

Lucas Bambozzi
The Day São Paulo Stopped

“We live in a cynical society.”
CLAUDIO LEMBO, São Paulo governor, 2006

In 1993, some inmates of Taubaté prison (the maximum security jail of the state of São Paulo, 130 km from São Paulo city) founded an organization called Primeiro Comando da Capital, or PCC (First Command of the Capital). The PCC was supposedly an organization created to defend the rights of prisoners in the country, but it was actually something more than that. Wikipedia describes it as “an anti-establishment Brazilian prison gang and criminal organization” which, “since its inception, has been responsible for several criminal activities such as prison breaks, prison riots, drug trafficking, highway robbery and other supposed ‘terrorist’ activities.”¹ The most impressive, among these criminal activities, were the attacks coordinated by the PCC in May 2006, held to be the largest wave of violence of its kind against security forces and civilian targets that ever happened in the history of Brazil.

Everything appears to start on 11 May, when a total of 765 members of the PCC were put into isolation in the Presidente Venceslau maximum security prison, in the attempt to cut their links with fellow gang members outside prison. Among these detainees was one of the leaders of the PCC - Marcos Williams Herbas Camacho, known as Marcola - who managed to avoid being interrogated, and using his mobile phone, succeeded in ordering the start of a rebellion which was intended to spread to the entire state of São Paulo. According to *Wikipedia*, on 12 May 2006, at 8 in the evening, “several attacks against police officers started, the 55th Police department was attacked by 15 cars and a police officer was killed near his house, in the eastern part of São Paulo. Four civil police officers, a prison guard, four civil guard members and a military were killed and other nine people were injured in 19 actions before midnight.”² The next day the disorder spread to several prisons and the entire metropolitan area of São Paulo, but the police crack-down only came on 14 May. On the same day, the number of rebel prisons rose to 71, while in the city numerous buses were set on fire, buses representing a vital means of transport for the population of São Paulo. The consequences of these attacks made their presence felt on Monday 15, the first working day following the start of the uprising. Local people, terrified by the media reports (which possibly exaggerated the situation) and by what they saw on the streets, where possible avoided leaving their homes, buses did not circulate³, and those who went to work by car tried to get home as early as possible. The result was unprecedented chaos, with residential areas resembling ghost towns and the big highways gridlocked by the most spectacular jams of the year. But by this point the situation was under control, and the violence had been stopped, though the final outcome was horrific: 141

dead (according to the most cautious estimates) and 53 injured, among police, criminals and civilians; 299 attacks against police stations, courts, banks and buses, and the largest city in Latin America brought to a standstill.

One of the most interesting aspects of the events in São Paulo was probably the role that the media played in the entire episode. This applies to the organization of the revolts, which were orchestrated by a handful of prisoners and their outside contacts by mobile phone, mostly using text messages and short pre-paid calls. As for the mass media, while official communications of the event were handled very badly, the news of the uprising soon hit the international media, before ricocheting back to the local media, with the effect of making the situation appear even more serious than it actually was. The most remarkable thing about the episode, however, was the tactical ability demonstrated by the PCC in its use of means of communication to strike. As Lucas Bambozzi explains: “The media spectacle performed by the PCC scared media-artists, activists and net-producers. The PCC’s perspicacity in the use of mobile technologies reverberates not merely as speech, but as a sort of extreme activism. The strategy of blocking mass transport produced a previously unseen impact on society. Its swarm effect has obscured most known models of mobilization, flash-mobs or any other expectation of massive use of the mobile network for greater social impact.” It is a fact that, after Genoa and Seattle, after *Electronic Civil Disobedience* and “The ABC of Tactical Media”, after Indymedia and *Smart Mobs*⁴, activists now have to acknowledge that the most effective demonstration of the tactical use of means of communication, with the strongest impact on society and the mass media, was not theirs but that of a group of semi-literate criminals.

The Day São Paulo Stopped is a project that attempts to analyse this particular aspect of the events in São Paulo, and takes the form of a single flow of images: both “original” material, conveyed by the mass media or produced by those involved in the events, and material “reconstructed” by the artist for the occasion. The result is a series of videos which roll out different versions of the events, and which, when taken together, form a complex, fragmented, multi-faceted mockumentary. Like Peter Watkins, Bambozzi mixes fiction and reality, making us wonder what is real and what is merely realistic, and at the same time he tries to attain a truth that goes beyond the spectacular nature of the episode, looking to the “plural” nature of an event that was driven by a large network of players, and followed by thousands of eyes motivated by different fears. In other words, rather than restaging the events in all their spectacularity, and therefore emulating the panic effect elicited by the media during the event (which also interests him, as evinced by his reference to the radio programme *The War of Worlds* by Orson Welles), Bambozzi states that he is interested in:

“unbalancing the predominance of simplistic views available online, addressing social and political aspects in the context of criminality.” This oversimplification seems out of place if we consider the events of May 2006 as a network of actions: *The Day São Paulo Stopped* therefore becomes a representation of the invisible, complex, reticulate flow of information that characterized the rebels’ network, rather than the visualization of a series of dramatic actions.

But reducing *The Day São Paulo Stopped* to the status of docudrama or fake documentary would be superficial. In line with previous works like *Do Outro Lado do Rio* (2004) or *I Have No Words* (2000), in which the definitions between the drama and the given social reality are deliberately blurred, *The Day São Paulo Stopped* overlaps different genres. As the artist explains: “The idea of a fake documentary is indeed present in the project, as it is with most re-enactments. In this sense, the way I intend to work with actors would have some influence, in the way directors such as John Cassavetes or Abbas Kiarostami did. But I would rather relegate the basic elements of a 'drama', by emphasizing other approaches related to the Brazilian context and its social reality, which could be also referenced by genres such as the 'mockumentary', the 'fly-on-the-wall' strategy⁵ (conducted by Frederick Wiseman for example), as well as the realism of a director such as Ken Loach.”

The most interesting aspect of *The Day São Paulo Stopped* is probably the fact that, unusually for re-enactment, the artist has chosen to work with a high profile historic event, comparable in scale to 9-11, that he himself experienced first hand, both directly and via the media. As he says: “I will never forget that 15th of May, which had a massive impact on the city’s inhabitants, affecting not only certain areas but the majority of the city, due to the sudden and de-centralized nature of the attacks. What at first appeared to be just something ‘on TV’, started to produce impacts on many levels, in all social layers (coming out ‘from’ TV). [...] Since most of the attacks were directed at the public transport system, the effects were progressive and escalated to the whole city, causing real trouble not only in the immediate environment of the attacks, but also to people living in far districts – who desperately wanted to return home. [...] Even though I was in a very privileged situation compared to those with long daily journeys (not to mention those who were victims of the attacks) none of us were blind to what happened around that day. Most working commitments during the day were called off, kids were asked to return home earlier from school, universities cancelled classes and huge traffic jams formed hours before the rush period. I was among those who suffered such ‘light consequences’, but I wanted to observe in depth other possible sides of the event, by recording statements, shooting empty roads and tuning into alternative radio stations and TV channels. The network really was a battle field. While attacks were occurring simultaneously in different areas of the city, instant messages from multiple senders bombarded everyone’s inboxes,

stating different versions, showing shocking images and claiming to report on a new attack on a bus, bank or government institution. Statistics such as the number of victims rose minute by minute, not a result of further attacks but due to a huge media struggle for the most attention. Hoping to be able to go out in the streets safely, people would check the web for last minute news, looking for safety information. Instead, web sites reported mainly rumors, fake news about non-existent events each minute.”

In other words, Bambozzi found himself in a similar position to the character in *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy⁶, for whom a painstaking, obsessive reconstruction of events he has experienced is the only way to relive what he felt at the time, and at the same time, tune into his memories, explore them from every possible point of view, and if possible, understand them. Bambozzi, who spent the day recording statements, shooting at empty roads and tuning alternative radio stations and TV channels, regains the events of 15 May by deploying their collective dimension: crowds walking along the railway tracks, an old man explaining the television news to a child, etc. And this inevitably entails the media, just as the media filtered most of the original experience.

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Translated from Italian by Anna Carruthers

¹ In *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primeiro_Comando_da_Capital

² In *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006_S%C3%A3o_Paulo_violence

³ In a city as enormous as São Paulo, where most people rely on public transport, the transport blockage played a decisive role in the handling of the revolt and its perception. And rather than stemming from fear and the spectacle of burning buses, the blockage was probably orchestrated on precise orders from the PCC, due to the fact that the gang controls also an alternative means of transport such as the van's services - which were the first to stop running early in the day.

⁴ Critical Art Ensemble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience*, Autonomedia, New York 1996; David Garcia, Geert Lovink, “The ABC of Tactical Media”, in *Nettime*, May 16, 1997, available at the URL <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9705/msg00096.html>; Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, Basic Books 2002.

⁵ “Fly on the wall is a style of documentary-making used in film and television. The name derives from the idea that events are seen candidly, as a fly on a wall might see them. In the purest form of fly-on-the-wall documentary-making, the camera crew works as unobtrusively as possible; however, it is also common for participants to be interviewed, often by an off-camera voice.” From *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fly_on_the_Wall

⁶ Tom McCarthy, *Remainder*, Vintage Books, New York 2007.