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EDUARDO COUTINHO

A terrible death took the Brazilian documentarist Eduardo Coutinho at the beginning of February, when he was knifed at home by his son in what was taken to be a psychotic attack. According to reports, the police told a press conference that the son, who suffered from schizophrenia, ‘knocked on a neighbour’s door after the attack saying he had “liberated his father”’. He had also attacked his mother, and tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide. The news occasioned a huge outpouring of shock and grief across Latin America, for Coutinho was well known and much loved. (How do I know? From Facebook!) It hardly registered in the mainstream English-language media.

Coutinho was 80, and still making films; his originality made him the most distinctive documentarist in recent Latin American cinema, and perhaps anywhere. He got there by an unusual route. Where many Latin American directors started in documentary and moved 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 was already working 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.¹ 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 the television station 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.

This was *Cabra Marcado para Morrer* (Man Marked To Die, 1984), a film about the repression of the years of military rule, and one of the 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. Around ten years later, now filming on video himself, came *Boca de Lixo* (Scavengers, 1993). 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, coming from somewhere which we – us, not them – call the public sphere, at any rate, a place from which

they've been banished. A two-and-a-half-minute opening sequence and again an exemplary piece of self-reflexive film-making.

In adopting video, Coutinho moved in a very different direction from the homogenisation of the television documentary, which renders it, he said, aseptic and neutralised. What video provided him with was mobility and the long take; he was never taken in by the idea of transparent observation (nor by flashy video graphics). Above all, video was for Coutinho an oral form, a medium of speech in which the voice had primacy, and his own role was that of a catalyst for the self-representation of his subjects. Turning to contemporary everyday life in films like *Boca de Lixo*, *Santo Forte* (1999), *Babilônia 2000* (2001) and *Edifício Master* (2002), what Coutinho does 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. Paradoxically, at first sight these films don't look unlike many television 'talking heads' documentaries, but there are crucial 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, put it back on its feet. As *Variety* put it in a review of *As Canções*: 'His apparently nonchalant style, with its roots in TV reporting, has now become so loose that Coutinho almost seems to stumble upon fabulous people and stories, though in reality they are the result of careful research and selection.'²

The principle of the 'unique location', as Coutinho called it, is crucial, because it enabled him to establish a relationship to his subjects on the basis of their common lived space, allowing the film to function as a social microcosm, and setting up a dialectic in which the location defines a certain place in the world which then becomes a metaphor for the lives of people living there. The rubbish dump becomes a metaphor of social rejection, the apartment block of the internal life of the city dweller; and in case of the *Babilônia 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 people's hopes at the turn of the millennium.

Because each location is socially different, so each of these films works a little differently. *Edifício Master*, for example, leaves 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 small private acts of creativity – writing poems, painting, and since this is Rio de Janeiro, after all, in music and singing. Taken together, these films represent the way people live in various environments typical of a modern world city in the South 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 and the way he approaches them, so that they are exemplary in not being exemplary, not being stereotypes but wholly individual.

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 personal stories of their life experiences. He's never judgemental, and he isn't trying to prove an argument or demonstrate a thesis. 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 – a diverse and heterogeneous world of lived experiences, 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. 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.

In *Jogo de Cena* (Playing, 2007), the focus is on the narrative act itself, and in *As Canções* (Songs, 2011) on the act of singing, both of them filmed in the neutral space of an empty stage. The former brings together a cast of real women recounting life experiences full of poignancy, intimacy and pain, and actresses (both well known and unknown) who (re)interpret their words, thus setting documentary off against fiction, authenticity against representation, while confounding the difference between 'real' and 'performed'. The latter invites people to sing a bit of their favourite tune and explain why it's important to them. As *Variety* put it, 'The brilliance of Coutinho's conceit is that he sets out to demonstrate that people often turn to song when words can't express how they feel, but he shows this by letting people talk about the emotions that inspired their song of choice.'²

Few filmmakers, say the authors of an introduction to a book on his work recently published in Ecuador, 'have his ability to watch people so intimately; and few like him, capable of listening and catching people's depth through the word. This is because cinema for Coutinho is an oral medium, a cinema of the spoken word with all its variations—the truth and the lie within it, the wealth of accents and slang; the word which turns into song, the word that emerges from silence and inevitably ends up returning to it. . . .'³

Notes

- 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 <http://variety.com/2011/film/reviews/songs-1117946523>.
- 3 *El otro cine de Eduardo Coutinho*, edited by María Campaña Ramia y Cláudia Mesquita, Quito: Edoc, 2012.

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