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# Flesh for the Author: Filmic Presence in the Documentaries of Eduardo Coutinho

Cecilia Sayad

Theoretical discussions about the filmed body's corporality or materiality have often addressed the emphasis on physical presence as something that halts narrative progression, even if temporarily. But whereas classical narratives may allow for pauses for the appreciation of, say, the physical attributes of a star, in other modalities the stress on corporality may indicate a more or less significant disdain for plot progression. In his revisionist and elucidating approach to early cinema Tom Gunning identified an impulse to simply *present* a filmed subject or landscape—the cinema of attractions, he says, was made of “instants, rather than developing situations.”<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, in turn, wrote about a cinema of bodies that do not enact unfolding events—in the domain of a “time-image” defined by the coexistence rather than the succession of temporalities,<sup>2</sup> the body appears as marked by accumulated experiences.<sup>3</sup> Though by no means similar to the idea of attraction, Deleuze's conceptualization of the actor's body as heavy, worn out, and tired is as much about “presence” as the aesthetics of astonishment described by Gunning.

In the realm of literary theory, Roland Barthes elaborated on yet another conception of presence as a means to differentiate authorial *figuration* from authorial *representation*, discussing the reader's desire for a writer to be found in the text “not in the guise of direct biography (which would exceed the body, give a meaning to life, forge a destiny),”<sup>4</sup> but in his or her physicality—thereby merging the writer and her work into one single entity. Barthes replaces the idea of authorship as origin with the concept of authorship as process, whereby the author ceases to be anterior to the text to become either a *scriptor*, a weaver of preexisting discourses,<sup>5</sup> or a voice relevant not as the conveyor of a message, but as a corporeal presence in a “tissue” that is “worked out in a perpetual interweaving.”<sup>6</sup> Figuration, says Barthes, “is the way in which the

erotic body appears (to whatever degree and in whatever form it may be) in the profile of the text,” which in turn can also “reveal itself in the form of a body.”<sup>7</sup> Underlying Barthes’s conception of authorship is a dialectical movement in which the text at once detaches itself from the author and contains the author, who is split into a real self and a textual self construed at each reading. The author is thus at once absent and present; even if the text cannot narrate or represent interiority, the materiality of language (its sounds and rhythms) evokes the author’s concrete body through textual irregularities that suggest her struggle for expression.

In cinema studies, the auteur has been sought mostly in the film—even if in the early days of *Cahiers du cinéma* the search for recurring elements of style was complemented by long interviews in which critics hoped to trace meaning back to a palpable and intending author. It is the concern for the author existing outside of the text that was lost with the ensuing auteur structuralism and the focus on reception studies, at least until the flourishing of autobiographical and first-person films resuscitated the interest in the historical human being(s) at the origin of the filmic utterance. Simply put, the theoretical distinction between the real person and the critically construed author has never completely suppressed the impulse to merge the two. Considerations about meaning and self-expression, which are obviously at the center of this distinction, have led theorists to overlook a possibility granted exclusively to filmmakers—self-inscription by means of the author’s photographic image.

It is in order to explore the filmic manifestation of what Barthes called figuration that I borrow and adapt the stress on physical presence to the detriment of narrative that is articulated (in different contexts and to different ends) by Gunning and Deleuze. The attention to the effects produced by the author’s body in the image shifts the focus from authorship as critical construct to authorship as self-construction, calling for an examination of directorial self-inscription. The author’s body, in turn, anchors the question of authorship in specific contexts. Rather than be absorbed by the film or exist outside it, the onscreen auteur may be perceived as a trespasser—a relatively foreign element contaminating the image with historical references (some of which may be autobiographical). What I propose is that we look at the national specificities of a category generally discussed as universal—that we situate the auteur in distinct cultural frameworks. Theoretical rearticulations of this figure tend to regard it as shifting in time rather than space, with little or no attention paid to consciously articulated and nationally contextualized authorial functions. However, contrary to the anti-auteurist doctrine, the expressive filmmaker is not necessarily a romantic delusion, nor does she transcend political, sociocultural, and economic conjunctures. We need to discern the auteur’s variable roles and modes of self-display, and the cultural and historical scenarios that “speak” through her screen performance.

Authorial self-inscription is typically found in essay films, which tend to address the director’s creative processes, to the point that the artist may

become the very object of a self-reflexive investigation (as in many works by Jean-Luc Godard, in Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* films, or in Jonas Mekas's *Lost Lost Lost*, to name but a few examples). Onscreen authors can also be a feature in fictional narratives by filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Woody Allen, John Cassavetes, Clint Eastwood, Nanni Moretti, or Agnès Jaoui—though the degree to which onscreen directors evoke their status as authors is variable. Finally, audiences are very familiar with the figure of the director in documentaries, even though these instances are rarely approached as a form of authorial self-inscription. This is partly because the self-expressing auteur has been traditionally and most frequently discussed in relation to fiction films, despite the performative and manipulative methods of Michael Moore, the explicitly subjective “new autobiographies” studied by Michael Renov in *The Subject of Documentary*,<sup>8</sup> or the association between names and documentary modes (John Grierson and the social documentary, Jean Rouch and *cinéma vérité*, Albert Maysles and direct cinema).<sup>9</sup> Perhaps because subjectivity has been persistently repressed in the terrain of documentary filmmaking (as Renov has stated),<sup>10</sup> documentary authorship is perceived as either irrelevant or too apparent to be worth debating. When pertinent, it is translated into the problem of mediation—after all, the documentary invokes oppositions between subjectivity and objectivity, partiality and impartiality, constructed and faithful realities, fiction and truth. Or else the documentary is explicitly a tool for self-investigation, in which case the director does not need to be “construed” as author—she simply is, and unquestionably so. If by nature the documentary interacts more frequently than fiction with elements exterior to the film, this holds true also for its maker or makers. In this modality, the continuity between real and depicted worlds is usually more evident—the same applying to real and onscreen authors.

It is precisely the less obvious attribution of authorship to documentary filmmakers that leads me to elect the work of Brazilian director Eduardo Coutinho as case study—however self-reflexive, his onscreen performance allows for the investigation of an under-explored authorial function: that of giving voice to the Other. In Brazil the desire to reveal hidden sectors of society was central to the constitution of a cinematic tradition once invested in envisioning itself as unique. Glauber Rocha's “aesthetics of hunger,”<sup>11</sup> for example, would expose the brutality of underdevelopment through a cinematic language aggressive in its resistance to the “imperialist” modes of representation characteristic of mainstream cinema. Rocha's oppositional aesthetics, as well as the Third Cinema proposed by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino,<sup>12</sup> deemed oppressive the understanding of cinema as universal language, and clung to Third World (rather than national) specificity as condition for survival. The extent to which *cinema novo* succeeded in shaking the cultural and political system of representation is a matter of contention—in “Towards a Third Cinema” Solanas and Getino place the Brazilian new wave in the superseded category of second (art) cinema,<sup>13</sup> alongside its insufficiently

political French counterpart. Irrespective of politics, the truth is that the lack of a solid industry and the difficult sustainability of popular genres have defined Brazilian cinema as auteur cinema<sup>14</sup>—the popular *chanchadas*, musical comedies that appeared in the thirties, did not survive the advent of television, waning in the sixties. Arguably, the country’s cinematic “rebirth” in the late nineties—its recovery from the closing of state company Embrafilme in 1990—saw nothing but a new boom of auteur films, constituted of the recent productions by established figures (i.e., Carlos Diegues, Julio Bressane, Nelson Pereira dos Santos) and by new talents (Walter Salles, Fernando Meirelles, Tata Amaral, and Karim Aïnouz, among others).<sup>15</sup>

Coutinho is among the most prolific Brazilian directors of the past decade, producing an average of one theatrically released documentary per year. He is also one of the most written about contemporary filmmakers in Brazil, where he is unquestionably perceived as an auteur; but outside of that country Coutinho is known mainly for *Twenty Years Later* (1984), a documentary that traces a parallel between the director’s career and the restoration of democracy in Brazil after two decades of military rule.<sup>16</sup> Though Coutinho started making films in the sixties, he has been at his most prolific in this century, when he revises the role of sociologist that used to define the politically engaged Latin American director. In step with dialogical and demanticizing representations of minorities, Coutinho shuns interpretation and analysis.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the director stresses the encounter between camera and subject, with takes of the film crew setting up the stage for the interview and arriving at specific locations (figure 1). He consistently avoids illustrative and representational images, structuring his documentaries as talking heads. Though bringing echoes of the director’s experience in television reportage (something he did in the seventies), Coutinho’s films owe much to both Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* and *cinéma vérité*—relying on verbal testimony while reminding viewers that the director generates (rather than captures) the filmed reality. Coutinho believes that the only reality the camera can register is that of the shoot. What his films document is primarily the impact of the filmmaker and the camera on the subject’s behavior, or the product of what Ismail Xavier calls the “camera-effect.”<sup>18</sup> The director appears always as an interviewer asking questions about the subjects’ origins, family, or job that are very similar in structure and content, making the Other be the focus of the scene. Coutinho thus becomes a recurring, recognizable, and central actor in the documentary, even if his mode of self-display is rather self-effacing. He is rarely positioned at the center of the frame, and for the most part stays off-screen. Nonetheless his figure constitutes a structuring device, and his unmistakable image has become a trademark—indeed, his authorial signature. It follows that in his documentaries the question of authorship is defined not by self-expression, but by self-inscription.

Coutinho’s works are partly in line with the Brazilian model of political cinema, where the intellectual investigates the Other—the masses



Figure 1. Coutinho (right) and crew arriving at a resident's apartment in *Edifício Master*. Courtesy Videofilmes.

having proved rich material for the political films of the 1960s, usually directed by representatives of the middle class. His documentaries focus on specific communities: peasants from the dry backlands in *Twenty Years Later* and *O Fim e o princípio/The End and the Beginning* (2005), the slums in *Santa Marta, Two Weeks in the Slums* (1987), *Santo forte/Mighty Spirit* (1999), and *Babilônia 2000* (2001), garbage collectors in *Scavengers* (1992), the Rio de Janeiro lower middle class in *Edifício Master/Master, a Building in Copacabana*, aka *Master Building* (2002), the working class in *Peões/Metalworkers* (2004), and so on. However, Coutinho refashions the approach drafted in the sixties by avoiding what Jean-Claude Bernardet called the sociological model, in which the director brings to light and diagnoses the mores of the unprivileged.<sup>19</sup> Coutinho evades the construction of abstract categories such as “the masses,” “the peasants,” or “the bourgeoisie.” Rather than generalize, Coutinho individualizes; he refuses to extract a theory from the experience of others, thus renouncing the role of social scientist. “I’m only interested in the singular,” he says in a documentary about his work; “I don’t make films about Brazil.”<sup>20</sup> The director follows Foucault’s teachings, turning away from “the indignity of speaking for others.”<sup>21</sup> His films correspond to Julianne Burton’s definition of a documentary mode “favoring investigation over exposition, hypothesis over prescription, ‘process’ over ‘analysis,’ ‘poeticized’ over ‘purely’ factual discourse,”<sup>22</sup> even if the poetic, in the director’s work, is the exclusive domain of the interviewee, as I discuss later.

Coming from a cinematic tradition largely defined by the desire to reveal the Other (as well as construct itself as Other), Coutinho transmutes the problem of self-expression into the question of mediation. Except for the self-referential *Twenty Years Later*, in which the director uses the investigation of a film suspended by the military coup to analyze his past practices, Coutinho's works do not address biographical events, nor do they reveal his standpoints. Some do display a strong essayistic component—especially one of his latest, *Jogo de cena* (2006), where he juxtaposes the same testimonies given by real people to their articulation by professional actors, examining the issue of performance in relation both to the individual who has experienced the narrated event and the individual who reproduces and reinterprets the other's verbal account. At any rate, in his productions of the past decade Coutinho's onscreen presence functions as a detonator, or catalyst, for the testimonies registered by the camera. Though present in the image, Coutinho does not express his own opinions; nor does he add any commentary to the discourses of his interviewees. To borrow Paul Willemen's summary of Bakhtin's modes of interpretation, Coutinho avoids projecting his own thoughts onto the experiences of his subjects, just as he eschews the "ventriloquist identification" in which the "middle-class intellectual . . . abdicate[s] from intellectual responsibilities and . . . pretend[s] to be a mere hollow vessel through which the voice of the oppressed, the voice of the people, resonates."<sup>23</sup> His methods follow the principles of "creative identification," which "does not renounce itself, its own place and time, its own culture."<sup>24</sup>

Coutinho actually foregrounds the awareness of the social, economic, and cultural gap between the director and his subjects—most of whom call him "sir." This unbalance, acknowledged by both filmmaker and interviewee, often takes center stage.<sup>25</sup> In *Scavengers* a young boy defiantly challenges the director on the purpose of shooting the garbage dump, indicating that such interest could only come from a member of the intellectual upper class. In *Babilônia 2000* a woman from the slums, stopped by Coutinho's crew when she starts putting on lipstick for the camera, humorously asks, "Do you want poverty?" In *Edifício Master* a resident of the apartment building in question tells the director that Copacabana is "anthropologically" very "interesting" for its mixed quality (presuming Coutinho's fascination for that Rio neighborhood), as the exasperation that surfaces in her comments on the bustling streets implies the impracticalities of living in an area that for outsiders may seem exciting or exotic. The examples are numerous, and the highlighting of such a gap establishes the director and his crew as central "actors"; it is Coutinho's presence in the image that draws attention to class and cultural contrasts. The interviewees' attitudes, in turn, betray their awareness of the media's desire to reveal and denounce the country's miseries, as well as their fascination with the "exotic Other." Coutinho's thirst for the spontaneous, for the momentary (the slum resident should not transform her image for the camera), may indeed be perceived as a desire to reveal poverty. At the same



time, the decision to retain the crew's intention to downplay the posed and the staged in the final cut ends up corroborating the director's project to highlight—and even cherish—the Other's impulse to perform.

After all, Coutinho's interest lies as much in the story being told as in its mode of presentation, with a special attention to the peculiarities of the subjects' syntax, choice of words, and accent. In "Sentido e verdade"/"Sense and Truth," director José Padilha discusses this aspect of Coutinho's work when he describes a debate between the Brazilian and Albert Maysles organized by the Pontifícia Universidade Católica (PUC) in Rio. In reference to *Edifício Master*, Coutinho professed to be less interested in the truth of the collected testimonies than in the encounter between documentarian and subject—apparently raising protests on the part of Maysles. As Padilha points out, Coutinho's statement reveals the principle of documenting not objective facts, but the subjective ways in which people remember and narrate certain experiences.<sup>26</sup> Coutinho's relative indifference to the reality that preexists the act of shooting, quite unusual in documentary filmmaking, is manifested in his declared preference for recording people and events that do not "ask to be filmed." As he once stated to newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*, it is only when he starts his camera that "a unique relationship takes place; [that] the film begins to exist."<sup>27</sup> The director's presence in the image establishes him as the producer of the moment to be captured; again, Coutinho's documentaries do not record a reality, they produce their own reality. This rationale brings to mind *cinéma vérité*, where, to paraphrase Erik Barnouw, rather than wait for a crisis the filmmaker hopes "to precipitate one."<sup>28</sup>

The result is a privileging of the present tense, of the relation director-subject-camera (and spectator, by implication). The fascination about the "here and now" in Coutinho's films is best exemplified by *Santo forte*, where a number of individuals describe spiritual trances, physical beatings by supernatural entities, conversations with the dead, and past lives—all narrated as more or less ordinary occurrences. The predominance of the talking head endorses this strangely casual approach to the fantastic, as it dismisses both the dramatic appeal and the support of the illustrative image—even because no illustration can serve as proof in such instances. The interviews take up some seventy-five minutes of this eighty-minute long documentary—the other five include a few insert shots of empty rooms or backyards, close-ups of statues of Umbanda and Candomblé deities, an interviewee dancing in a night club, and an Umbanda baptism—though the latter, a home video shot by one of the talking heads, is embedded in the interview. In her analysis of the film, Consuelo Lins comments on the allusive quality of the insert shots of empty places, which interrupt the subjects' speeches.<sup>29</sup> I would go further to suggest that these takes function as narrative pauses. The images of the night-club and the baptism, on the other hand, constitute a "sin" that Coutinho has since tried to avoid: images meant to illustrate events in the lives of the interviewees. The director has constantly addressed his effort to privilege the



depiction of the talking subject.<sup>30</sup> Yet it is *Santo forte*'s refusal to "represent" or dramatize the characters' religious or mystical practices that best epitomizes Coutinho's resistance to capturing anything that goes beyond what is directly said to him in the presence of a camera. As stated before, he is concerned with the truth of the encounter, and has little interest in incrementing verbal testimonies with enactments.

Coutinho's aversion to illustrations and love for verbal testimonies constitute the *mise-en-scène* of what Bakhtin called "speech situations," with an emphasis on the context and circumstances of the speech (figure 2).<sup>31</sup> To borrow and recontextualize Gunning's phrase, Coutinho's is a cinema of instants, concerned with the subjects as they find themselves at the moment in which the camera is turned on. The director's investment is on the profilmic; the editing (supposedly film's most obvious way of "telling") is subservient to a desire to reproduce the reality of the shoot. Coutinho refuses to put the editing at the service of clarity; he avoids imposing a linear structure on the testimonies or erasing expressive hesitations and repetitions. In a conference during the 2006 Visible Evidence conference, the director stated that the editing never "rescues" or "corrects" the discourses registered in his documentaries, many of which are structured as they are filmed. The very chronology of the shoot would, in theory, be preferable to rearranging interviews according to themes or characters.<sup>32</sup> His films seem to be committed to the profilmic, they are loyal to the original *mise-en-scène*—something that is partly manifested through the preservation of the spatiotemporal integrity theorized by Bazin. For that matter, some of Coutinho's films (shot on video) do display a few relatively long takes, whose duration is especially felt in the sometimes touching, sometimes awkward, displays of emotion or uncomfortable silences—when real duration is at its most dramatic. Yet Coutinho resorts also to jump cuts meant to shorten (but not to digest) the testimonies. In fact, the jump cuts sometimes mimic and emphasize truncated sentences or eventual ellipses. While presumably omitting chunks of the subject's speech, these cuts at the same time transfer to the image the expressive discontinuity of some discourses, as if to further dramatize it. Finally, the "telling" or discursive dimension of Coutinho's films is more palpable in the profilmic (in the *mise-en-scène* of verbal narratives) than in the editing.

This refusal to narrativize the subject's discourse is one of the elements that associate Coutinho's documentaries with Deleuze's theory, where the body contains past and present, "tiredness and waiting," "no longer experience, but 'what remains of past experiences,' 'what comes afterward, when everything has been said.'"<sup>33</sup> The subject's speech is in some instances complemented by the only open "act" that Coutinho's talking-head documentaries allow for: the signature sequences in which characters sing to the camera. The singing, for that matter, constitutes a discursive rather than representational practice, staying in line with Coutinho's project to avoid the depiction of subjects engaged in activities other than the conversation with the director.



Figure 2. Coutinho (left) and the mise-en-scène of speech situations in *O Fim e o princípio*. Courtesy Videofilmes.

The musical numbers in *Santa Marta*, *Scavengers*, *Santo forte*, *Babilônia 2000*, and *Edifício Master* appear to be rare opportunities for the interviewees to express themselves through songs that tell their stories—they constitute the poetic element I referred to earlier in this essay. A senior resident of the apartment building of *Edifício master*, for example, explains how the lyrics of “My Way” translate his personal trajectory—this interview culminates with the aging, tired, short-breathed Henrique singing along with the Sinatra CD in his living room, clearly shaken, the dramatic movements of his fists punctuating the song’s triumphal tone (figure 3). Similarly, in *Santo forte* Vanilda sings a Roberto Carlos tune evoking Jesus, stressing her religious faith, as do Dejour and Alex, who appear chanting Umbanda songs. In the same film a young couple sings to a CD track that reflects their married life. Single mother Fatima (*Babilônia 2000*) sings a Janis Joplin tune whose lyrics she cannot distinguish—in fact, she sings by phonetic approximation, creating her own personal version of the English language. The Joplin song (and the Joplin persona, for that matter) symbolize Fatima’s hippie past; here, discourse is replaced by the song’s cultural “aura,” and also by the language of music.

These open acts, which for the most part respect the duration of the songs, evoke Deleuze’s description of the *vérité* depiction of rituals, where “history would not be told: it would be revealed, and all the more so for being less shown; the only thing to be shown would be the way the attitudes of the body are coordinated in the ceremony, so as to reveal what did not allow itself to be shown.”<sup>34</sup> Again, the emphasis on the body replaces the organization of experience in terms of a clear progression of events. Likewise, Xavier establishes a



Figure 3. Musical numbers: Henrique sings “My Way” in *Edifício Master*. Courtesy Videofilmes.

parallel between the subjects in Coutinho’s works and the characters of modernist films from the 1960s, especially in the

rupture with the linearity of experience (or plot) as the basis for the production of meaning, a linearity that would inscribe every experienced moment within a predetermined logic, so that the manifestation of, and the familiarity with a personality (the individual’s truth) would require the concatenation of, and the engagement in those successive moments that compose life stories which we can access, for example, through the classical narrative. Modern cinema freed the character from this grid of actions and reasons, from the natural, psychological and social logic.<sup>35</sup>

Coutinho hence frees the subjects from this very “logic”; his search for a spontaneous image finds a similar version in his search for the “truth” determined neither by the clear concatenation of events nor by their factual verification. The truth that matters, again, is that of the behavior of his subjects at the moment in which they are filmed—though “tired” and/or “expectant” (to use Deleuze’s words), thus containing past and future, these subjects are revealed in the *present* and in the *presence* of the director and the camera.

Coutinho’s cinema is therefore a cinema of bodies, enamored with the corporeal, physical presence of its subjects, which he privileges over their stories. This love for the corporeal sometimes bleeds into the film’s visual style through the proximity between camera and figure, organic camera movements, the grainy image that draws attention to the film stock or the glare that exposes the camera lens (figure 4). But Coutinho’s camera is for the most

part stable and straight on; he has also claimed that the less artistic the better.<sup>36</sup> Despite working in a completely different register, Coutinho realizes John Cassavetes's desire to promote a cinema privileging the people over the film.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Coutinho's is a type of "acinema," Jean-François Lyotard's definition of a modality that embraces, rather than eliminates, "all movement which would escape identification, recognition, and the mnemonic fixation."<sup>38</sup> Going back to Barthes, Coutinho's cinema avoids that mode in which "nothing leaps out of the frame," which to the French author defines the oppressive economy of "representation."<sup>39</sup>

One could even say that Coutinho's is a cinema of the corporality of voices, obsessed with the syntax, choice of vocabulary, and accent of its "actors." Body and voice, in turn, also constitute the documentarian as an auteur; while avoiding the discursive possibilities given by the voiceover narration and the editing, he still asserts his control in the mise-en-scène of speech situations. In the few instances in which Coutinho has acted as narrator in the past decade, his discourse has been rather of the testimonial sort, as in the clarification of methodology and the deliverance of key production notes through voiceover in *Twenty Years Later* and *O Fim e o princípio*. Even when situating the subjects within a specific community, he prefers to do so through dialogue—when visiting the Vila Parque da Cidade slum in *Santo forte*, for example, Coutinho chooses to ask a member of that community to explain where the crew is. It follows that narration is not deployed to fill in the gaps in the testimonies given by the documentary's subjects. Rather than produce a discourse or express a worldview, the author in the



Figure 4. The proximity between camera and subject: Leocádio in *O Fim e o princípio*. Courtesy Videofilmes.

text simply imprints the visual and audio tracks with the image of his body and the sound of his voice. To once again evoke Barthes, Coutinho constitutes the author who *figures* in the text. Barthes describes a textual mode, termed “writing aloud,” which is less about content than it is about voice. Writing aloud, says Barthes,

leaves expression to the pheno-text, to the regular code of communication; it belongs to the geno-text, to significance; it is carried not by dramatic inflections, subtle stresses, sympathetic accents, but by the *grain* of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language. . . . Due allowance being made for the sounds of the language, *writing aloud* is not phonological but phonetic; its aim is not the clarity of the messages, the theatre of emotions; what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language.<sup>40</sup>

Just as with the documentary’s subjects, it is Coutinho’s vocal qualities, rather than his discourse, which mark his presence. As I said before, the director limits his own speech to questions that are very simple and similar, enquiring as to the interviewees’ place of birth, job, and family. His São Paulo accent, his raspy, cigarette smoker’s voice, and even his breathing<sup>41</sup> are more distinguishable than what the director actually says. Coutinho’s mode of self-inscription unintentionally stresses the materiality of his body and voice—which allow for a corporeal, rather than abstract, sense of an authorial presence.<sup>42</sup> To be sure, authorial self-inscription tends to be associated with self-investigation. Commenting on Montaigne, Renov has noted that, in the essay, “The bodily emerges as an intransigent, inescapable source of self-knowledge.”<sup>43</sup> Coutinho, nevertheless, seeks not his own self, but the Other—and in *Twenty Years Later* and *O Fim e o princípio* (which is largely about aging), his own self *through* the Other. Given the director’s self-effacing attitude, his body cannot constitute the focus, but it is certainly the motor of the documentary’s investigation. However, far from being a mere accessory, Coutinho’s physical presence is a requirement, as he says in *Cinema de Reportagem*, the aforementioned documentary about his work. He is attracted to the idea that, “without [him], not only would there be no film, but the people would not say what they say.”<sup>44</sup> This emphasis on the director’s presence is what constitutes the auteur as a catalyst—Coutinho craves for what could be said only to himself, and only in a specific moment; for all which could never repeat itself, even if the director tried to capture the same speech a few seconds after its first utterance. The presence of the auteur is therefore essential to the production of a certain kind of image; if not openly expressive, the director is a fundamental “actor” without which the film would not achieve the desired goal—give voice to people who constitute identifiable sectors of the nation, diffused into palpable individualities. Thus the use of space as an organizing

device circumscribing the films to a specific garbage dump (*Scavengers*), specific slums (*Santa Marta*, *Babilônia 2000*, *Santo forte*), a specific apartment building (*Edifício Master*), or an endogamous society in the arid backlands (*O Fim e o princípio*): in addition to considerations about practicality and scope, the decision to limit the choice of subjects to a geographic space anchors individuals in identifiable and concrete locations.

To note, the emphasis on the subjects' syntax and accent causes a problem of translatability. For international audiences relying on subtitles, the documentaries end up being more interesting for their sociological or anthropological value. Linguistic elements, which give materiality to the subjects' voices, may be intuited, but their translation tends to neutralize or erase their uniqueness. The emphasis on elements recognizable only to Portuguese speakers defines not a national specificity, but a linguistic one—though it is unclear whether people from other Portuguese-speaking countries experience the same kind of recognition that Brazilians do.

At any rate, my goal is also to draw attention to the extent to which Coutinho subscribes to the project of a national cinema, defined partly, but not exclusively, by the aforementioned dialogue with a Brazilian conception of film authorship. While opposing the class-based “sociological” or analytical mode of scrutinizing the nation, the director does not completely trade class for a politics of the individual privileging gender identity, sexual preferences, or ethnic origins. Coutinho's attempt to individualize the members of a social group should not be confused with a disregard for the issue of class. *Santo forte*, a film about religion, elects the slums as the site for its enquiries, and Coutinho admits that what allows for the storming of middle-class sorrows in *Edifício Master* is the absence of the “immediate problems of violence and economic pressure”<sup>45</sup> found in the slums: a comparison that signals a class concern. Clearly, Coutinho's impulse to supersede the economic and cultural gap between his crew and the interviewees presupposes this class difference (unavoidable in a country marked by great contrasts). Both his fascination with the Other's social background rather than with his own and his concern with revealing and humanizing those who are socially set apart from the presumed film viewer expose an acute sensitivity to social differences—detectable, for example, in the contrast between a housekeeper's description of the Christmas dinner she cooked for her boss and her own Christmas meal in *Santo forte*. As Willemsen has aptly pointed out, the national in cinema is best defined by address.<sup>46</sup> To give voice to the Other is also to give voice to a community, which in the case of Coutinho belongs to a specific nation. Indeed, the interviewees often address national affairs, especially in *Babilônia 2000*, which is about the expectations about the new millennium. The documentary's modality, its *vérité* dimension, may transcend national boundaries—but its themes and subjects do not. It is not by chance that Coutinho often elects the slums (*favelas*) and the backlands (*sertão*) as material for his investigations. These spaces have long constituted mythical sites in Brazilian cinema, as they

epitomize the miserable Other. The director's "non-analytical" approach to such milieus, however, constitutes a revision of 1960s militant cinema, offering a different take on the economic and social issues that persist in contemporary Brazil—a take that does not mystify the Other, but acknowledges the difference by exposing the process and focusing on the encounter as an extraordinary event, instead of hiding behind a camera in the hope of giving us direct access to the subjects' lives. Most important, it is mainly by revealing the Other's awareness of how the media portrays them that the director acknowledges this unsurpassable difference.

In other words, what best distinguishes Coutinho's films from the sociological model is the fact that while the latter narrates, he offers a portrait of the nation—privileging tones, color, and the momentary over message, psychology, a sense of progression, and closure. Coutinho produces a cinema of instants and bodies, in which the author *figures* as central actor, and where the nation, rather than be discussed, is simply rendered present. The director gives flesh to a "function" that has long been discussed as abstract construct, and his celebration of presence restores indexicality to the unstable categories of author and nation.

Coutinho thus offers a model in which the author located outside of the text opens it up, challenging its autonomy. I should point out that though inspired by Barthes's idea of figuration, my discussion has somehow inverted the terms of his conception of authorship. As mentioned earlier, Barthes splits the author, discerning between her existence as textual construct and as a real human being. In *The Pleasure of the Text* the construed author materialized in the pages of a book remains circumscribed to this book—her presence is felt only in the text and remains enclosed within its grid. At the same time, this text closes itself to the real author. While Barthes envisions a text open to multiple readings (representation is imprisoning because it fixes meaning), once the text becomes autonomous the author is denied access to it, as she can no longer control it—the product of her work exists as a continuous and unstoppable process shy of closure. The author is thus at once completely strange to the text (intended meaning, or expression, being untraceable) and contained within it—her body becoming one with the text's body (in which case the author is a textual effect).

Conversely, my suggestion that the onscreen director restores indexicality to the author connects this figure's textual and phenomenological beings. Though in my case study the author asserts himself through his physicality rather than through the expression of his interiority, and though the recognizable and corporeal quality of his voice prevails over the content of his discourse, he differs from Barthes's figuration in that he destabilizes the text's autonomy. On the contrary, the idea that the auteur acts as a catalyst motivating the filmed events asserts him as the motor behind the film—as its source, as its origin. It is as an element foreign to the filmed world (and as originator of it) that the onscreen director opens this world up to what lies beyond the



frame, demolishing the fourth wall. The continuity between what lies within the frame and what exists beyond its borders includes the spectator: instead of remaining oblivious to the audience, the film looks back at them—it acknowledges their presence. If in addition to the filmmaker the camera acts as motor for the action that develops before it, so does the audience. It follows that, far from closing the text, the self-inscribed author, like the one described by Barthes, establishes it as process. The emphasis on the body, as Vivian Sobchack has stated, anchors it in context, thereby defining it as variable—only the “universal” and that which exists on the abstract plane of ideas can be fixed.<sup>47</sup> Context, as this essay has shown, defines distinct authorial functions—it is only when studied against diverse historical frameworks that authorship can be truly assessed in both its concreteness and its instability, giving body to Barthes’s idea, albeit through twisted lines.

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## Notes

I would like to thank Robert Stam, Elizabeth Cowie, Stefano Ciammaroni and Felipe Ribeiro for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 826.
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Le Bergsonisme* (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1997), 56.
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 189–224.
4. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 56.
5. Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*, ed. John Caughie (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, in association with the British Film Institute, 1981), 211.
6. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 64.
7. *Ibid.*, 55–56.
8. See Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
9. On that note, it is important to point out that *cinéma vérité* stresses the presence of the author, while direct cinema seeks to efface it.
10. Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, xviii.
11. Glauber Rocha, “An Aesthetics of Hunger,” in *New Latin American Cinema, Volume 1: Theory, Practices and Transcontinental Articulations*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 59–61.

12. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World," in Martin, *New Latin American Cinema, Volume 1*, 33–61.
13. Solanas and Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema," 42.
14. See Ismail Xavier, *O Cinema Brasileiro moderno* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2001).
15. I should note that current Brazilian productions include also commercial hits that flirt with the musical or the adventure film featuring television hosts Xuxa or Angelica and comedian Renato Aragão. But these have long constituted the exception that confirms the rule, even because this hybrid genre does not define the majority of Brazil's yearly releases. Though these popular features generate relatively large box office revenues, they rarely receive critical attention. Targeting a local audience familiar with the said TV stars, such "popular" films are absolutely inexpressive in the international scenario, which is for the most part either dismissive of or oblivious to their existence.
16. For a study of this film, see Robert Stam and Ismail Xavier, "Transformation of National Allegory: Brazilian Cinema from Dictatorship to Redemocratization," in *New Latin American Cinema, Volume 2: Studies in National Cinemas*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 295–322. See also Julianne Burton, *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 373–401.
17. Robert Stam, Ismail Xavier, and João Luiz Vieira discuss Coutinho's move from an idealizing representation of peasants to a more dialogical approach in their analysis of *Twenty Years Later*. See Robert Stam, Ismail Xavier, and João Luiz Vieira, "The Shape of Brazilian Cinema in the Post Modern Age," in *Brazilian Cinema*, ed. Robert Stam and Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 387–472.
18. Ismail Xavier, "Indagações em torno de Eduardo Coutinho e seu diálogo com a tradição moderna," in *Eduardo Coutinho: Cinema do encontro*, catalogue for a retrospective of the director's films (Rio de Janeiro: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, 2003), 52.
19. Jean-Claude Bernardet, *Cineastas e imagens do povo* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2006), 16–17.
20. See *Cinema de reportagem: A Obra de Eduardo Coutinho*, dir. Daniela Muzi, Daniela Santoro, Maria Aparecida Costa, and Maria Eduarda Mattar (BR, 2001).
21. Deleuze's phrase came in a conversation with Foucault, where he praised his colleague for being the first to point out the importance of acknowledging that "only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf." Conversation printed as "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 209. I would like to thank Robert Stam for calling my attention to this connection.
22. Julianne Burton, "Democratizing Documentary: Modes of Address in the Latin American Cinema, 1958–72," in *Show Us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1984), 345.
23. Paul Willemen, "The National Revisited," in *Theorizing National Cinema*, ed. Paul Willemen and Valentina Vitali (London: BFI, 2006), 36–37.

24. Raymond Williams, quoted in *ibid.*, 37.
25. Consuelo Lins and Ismail Xavier have discussed these dynamics. See Consuelo Lins, *O Documentário de Eduardo Coutinho* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2004), 90, and Xavier, “Indagações,” 55.
26. José Padilha, “Sentido e Verdade,” *Cinemais* 36 (October–December 2003): 65.
27. Eduardo Coutinho, interviewed by Leonardo Cruz, *Folha de S. Paulo*, November 18, 2005, available at [www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/ilustrada/ult90u55261.shtml](http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/ilustrada/ult90u55261.shtml) (accessed February 20, 2009). Translation mine.
28. Quoted in Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 39.
29. Lins, *O Documentário de Eduardo Coutinho*, 177.
30. *Ibid.*, 116.
31. See, for example, M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).
32. Carlos Alberto Mattos, *Eduardo Coutinho: O Homem que Caiu na Real* (Santa Maria da Feira: Festival de Cinema de Santa Maria da Feira, 2004), 102.
33. Deleuze, *The Time-Image*, 189.
34. *Ibid.*, 197.
35. Xavier, “Indagações,” 53. Translation mine.
36. Lins, *O Documentário de Eduardo Coutinho*, 12.
37. George Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 3.
38. Quoted in *ibid.*, 35.
39. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 57.
40. *Ibid.*, 66–67.
41. Coutinho’s breathing is more apparent in *O Fim e o princípio*. In this film the director acknowledges the effect that the passing of time has on his own self as he revisits the state of Paraíba, where he had shot *Twenty Years Later*.
42. I should mention that the voice has been analyzed as the element disavowing the lack inherent to the filmic image. For a study of the voice in the cinema see, among others, Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Mary Ann Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space,” in Brady and Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 363–75; and Michel Chion, *The Voice in the Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
43. Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, 185.
44. Translation mine.
45. Mattos, *Eduardo Coutinho*, 116.
46. Willemen, “The National Revisited,” 36.
47. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 2.

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