

## Eduardo Coutinho and the spirit of documentary

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CONSIDER the opening of Eduardo Coutinho's *Boca de Lixo* (Scavengers, 1993). What is happening here? The film crew arrives at a huge rubbish tip overrun by scavengers. The scavengers don't exactly like it, but the camera attracts a few of the bolder children, who immediately identify it as an interloper from somewhere which we – us, not them – call the public sphere, at any rate, a place from which they've been banished. Thus, in two-and-a-half-minutes and an exemplary piece of self-reflexive film-making, the film carries itself and us into a world of otherness.

If Coutinho is today one of the most distinctive documentarists in Latin America, he got there by an unusual route. Where many directors start in documentary and move on to fiction, Coutinho did the reverse. Born in São Paulo in 1933, and thus a member of the *cinema novo* generation, he began in fiction, which he abandoned to go and make television documentaries when he joined TV Globo in the mid-70s to work on a programme called Globo Reporter. Globo Reporter was unique. At a time when Brazilian television already produced entirely on videotape, it was the only programme still made on film, which according to Coutinho allowed a certain separation from the normal processes of internal censorship and a different style of film-making: more autonomous, slower, more open to controversy, and a relative degree of experimentation.<sup>1</sup> A beneficiary of the *apertura*, when the military dictatorship very gradually relaxed its censorship, this was a space of relative freedom which ironically closed down when the programme moved to videotape and could thus be more easily monitored by the programme controllers. Coutinho now left TV Globo and using his new found skills as a documentarian, he picked up where he left off in 1964, when he'd been forced by the military coup to abandon a projected film about the assassination of a peasant leader.

*Cabra Marcado para Morrer* (Hombre marcado para morir, Man Marked To Die, 1984) is a film about the repression of the years of military dictatorship, and one of most thoughtful testaments of this history and its aporias. It is also a film about its own history, which juxtaposes actuality footage from 1962, re-enactment from '64, and contemporary testimony from the early 80s, showing the same social actors – including Coutinho himself – at different ages and in different roles, to become an exemplary exploration of the representation of history and memory on the screen. As self-reflexive an aesthetic as anyone could want, the result was a documentary about documentary, a complex and highly layered film, which even the New York Times film critic Vincent Canby called 'incomparable'. I cite Mr Canby not as some kind of high-priest of film criticism but simply to establish that films like this are not totally unknown abroad – they circulate at least in festivals and the great metropolitan centres of film culture. But they don't commonly reach a wider audience, because they're treated by distributors as exotic marginalia of even less interest than fiction, and nowadays they rarely get on to television either.

In the 90s, when Coutinho himself moved onto video, he simplified his style, but in a very different direction from the homogenisation of the standard television documentary, which renders it, in Coutinho's words, aseptic and neutralised. The films I'm looking at – *Boca de Lixo*, *Santo Forte* (1999), *Babilónia 2000* (2001) and *Edifício Master* (2002) – turn away from big subjects like history, to contemporary everyday life; except *Santo Forte*, which is about religion, although religion as it's lived in one working class community. What Coutinho does in these films is fix on a location and portray the people to be found there: a rubbish dump on the outskirts of the city, a shanty-town overlooking the bay of Rio de Janeiro, an apartment house a

block away from the beach. At first sight these films don't look unlike many television 'talking heads' documentaries, but there are certain critical differences, to do with place, people, and the film-maker's procedure. (You could even say that what these films do is take the idea of reality tv, and by turning it upside down, puts it back on its feet.)

To start with, the choice of location is crucial, because it allows the film to function as a social microcosm, without losing contact with the macrocosm outside and beyond the frame. The principle of the 'unique location', as Coutinho calls it, is a geographical choice to focus on a place which, first, is defined by and through a certain population, and second, allows him to establish a relationship to his subjects on the basis of their lived space. In each case, this is a delimited space which evokes certain generalisable characteristics while remaining quite concrete and specific. It is also constantly connected with the wider world through the people in each location, who often speak of other places where they've been or come from. The dialectic at work here is that the location itself establishes determinate limits and boundaries, which define a certain place in the world, which then becomes a kind of extended or expanded metaphor for the lives of its population. The rubbish dump becomes a metaphor of social rejection, the apartment block of the internal life of the city dweller; and in case of *Babylonia 2000*, since the film is shot in a shanty town overlooking the bay of Rio de Janeiro on December 31st, 1999, the metaphor is simply the hopes of the people at the turn of the millennium.

Because each location is socially different, so each of these films works a little differently. Coutinho doesn't apply his method rigidly but adapts it to the circumstances.

*Edificio Master*, for example, is interesting because it penetrates a new social space, leaving behind the domain of the disinherited to enter the domicile of the petit bourgeoisie, where it discovers the internal worlds of the atomised individual of modern urban living, expressed especially in private acts of creativity – writing poems, painting, and since this is Rio de Janeiro, after all, in music and singing. The other films are not devoid of music either, but here it acquires special resonance as a very personal form of spiritual sustenance.

The result is that taken together, these films represent the way people live in various environments typical of a modern third world city called Rio de Janeiro. But if the places are typical – every such city has its scavengers, its shanty towns, its petit bourgeoisie – the people we discover in them disabuse us of ready-made assumptions about what the typical consists in. This is because of the extraordinary range of characters he finds in each place – who are exemplary in not being exemplary, not being stereotypes – and the way he approaches them.

Coutinho's questions are all about *them*, not about their opinions. He doesn't ask people what they think about politics or current affairs or social issues, but just about their lives – where they were born, went to school, how they met their partner, if they have children, about their jobs, how they got where they are – in short, the unique and personal stories of their life experiences. He's never judgemental. He asks them to talk about themselves, and lends them an inquisitive and sympathetic ear. He isn't trying to prove an argument or demonstrate a thesis. (Nor do these films analyse anything in terms of cause and effect, or offer solutions.)

What Coutinho gives us is a gentle but arresting re-visioning of everyday life – its difficulties, small pleasures, fears, frustrations, spiritual beliefs, consolations, loves, encounters, friends, education, rewards – in the telling of which people reveal the symptoms of social and personal misfortune but equally those of health and sanity. These stories are all the more engaging because they have a strong tendency to escape the categories of social stereotyping which dominate the cinema of fiction. The people we see are not presented as examples of anything, the personification of some kind of category, least of psycho-social types – the shantytown-dweller, the scavenger, the religious believer, the petit bourgeois man or woman. Moreover, the various testimonies sometimes contradict each other, comprising a diverse and heterogeneous world of lived experiences which point in different directions, a series of small

disconnected tales with a fragile relation to each other, lacking in any obvious forms of causal linkage but with a cumulative effect. In short, echoes arise between different speakers, but what the viewer perceives is a mix of talk, sounds, and images, which are never put in place by a controlling voice, with its generalisations and classifications, for there is no commentary to centre the narrative, in fact there's no overarching narrative at all, only lots of little ones.

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If all this implies a certain concept of documentary, Coutinho, says Consuelo Lins, one of his collaborators on *Babilónia 2000* and *Edifício Master*, is an inveterate critic of theories which foreground cinema as image, thereby reducing the soundtrack to mere accompaniment of the picture, rather than a fully audio-visual medium which encompasses the richness and complexity of speech, including its silences, rhythms, inflections, slippages and resumptions of discourse, its looks and gestures, fleeting wrinkles of lips and eyebrows, shrugging of shoulders, and so forth.<sup>2</sup> Coutinho himself speaks of this as a 'conversational cinema', which draws on the spontaneity of oral expression, the impromptu and ad-lib, without imposing a predefined scheme of investigation. This, in Coutinho's words, doesn't exclude a central idea prior to the film which guides its construction, but this idea is not in the form of a working hypothesis which the film tries to demonstrate through the succession of encounters with flesh-and-blood people. It also doesn't mean there is no preparation, which is described by Lins as a phase of research intended to get a clear idea of who and what is to be found in the chosen location: the researchers interview and film those people who are prepared to participate, and the director uses this information to select his cast of characters. The research completed, the film is then shot rapidly over a short period of time, and centres on the moments of encounter between the director and the characters.

The sense of encounter is emphasised by the fluid hand-held camera style familiar from a certain kind of investigative television reportage where the camera doorsteps its chosen victim, which is also practised by film makers like Nick Broomfield and Molly Dineen, and in fact goes back to *Chronique d'un été* (Rouch and Morin, 1960) and the beginning of *cinéma vérité*. Coutinho elaborates this style by often filming with two cameras, so that cutting between them increases the self-reflexivity associated with *cinéma vérité*. This, of course, is the reverse of the idea of observational filming practised by North American direct cinema, or to cite a contemporary version, the French director Nicolas Philibert, which pretends that what we see is independent of the camera, but on the contrary, here it's presented as something which the camera elicits or even provokes. Coutinho even counts on this, he counts on his characters feeling the sense of occasion which the camera produces when it comes to visit them, and therefore giving of their best. They might have told the researchers the same things already, but they will be eager to tell them anew, to a new interlocutor, a new guest.

To explain what is going on here, Lins perceptively refers to some comments on *cinéma vérité* by Deleuze, who speaks of certain moments in films by Pierre Perrault and Jean Rouch where the character 'becomes another, when he begins to tell stories without ever being fictional'.<sup>3</sup> Something is created here, in the space between the word and the ear, a kind of story telling where the character reinvents himself, creates himself anew in the act of speaking; a form of utterance which transcends the relationship of interviewer- interviewee, but which constitutes a novel speech genre created by the act of filming. The most poignant example is the stammerer in *Edifício Master*, who begins by saying the interview will be terrible because he stammers so much, and then speaks fluently for several minutes, and when Coutinho asks him how come he didn't stammer, breaks into a broad smile and says it must have been God's doing.

These moments, when the character in front of the camera becomes other, have a corresponding effect, according to Deleuze, on the film-maker: 'they must become others, with their characters, at the same time as their characters become others themselves'. In other words, '[the director] too becomes another, in so far as he takes real characters as intercessors and replaces his fictions by their own story-telling'. The paradox is that Coutinho continually makes his presence felt as the director, then, only in order to become self-effacing.

This kind of paradox about documentary authorship first arose with cinéma vérité, but Deleuze points out a certain difference between two of the pioneers, Rouch, the anthropologist from Paris, and Pierre Perrault, a French Canadian. For Rouch, the concern is to escape his dominant civilization and reach for the premises of another kind of identity. For Perrault, it is to identify with his dominated people, to rediscover a lost and repressed collective identity to which he himself also belongs. In this respect, Coutinho is closer to Perrault than Rouch. When Perrault, says Deleuze, is addressing his real characters in Quebec, it is not simply to eliminate fiction but to free it from the dominant models which penetrate it, in other words, to use one kind of story-telling against another. What is opposed to fiction is not the real, says Deleuze, not even 'the truth', which in the public sphere is always truth according to the masters or the colonisers, but the simple capacity for another kind of story telling which is found among those who have the least part in the public sphere, the poor. Or as Coutinho puts it, he is driven by something very simple: 'to look and listen to people. Mostly, the rural and urban poor, the social and cultural Other. To try and understand the country, the people, history, life and myself, but always connected to the concrete, the microcosm.' Richard Leacock spoke of documentary as gathering data to try and figure out what was going on – Coutinho might well say the same.

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1 Eduardo Coutinho, 'La mirada en el documental y en la television' [1992], in Paulo Antonio Paranagua, ed., *Cine documental en America Latina*, Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2003, p.493.

2 Consuelo Lins, 'Eduardo Coutinho' in Paranagua, ed., 2003, op.cit., p.228.

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, tr. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, London: Athlone Press, 1989, p.150.