

Night Café, Lígia Dabul (2011)

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Painted in 188, Van Gogh's *The Night Café* was inspired by the *Café de la Gare* in Arles. At the center of the painting, is a pool table, surrounded by smaller tables occupied by patrons with their heads bowed and couples in the penumbra. The painting is mostly in the complementary colors of red and green, and is crowned by dramatic yellow lights. The first takes of the documentary present the name of Van Gogh's painting over a sequence of a series of images of a bar in Niterói presented in slow motion at less than 24 frames per second, giving the impression that it is in a blur; a deliberate mark of the subjectivity of the artist-researcher.

With its green pool table and almost scarlet brick wall, the bar in Niterói becomes the real space represented by the painter. Among the tables of the here and now, the researchers become interviewers, showing a reproduction of Van Gogh's picture to see how it will be understood by the patrons of the *Caverna do Bin Laden* [Bin Laden's Cave]. Meanwhile, we hear excerpts of Van Gogh's letters in voice over, such as: "it's the ugliest painting that I made."

Confronted by the image and the excerpts from the painter's letters, the customers begin to perceive possible relations with Van Gogh's work.

The high point of the film, however, is the moment in which art and life appear to merge. During the first minutes of the interviews we are surprised when the patrons of the bar engage in a conversation that touches much more on the bar where they sit than on the image presented in the painting. This unexpected reaction, a fortunate serendipitous event, suggests a greater interest in life than art. The *Mise en abyme* reveals the collective social practices which, in the act of interaction, orders the discourse about the picture based on lived experience. While *Night Café* appears to be a film about a bar, in reality it delicately reveals that the patrons of the bar speak about themselves through van Gogh's painting. As Lígia Dabul has observed:

Commentaries of visitors about works of art in an exhibition in many cases

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flow to issues from their daily lives and of common interest, the pleasure of conversation, [...] and which are not related with the situation of the exhibition (Dabul, 2008: 56-57)

The film, therefore, presents sociological research in an original manner. The fact that the reception of Van Gogh's work and letters ends up with narratives about life, nightlife and the bar, provides an alternative for readers of current sociological reflections about the reception of artwork, who are usually referred to an erudite individual from the art world, as well as for viewers accustomed to narratives that commonly, as Clifford (1998: 17-62) has affirmed, emphasize the coherent narrative of the author's framings. By letting the social actors speak freely about the perception of the work, Lígia Dabul's film opens new avenues for thinking about the use of images in anthropology and sociology.

References

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