

Frente de fogo (Firefront): analysis of an epic story of survival

by Charlotte de Beauvoir

“FRENTE DE FOGO” (“Firefront”) by Isabel Meira

Duration: 33’22

Listen to audio: <https://soundcloud.com/user-610031471/frente-de-fogo-fire-front-isabel-meira>

Original language: Portuguese

English translation available on *RadioDoc Review* site as pdf

Nominated in Radio Documentary Category in Prix Europa 2018

Frente de fogo invites us on a multiple journey through the story of a Portuguese fireman who unbelievably survived the forest fires that devastated his country in the summer of 2017. The journey takes us first – illustratively, with testimonies and sound design - to the road where Rui Rosinha got trapped by flames with several of his colleagues on the 17th of June, on their way to a rescue mission close to the town of Castanheira de Pera. The tale then follows Rui from his rescue, that same day, to the long weeks of recovery in several hospitals, where he is still being taken care of at the time of production. The journey there can get more literal for the listener, who follows Rui’s wife on a car drive to the hospital which she frequently visits. And the documentary itself, on a more symbolical level and through its structure, offers a round trip. It opens and ends with Rui’s reflections on the catastrophic fires, and his message: how should the Portuguese people remember what happened that summer in order to prevent a recurrence. A purpose we can guess the author of the documentary shares.

Isabel Meira’s production is based on a very strong story and backed with good, honest testimonies. What does one do in the face of an exceptional situation and a danger of death? What is it like to live in hell for several hours? How do you survive this when your friend did not? How can your family survive this? *Frente de fogo* tackles those important questions. It’s the tale of a survivor and the tale of a surviving family.

In the English transcribed script, the documentary is presented as a “first-person memoir” of Rui. I wonder if this work can be categorized as such. I understand that, in this genre, the producer is not in the room when the voice is being recorded. Instead, the character tapes himself, as in an audio diary. The difference between talking to oneself in a microphone and answering questions or explaining situations to a reporter is very audible. In *Frente de fogo*, you can tell the characters are being interviewed. You can also tell these were long-lasting interviews, especially for the two main characters, Rui and his wife Marina. Now, if the production is introduced as a first-person memoir, it’s probably because the author’s own voice does not appear in the documentary – except for a brief moment, almost as an ambience sound, when Marina is about to drive to the hospital. Given this, I would rather categorize this work as a “production without a narrator”; a piece that unfolds with interviews clips and sound design, in the absence of an almighty voice that leads the story, gives information and elaborates transitions between the different sound bites.

As a radio producer myself, I have once produced such a piece. I know how demanding it is to put together; to get everything to work as a whole, all the elements you need for the audience to get the story flawlessly, without the safety net of a narrative you’ll eventually write and perform – or have performed - and include in the production. It’s a challenge and it requires a lot of preparation and thinking. I also know it’s worth the trouble: it’s how you get to cut the intermediation between the story and the audience.

I’d like to steal here a quote that Alan Hall, from UK company Falling Tree Productions, used when he reviewed the feature *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah* for *RadioDoc Review*. It’s taken from the novel *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson and it states: “Fact explains nothing. On the contrary, it is fact that requires explanation”. After listening several times to *Frente de fogo*, I’m still, unfortunately, left with numerous unanswered questions; questions about facts that require explanation. What exactly happened with the car that ran into the fire truck on the road to Castanheira? How many firemen were there in the truck? How long did they actually stay trapped in the flames before being rescued? ... Reconstruction of the events, their timing and characters are blurry, at risk of losing the audience. Radio is a cruel medium: one second when you have your listener wandering around trying to understand something he didn’t get is a second he’ll not pay attention to the tale - and once it’s started, getting out of this vicious circle is difficult.

We could argue here whether *Frente de fogo* is a journalistic piece – in which case it would be mandatory to present facts clearly – or an authored feature piece – in which case some flexibility could be allowed in the presentation of the facts. I believe the production is in between the two. But, anyway, in the parts that tend to reconstruct the story, it should all be crystal clear. As a listener, I know I need to understand clearly the events in order to imagine them in my head.

On a more positive note, I'd like to point out a particular achievement of the piece: the very much alive reconstruction of the dialogue between the two main characters of the documentary. Rui and Marina, a married couple for 21 years and the parents of two boys, have been physically separated since the day of the accident. They've lost for now their intimacy, their living together, their daily talking together. Somehow, listening to them in *Frente de fogo* feels like restarting an intimate conversation that stopped. Rui and Marina were interviewed separately, but thanks to the mix, they talk to and answer one another, as in the 07'53-time mark:

Marina (wife of Rui): At exactly 8:13 I was on the balcony when my son came up to me [*heart beating*] – the oldest one – telling me that his father was shouting and saying that they were all going to die.

Rui Rosinha (fireman): This isn't normal – I never take my phone to the scene of the fire, my phone is always left in the fire engine but, as we were not yet at the scene of the fire, I still had my phone on me. Before, I had tried to use the SIRESP and saw that the thing was dead. I called Marina to say: Marina – we're all going to die here. I had never made a phone call like this in 24 years as a fireman.

Marina (wife of Rui): It was when I took the phone then I heard my husband saying that we're all going to die here.

Rui Rosinha (fireman): Marina put the phone on speaker and I'm shouting that we're all going to die because I felt... we felt that this was all unprecedented – very – extremely hot and something that we had never witnessed before, something that we had never experienced.

Marina (wife of Rui): Get back, I'm ordering you, we have to protect ourselves and the call cut off and I wasn't able to call again. [*music*]

The author manages there to take the listener into the recreated intimacy of the couple. It's a privileged experience.

I'd like to address now the creative treatment of sound and space in the production. *Frente de fogo* deals with an issue many productions have to face: How do you make a radio documentary about past events? Beyond interviews, which sounds do you use? How do you set to sound the story you're telling?

In my own personal sound dictionary, I call every sound that has not been recorded *in situ* on the ground an "FX". Isabel Meira decided to use three kinds of FX:

1- Illustrative FX (sirens, heart monitor, fire encroaching, footsteps in the forest, etcetera) that are used, under the voice of the interviewee, to illustrate with a sound what he or she tells with words.

2- Metaphorical FX (heart beats, heavy breathing, fire encroaching, etcetera) that are used, off beat of what is being said by the interviewee, to create an ambience or an emotion.

3- Sound composition and instrumental music, another way to convey an ambience or an emotion.

There is also one radio news bulletin and ambient sound (recorded on the ground), though not much and just once, when Marina is taking the trip to the hospital and then in the hospital.

I'd like to discuss here the use of FX or music when it's aimed to create an emotion, when at the same time the interviewee or the situation already suggests the emotion. Let's say, for example, a woman is crying, and then enters the sound of a melancholic violin. Or, in *Frente de fogo*, Marina explains she received a phone call from her husband telling her he is going to die, over the sound of a heart beating strongly (see extract above). There are several moments such as this one in the documentary. As a listener, I am strongly against this kind of sound experience. Beyond the lack of subtlety these techniques show, I feel it's like the producer is telling me what to feel, instead of letting the emotion grow on its own and settle into me. So, not only does it distract me, it blocks me from entering into the emotion. Whereas just the naked voice, conveying a strong message, can really get to me.

If one were to add sound design over the voices, in the case of *Frente de fogo*, I personally responded better to the use of music and abstract sound composition offered by the author. There are several extracts using this technique that caught my attention, as in the 21'00 to 23'10-time mark, when Rui and Marina explain how he learned a close friend and colleague did not survive his fire injuries.

As a whole, I believe the sound design in the piece helps recreate the angst of the original events. On one hand, the mix, understood as the place each sound bite occupies in their juxtaposition, is quite tight. There is no lateralization (pan) and not much focal depth. The documentary offers from one to three layers of sound (voice plus FX, for example, road sounds and fire encroaching). Those layers are close one to another, all of them reaching for the forefront. It gives the impression of a confined space, as a metaphor to the lack of air during the fire, all the “oxygen being absorbed” as Rui explains in the documentary.

On the other hand, the pace is even all along the production; we could say it is moderate. It corresponds to the pace of the interviews: Rui, Marina and the other interviewees speak in a soft, story-telling tone. Isabel Meira chose, in her montage, to practically always have a voice on. As a result, the closely-butted up interview bites helps achieving the metaphorical effect of sucking the oxygen out of the space. If this technique serves well the “angst effect” of the piece, I wonder if the density induced all throughout the program does not end up suffocating the audience as well, in the need of taking it all in without any break or respiration. The author could have instead opted for aerating her narrative. A combination of rhythms – dense, moderate, slow – according to the informational or emotional need of the moment would have allowed the audience to absorb more effectively what is being said, and to reflect on it.

There could have been different ways to achieve lightening the narrative. Using music or FX without voice on the forefront is one option. Another one is using actualities or onsite recordings. In the end, a story is never only about past events. Even if you cover facts you were not there to see, because you look for the characters and spend time with them reviving the events, you end up framing the story in the present time of the production. Plus, in the case of *Frente de fogo*, Rui's actual time in the hospital is part of the story. The author could have chosen to show this present time: scenes of Marina cooking for her husband in the kitchen, interacting at home with her sons; Rui with a nurse at the hospital or during one of his treatments,

etcetera. There were many possible scenes to include in the documentary. These scenes would have not only provided punctuation to aerate the piece, but also texture to establish the characters and their relationships. And it would have helped the listener to picture them and the places the story unfolds in his head.

Frente de fogo offers a definitely great story with very strong testimonies. If the facts had been clearer and the author had added fly-on-the-wall scenes and actualities, it looks like we had a complete recipe to take the narratorless montage to another level, for the greater benefit of the audience.

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