2017 pelo Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL) em sua fanpage no Facebook", Pereira da Silva (ed.), *Impactos Comunicacionais da Ciberultura na Contemporaneidade*, Ponta Grossa, Atena Editora, 2019, available at <https://www.atenaeditora.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/E-BOOK-Impactos-Comunicacionais-da-Ciberultura-na-Contemporaneidade.pdf> (accessed 1 December 2021); Maria Cortez Salviano, "Eleições e propaganda política computacional: um olhar sobre a atuação do MBL durante o período eleitoral de 2018," *Anais da Rede de Pesquisa em Governança da Internet*, vol. 3, 2019, <http://redegerencia.net.br/index.php/encontro-anual/anais-terceiro-encontro> (accessed 1 December 2021); Alberto Rodrigues de Freitas Filho, *A batalha político-midiática do Movimento Brasil Livre: mídia, gênero e sexualidade como alvos da desinformação nas redes sociais*, Master Dissertation, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 2019.

23. *March for Freedom* (original title in Portuguese *Não Vai Ter Golpe!*), directed by Fred Rauh and Alexandre Santos, licensed for Amazon Prime Video, 2019, 2h14m.

response to Costa's movie—in which the ousting of Rousseff is portrayed as a coup d'état, and the incarceration of Lula (which reaffirmed the MBL identity)²⁴ is shown to be a form of electoral fraud. Wrapped in a language of documentary film, *March for Freedom* aims to deny the version given by Petra Costa by placing a counterpoising narrative that legitimizes the MBL's political agenda and therefore functions as its institutional propaganda.²⁵

While we cannot engage in a close comparative analysis of the two films, it does make sense to observe how they join the plurimedial cyberwar of narratives around Brazil's political crisis²⁶ at another level: that of USA-based hegemonic new media conglomerates of global presence. Both hemispheres of Brazil's polarized political field find a filmic representation of their social and political awareness on two of the most popular global video-on-demand services.

On one side of the trench, Amazon Prime Video licenses a propaganda film by a notorious fake-news-based organization that reaffirms the narrative (backed by local press²⁷ and elites) according to which Rousseff's impeachment and Lula's condemnation were both legitimate. Such an editorial positioning (within the right-wing spectrum) happens to be in coherence with Amazon's own interests—oriented to an economically liberal agenda that favors the lack of public regulation on new media and ensures the video-streaming corporations' profit.

On the opposite side, Netflix embraces a narrative that confronts the version of history given by hegemonic political and local media institutions, consequently

24. Antonio Roberto Rossi & Paolo Demuru, "Movimento Brasil Livre: a prisão de Lula como discurso de reafirmação de sua identidade," *41º Congresso Brasileiro de Ciências da Comunicação*, <https://portalintercom.org.br/anais/nacional2018/resumos/R13-1364-1.pdf> (accessed 1 December 2021).

25. Under an anti-corruption message, MBL digital activism in social media has "favored sharing fake news as a strategy to disseminate its truths and persuade public opinion" (Oliveira and Artico, 2019, p. 60.). Their action—which resulted in Facebook bans—has influenced the 2018 elections (Salviano, 2020, p. 3.) while promoting an ultraconservative agenda of moral values (Freitas Filho, 2019).

26. Mariana Rezende dos Passos & Érica Anita Baptista, "Impeachment versus golpe: a disputa de narrativas no contexto político brasileiro de 2016"/"Impeachment versus coup: the dispute of narratives in the Brazilian political context of 2016," *Eptic*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2018, <https://seer.ufs.br/index.php/epctic/article/view/9619> (accessed 1 December 2021); Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, "Impeachment or backsliding? Threats to democracy in the twenty-first century," *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, vol. 33, no. 98, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1590/339801/2018> (accessed 1 December 2021).

27. The contribution of the largest Latin American mass media conglomerate, Globo TV, to Rousseff's impeachment is explained in Teun A van Dijk, "How Globo media manipulated the impeachment of Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff," *Discourse & Communication*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2017, p. 199–229, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481317691838> (accessed 1 December 2021).

offering a space of resistance. By describing the falls of both Rousseff and Lula as moments within an orchestrated threat to democracy (instead of legitimizing them), *The Edge of Democracy* channels the influence and penetration of Netflix, that hegemonic USA media multinational corporation, towards combating a plurimedial misinformation cyber arsenal intended to promote ultraconservatism and democratic degradation.

The film's discourse of resistance, echoed through a dominating institution of the medium of video-on-demand, had its credibility further boosted by another hegemonic institution of moving images: the traditional *Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science*, which granted *The Edge of Democracy* an Oscar nomination for the Best Documentary.

Such a substantial validation from one of Hollywood's most long-standing institutions would enhance the film's mainstream acceptance and exposure, and consequently place the Brazilian threat to democracy "on the red carpet"²⁸ rather than "under it,"²⁹ where it had been expected to remain.

Backed by an Academy Award nomination, Costa's documentary became a cause of concern and embarrassment to the Bolsonaro administration that could not be easily ignored. Having earlier criticized the entire national cinema based on the lack of nominations for Hollywood's most prominent award,³⁰ the President would then have to face such validation granted to a film that depicts him as an anti-democratic neofascist leader. He reacted with verbal attacks on both the film and the filmmaker—through institutional channels, personal interviews, and social media posts³¹—and

28. *Petra Costa no Oscar*, video by Borba, 2020, Meteoro Brasil, <https://youtu.be/GxIQE6Odsys> (accessed 1 December 2021), 10 min.

29. Borba, 2020.

30. During an interview with Petra Costa in 2016, Bolsonaro "complained that no Brazilian film was good enough to be awarded with an Oscar nomination" (our translation). Quoted from the Portuguese version of Petra Costa, "Bolsonaro's War on Truth", *The New York Times*, January 24, 2020.

31. Costa has been called an anti-Brazil activist by the Communications Office of the Presidency of the Republic, who accused her of spreading fake news in USA television after an interview at PBS. A headline would state "Filmmaker Petra Costa loses all contact with reality and lies again about Brazil" (see reference below). To Borba (2020), this Twitter post has been one of the best publicity pieces the film has received, calling the attention of Bolsonaro supporters to Costa's film. By the time of the closing of the present article, the Twitter post was still active on the URL: <https://twitter.com/secomvc/status/1224456631137619969> (accessed 17 December 2021).

with a censorship venture designed to gain more state control over the choice of the country's representing films at the Oscars.³²

In order to subvert hegemonic media institutions that are considered quality benchmarks when it comes to mainstream cinema, while also catalyzing their acceptance towards denouncing the Brazilian crisis, *The Edge of Democracy* embraces an aesthetics of hegemonic cinema, engaging with a visual presentation that is in line with its standards. This reduces the film's connection with a certain tradition in Latin American political documentary filmmaking, which argued for an "imperfect cinema."³³ With the popularization of stabilized digital cameras (also handheld, but prominently in the form of unmanned aerial devices, as delimits the scope of this study), an immaculate visual aesthetic becomes available to anti-system filmmaking—paradoxically, resistance emerges with the appropriation of a device that was originally exclusive to powerful institutions.

Apparatuses of military origins and vocations, as Grégoire Chamayou stresses in his *A Theory of Drone* (2015),³⁴ drones later proliferated as image creating devices to be used spontaneously by ordinary citizens. The ongoing popularization of these flying-cameras has unfolded new possibilities of resistance based on (i) capturing evidence of misuse of power, free of risk to the human operator, and (ii) gaining aesthetic possibilities once reserved to large budget creations as well as unprecedented freedom of the gaze (exemplified with the help of Costa's documentary). Once an exclusively military tool dedicated to surveillance and assassination, and now a device that allows individuals to exercise power *over* rulers by watching them, drones are gaining

32. Bolsonaro's culture secretary has expressed the intention to change the cooperation term signed between the Brazilian state and the private institution *Brazilian Academy of Cinema* (ABC) in order to assure half of the seats in the commission that selects the country's representing films for the Best International Feature Film award at the Oscars. His expressed intent of preventing the 2020 case from happening again, in reference to Costa's film nomination (Amado, 2020), has even exposed his lack of knowledge on the matter, since *The Edge of Democracy* was nominated for the "Best Documentary" upon which ABC does not deliberate. Guilherme Amado, "Mário Frias tentou intervir no colegiado que escolhe filme brasileiro para o Oscar"/"Mário Frias tried to intervene in the collegiate body that chooses Brazilian film for The Oscars" (our translation), *Época*, August 14, 2020.

33. Julio García Espinosa, *Por un cine imperfecto*, Caracas, Fondo Editorial Salvador de la Plaza, 1973. Despite the prevalence of stable and high quality imagery, *The Edge of Democracy* does engage aesthetic elements of traditional political documentary, such as Cinema Novo's hand-held camera or the "imperfect" aesthetics described by the Cuban García Espinosa (1973). Costa would use such sort of unstable footage in interviews, as well as covering political events.

34. Grégoire Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, New York, The New Press, 2015, translated by Janet Lloyd from original edition in French *Théorie du drone*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2013.

political relevance by confronting facets—which will be problematized with the help of a corpus of short films and internet videos. This prepares the ground for the core discussion of this article: the aesthetic tools and possible gazes enabled by drones, as expressed in *The Edge of Democracy*, and their role in the construction of the film's intermedial sensory poetics. Our discussion is illustrated by a selection of prominent drone shots from the film and the promotional poster used to distribute the film, and will also be enriched by an exclusive interview with filmmaker Petra Costa.

The present study invites a reflection on how Costa's documentary subverts hegemonic institutions, devices, and aesthetics through an intermedial approach, shaping itself as a vector of resistance against globally-coordinated power forces that, backed by elites, promote the rise of ultra-conservatism and neofascism through misinformation. Beyond the Brazilian case, could this film, with its global circulation, sensitize citizens of overseas societies to similar threats they face, or help to illuminate their hard-to-understand crises?³⁵

SUBVERTING HEGEMONIC DEVICES AND DRONE IMAGE

Institutions of power have systematically used the air, or the "aerial" (in a wider sense), to exercise power over regular citizens: surveillance, control, and assassination have been operated from helicopters, towers, and skyscrapers. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (or UAVs), one of the working definitions of drones, give new magnitude to those mechanisms. Their real advantage, according to a US Air Force officer, would be the possibility of "projecting power without projecting vulnerability."³⁶

Chamayou reflects on the rising adoption of "armed flying drones" by military forces, anticipating a series of safety issues to which humankind is already exposed. According to him, what keeps democracies reluctant to use violence directly relates to the consequent human and fiscal costs, as seen by "citizen-electors," and the resulting electoral costs seen by rulers.³⁷ By immunizing citizens "against vital demands of warfare,"³⁸ drones frontally affect the very basis of "democratic pacifism,"³⁹ which the

35. Dunker (2020) argued that *The Edge of Democracy* works, from a psychoanalytical standpoint, to elucidate a crisis of difficult understanding.

36. Chamayou, 2013, p. 12.

37. Chamayou, 2013, p. 186.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

39. *Ibid.*

author believes gives way to a “democratic militarism,” with citizens more likely to embark on war ventures or less likely to participate in the decision to go to war: “once warfare became ghostly and teleguided, citizens, who no longer risked their lives, would no longer even have a say in it.”⁴⁰ A phenomenon that he calls the *dronization* of armed forces (designating their automation) changes the decision-making process in regard to war: “because the threshold of recourse to violence is drastically lowered, violence tends to be seen as the default option for foreign policy.”⁴¹

Once the military has no American human losses to explain to its citizens, drone assaults can be operated invisibly and have become a new type of “clandestine military operation.”⁴² The logic behind its growing adoption by the USA is because:

it removes the risk of losing American military, it's much cheaper than deploying soldiers, it's politically much easier to maneuver (i.e. flying a drone within Pakistan vs. sending troops) and it keeps the world in the dark about what is actually happening. It takes the conflict out of sight, out of mind.⁴³

The invisibility or clandestine nature of unmanned air strikes also pivots to the high rate of civilian assassination on the enemy side⁴⁴—in other words, with a low success rate, drones continue to be debated. But how would public opinion react to a scenario in which unmanned air strikes achieve a virtually full success rate, meaning that all enemy targets are eliminated while all non-target lives are preserved?

The short docufiction *Slaughterbots* (2017)⁴⁵ invites such reflection by carefully explaining—in a simulated product launch—a new technology able to perform selective mass assassination. Working as coordinated teams, autonomous drones would carry just the amount of explosive needed to penetrate one human scalp instead of deploying powerful bombs that could damage the surroundings. Through

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. Quote from Info page of the project *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*, <http://drones.pitchinteractive.com/> (accessed 1 December 2021).

43. *Ibid.*

44. The project *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* has cataloged over three thousand deaths in Pakistan operated by USA unmanned air strikes between 2004 and 2015. Less than two percent of the victims were high profile targets, while more than twenty percent were civilians and children.

45. *Slaughterbots* (original title: Robots Massacreurs), directed by Stewart Sugg, concept by Stuart Russell, produced by Stop Autonomous Weapons, 2017, <https://youtu.be/9CO6M2H-soIA> (accessed 1 December 2021), 8 min.

facial recognition, the lethal robots would identify and decide which human target to preserve and which to assassinate based on, for example, their political orientation (extracted through big-data AI algorithms).

Slaughterbots is clearly a warning message⁴⁶ that highlight that the technology of the lethal autonomous UAVs depicted is not at all unfeasible. On the contrary, the core elements are already available in the retail market, such as low-cost drones powered with AI systems of facial recognition: “Your kids probably have one of these, right?”⁴⁷ asks a showman introducing the apparently-innocent murdering drone that fits in the palm of his hand (see Figure 2). He would illustrate the proximity between today’s mass electronic devices and the new lethal UAV being released by explaining that “just like any mobile device these days, it has cameras and sensors. And just like your phones and social media apps, it does facial recognition.”⁴⁸

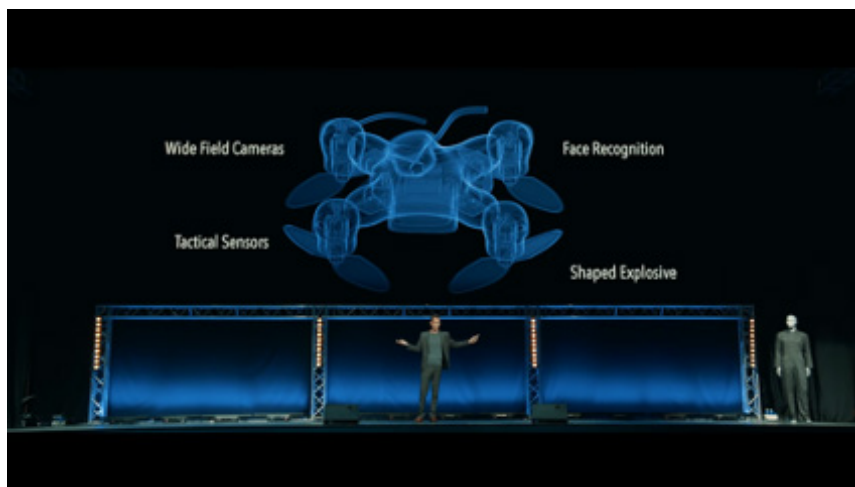


Fig. 2. Image from *Slaughterbots* (2017) presenting lethal autonomous suicidal drones deployed as teams to execute selective massacres.

46. The organization that produced the film calls for the ban of what they call autonomous weapons.

47. *Slaughterbots*, Stewart Sugg, 2017.

48. *Ibid.*

The powerful big data artificial intelligence systems—that track individuals' geographical location, purchases, clicks, communication, and more—already used by rulers to segregate and politically persecute individuals, could deploy a new form of extermination: one that eliminates a class of citizens that threatens the most powerful, while preserving the rest, even if both are sharing the same space. Launched in a classroom, such a strike could murder all regime opposers, while doing nothing to the non-target individuals.

The dronization of warfare and the consequent reduction in the “threshold of recourse to violence”⁴⁹ already affects the sphere of international conflicts. What *Slaughterbots'* projected scenario, where unmanned troops perform selective mass killing, suggests is that local polarized contexts could undergo a violent turn as well.

To Petra Costa, resisting far-right populism is particularly difficult because its supporting elites often resort to unscrupulous methods to achieve their goals. Reflecting on the role of billionaire brothers David Koch and Charles Koch⁵⁰ in the molding of our democracies, she believes that winning an election requires little more from such wealthy supporters of ultraconservative values than getting Steve Bannon, Trump's former strategist and Campaign CEO, hired to manipulate it.

Bannon's and Bolsonaro's microtargeted cyberwar arsenals—whose virtual robots coordinate in social media and private messaging environments towards manipulating public opinion—would find a direct fit with *Slaughterbots'* technology, with the physical aerial robots adding a lethal component to the information warfare. If this killing technology is released as a commercial product, and its use becomes simply a matter of access to capital, would the respect for human life prevail over the temptation of wiping out with robots (and therefore, with no vulnerability) an entire slice of the population that disagrees with the most powerful?

Richardson⁵¹ broadens the concept of *drone* far beyond the unmanned aerial vehicle form. To him, the term can encompass any “autonomous sensing technology.”⁵²

49. Chamayou, 2013, p. 188.

50. The Koch brothers' networks coordinate big money funders towards pulling US politics to the right wing of the spectrum. For more information, refer to Theda Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez, “The Koch Network and Republican Party Extremism”, *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2016 p. 681–699.

51. Michael Richardson, “Drone Capitalism,” *Transformations*, no. 31, 2018, p. 80–98, http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Trans31_05_richardson.pdf (accessed 1 December 2021).

52. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

In this sense, Bolsonaro's digital arsenal—institutionally operated by the federal intelligence agency,⁵³ as well as through the clan's unofficial cyber army⁵⁴ run with the support of Bannon—could be understood as an obscure form of drone-network illegally working to sustain a regime and a global political movement it embraces. Understanding this automated conflict of information as a battle of different types of drones makes it clear that resisting neofascism in the post-digital era implies fighting an intermedial dronized⁵⁵ war.

But what we seek to understand about *The Edge of Democracy's* has to do with image creation and relates to the rise of an industry of physical consumer UAVs called “toy drones”—started in the 2010s with a monopoly of Chinese manufacturer DJI. The efforts of the corporation to develop reliable image-capturing flying devices that can be operated intuitively and spontaneously—with clear aspirations of becoming a daily mobile accessory—make sneaky aerial imagery more omnipresent every day. Besides the privacy and safety issues of having cameras peer through windows or over walls, DJI's origin raises concern and even discussions of banning it (especially in the USA) given that Chinese authorities have the legal possibility of requesting the data stored in their servers.

In spite of being centered on “flying video cameras armed with missiles,” Chamayou's discussion can still provide guidelines to help us understand the question of power through the *image* created by mass unmanned aerial camera devices. Like Virilio, who argued that “technologies of cinema and warfare have developed a fatal interdependence,”⁵⁶ Flusser would draw a number of relations between the act of photographing and the use of a weapon, such as by calling the camera a gun-

53. To Carpentieri (José Rafael Carpentieri, “Structural Change and Democratic Control of Intelligence in Brazil”, 2016 quoted by Ribeiro Assumpção, 2020), ABIN (acronym for *Agência Brasileira de Inteligência*, or Brazilian Intelligence Agency) follows a logic of political police focused on domestic surveillance and its submission to the Presidency of the Republic symbolizes a legacy from the authoritarian military past. Clara Ribeiro Assumpção, “Intelligence Oversight and Effectiveness in New Democracies: The Case of Brazil,” *Politikon: The LAPSS Journal of Political Science*, no. 45, 2020, p. 75–89, <https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.45.4> (accessed 1 December 2021).

54. *Office of Hate* (Gabinete do Ódio) is an unofficial organization led by the President's son Carlos Bolsonaro that massively works on social media trends and smartphone messaging applications (in micro-targeted level) to incite anti-democratic acts, promote hate speech, and spread calumnious fake news against political opponents. Its digital activism is detailed in Campos Mello, *A máquina do ódio: Notas de uma repórter sobre fake news e violência digital*, Companhia das Letras, 2020.

55. Chamayou, 2013.

56. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* [1984], London, Verso, 1989.

apparatus⁵⁷ and relating the pressing of its shutter button with the act of triggering the “red button” that launches a missile or a war. Sontag noted that photography’s ability “to appropriate the thing photographed”⁵⁸ is at the service of rulers, while individuals would profit from the spectacle created by cameras.⁵⁹ But the question of power through photographic image does not seem to be simply unidirectional. A phenomenon that accompanies the multiplication of portable camera devices—especially smartphones, but also lately drones—is an increasing number of episodes in which misuses of power committed by authorities are documented and made public by regular citizens, inverting the vectors of power through the image noted by Sontag.

The potential of such evidential imagery has recently been demonstrated in the case of George Floyd (1973–2020), whose cruel murder by asphyxiation by a white policeman, documented with a smartphone, triggered massive worldwide anti-racism protests, clamoring that “Black Lives Matter,” which may have turned into “the largest movement in US history.”⁶⁰

However, the surveillance of institutions of power by individuals through images is not always feasible with handheld devices, especially in contexts that lack the presence of the state or freedom of thought. The issue is illustrated in the fiction *Les Misérables* (2019)⁶¹ in which a policeman committing abuse of power against a girl reacts to being filmed by her friend by destroying the smartphone used to document his crime. But the same officer is later caught in a second episode of misuse of power, this time by a remotely-operated drone (see Figures 3, 4 and 5), and would not succeed—even resorting to bullets—in destroying evidence of his crime, carried away by the sneaky robot of three-dimensional freedom.

Les Misérables didactically illustrates the possibility that drones enable to witness safely, far from human harm (as explained by Chamayou⁶² and Richardson⁶³), limiting the risks assumed in exchange for photographic evidence to material losses.

57. Our translation from Portuguese expression aparelho-armas. Vilém Flusser, *Filosofia da Caixa Preta: Ensaios para uma futura filosofia da fotografia* [1983], trans. by the author from original edition in German, São Paulo, Hucitec, 1985.

58. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.

59. Sontag, 1977, p. 140.

60. Larry Buchanan, Bui & Quoctrung Patel, “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History”, *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020).

61. *Les Misérables*, directed by Ladj Ly, distribution by Amazon Studios, 2019, 1h44m.

62. Chamayou, 2013.

63. Richardson, 2018.



Figs. 3, 4 and 5. Images from *Les Misérables* (2019, France, 95'), film by Ladj Ly. Reproduction: Amazon Studios.

Tom Gunning explained that portable handheld cameras have facilitated a “new attitude toward subject matter, an ability to penetrate into terrain previously difficult to navigate with bulky equipment and to capture spontaneous action quickly and simply.”⁶⁴ Focused on older analog devices, his statement finds direct correlation with the possibilities introduced by drone technology in documentary practice. A phenomenon called “documentary impulse”⁶⁵ seems to receive new magnitude upon the popularization of flying robot cameras, as illustrated by fictions like *Les Misérables* and by other non-fiction works.

64. Tom Gunning, “Embarrassing Evidence: The Detective Camera and the Documentary Impulse”, Jane Gaines & Michael Renov (eds.), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, vol. 6, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 48.

65. *Ibid.*

An example on the documentary side is the internet video *Drone over Hong Kong Protests* (2019),⁶⁶ which portrays the 2019 civil rights demonstrations carried out against mainland China's extradition laws that allow political persecution of regime opponents in Hong Kong. Flying over police shields, through teargas clouds, or even within the fire zone, the unmanned camera does not find the same limitations imposed on a human photographer with a hand-held camera. Without needing to engage a human body or a life, the drone photographic gaze is not threatened with arrest or even with a bullet. Attributed to an anonymous collective—suggesting a risk of retaliation against the makers by hegemonic institutions—the video provides visual evidence of the massive popular support for the protests, as well as of disproportionate acts of violence practiced by Chinese police forces. Its viral number of views⁶⁷—although partly due to the playful immersive experience created by the camera movements (which sometimes resemble a kind of skydiving towards the crowd)—has shed light on an unofficial version of the facts and given public attention to the depicted misuse of power, becoming a reason for public embarrassment for Chinese power institutions, as noted by Szendy.⁶⁸

What the Hong Kong documentary has in common with *The Edge of Democracy* is the fact that both rely on drones' risk-free operation and three-dimensional mobility to transport the cinematic gaze beyond barriers designed by institutions of power to stop citizens, making it possible to see or build a counter-hegemonic version of the facts.

What differentiates them is the purpose of the drone image: in the Asian video, footage has a primarily evidential role, as it is intended to constitute proof of facts, although the spectacle of drone acrobatics also offers an aesthetic appeal. The drone image in *The Edge of Democracy* will also transport the filmmaker's gaze to places that her body cannot access, some of them hostile, but not with the goal of capturing incriminating photographic evidence. Rather, it allows her to gather signs that visually

66. *Drone over Hong Kong Protests*, video by Team BlackSheep, post on Facebook by the page 9GAG, 2019, <https://fb.watch/7YuLolBVha/> (accessed 1 December 2021), 3 min.

67. The video in Team BlackSheep YouTube account registered 1.3 million views as of March 2020, but has been turned private. Another copy published on 9GAG Facebook page reached more than three hundred thousand views as of September 2021.

68. Peter Szendy, "Le peuple des drones," *Hors Pistes 2020 - La leçon des images*, Centre Pompidou, 2020, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/hors-pistes-2020-la-lecon-des-images/article/120220/peter-szendy-le-peuple-des-drones> (accessed 1 December 2021).

depict the complex plot that is drawn, as well as to extract a visual poetry to accompany her verbal narration.

MEDIATING VERTIGO AND DEMOCRATIC DETERIORATION THROUGH DRONE IMAGE

For Petra Costa, one of the characters in the film is the capital city of Brasília.⁶⁹ At the beginning of *The Edge of Democracy*, she describes the metropolis erected in the middle of the country in the late 1950s as “an utopian city that would house the dream of democracy.”⁷⁰ Not long after its 1960 inauguration, however, it became a dystopian space with the installation of a totalitarian military regime that would last two decades (1964–1985).

In an interview carried out with Costa for the present paper, she maintained that Brasília's urban planning and architecture “configure, spatialize and draw power in a graphic way.”⁷¹ The film's plot hence has a visual character, as the story unfolds within the so-called Three Powers Square (*Praça dos Três Poderes*), where the three branches of the Brazilian government are located. The story alternates between the National Congress (headquarters of our bicameral legislative branch) to the Planalto Palace (headquarters of the executive branch), then to the Supreme Court (the highest court of the judicial branch), as the documentary filmmaker explains.⁷² The federal capital is the subject of twelve drone shots used in the film, with a total length of approximately eight minutes.

Not by accident, *The Edge of Democracy*'s promotional poster features an aerial image of Brasília captured with a drone on the day of Dilma Rousseff's impeachment vote, a decisive episode in the degradation of Brazilian democracy.⁷³ Visually synthesizing a kind of essence of the movie, the drone image evidences the relationship between the three powers and the people, from which it is possible to extract a series of signs. “It is an image that tells the story of the whole film,”⁷⁴ describes Costa. She

69. Costa, September 29, 2020.

70. *The Edge of Democracy*, Petra Costa, 2019.

71. Costa, September 29, 2020.

72. Ibid.

73. Roberta Salazar Uchoa, “Requiem for Brazilian democracy,” *Critical and Radical Social Work*, vol. 5 no. 1, 2017, p. iii–14, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986017X14835299542812> (accessed 1 December 2021).

74. Costa, September 29, 2020.

highlights the power that aerial images have to visually depict such a “fascinating cinematic scenario,”⁷⁵ projecting its magnitude and configuration.

Overflying provides a geographical and architectural dimension from that place, detached from the individual. The drone [image] shows the structure: the power structure, the geographical, logical structure. It makes evident the structures that are not perceived when one is standing with a [handheld] camera, and allows one to see more what is individual, not the whole.⁷⁶

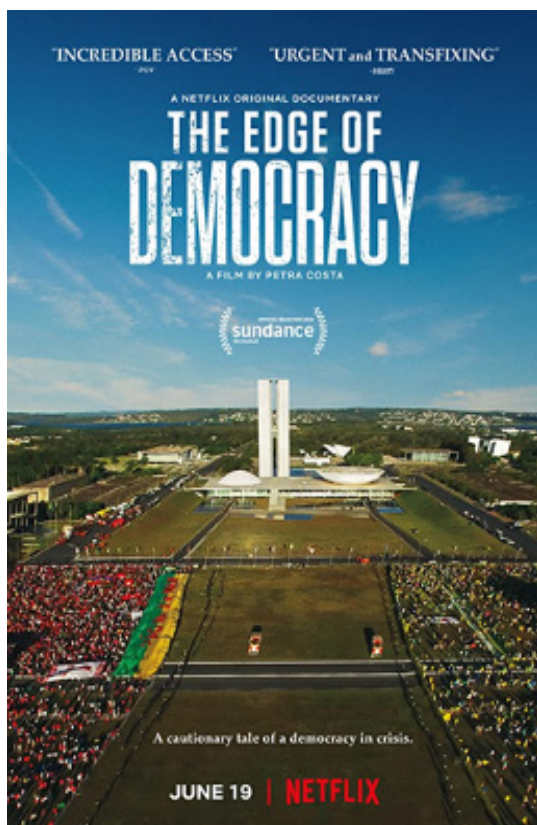


Fig. 6. *The Edge of Democracy* film release promotional poster. Photo credits: Ricardo Stuckert. Reproduction: Netflix

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

In the film scene from which the poster image has been extracted, Costa verbally describes Brasília's spatial configuration as the camera moves: "at its heart, the two houses of Congress. The lower house looking up, open to the desires of society, and the upper house closed in, meditating in deep thought."⁷⁷

Gathering in front of the National Congress, a divided population is kept away from the palaces: "the perfect architecture forgot a main ingredient of democracy: the people, who were even more isolated from power,"⁷⁸ she adds.

The imposed distance between the crowd and the Parliament house is one of the signs brought into evidence by the drone image. At a closed Chamber of Deputies, a session chaired by Eduardo Cunha (later condemned for corruption)⁷⁹ gave Michel Temer, Vice-President and member of the same party, the Planalto Palace seat. With the vote atypically scheduled on a Sunday, the Brazilian 2016 coup d'état was carried out as a mass media show, broadcasted live and followed in public screenings all over the country. Either from the National Congress barricades, at home, or on the streets, people watched (celebrating or lamenting, as an audience) the outcome of the 2014 popular elections being overturned.

Another kind of distance is evident in the emblematic image of the poster, one that separates protesters who were against impeachment from those who were for it. On the left, wearing red, the group that defended the permanence of the President elected at the polls through the Workers' Party (PT), aligned with a left-wing political orientation; on the right side, the portion of the population that demanded the replacement of Rousseff by her Vice-President, aligned with a right-wing political project, wearing the colors of the motherland in a demonstration of a nationalism that is inherent to its populist rhetoric.⁸⁰

The Brazilian polarization is described as a "social binarization in two supposedly confronted beives, not only of opponents, but of enemies."⁸¹ This understanding is confirmed by the barricades separating the two antagonistic groups, suggesting

77. *The Edge of Democracy*, Petra Costa, 2019.

78. *Ibid.*

79. Matt Sandy, "Brazilian politician who led Rousseff impeachment arrested on corruption charges", *The Guardian*, October 19, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/19/eduardo-cunha-arrested-corruption-charges-brazil> (accessed 1 December 2021).

80. Araújo & Prior, 2020, p. 7

81. Our translation from original in Portuguese: "binarização social em dois supostos bandos confrontados, não só de adversários e, sim, de inimigos" (Esther Solano, Pablo Ortellado & Marcio Moretto, "2016: o ano da polarização," 2017 quoted in Passos & Batista, 2018).

that the present rivalry could gain violent contours. To Costa, the wall between the two sides illustrates the polarization that “gnawed at society in a deep and fast way,”⁸² with the poster’s symbolism extending from the crowd to Brazilian families, including her own personal case: “the story of this crisis, of this wall, runs directly through my family (...) on one side, it’s the story of the establishment that my grandparents were a part of. On the other, it’s the story of my parents, and the left they dreamt of, which is crumbling.”⁸³

The empty wall that divides the protesters offers a visual representation of the absence of communication and of the Brazilian trauma itself:

The drama that the film wants to tell brings this wall up. There is the germ of our tragedy, which is the tragedy that we continue to live through: the impossibility of communication that is generated between these two sides. (Petra Costa)⁸⁴

The choice of the photo for the poster of *The Edge of Democracy* confirms the relevance of Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment to the degradation of Brazilian democracy, defended in the film and by scholars such as Vieira Santana⁸⁵ and Uchoa.⁸⁶ The real motivations and architecture of this maneuver would come to be revealed in a taped conversation between prominent figures of the political game. The phone call audio, manipulated in *The Mechanism*, as discussed earlier, is in *The Edge of Democracy* accompanied by drone footage.

Then-senator Romero Jucá (who later became Temer’s first Minister of Planning) was recorded talking to a former senator and oil executive. Concerned about the risk of being preventively arrested by Judge Sérgio Moro (within the same Car Wash Operation that would later culminate with the sentencing of Lula) the men agree that the simplest solution to “stop the bleeding” (the corruption investigations) would be to put Michel Temer in the President’s office. In the words of Jucá: “in a great national

82. Costa, September 29, 2020.

83. *The Edge of Democracy*, Petra Costa, 2019.

84. Costa, September 29, 2020.

85. “The coup was not only a political operation to oust former President Rousseff, but moreover a long-term effort to undermine the 1988 Brazilian Constitution” (Carlos Henrique Vieira Santana, “The geopolitics of the Brazilian coup d’état and its consequences”, *Transcience*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2018).

86. Uchoa, 2017.

pact, with the Supreme Court and everyone,”⁸⁷ confirmed by the executive: “With everyone. So it all stops.”⁸⁸

While the dialogue unfolds, the drone provides a contemplating view of the proposed arrangement. The filmmaker combines a close-up and non-human image of the Congress—more specifically, of the building where parliamentarians’ offices are located—with the audio of the phone call, allowing her to listen to what is being plotted in those spaces of power she could not have access to as a citizen. The drone technology offers a unique visual possibility, as the proximity between the camera and the building could not be reproduced by a helicopter, for safety reasons, and could not be executed furtively with a crane. As night falls, a soaring camera movement focuses on the horizon between the twin towers of the National Congress (see Figures 10, 11, 12), while closely scanning the buildings’ offices—from top to bottom—to shed light in the perverse plan being orchestrated “in the shadows of the republic,” as Costa’s narration puts it.

The last part of this dialogue is so particularly revealing that the filmmaker invites the spectators to listen to it a second time. When the goal of changing the occupant of the Planalto Palace seat is revealed, the filmmaker’s gaze flies towards that building. While the image travels between the buildings of the legislative and executive branches (from where the coup has been engineered towards where it would be materialized), the voice of two journalists describe what the leaked audio recording revealed. A Brazilian reporter highlights the fact that “the conversation happened a few weeks before the vote in which the Lower House opened an impeachment process against President Dilma,”⁸⁹ and is followed by an anglophone journalist who didactically clarifies: “in the conversation, the men agree that ousting President Rousseff would be the only way to end the corruption probes against them.”⁹⁰

The evidentiary audio—from both the leaked telephone conversation and mass media news shows—as well as Petra Costa’s narration are presented within an atmosphere of contemplation and observation created by the drone’s non-human gaze. Costa would later explain her preferences for such stable and even meditative imagery (mostly captured with drones) as an escape from the heavy and claustrophobic

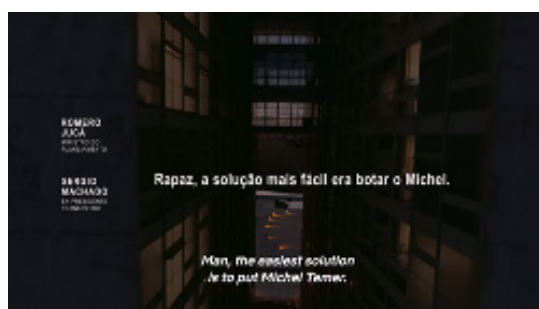
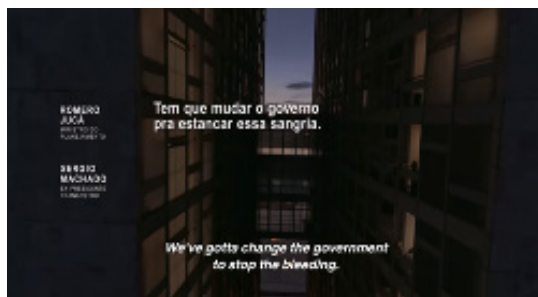
87. *The Edge of Democracy*, Petra Costa, 2019.

88. *Ibid.*

89. *The Edge of Democracy*, Petra Costa, 2019.

90. *Ibid.*

RESISTING BRAZILIAN NEOFASCISM THROUGH DRONE IMAGERY IN (NEW) HEGEMONIC MEDIA:
THE CASE OF PETRA COSTA'S *THE EDGE OF DEMOCRACY* (2019)



Figures 7, 8 and 9. Images from *The Edge of Democracy* depicting the scene of a leaked conversation that uncovered perverse motivations for Rousseff's ousting. Image credits: João Atala. Reproduction: Netflix.

environments in which the narrative unfolds:⁹¹ “the drone gave a timeless breathing space to take leave the suffocation, the drama, the tragedy of the here and now.”⁹²

The film ends with the presidential inauguration of Jair Bolsonaro, in images from Michel Temer passing the presidential banner to Bolsonaro accompanied by a somber and depressing tune that even includes a discrete arrangement of Brazil's national anthem.⁹³ The soundtrack of this tragic event sensorially prepares the viewer for Costa's final meditative verbal path, which includes the movie's longest drone shot.

Sober and stable, the filmmaker's gaze travels hundreds of meters to near the National Congress, hovering right above the Lower Chamber dome before moving to a demonstration taking place behind barricades positioned in front of the legislative houses. The two-minute-long shot creates the atmosphere for Costa's poetic reflections on that trauma, synthesized in questions that refer to the two decades long totalitarian regime: “How do we deal with a pain of being thrown into a future that looks as bleak as our darkest past?”⁹⁴

Assuming vertigo as a “defining experience of humans from the proximity to malaise, with anguish in its most extreme state,”⁹⁵ Dunker understands that those feelings are mediated in the film with the help of the drone imagery. By concluding that Brazilian democracy had reached its edge, Costa resorts to aerial footage in the search for vertigo: “a weird impulse of throwing yourself, of being drawn into the abyss.”⁹⁶ Switching the focus to her individual parcel of such collective frustration, she agonizingly concludes the movie, asking “Where do we gather the strength to walk through the ruins and start anew?”⁹⁷ as the crowd becomes smaller and smaller (as illustrated by Figures 10, 11, 12).

91. Costa, September 29, 2020.

92. *Ibid.*

93. The arrangement of Brazil's national anthem starts around 1h 52min 37s.

94. *The Edge of Democracy*, Petra Costa, 2019.

95. Dunker, 2020 (our translation).

96. *Ibid.*

97. *The Edge of Democracy*, Petra Costa, 2019.



Figs 10, 11 and 12. Images from the final scene of *The Edge of Democracy*.
Image credits: João Atala. Reproduction: Netflix.

CONCLUSIONS: DRONIZATION OF A PLURIMEDIAL CYBERWAR

In order to effectively function as a message of resistance, *The Edge of Democracy*'s language should have its capacity for elucidating an opaque reality tested as of its arrival in people's homes. One of the main reasons that led Petra Costa to choose Netflix for co-producing *The Edge of Democracy* is the platform's extensive penetration among citizen-electors from across the entire political spectrum: "I wanted the film to be widely seen in Brazil. To me, that was very important, and Netflix was the only streaming service that offered that possibility."⁹⁸ And beyond some weeks of screening (as in regular movie theaters), the director wanted the film to remain available to the public over a long period.⁹⁹

Chamoyou's notion of dronization of warfare could be metaphorically understood in the context of the cyberwar of narratives and media in which the film participates. In this sense, *The Edge of Democracy*'s power of resistance relies on being invisibly delivered, such as by a drone, to the homes of the ultraconservative electorate wrapped in major mainstream artistic validations—crossing the barrier (as shown in the iconic film poster) that extends to the entire country:

The film arrived at some people on the other side of that wall—I received several testimonies of this type. One that I loved came from a congressman of PSL [Bolsonaro's party in the 2018 elections], who saw the film, loved it and showed it to his entire office; and others, who supported the impeachment and voted for Bolsonaro. Without those two endorsements [from Netflix and the Oscars], I wouldn't have reached those people.¹⁰⁰

The movie's penetration in other countries beyond Brazil is, in Costa's opinion, a consequence of Netflix's immaterial omnipresence. Feedback she received from foreign spectators highlighted a connection between the film plot and their local realities. A headline by CNN would also place emphasis on the global pertinence of Petra Costa's denunciation: "This Oscar-nominated Brazil documentary is a warning for democracies around the world."¹⁰¹

98. Costa, September 29, 2020.

99. *Ibid.*

100. *Ibid.*

101. Shasta Darlington, "This Oscar-nominated Brazil documentary is a warning for democracies around the world," *CNN*, February 3, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/03/americas/brazil-the-edge-of-democracy-documentary-intl/index.html> (accessed 1 December 2021).

Drones' unique capabilities of visually depicting such an urban and architectural plot, in which institutions of power and buildings assume the role of characters, are at the heart of *The Edge of Democracy*'s sensory poetics. Aesthetically supported by image-creating devices that have democratized¹⁰² the creation of stable and extremely mobile (in three dimensions) imagery, but also endorsed by new (Netflix) and traditional (the Oscars) hegemonic media institutions of the moving image, Costa's documentary is an artifact of true resistance born from a subversion of hegemonic technological apparatuses and networks.

Resorting to devices and structures that have typically served the institutions of power, *The Edge of Democracy* introduces its own form of guerrilla filmmaking, using new and traditional hegemonic apparatuses for the genesis and propagation of a counter-hegemonic discourse.

For Dunker, Costa has initiated the slow judgement of history of the Bolsonaro administration even before his far-right project began being implemented from the Planalto Palace.¹⁰³ But resisting the rise of neofascism, constructed through mass and social media, goes beyond a simple conflict of narratives¹⁰⁴ and clearly points to a combat traversing multiple media. Having intermediality at the center of an aesthetic strategy, and expressed in the articulation of hegemonic devices and media actors, *The Edge of Democracy* introduces a sharp and unique contribution against such a global wave of ultraconservatism and neofascism.

102. Costa, September 29, 2020.

103. Dunker, 2020.

104. Bolsonaro's election lacked support of traditional media, and was highly influenced by a complex network of WhatsApp messaging groups, which functioned as a social network. Evangelista and Bruno, "WhatsApp and political instability in Brazil: targeted messages and political radicalisation", *Internet Policy Review*, vol. 8, n° 4, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1434> (accessed 1 December 2021).

Resisting Brazilian Neofascism Through Drone Imagery in (New) Hegemonic Media: The Case of Petra Costa's *The Edge of Democracy* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

In *The Edge of Democracy* (2019, Brazil), Petra Costa denounces the weakening of democracy and the rise of neofascism in Brazil—a crisis that is difficult to understand, as it is instigated, in part, by local hegemonic mass media vehicles and sophisticated virtual arsenals on social media. This intermedial analysis will focus on the filmmaker's poetic gesture of transforming drone-captured images into a personal, reflexive, and structural gaze at the power relations that permeate the plot— an act of subversion of this military-originating device, whose growing role as a mechanism of resistance will be explored. The study also points out the film's paradoxical trajectory through hegemonic institutions of the moving image—Netflix (new) and The Oscars (traditional)—which resulted in a counter-hegemonic discourse being brought into the mainstream and therefore functioning as an artifact of resistance within the plurimedial cyberwar of information surrounding the Brazilian political crisis.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans *Une démocratie en danger* (2019, Brésil), Petra Costa dénonce l'affaiblissement de la démocratie et la montée du néofascisme au Brésil : une crise difficile à comprendre, puisqu'elle est soutenue par des véhicules de médias de masse locaux hégémoniques et des arsenaux virtuels sophistiqués sur les médias sociaux. Cette analyse intermédiaire se concentrera sur le geste poétique de la cinéaste qui transforme

des images capturées par des drones en un regard personnel, réflexif et structurel sur les relations de pouvoir qui imprègnent l'intrigue — dans un acte de subversion de ce dispositif d'origine militaire, dont le rôle croissant comme mécanisme de résistance sera présenté. L'étude met également en évidence la trajectoire paradoxale du film à travers des institutions hégémoniques de l'image en mouvement — Netflix (nouvelle) et les Oscars (traditionnelle) — pour amener un discours contre-hégémonique dans le mainstream et donc fonctionner comme un artefact de résistance dans une cyberguerre plurimédiatique de l'information autour de la crise politique brésilienne.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Paulo T. Gonçalves Pinto does research-creation on drone images within Entelas (Research Group on Transmedia Content, Convergence of Cultures and Screens) and as part of the ongoing *International Master in Cinema Studies* program from Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, partially carried out at Université de Montréal and Université Sorbonne Nouvelle. A control and automation engineer by training, his work of drone-shot short films has been selected by festivals from four continents. He is the founding director of *NO AR Drone Film Fest Brazil*—Latin America's pioneer event dedicated to drone cinematography.