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Technical and documentary languages by Brazilian Eduardo Coutinho

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Abstract

1. Introduction. Eduardo Coutinho represents the development and innovation of the Brazilian documentary. His career is still marked by a novel technique of interviews with participants also mix documentary with other communication techniques, especially fiction and journalism. This article provides a recovery path Coutinho and his major works. **2. Method.** A literature review and analysis of filmic discourse is applied to understand the history and languages adopted by Coutinho during his career as a documentary. **3. Who was.** Before acting as a documentary, Coutinho has studied law but always acted in theater and visual arts. This discussion presents Coutinho before documentaries. **4. Frames by Eduardo Coutinho.** The main works of the documentary are presented, as well as its important features that transform the filmography of director in one of the most important in Brazil. **5. Conclusions.** We conclude that Eduardo Coutinho has left a gap in the Brazilian documentary, since his death in 2014. However, their contributions are transformed the genre, as the results presented in the article.

Keywords: Communication, Audiovisual narratives, Documentary, Language.

Contents: 1. Introduction. 2. Method. 3. Who was he? 4. Scenes of Eduardo Coutinho. 5. Conclusions. 6. References. 6. Filmography

1. Introduction

On February 2nd, 2014, documentary cinema lost one of its most important names, especially with regard to innovations in the fields of narrative and research. On that date, Eduardo Coutinho was murdered by one of his sons, who, in a moment of rage, stabbed his father with a knife. It was the end of a story marked by *Cabras*, *Edifício Master*, *Peões*, and the many cinematographic characters who passed through his frames over nearly fifty years, even though he had started in cinema even earlier with the production management of the film *Cinco vezes favela* (1962), produced by a group of filmmakers from the Centro Popular de Cultura – CPC.

But Eduardo Coutinho is immortal in Brazilian documentary cinema, especially since he revolutionized audio-visual production in the country and because he was part of a historic moment of the Seventh Art –the New Cinema–, experimenting with narratives and aesthetics for the documentary, while the world was following traditional patterns and / or working with fiction.

Indeed, Coutinho experimented with a new language, producing a fiction defined as hybrid cinema (Renó, 2013), from the earliest records of the work *O Cabra*, which had begun its second week of filming, when the military coup of 1964 shut down its production. It was a fiction based on the true story of the peasant leader João Pedro Teixeira, assassinated as a result of his political and social leadership. The film is populated by real people playing themselves, one such example being João Pedro's wife Elisabeth Teixeira playing herself.

Although Eduardo Coutinho's filmography is especially known for its similarity to the position of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in *Chronicle of a Summer*, in which documentarists are at the same time actors (cinema vérité), the differential element lies in the way he obtained the responses and the participation of his characters, using an interview technique known as "recovery of the memory of an image" (Gervaiseau, 2012), popular also in the works of another documentarist, the Frenchman Claude Lanzmann. Also is very important to comment that the public was changed (Renó, 2008), and is very important to know new narrative models.

2. Method

This article presents a biography of Eduardo Coutinho and a critical reflection on some of his most important works (though all his works were equally important, when taking into account their frame by frame contribution to documentary film). To do this, we adopt bibliographical research and the analysis of filmic discourse as our methodology, obtaining at the end a record of the career path of he who was one of the most important artists of nonfiction cinema that Brazil has ever known.

The model of analysis of filmic discourse is a method of study of cinema as Vanoye and Goliot-IETE (2008), results in draft conclusions from the visual observation of the content from their production techniques and the language adopted. This is what is presented in the study, from a selection of the most important documentary works of Eduardo Coutinho.

3. Who was he?

To know Eduardo Coutinho it is not enough to watch his works, though they themselves have the ability to express the qualities of the filmmaker. Even so, it is important to know Coutinho's training to thereby discover where his techniques and aesthetics come from. This is justified particularly because a professional is not just a product of his studies, but also of his personal experience.

The productions developed by Eduardo Coutinho could not be oblivious to this reality. Born on May 11th, 1933 in Rio de Janeiro, Coutinho studied law at the University of São Paulo, one of the most important of the country, but he did not complete his education. Like many other students at the time, he decided to work in the field of culture and communication. In 1954 he began his relationship with art and cinema, working as a reviewer for *Visão* magazine and as a theatre director on the children's show *Pluft, o fantasminha*. Furthermore, he won money answering questions about Charles Chaplin on a TV quiz show. With the prize-money he travelled to France to study cinema direction and editing at IDHEC. His first documentaries were made there.

On his return to Brazil, he joined the group of film makers of the popular New Cinema, made up from the Popular Center for Culture of the National Union of Students (known by the acronym CPC da UNE). With the group he participated in community theatre productions (with popular discourse) and worked as production manager on the film *Cinco vezes favela* (1962), which counted on the involvement of important filmmakers of the Cinema Novo, such as Caca Diegues or León Hirzsmán, among others. With Hirzsmán and Marcos Faria, Coutinho created the production company Saga Filmes, where he directed works such as *Pacto*, (a segment of the film *ABC do Amor*, 1966), *O homem que comprou o mundo* (1968) and *Garota de Ipanema* (1967), among others.

In 1975, Eduardo Coutinho was invited to join the team of the programme Globo Reporter, at Rede Globo, where he remained until 1984. What characterized his time on the program was the editorial freedom and the possibility to produce it all in 16 mm. That was the time when Globo Repórter gained notoriety for its semi-documentary productions. The imprints of such training can be detected in Coutinho's style, present in each of his documentary works.

As discussed later on, Eduardo Coutinho applied a particular performance style to his documentaries, in addition to a peculiar interview technique. These features are typical of someone who had studied law in addition to having developed and discovered the world of cinema in France in 1960; which is to say, the time when Cinema Vérité (Nichols, 1997) was the emerging force due to works such as *Chronicle of a Summer*, by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin.

Just like Rouch / Morin, Eduardo Coutinho participated in all his works in the role of interviewer, conversing with the interview subjects. It is a technique that places the documentarist within the story, sharing with it the credibility of that which is revealed in the narrative. This had been present since the beginning of his filmography. Although *Cabra marcado para morrer* was released in 1985, it was the first work produced by Coutinho, in 1964, when the military dictatorship prohibited its production. In this work, Eduardo Coutinho did not directly participate, as was his style, but he built a hybrid narrative using the interpretation of the characters played by their real life counterparts as the starting point. But, on finishing the work 21 years later, the filmmaker produced a totally cinema vérité aesthetic, with a central character all through the narrative: Eduardo Coutinho –he who had been to France to study cinema when Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin were teaching the world what cinema vérité was.

Another characteristic of Coutinho which came from his training was the way he used to discover information. To do so, the filmmaker adopted the technique known as recovery of the memory of an image –used by a few filmmakers, like the French Claude Lanzmann– as his technique. With this technique, Coutinho promoted a dialogue -which came to be simultaneously an interrogation-through physical / visual / sensory evidence. For example, in almost all his works, Coutinho presented the interviewees with something that evoked memories of a past event which had occurred during the time frame the documentary was examining. Using the memories retrieved in response to the object as the starting point (it could be a photograph, a garment, a tool, a piece of food or even a situation), Coutinho introduced the questions. It is impossible to contain emotions when we revisit something or even sustain a lie when facing a truth (because the proof is a truth). That was most probably a skill that arose from the techniques Coutinho learned whilst studying law. And this is his main feature, along with others, which will be discussed later.

4. Scenes of Eduardo Coutinho

Although some documentaries stand out as the most well-known, it is extremely difficult to establish what the major works of Eduardo Coutinho are. This is due to his being different to other artists of his time, especially in Brazil, and also to his ability to create an aesthetic and a documentary production technique so that some scholars came to mistakenly define him as a theorist. Actually, Coutinho was not a theorist nor was he interested in becoming one. Although he experimented with many techniques possessing the ability to become theories (that arose from his mind with this characteristic), Coutinho did not defend them, leaving them scattered through the academic field. This is common among filmmakers who have tested various production techniques without converting them into theories, such as Dziga Vertov, who only develops some mission statements.

But among his works *Cabra marcado para morrer* is probably the most important. According to Henri Gervaiseau (2000), this work is as important for Brazilian documentary cinema as Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Camera* (1992) is for worldwide documentary cinema. From this work onward, not only documentary techniques were discovered, but a more significant diffusion of the genre in the country was also achieved.



Picture 01: "*Cabra marcado para morrer*", with the recovery of the memory of an image as a technique.

Initially it was conceived to tell the story of the murder of the League of Peasants leader, João Pedro Teixeira. In the film, various characters were played by their real life counterparts, such as Elizabeth Teixeira, João Pedro's widow, who played herself in the film. Unfortunately, after filming for two weeks, armed forces carried out the military coup in 1964 and the production was permanently closed down.

In 1985, with few images produced (but enough to initiate a new project), what should have been a film of a real-life story became a documentary, in which Elizabeth Teixeira tried to find their children in various parts of the country. At all times, Eduardo Coutinho (one of the characters, who helped Elizabeth) showed scenes from the original production and recorded the participants' reactions as they watched. This is fundamental to the work (the reaction of the participants) because this was the issue, especially since the subject was Brazil before and after the military dictatorship. The documentary received 12 international awards, from diverse countries such as Brazil, Cuba, France, Germany, Portugal, etc.



Picture 02. Original version (realistic fiction) of “*Cabra marcado para morrer*”.



Picture 03: The same character in the film version of "Cabra marcado para morrer”.

After *Cabra marcado para morrer*, Coutinho gained notoriety in the audio-visual field, leaving behind the programme Globo Repórter in order to produce documentary videos for the CECIP (Center for Popular Image Creation), with contents related to citizens and education. It was at that time that a fundamental work in his career emerged: *Santa Marta-Duas semanas no morro* (1987). In it, Coutinho introduced issues related to prejudice and urban violence and through the documentary he aimed to expose the precarious conditions of its production. It was the first time the relationship between favela and city was examined, after *Cinco Vezes Favela* (1962).



Picture 04: “*Santa Marta–Duas semanas no morro*”.

Later however, Eduardo Coutinho returned to the *carioca favelas*, albeit with a different central story. In *Babylon 2000* (2000), the objective of the documentarist was to portray what the inhabitants of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro hoped from the new century and obviously the values that distinguished them with regards to the inhabitants of the wealthiest regions of the city.

Among those values there was violence, sex and a concern for the future. Coutinho went to live with some residents of favelas during the final preparations for the New Year party. These are special images, since news bulletins always cover the preparations of the wealthiest citizens and not those of the inhabitants of the carioca favela.

With this work, Eduardo Coutinho became known as someone devoted to capturing the truth of the citizens and not the fairy tale, the American dream we have come to know in some audio-visual works. According to Jean-Claude Bernadet (2003), Eduardo Coutinho managed to show the people as they are, without makeup, shadows or fake smiles.



Picture 05: The characters Eduardo Coutinho and Dody, in "*Babilônia 2000*"

Another innovative work of Coutinho was *Edifício Master* (2002), for which the director decided to live inside the building for three weeks, together with all members of the production. The building was located in a well-to-do area of Rio de Janeiro, but had approximately 500 inhabitants belonging largely to the lower strata.



Picture 06: Characters during an interview in "*Master Building*"

In the documentary, Eduardo Coutinho employed a mixture of gonzo journalism techniques, created by the American journalist Hunter Thompson, who developed his journalistic works on the basis of immersion in the subject (something he sometimes to an extreme).



Imagen 07: Residencia de Coutinho durante las grabaciones de “Edifício Master”.

The work displayed a wide range of viewpoints, from the perspective of the inhabitants themselves, expressing their varied personalities. Each of them gave their impressions about the neighbours and also about life inside the cluster of homes in which more than 500 families were living, which exhibited a remarkable social, cultural, sexual and religious diversity, similar to that of a city. Based almost exclusively on interviews, Coutinho created a documentary basically exempt from accompanying images, which were only presented in the beginning and the end.

However, one of the most expressive of Coutinho's works in terms of experimentation and innovation was the documentary *Jogo de cena* (2007), which is made up directly and almost imperceptibly of a mixture of fiction and reality. To this end, the director published a note in a newspaper, inviting women to tell their personal stories. 83 candidates came forward and revealed their lives on camera in a studio. From that first approximation, 23 stories were chosen to be represented on camera again, but this time by actresses –with their own interpretations and emotions– in Glauce Rocha Theatre in Rio de Janeiro. In the end, was it a documentarist making fiction?

Eduardo Coutinho defined his work as an "impure documentary", since it offered real contents but through new voices, new women, with new emotions (real or not) based on their reality. And he did this in a sensitive and moving way, building a tenuous relationship between fiction and reality, giving relevance to the ongoing discussion between Roger Odin and Christian Metz about fiction and reality. Both French filmmakers defended conflicting interpretations regarding the existence of a filmic reality. For Christian Metz (Renó, 2012), documentary did not exist, since any interpretation would be fruit of the self-censorship of the interviewee. No one speaks their mind, for fear of being misunderstood. Meanwhile, Roger Odin (1984) considered that there was no work of fiction, because

every actor, when interpreting, would bring a part of their personality and individuality to the role. That is, all fictional characters would have at least a some piece of reality. Everything is documentary.



Picture 08: A character talking about herself in "*Jogo de cena*".

Coutinho represented the discussion regarding the documentary in an artistic way, as he always did, but this time with the help of actresses, some of them professional and others unknown. He established a play between fiction and reality. In an interview, he justified this, saying that "a well-told story is true without asking ourselves whether it is or not. Told correctly, everything is true". Based on that experiment, a review of the concepts of documentary and of the distance between documentary and fiction becomes necessary. Bill Nichols, Fernão Ramos and Roger Odin, among other theorists of documentary cinema, are worth reviewing, since the essence of the experiment in this game of Coutinho's –though he himself would not defend this thesis– can be transformed into new and interesting theoretical concepts about the documentary.



Picture 09: Unknown Character of "*Jogo de cena*", talking about her life.



Picture 10: Scene from "Jogo de cena", with actress Marilia Pera telling a mixture of stories of other characters.

In fact, the complete filmography of Eduardo Coutinho deserves special attention, be it in regard to experimentation, social and public concern, the arts or even as a reflection about the genre itself. In all these areas, Coutinho always offered his contributions and he achieved this through moving images, which is precisely the distinguishing feature of cinema. That was, in a way, what Kuleshov did, the creation of the ideal woman (phenomenon known as the Kuleshov effect) to justify the importance -and the power- of audio-visual production to create truths or make an impression. It is unjust -as it has proven to be in this article- to pick just a few examples among all his works. However, at the same time it is a necessary academic exercise and also an invitation to better understand Eduardo Coutinho's "framings", beginning with the filmography that can be partially found on the Internet.

5. Conclusions

As stated at the beginning, the world of documentary cinema has lost one of its most important artists, recognized even by the Academy of Hollywood, who invited him to participate as a member of its jury in 2014. This opportunity went unfulfilled due to his tragic death. Even though it cannot be said that the American Academy always makes the best choices, the nomination of Eduardo reflects to some extent the relevance of this filmmaker for documentary cinema.

Surely, Coutinho is much more than synonymous with good documentary works. The director offered society a way to tell stories and to observe them. On producing *Cabra marcado para morrer* he introduced the technique of recovery of the memory of an image, allowing the emotions of the participants to emerge from their memories on camera. At the same time, he offered a debate on Brazil with and without military dictatorship (in a way introducing a social debate of the same level as the one proposed in *Chronicle of a Summer*, by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin).

In *Santa Marta-Duas semanas no morro*, for two weeks he experienced what could be called gonzo research and once again adopted the technique of appropriation and immersion in *Edifício Master*,

this time with even greater sensitivity. He succeeded in making his feelings in relation to the housing complex seem almost as real as those of the inhabitants who were living their everyday stories there.

The sequences of *Babilônia 2000* belong to Eduardo Coutinho the journalist, even if that was not his academic formation. Here, the filmmaker showed the world an unknown society, along with its desires, hopes and dreams. In fact, a world that newspapers should be showing, but which they have no interest in reporting.

We then considered his most significant work in that which relates to the documentary genre. With *Jogo de cena*, Coutinho triggered a reflection on the documentary genre, which established him as an artist and a professional in audio-visual communication. To this end, he demystified his own product, his own art, claiming that anything could be a documentary and anything could be fiction; i.e. we can construct our own truths and they form the basis for the construction of a good story.

In the end, we conclude that Eduardo Coutinho was more than a documentarist. In fact, we can consider him as a theorist / technician / aesthete since from his techniques and aesthetics many theories have been edified, especially by those who have tried to reproduce his techniques and aesthetics, defending them on the basis of the results obtained. It is about a need for applied academic development, where the experiment comes before the conclusions, which are nothing more than the interpretation of the empirical results.

The world lost Eduardo Coutinho, but his legacy continues, teaching us to understand what subjects can be included in the documentary genre (that is to say, every subject), the possible ways to develop the documentary (in any way), the boundary between fiction and reality (no boundary, except our own eyes) and finally the value of memory and emotion, present in all documentaries in which the recovery of the memory of an image is employed. Eduardo Coutinho is indeed an example for the documentary.

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