

**CAFFÉ, E. (DIRECTOR). (2003). *STORYTELLERS* [FILM].
BRAZIL, FRANCE: BANANEIRA FILMES, GULLANE
FILMES, LATERIT PRODUCTIONS AND RIOFILME.**

**CAFFÉ, E. (REALIZADORA). (2003). *NARRADORES DE JAVÉ*
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Giane Lessa

A town in the northeastern outback of Brazil is to be flooded for the construction of a hydroelectric plant. In *Storytellers*, a film directed by Eliane Caffé¹, faced with its imminent fate, the population of the small town (Javé) is notified that flooding could be avoided only if the town acquires the status of a heritage site. The people need to prepare a dossier to give an account of the great achievements of Javé so that they can justify its preservation.

As occurs in some regions of Brazil, the inhabitants of Javé live in a system of almost total orality. Few are able to make small incursions into the world of literacy. So they decide to call on the only literate local to record their history: Antonio Biá, a former employee of the local post office. Biá had been outcast by the community because, to save his position in the post office of a place full of illiterates, he had written letters in which he invented, lied and defamed his neighbors. With his imagination and wits, Biá was surviving the hardships of the northeastern backlands as would a rogue: with drama and burlesque.

The villagers' only option was to ask him who had cheated them to transcribe the stories of the town's foundation. Biá should perform the task of an ethnographer: listening to the stories told and editing them in a "scientific" manner. The book of Javé was envisaged to be a possible and the only bearer of the authenticity of facts guaranteed by the scientific rigor of its preparation. Only thus would the people of Javé be able to prevent the advance of progress from leaving their possessions, their lives and their dead underwater.

¹ Eliane Caffé was born in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1961. She studied Psychology at PUC-SP [Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo] and Drama at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y TV [International School of Cinema and Television] in San Antonio de los Baños, Havana, Cuba, and completed post-graduate studies at the Instituto de Estética y Teoría de las Artes [Institute of Aesthetics and Theory of the Arts] of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid [Autonomous University of Madrid]. Eliane Caffé has received numerous national and international awards (France, Belgium, Uruguay) for work situated between the documentary and fiction of a social nature. Her first feature-length film, *Kenoma*, was awarded Best Film at the 20th Biarritz International Film Festival, France. *Storytellers* was her second film and received several awards in Brazil and the award for Best Film and Best Screenplay at the Festival de Cinéma des Ameriques 3 (Quebec, Canada) and Best Film at the 30th International Independent Film Festival, Brussels. The director also coordinated experimental documentaries and TV series, as well as audiovisual workshops in conflict zones in São Paulo. Her theater debut was as the director of the play *A Vida que Eu Pedi, Adeus* ["The Life I asked for, Farewell"], by Sérgio Roveri.

Antonio Biá goes out into the field with the task of saving his neighbors, trying to organize hearings for those who are claiming a place in the history pages of the Javé Valley and urgently need the book to be produced. None of them fails to recognize that there existed a certain individual, called Indalésio, who founded the city by “verbally declaring his ownership”, but every one of them claims kinship with the founder. Contradicting the legitimacy of the written text, orality emerges as trustworthy, since the “declared ownership” contradicts the signed and recorded document that currently assigns the possession of land. On the other hand, listening to the other residents, Biá is faced with a multiplicity of points of view that ultimately undermines the oral narrative, since the intention is to have a “true” account of the events.

During his first hearing, Antônio Biá “improves” the story of one of the villagers during the course of its transcription and is severely reprimanded by the villager. On questioning, Biá argues: “the fact as it happened is one thing; the fact written down is another. What happened has to be improved on and written in a better way so that people believe what happened”. To become plausible, the event narrated orally has to be amended in writing. Orality comes across as factual, while the written word is a necessary invention that could lend authenticity to the facts. As such, the written word – which has acquired the status of veracity in western societies – also appears as controversial. The documentary demonstrates that, if the oral memory is plural and diverse, the written memory is edited and necessarily alters events.

Indeed, the oral discourse will have its authenticity questioned by the characters due to the lack of consensus in their disputes over the roles in the constitution of the village’s memory. Since their versions of the facts contradict, they try to validate them using objects, documents and the memory inscribed on the body of the single inhabitant who claims the female role as foundress of Javé – Maria Dina. To prove her point of view, she shows a birthmark that every descendant of Maria Dina is said to have. However, the heroine – the supposed foundress of Javé – is written off as crazy by one of the characters, and therefore unfit for the honor of having founded the small town. The dispute for the legitimacy of memory becomes more complex when it comes to the issue of gender, because the absence of other possible foundresses of Javé and the attribution of madness to the only feminine protagonist show the strength of male domination over historical narratives.

Another aspect highlighted in the film concerns the temporality of oral narrative and the process of translation involved in the contact with ethnic groups of cultures of a non-western oral basis. One of Antônio Biá’s informants is an elder of a *Quilombola* community in the region, who gives his account from the perspective of his community. The hearing can only be carried out via the translation of a member of the community who also has mastery of the western language. This mediation involves the lack of correspondence between the lexical and cultural categories of the languages and cultures in question. The old narrator stops his report dead when interrupted by Antônio Biá. The interpreter warns that the silence will last three days, prompting protests from the writer of Javé, who fails to understand the temporal relationships and their significance when invoking the word and the memory of a culturally diverse community.

Cultural heterogeneity is yet another factor that constitutes the plurality of discordant memories. It becomes increasingly evident that it will be impossible to record them from a single perspective. The dispute over the memory of Javé opens up a battlefield on which the complexity and constitutional instability of the formation of that memory are in evidence. The film indicates the procedural, subjective, conflictive and socio-historical aspects of the construction of memory. The evidence of the plural rather than consensual nature of its constitution ultimately prevents the book from being produced. Antonio Biá does not have the courage to attend the meeting arranged with Javé residents to report on the task expected of him. Instead, he sends a blank book accompanied by a letter in which he attempts to justify himself: “as for the stories, it is better for them to stay in the mouths of the people, because there is no hand that could make sense of them”.

The film reveals the ambivalence of the values historically and socially attributed to oral and written discourse, especially with respect to the trustworthiness in the narrative construction of events. We end up investigating the discursive conditions and enunciation: Who narrates? Who is authorized to narrate? Who has the right to narrate? Who writes? Who is allowed to write? Who is able to write? How should they write? Who recalls? How do they recall? On the other hand, the work expresses what is expected of education and literacy in schools, when a child is asked to read Antônio Biá’s letter because none of the adults around is able to.

Emblematic of several flooded locations in Brazil, the fate of the Javé Valley resembles that of other villages whose inhabitants were uprooted and had to migrate to other regions. The tensions between the oral and written words are not diluted. The written word would set in stone what is in constant motion and seems unable to cope with pulsating reality and living memory. Progress advances abruptly, undermining the frustrated effort to form a single version of the facts: Javé is irremediably flooded by economic power. And what is left for its inhabitants? Memory: Every cycle ends by inaugurating the birth of another contingency, which will give rise to new needs for narration. Faced with the flooded village, the residents of Javé immediately engage in reordering their memories starting from the situation that presents itself. In Caffé’s film, literacy and memory unleash the need for a future and for survival in that which is to come.

With *Storytellers*, while remaining faithful to the social topics emblematic of her work, Eliane Caffé also highlights an argument common to several regions of Brazil where local populations are forcibly uprooted, and their references of identity and family are deeply compromised due to the construction of dams. The director is consolidating her career with a cinematic production committed to socially and culturally displaced communities and drawn from experience of living with these communities and a well-structured research base characteristic of her scripts.

Translation: GRF Assessoria Linguística

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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* Submitted: 04-09-2018

* Accepted: 02-01-2019