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# VARIATIONS ON THE AUTHOR

Cecilia Sayad

Eduardo Coutinho's *Últimas Conversas* (*Last Conversations*, 2015) and *Um dia na vida* [One Day in Life, 2010] deploy modes of authorial self-display that, in addition to being the exact opposite of one another (at least on the face of it), stand out as isolated examples in the director's vast filmography. Where Coutinho's on-screen performance was characteristically self-effacing, *Últimas Conversas* made it central to the film. *Um dia na vida*, on the other hand, deprived his audience entirely of any visible and aural indices of the documentarian's body; that is, of a presence that had otherwise been a constant feature in his work—indeed his authorial signature.

The posthumously released *Últimas Conversas*, which Coutinho's sudden death in 2014 left to be completed by editor Jordana Berg and producer João Moreira Salles, features a prologue with a focus on the director himself that is highly unusual in his documentaries. Instead of being discreetly positioned at the corner of the image (or simply off-screen), Coutinho is framed at the center. Accustomed to sharing the screen with his documentary subjects, he appears in it alone.

Rather than the short, mundane questions about a subject's origin, work, and family that he customarily favored, Coutinho opens *Últimas Conversas* by voicing existential anxiety, indicative of a creative crisis. Why would the teenagers chosen as this documentary's focus want to talk to him? he asks Berg, who addresses him from off-screen. Why would they, he says, when he admittedly may not be curious about what they have to tell? "I can only give them my eyes and my body," Coutinho concludes, while also questioning whether he had been able to give anything at all to the youth he interviewed in this, his last film.

This atypically personal prologue is followed by a series of conversations with adolescents on topics ranging from domestic abuse and bullying to the importance of silence and of God, identified as "a man who died" by a little girl. It is her phrase that prompts Coutinho to close this documentary on a note that is at once sad and hopeful: he expresses regret

at not making this film about children, indicating that this could have been his next project.

Although Coutinho's testimony suggests he felt differently about his subjects in *Últimas Conversas*, his interviews with teenagers feature the same balance and tension between full disclosure, resistance, and performance that had long characterized the director's work. But it is this privileging of the directorial eye and body that best defined Coutinho's approach to his role as documentarian, inviting profound considerations about the general question of cinematic authorship.

From the moment of the critical success of *Santo Forte* (*The Mighty Spirit*) in 1999, which brought Coutinho back into the feature documentary scene in Brazil for the first time in a decade and a half, he steadily solidified his carefully conceived approach to nonfictional filmmaking.<sup>1</sup> For Coutinho, the director does not speak, he listens—as Ismail Xavier has noted.<sup>2</sup> The director's reference to his eyes make them stand for his consistently contemplative attitude, whereas his body, far from irrelevant or passive, functions as catalyst.

The widespread critical endorsement of Coutinho's films comes largely from the understanding that he could achieve so much with what appeared to be so little. In keeping with the sincerity of the emotional and intimate stories relayed to him, the questions that propelled them were always very simple in nature—short sentences that queried subjects on their job, for example, or on how couples met. True, the questions could become more profound as the conversation developed: subjects have revealed private experiences of love, abandonment, and death in his *Babilônia 2000* (*Babylon 2000*, 2000), *Edifício Master* (*Master Building*, 2002), *Jogo de cena* (*Playing*, 2007), and *Últimas Conversas*, to name a few. Coutinho's questions, though, always emerged in short sentences.

The director's presence was marked more by his physicality than by what he had to say, which often was not much. It was a physical presence that could be felt in the loud breathing that punctuates silences and conversations in *O fim e o princípio* (*The End and the Beginning*, 2005), or in his recognizable raspy voice, the product of his many years of cigarette smoking. In other words, Coutinho's authorial identity

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Coutinho, seen here during the shooting of *Santo Forte* (*The Mighty Spirit*, 1999).

Photo courtesy of Instituto Moreira Salles and Centro de Criação de Imagem Popular

was defined by his physical presence in the image and on the soundtrack—not by the audience’s access to his subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to *Últimas Conversas*, but just as atypically, the director is completely absent from the image in *Um dia na vida*. Most importantly, where his other documentaries present him as instigator, as the motor for the production of testimonies, here Coutinho is simply an observer. The documentary’s images are neither produced nor caused by the filmmaker. Instead, the film in its entirety is composed of excerpts from Brazilian network television programs. Authorial presence is marked only by time stamps that situate specific shows on the day’s schedule and in the title cards that precede the images. The first card announces that the material was recorded as part of the research for a future film, a possibility that the director’s death ruled out; the second locates the images in time (they were aired in the course of nineteen hours from the morning of October 1 to the early hours of October 2, 2009) and space (Rio de Janeiro). This second card also provides information about the images’ sources (from broadcast networks Bandeirantes, CNT, Globo, MTV, Record, Rede TV, SBT, and TV Brasil). Coutinho abstains from commentary.

These instances of unprecedented authorial overexposure and authorial invisibility break the mold of a minimalist style of self-inscription that Coutinho had constructed over the course of fifteen years—from 1999 to 2014. The variations in Coutinho’s display of authorial self-inscription in *Últimas Conversas* and *Um dia na vida* offer a springboard into the general question of cinematic authorship that the director’s documentaries have at once challenged and illuminated.

Whereas authorship has traditionally been discussed in terms of the expression of an individual’s inner life, Coutinho’s films grant the spectator only his outer self: the author exists exclusively through his interaction with another person.<sup>4</sup> Anything that his films might express must emerge from this encounter, as noted by Claudia Mesquita, Consuelo Lins, Ismail Xavier, and Vinicius Navarro.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, this interaction is not included as a means for the director to express his views. While it might communicate the elements of the director’s curiosity, the mundane quality of his questions suggests that this curiosity is not particularly revealing of the director’s thoughts (or the author’s inner life). It is Coutinho’s own reliance on his interest in the documentary subject that is most



Coutinho on location during the shooting of *O fim e o princípio* (*The End and the Beginning*, 2005).

Photo courtesy of João Moreira Salles

revealing—hence the anxiety at his presumed incuriosity toward the adolescents of *Últimas Conversas*.

Coutinho’s authorial presence has always been located in his ability to see and listen, not in any self-expression. This is not to undermine the centrality of his personal input. In his talks and interviews the filmmaker repeatedly stressed the importance of his presence as director in the image, calling attention to the fact that the person sitting opposite the interviewee in his films had to be him. In a 2001 documentary on his work, *Cinema de reportagem: A obra de Eduardo Coutinho* [Reportage Cinema: The Work of Eduardo Coutinho], the director expressed the sense of fulfillment that he experienced in his belief that, without him, “not only would there be no film, but the people would not say what they say.”<sup>6</sup>

It follows that Coutinho’s works do not present the world according to the director, especially as he consciously shunned commentary and analysis; they present instead a world that reacts to the director’s presence. His systematic refusal to judge or express his worldview relocates the textual markers of authorial intervention, moving them away from the realm

of subjectivity and placing them in the director’s actions—the act of filming and, most importantly, the act of interviewing. Coutinho’s mode of authorial self-inscription stresses the author’s exterior gestures; not his inner life but the actions he undertakes in the process of making a film. The hints at future developments in both *Últimas Conversas* (the desire to follow this film with another one about children) and *Um dia na vida* (described as “notes for a future film”) indeed present the documentaries themselves as process, as stages in a continuous practice.

### Reassessing Authorship

One wonders whether the confessional prologue that opens *Últimas Conversas* would have remained in the film’s final cut had Coutinho lived to complete the project. Irritable and digressive, the Eduardo Coutinho who is featured in the opening images of his last documentary may be very similar to the one whom viewers had seen in the extrafilmic realms of public appearances and interviews, but he is strikingly different from the on-screen documentarian who sits quietly

before the subjects he liked to refer to as “characters,” regardless of whether they were professional actors (as in *Moscou* [2008] or *Jogo de cena*), inhabitants of a Rio de Janeiro favela (in *Santo Forte* or *Babilônia 2000*), or octogenarians from the arid backlands of Brazil (*O fim e o princípio*). Indeed, the documentary that came to be the director’s last film reveals Coutinho as a much more talkative interlocutor than heretofore seen—preaching, for example, on the importance of silence to a teenager who laughs at a presumably awkward pause in the conversation, and timidly admitting to a young woman who shakes his hand before sitting on the designated interviewee’s chair that he has never really known how to greet his documentaries’ subjects.

One could also ask whether Coutinho would have kept his instructions to the subjects in the final cut—though his request that the teenagers stand up from the chair and walk away without looking back evokes the arrival scenes that mark all his works: the crew walking into a person’s home (*Edifício Master*; *O fim e o princípio*) or subjects walking onto the stage on which interviews take place (*Jogo de cena*, *As canções* [Songs, 2011]). But with regard to his authorial interventions, the prologue to *Últimas Conversas* functions as the exception that proves the rule. Coutinho’s usual mode of self-inscription configures an authorial function defined by action (the act of interviewing, the act of filming), repetition (of questions that are very similar in content and structure; of the very act of interviewing), appropriation (it is the testimonies of others, rather than his own, that make the fabric of his films), and masquerade (Coutinho hides behind the role of interviewer). Since the only truth that he values is that of his encounter with the documentary subjects, not a truth which precedes that encounter, performance becomes an integral part of his films.<sup>7</sup> Coutinho shows that authorship is defined by the processes that it entails, and his work allows for a new take on the question.<sup>8</sup>

The widely noted contemporary crisis in authorship is largely the result of a subject crisis that could be blamed on the “metaphysics of substance” central to Judith Butler’s questioning of identity formation: the idea that everyone has an essence that is shaped and often stifled by social and cultural experiences; an essence longing for expression; an essence that lies deep inside the individual and seeks to resurface.<sup>9</sup> The discrediting of the author evolves from the inaccessibility of this essence, which has led theorists to deem the author absent. Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault’s notion of the “author-function” still stand as canonical examples of such an understanding.<sup>10</sup> Yet much has happened since the late 1960s. The past forty years saw important considerations emerge regarding the socioeconomic forces behind the

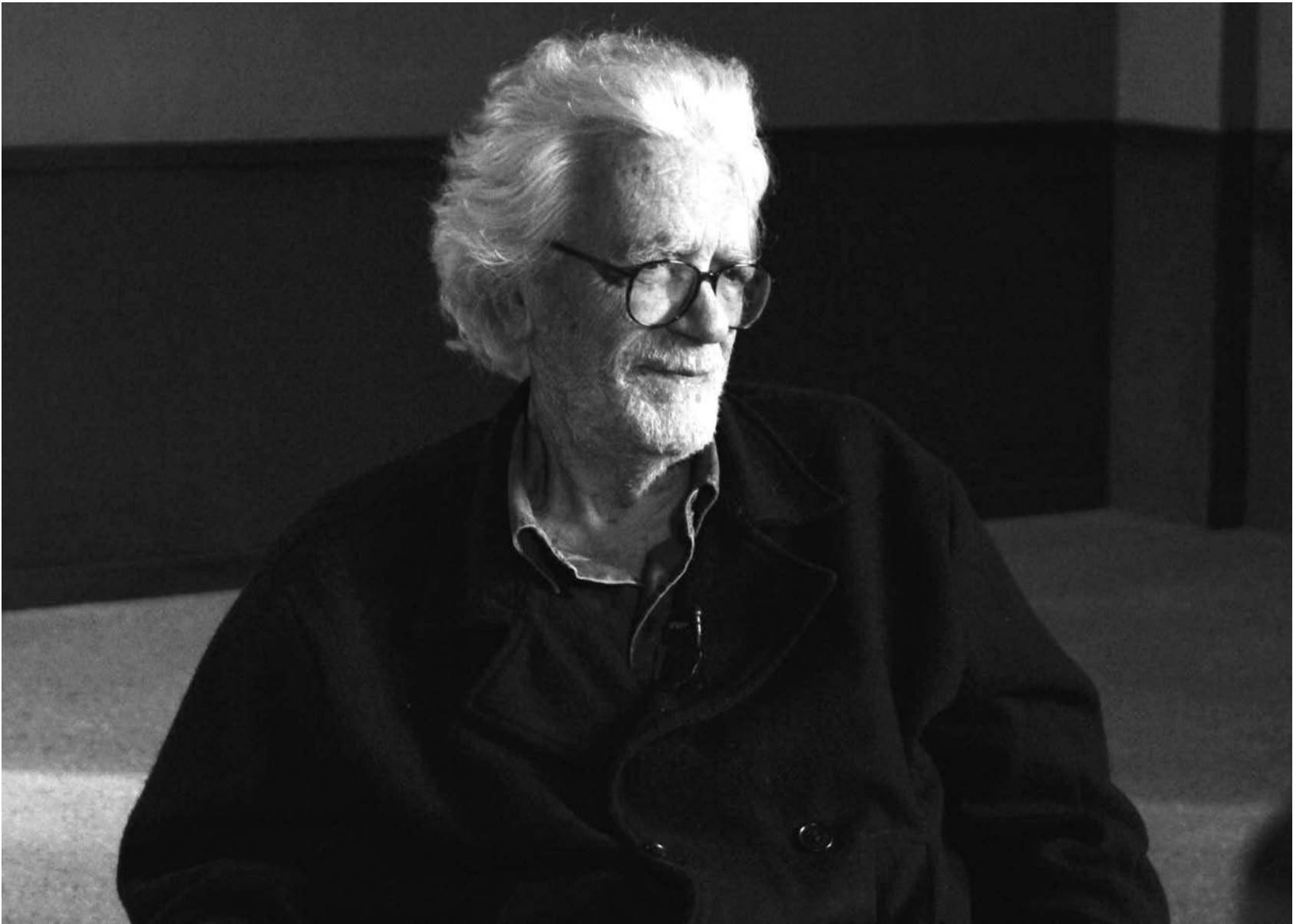
production of films and the branding of auteur names.<sup>11</sup> By placing the author in context, these studies fleshed out a figure that had been reduced to an abstract construct: to a set of structures, a function, or a lack.

My proposed notion of performing authorship, as evidenced in Coutinho’s works, replaces the sense of authorial absence with an emphasis on authorial presence. Moving away from the set of requirements for originality, authority, control, and expression, and drawing from Barthes and Foucault, I stress the importance of performance as an element in the act of authoring a work.<sup>12</sup> Further, I would suggest that authors are defined not as individuals who can meet such requirements, but simply as individuals who confront them. Authors are furthermore individuals who make themselves apparent, visible, and *present* through this confrontation—and sometimes even through the desire to divest themselves from an authorial role in the traditional sense, which surely is Coutinho’s goal.

Rather than conditioning authorship on the expression of an individual’s essence, I locate the author in the external actions that constitute any creative impulse. I may be indebted to Barthes and Foucault, but instead of deeming such an inaccessible author dead (Barthes) or absent (Foucault), I privilege exterior gestures over subjective expression. This is not to dismiss interiority; on the contrary, such external actions are often guided by the attempt to communicate inner experiences. In fact, and in line with contemporary scholarship on film phenomenology, my proposed notion of performing authorship should ideally replace the binary of interiority/exteriority completely, rather than privilege either term of this equation.<sup>13</sup>

## The Author in the World

Coutinho’s reliance on his physical presence, rather than on any verbal articulation of specific ideas, makes him a perfect embodiment of this understanding of authorship. That which the concept of performing authorship describes, in Coutinho’s films, is precisely the representation that the author gives of himself as someone whose presence invites others to speak. He is someone whose ability to listen becomes a form of authorial signature. In this sense, an author who propels and orchestrates the discourses of others is an author defined more by his presence than by the articulation of a worldview, an author who does not create an identifiable universe but rather interacts with the universe he films. To identify Coutinho as the source of his film material, then, is to recognize that what he originates is another person’s impulse to speak, not his own



*Últimas Conversas* (*Last Conversations*, 2015) is atypical, often positioning Coutinho in the center of the frame.

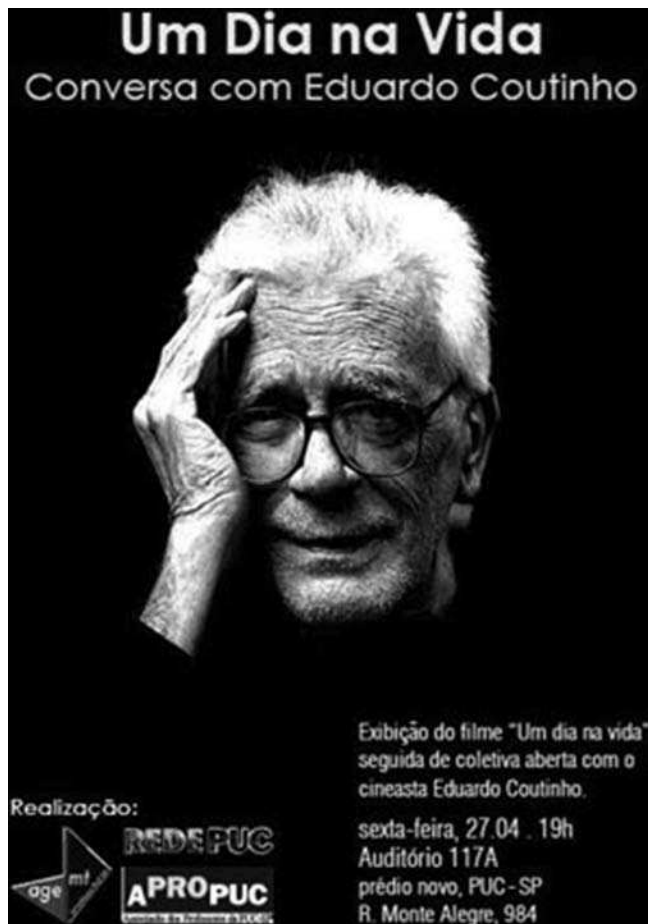
Photo courtesy of Instituto Moreira Salles

speech; the author is identified by physical presence, not by any expression of an individual essence.

Such a strategy does not divorce exteriority from interiority, or body from “soul.” Quite the opposite. The absence of the director’s body in *Um dia na vida* and the expression of his inner angst in *Últimas Conversas* together locate the sense of an authorial presence precisely in the tension between the elements constituting these binary oppositions.

*Um dia na vida* may not display the director’s image, but the film’s public screenings were accompanied by its author, present in flesh and blood. In a Q&A following a screening at São Paulo’s Pontifícia Universidade Católica (PUC) in 2012, Coutinho said he had to personally attend each of the

projections of the film (which for reasons of copyright was shown “clandestinely” and free of charge) to provide some context—even if, as he rightly claims, the images speak for themselves.<sup>14</sup> English lessons, animated cartoons, adverts for toys and jewels, news broadcasts, celebrity gossip shows, soap operas, and evening prayers are presented as something that is just there, with chronology as their only apparent organizational logic (with the first show recorded at 6:50 a.m. and the last at 1:30 a.m.). In that Q&A, Coutinho said he avoided deploying montage in expressive ways, stating that the idea was to respect the real chronology of the broadcast, even if this were to lead to difficult choices. While stressing the importance of not including any authorial judgment in the



The 2012 poster that advertised the public screening in São Paulo, Brazil.

film, the director was also very open about his selection of images. He claimed, for example, to leave out a Mundial evangelical show because of a minister's unacceptably abusive behavior toward women, and stated that he chose to ignore an interview with a lawyer offering a polemical take on the murder of a little girl that had shocked the nation.<sup>15</sup>

If Coutinho's requisite presence at screenings anchored these images in the director, did those public appearances posit him as the film's origin? Presumably Coutinho would reject that idea. In the Q&A at PUC, he actually claimed to "rebel" against the understanding of the author as both origin and original. The director's extrafilmic presence at screenings might identify him as source, but not in the traditional sense. As a compilation film, *Um dia na vida* presents the spectator with images that were not even produced by the filmmaker. Orchestrator, yes, but not creator. In spite of the director's absence from the screen, his implied attitude toward television images that he does not generate, but instead edits together, is not dissimilar from the one he adopts before all his documentary subjects—but minus his interactions with them. In other

words, just as Coutinho is best characterized as a listener in his body of works, in this compilation film he acts as a spectator—as a consumer, rather than producer, of images.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, *Últimas Conversas* and *Um dia na vida* stand simultaneously as direct opposites and each as a complement to the other. The former offers up Coutinho's emotional and anguished testimony; the latter abstains from authorial self-inscription. Considering Coutinho's refusal to analyze or express inner experiences, one film offers too much of the author, while the other takes away the little that was ever given of him. One film was finished in the author's absence; the other required his live presence. In their atypical takes on authorial display, these two works bracket the director's filmography and reassert Coutinho's configuration of his authorial function. As vocal as he may have been both in the prologue to *Últimas Conversas* and in his participation in Q&A sessions with audiences following *Um dia na vida* screenings, for the most part he limited his discourse to issues surrounding the filming process. Coutinho may have lent his body and his eyes to his subjects and to his viewers, but what his presence both in the films and outside of them conveyed is that, for him, authorship was less about expression than it was about interaction—with subjects, with audiences, with words and images. Coutinho's films never really represented the author's world. Instead, what they showed with eminent clarity was the author *in* the world.

## Notes

1. In the period between *Cabra marcado para morrer* (1964–1984) and *Santo Forte* Coutinho worked mainly in the production of medium- and short-length documentary and institutional videos. For a detailed and comprehensive study of Coutinho's career see Consuelo Lins, *O documentário de Eduardo Coutinho: Televisão, cinema e vídeo* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2004).
2. See Ismail Xavier, "Ways of Listening in a Visual Medium: The Documentary Movement in Brazil," *New Left Review* 73 (2012): 97–116.
3. For more on the director's physical presence, see my earlier writing in *Performing Authorship: Self-Inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 88–106, and in "Flesh for the Author: Filmic Presence in the Documentaries of Eduardo Coutinho," *Framework* 51.1 (2010): 134–50.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Claudia Mesquita, Leandro Saraiva, Consuelo Lins, and Vinicius Navarro have referred to Coutinho's documentaries as a form of "conversational" cinema. Ismail Xavier discusses the centrality of the interview. See Claudia Mesquita and Leandro Saraiva, "O Cinema de Eduardo Coutinho: Notas sobre Método e Variações," in *Eduardo Coutinho: Cinema do Encontro* (Rio de Janeiro: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil,

- 2003), 60–69; Lins, *O documentário de Eduardo Coutinho*; Vinicius Navarro, “Performance in Brazilian Documentaries,” in *New Documentaries in Latin America*, ed. Vinicius Navarro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 75–90. See Ismail Xavier, “Indagações em torno de Eduardo Coutinho e seu diálogo com a tradição moderna,” in *Eduardo Coutinho: Cinema do encontro*, 51–59.
6. *Cinema de reportagem: A obra de Eduardo Coutinho* [Reportage Cinema: The Work of Eduardo Coutinho] is directed by Daniela Muzi, Daniela Santoro, Maria Aparecida Costa, and Maria Eduarda Mattar (2001).
  7. See Navarro, “Performance in Brazilian Documentaries.” See also José Padilha, “Sentido e Verdade,” *Cinemais* 36 (October–December 2003): 59–70.
  8. See Sayad, *Performing Authorship*, 1–31.
  9. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 13–14.
  10. See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*, ed. John Caughie (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul in association with the BFI, 1981), 208–13; and Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 113–38.
  11. Such approaches include Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Dudley Andrew, “The Unauthorized Auteur Today,” in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 20–29; Dana Polan, “Auteur Desire,” *Screening the Past*, March 1, 2001, at [www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fro301/dpfr12a.htm](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fro301/dpfr12a.htm); and Rosanna Maule, *Beyond Auteurism: New Directions in Authorial Film Practices in France, Italy and Spain since the 1980s* (London: Intellect, 2008).
  12. Barthes states that writing should no longer be understood as the “operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction,’” but as a “performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense) in which the enunciation has no other content . . . than the act by which it is uttered.” See Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 211.
  13. For a detailed consideration of the application of phenomenology in film studies see Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 26–46.
  14. Rede PUC published the video of the event, which took place on April 27, 2012, on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLSMA4qZm34](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLSMA4qZm34).
  15. Coutinho is referring to the murder of five-year-old Isabella Nardoni in 2008.
  16. In her study of Jean-Luc Godard’s *JLG/JLG: Self-Portrait in December* (1994), Kaja Silverman discussed the idea of the author as consumer or receiver, rather than producer. See Kaja Silverman, “The Author as Receiver,” *October* 96 (Spring 2001): 17–34.