ISMAIL XAVIER

WAYS OF LISTENING IN A VISUAL MEDIUM

The Documentary Movement in Brazil

The new prominence of documentary films seems to be an almost universal phenomenon within world cinema. But in each country, the specificity of national-historical experience necessarily imprints its own character on the form. In Brazil, the contemporary documentary movement cannot be understood without reference to the highly political film-making of the early 1960s, a time when direct-sound techniques were becoming a central device in the *cinéma vérité* of Jean Rouch, or the 'direct cinema' of Richard Leacock, Robert Drew and the Maysles Brothers. For Brazilian documentary makers, the synchronized capture of sound and image permitted the presence of popular voices, mainly of peasants and migrant workers, in a cinema deeply concerned with power relations and people's living conditions.[1] Already in the mid 50s, the films of Nelson Pereira dos Santos had pointed the way towards following the example of Italian neo-realism and making movies in the streets.

The pioneering directors of 1960s Cinema Novo—Glauber Rocha, Paulo César Saraceni, Leon Hirszman, Joaquim Pedro de Andrade and Carlos Diegues—to whom Pereira dos Santos was a 'cultural godfather', spoke of incorporating the devices of documentary into fiction films—'a camera and an idea' were all that was needed, according to Rocha—as well as making documentaries themselves. The necessity of human and social transformation informed the aesthetic logic of their work: Linduarte Noronha's documentary *Aruanda* (1959–60), on the outlook of slave

descendants in Paraíba, for example, or Leon Hirszman's *Maioria absoluta* (1964), on illiteracy among peasants and work exploitation in the Brazilian countryside. Young film-makers from the Centro Popular de Cultura, including Eduardo Coutinho, developed radical collaborative projects with workers and peasants.

The military dictatorship of 1964–84 did not put a complete halt to radical film-making in Brazil, but it constituted a significant rupture. The initial response of many Cinema Novo directors to the new conditions was a shift to fiction films as a locus for political debate, centring particularly on the position of intellectuals.[2] As the repression sharpened after 1968, some film-makers went into exile; others were engaged in making less controversial films in popular genres, not least for TV; political concerns tended to be expressed allegorically, through literary adaptations or historical fictions. Despite the regime pressure, however, documentaries recovered their political élan in the late 1970s: some powerful films were made about the labour movement in the industrialized suburbs of São Paulo, which became a central focus of resistance to the regime and would have a decisive long-term effect on Brazilian political life.[3] This new impulse strengthened in the early 1980s, just as the country itself was emerging from dictatorship. Film-makers from the long-suppressed left set out to portray what Brazil had become during the twenty years of military rule. Their contributions became part of the complex process of the country's rediscovery and remaking of itself; a process in which the Workers' Party, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), would play a crucial, evolving role. A vital concern for Brazilian documentary makers, then, has been to explore ways of listening, in a visual medium. The interview—of which Coutinho, undoubtedly the central figure of the new documentary movement, is a master—has been a major strategic resource.

Under Brazil's so-called New Republic, inaugurated in 1985, the work of a younger generation, itself engaged in a productive dialogue with

---

[1] For the trajectory of documentary cinema in Brazil during the 1960s and 1970s, see Jean-Claude Bernardet, *Cineastas e imagens do povo*, São Paulo 2003 (2nd edn).

[2] See *O desafio* (1965) by Paulo César Saraceni, *Terra em transe* (1967) by Glauber Rocha, *O bravo guerreiro* (1968) by Gustavo Dahl and *Fome de amor* (1968) by Nelson Pereira dos Santos.

[3] All made in 1979, Renato Tapajós' *Linha de montagem*, João Batista de Andrade's *Greve!* and Sérgio Toledo and Roberto Gervitz's *Braços cruzados, máquinas paradas* were the first documentaries to examine the São Paulo labour movement.

the 1960s, has interacted with that of film-makers like Coutinho.[4] New technologies—video and, more recently, digital cameras—have altered not only the economics of documentary-making but also the style of shooting, and the ways in which recorded images are juxtaposed in the editing process. But they have not eliminated decisive aesthetic features of the documentary: the film-maker's shaping of the 'scene', for example, or the camera-effect, by which the presence of the lens itself alters the field in which it operates, lending a new dimension to events that take place before it—including during interviews, sometimes eliciting or provoking a theatrical response.

Though usually under-funded, the independent documentary must operate within a highly sophisticated visual field. In the 1980s, the new Brazilian documentary movement emerged within a society already saturated with TV: the military had showered resources on the television companies, which streamed highly coloured representations of a supposed 'Great Brazil' created by the 'economic miracle'—the official term for intensified working-class exploitation under conservative modernization. As subjects, therefore, media-savvy Brazilians have always been ready to challenge the terms of the documentary—to question the film-makers' intentions, or their access to national TV and Hollywood; and to reflect upon their own representations on screen. In what follows, I will look at six outstanding documentaries, from the thousand-plus produced in Brazil over the past few decades. I will conclude by contrasting the achievements of the new documentary movement, firstly with the Cinema Novo films of the 1960s and, secondly, with Brazil's international blockbusters—movies such as *Central Station*, *Elite Squad*, *Carandiru*, *City of God*.

Re-emergence

Two films from the early 1980s encapsulate the process by which, in Roberto Schwarz's words, 'committed cinema and the popular struggle come back into the open together'.[5] The first is Coutinho's *Cabra*

[4] On Coutinho's trajectory from the 1960s to 2004, see Consuelo Lins, *Eduardo Coutinho—televisão, cinema e vídeo*, Rio de Janeiro 2004. Born in 1933, Coutinho has made some two dozen documentaries, including *Boca de lixo* (1993), *Babilônia 2000* (2000), *Edifício Master* (2002), *Peões* (2004) and, most recently, *Moscou* (2009).

[5] Roberto Schwarz, 'On *A Man Marked Out to Die*', in Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, London and New York 1992, p. 167.

marcado para morrer of 1984.[6] The unforgettable opening sequence of this seminal work stages, literally and cinematographically, the ongoing re-emergence of the new Brazilian documentary from the darkness of the dictatorship years. A long-shot establishes, in silence, a twilit rural landscape; a small light flickers on, against the blackness of a hillside. Its source is a film-projector: Coutinho and his colleagues are setting up an outdoor screening for the villagers of the black-and-white rushes that they had filmed, with the local people as actors and participants, twenty years before. Back then, Coutinho had worked with the comrades and widow of João Pedro Teixeira, a northeastern peasant leader assassinated by local landowners. The film, provisionally entitled 'A Man Marked Out to Die', aimed to reconstruct Teixeira's struggle as a means to continue the peasants' fight. The shooting of the film was interrupted by the security forces at the time of the 1964 military coup. Peasant activists involved in the project were arrested and tortured, or fled into hiding. Some of the reels disappeared. Now, in 1983—with military rule starting to give way to limited representative government—Coutinho has come back to show the surviving footage to the villagers and find out what had become of them, and therefore of Brazil.

At the impromptu outdoor screening, Coutinho and his small team film—in colour—the villagers' noisy and appreciative viewing of their 1964 performances. The images trigger the peasants' memories: their words become voice-overs to the old footage, a present-day soundtrack reflecting on a collective past. The film-maker thus resumes his unfinished work, inscribing in the new documentary the rushes that the security forces had tried to destroy. With the military coup, Teixeira's family had been split up. His widow Elizabeth—first seen, black-clad, with her six children in old newsreel footage of the huge demonstration at his funeral—had gone into hiding, working as a primary-school teacher in a distant village, under an assumed name. The children had been scattered across the country; the oldest girl had committed suicide after her father was killed. *Twenty Years After* takes on the structure of a documentary quest, as the film-makers seek out first the indomitable Elizabeth and then her surviving children, whose fates mirror that of the Brazilian working class. One daughter, now a Rio bar hostess, is in tears at the sight of the old photographs. A tight-lipped son, working as a security guard on a modern industrial estate, will say nothing

[6] The film's English title is *Twenty Years After*.

to the camera. Another daughter, baby in arms, has married into the middle class and does not want to talk about her communist parents. The middle son, sent to Cuba by friends to train as a doctor, speaks with restrained dignity of his father's role. Their reactions to Coutinho's camera speak volumes about the changes the country has undergone.

The process of making the documentary becomes the occasion for Elizabeth to reveal her identity, to resume contact with her children and, in a sense, her activist life—detaining the film-makers' VW van as they prepare to leave her village, insisting on having the final word. But the film's portrayal of the conditions under which she and the others are now living also shows how the repression destroyed the previous forms of peasant solidarity; this belated encounter takes place in a different political conjuncture. *Twenty Years After* does not offer a celebratory happy ending but an act of reflection, by film-makers, participant subjects and viewers alike, on the uncertainties of the present.

In retrospect, the other seminal work for Brazil's post-dictatorship documentary movement is Leon Hirszman's *ABC da greve*, filmed in 1981 although not finally released until 1990.[7] The title, 'ABC of Strikes', refers both to São Paulo's industrial suburbs—Santo André, São Bernardo, São Caetano—and to the militant example of the autoworkers there, which served as a primer for anti-dictatorship struggles. Hirszman had set up a film production unit in São Bernardo, location of the giant Volkswagen plants, to make an adaptation of Gianfrancesco Guarnieri's 1958 play about an earlier episode of class struggle, *Eles não usam black-tie*; Hirszman and Guarnieri had reworked the screenplay, updating it to the late 1970s and the ongoing ABC struggles. Hirszman found himself caught up in the vigorous strike movement which would lead to the founding of the PT, with the trade-union leader Lula at its head. The film contains one of the most astounding shots in Brazilian documentary cinema: as Lula is borne aloft by the surging mass of the workers, so the cameraman too is literally swept up and carried along with him by the crowd, in a take several minutes long—as if this powerful new social force had taken hold of the camera and were filming itself in action.

---

[7] Leon Hirszman (1937–87), directed over twenty documentary and fiction films; *ABC da greve*, left unfinished when he died, was released in 1990 after restoration and final editing by Adrian Cooper, who had been the film's cinematographer.

ABC da greve includes dramatic footage of the outdoor mass meetings of auto-workers, perhaps 100,000 strong, roaring their support for the all-out-strike tactics of the union leadership; the camera, positioned with Lula and the others on the flat factory roof, looks out across the sea of workers below. Hirszman also managed to film the appalling conditions inside the plant: workers slave in semi-darkness, stripped to the waist and dripping with sweat, with scant protection from the ferocious pounding of the ancient machines, shipped from Germany to take advantage of low Brazilian wages under the dictatorship. Key moments of the struggles that would continue through the 1980s are captured on film: the mass meetings, the riot police firing on the strikers, beating them with clubs and bundling them into police vans. At one point Lula and his deputy are snatched by the military regime and held for two days. Lula returns, visibly troubled, and calls on the mass meeting to go back to work, otherwise 'they will call us militants', the movement will be criminalized. 'But if we don't get what we're asking for, I will personally lead you out on strike again.' With near unanimity, the workers follow him back inside.

New economic order

Documentaries survived, rather better than feature films, the economic hardship—stagnation, hyperinflation—that followed the halting transition from dictatorship to the 'new republic', and the savage cuts to arts budgets inflicted by Collor's government (1990–92). Video equipment was relatively cheap, and cassettes could be shown and distributed easily. Coutinho's powerful 1992 documentary about rubbish-dump scavengers, *Boca de lixo*, famously contains footage of an early cut of the film itself being shown on a TV, strapped to the roof of a VW van, in the middle of the garbage-strewn landscape of the dump, with its subjects crowding round to watch. By the mid-90s, a new economic and social order had begun to stabilize under Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994–2002): financial profits soared under the harsh discipline of the Washington Consensus, while the turbulent workers' movement was increasingly neutralized and dispersed, though the PT expanded its electoral hegemony.

Funding for the arts increased. Cash-rich companies—among them Globo Network, Unibanco, Banespa, Petrobras—and the National Development Bank were given tax breaks for financing film production,

the basis for Brazil's contributions to world cinema. There was also a degree of institutional backing for documentary makers. By the end of the 1990s, digital technology was helping to reduce costs and, crucially, vastly expanded the amount of footage freely available to documentary makers online. In 2000 the Moreira Salles brothers, Walter and João, founded a specialist documentary company, Videofilmes, in Rio.[8] From the scores of independent documentaries now being made, four of the most important will be considered here.

Notícias de uma guerra particular, João Moreira Salles and Kátia Lund's 1997 documentary about armed combat between drug dealers and police in the Rio *favelas,* was a path-breaking analysis that could not have achieved its effects in any other form.[9] Its material has since been plundered by innumerable *favela* movies, but none have matched the complexity of its portrayal. *Notícias de uma guerra particular*—literal translation: 'Bulletins from a Private War'—constructs its case by juxtaposing the explanations of police, *favela* dwellers and drug dealers, some of them just children. Cutting between these apparently opposed social forces, with inter-titles ('Guns', 'Disruption'), Lund and Salles create a composite conceptual framework capable of grasping the overall logic of Rio's cocaine war, as well as its historical development. In the words of the soft-spoken police analyst, Hélio Luz, it is a straightforward question of repression: 'The police were created to protect the state, and to keep the two million in the *favela* under control.' Paulo Lins, a social scientist born in the *favela* and author of the novel, *City of God*, offers a political account of the evolution of the drug gangs. Under the dictatorship, dealers were locked up with political prisoners in the city's notorious jails, whose cells replicate the crowded, chaotic architecture of the slums. The result was the Comando Vermelho, the tightly organized gang structure that also aimed to bring 'peace, justice, freedom' to the *favelas*—to provide what the government would not. Yet, as Luz points out, the most politicized leaders were killed as soon as they left prison. The current commanders have no political background, and their dreams of escaping the poverty of the slums are illusory: even the richest cannot leave their wealth to their sons.

---

[8] Walter Moreira Salles, b. 1956, director of *Central Station* (1998) and *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004); João Moreira Salles, b. 1962, director of *Notícias de uma guerra particular* (1997), *Entreatos* (2004) and *Santiago* (2007).

[9] Kátia Lund, b. 1966, co-director of *City of God* (2002) and its TV series spin-off, *City of Men* (2002–05).

The *favela* dwellers provide vivid illustrations of the arbitrary violence of the BOPE—the Special Operations Battalion created by Rio's military police for 'combat in urban areas'. But they also fear the suicidal behaviour of the young outlaws, who share the same virility codes as their enemies, the police. The boys, for their part, explain how much they earn from the drug economy and the gratification of taking revenge on the BOPE. They claim to prefer a short, intense life, knowing they will die young, to survival in a world of humiliation and deprivation. Footage of parallel funerals suggests the futility, for both sides. But as Luz underlines, the 'private war' is a structural component in the stabilization of Brazil's class society: 'It will never end.'

The workers' president

Two documentaries made at the time of Brazil's 2002 presidential election, and released together by Videofilmes two years later, constitute a remarkable critical diptych on the advent of the Lula era. João Moreira Salles's *Entreatos* (2004) was originally conceived as an 'observational' film on Lula's 2002 presidential campaign, in the tradition of *Primary* (1960), Robert Drew's documentary on JFK's nomination. But director and subject both contrive to undermine the genre. As Salles's opening voice-over explains—against footage of Lula pressing through a huge crowd of cheering supporters to address a mass rally—he had first intended to make a film about the campaign's public impact: 'rallies, caravans, marches'. But—cut to Lula sharing a coffee with his bodyguards, having his make-up applied, being coached at the teleprompter by his campaign director, Duda Mendonça—'during the editing process, I realized that the material which interested me most was the private moments: Lula in cars, hotels, airplanes, dressing rooms. Of the innumerable films that could have emerged from the uncut footage, I decided on one that focused on these backstage scenes.'[10]

One result is that *Entreatos* reveals in extraordinary detail the finishing touches of Lula's makeover from militant workers' leader to successful presidential candidate, at the hands of Mendonça, José Dirceu, Antonio Palocci and others. Lula himself performs with cool professionalism, adopting quite naturally the gestures his advisors think will make him

[10] Hence the title, *Entreatos*—'Intervals' or 'Entr'actes'. 'Interesting things happen during intervals', Salles has said. See 'Entrevistas: João Moreira Salles, Walter Carvalho', Videofilmes, Rio de Janeiro 2004.

more marketable, accepting the mask they propose, confident of its fit with his own identity as a man of the people, the basis of his legitimacy. (The same strategy would hold good in 2005 when Dirceu and Palocci, his close collaborators, were convicted on corruption charges, and Lula came under immense pressure from the opposition and the media. Despite the gravity of the crisis, his image carried him through the 2006 elections.) He justifies his alliance with the centre-right parties—'coalitions are inevitable to guarantee governability'—as Cardoso had done in 1994; already anticipating the parallels between many of his policies and Cardoso's measures, which he had opposed for the past eight years. Lula presents himself as a pragmatist, whose compromises are by definition benign. The priority now is to win the election, forcing the ruling class to accept a lathe operator as president. At a key briefing before the first big television debate Mendonça, in T-shirt and baseball cap, tells the candidate: 'The trade unionist scares them. They want an optimist who will get Brazil moving, someone calm, not aggressive to anyone. What do we want in the debate? Tranquillity, firmness, objectivity, empathy.' Wall-posters spell out the tactics: 'Don't assume an attack position', 'Reaffirm the "Letter to the Brazilian People"' (committing a PT government to economic orthodoxy), 'Don't be ironic', 'Show concern'.

In *Entreatos*, Lula is repeatedly seen having his make-up applied or knotting a silken tie; on one occasion, doing a fluent phone interview with a provincial radio station from a barber's chair, while having his beard trimmed. 'I've always liked to dress well', he explains to a visiting PT leader, knotting his tie for a TV interview. 'I spent thirty years in factories and couldn't get used to the overalls.' Later, he describes his reply to a PT militant who had claimed to prefer Lula in overalls:

> Only someone who doesn't know what it's like to work under a cement roof would say that. After lunch, it's really hot, and you sweat it out till three. At lunchtime, you'd drink three or four shots of *cachaça*, you'd come for lunch dripping with sweat. You'd eat like a horse in fifteen minutes, then you'd go out to play football in the scorching sun. When it was over, those heavy overalls were sticky and sweaty, and you went back to work. The management had a window just over my head, to watch us work. Sparks this big, singeing my hair, landing here, next to my eye—*merda*! I'd be going crazy and the boss would be up there, laughing . . . Not for one minute do I miss the factory.

The long exposure to the camera in *Entreatos* confirms the sense of Lula as a politician with a rare instinct for the present moment. He accepts the rules of both games—that of the film and that of Brazil's political system. Salles himself acknowledges the degree to which his subject plays to the camera:

> In Lula, there's a coefficient for acting that forms part of his character. The presence of the camera catalyses things, it awakens in him the desire to talk about certain things, which is good for the film. On that point, I would have a greater affinity with the *cinéma vérité* of Jean Rouch than with the more orthodox 'direct cinema'. What the camera stimulates should not be refused on the grounds that it is theatre. Theatre is interesting.[11]

At the same time, the camera and crew form part of the candidate's entourage, retainers who are sometimes waved away, sometimes invited in; hanging out with Lula in a TV dressing room while he talks to his aides and make-up people; filming from a cramped corner of their small plane, or crouching at the speakers' side during a press conference. During long journeys, or moments of relaxation, the camera is drawn into a ritual of intimacy; while Lula, a man who loves to talk, actively turns the film towards a more 'conversational' mode. On a night-time flight from Macapá to Belém, visibly tired, relaxing with a beer, he becomes even more expansive:

> There's no great leader in Brazil today; I'm the only figure with national stature. Why? Because I have a movement behind me—a large part of the Catholic Church, the students, the PT, the CUT. No other Brazilian politician has such a constituency. You know what the problem was with Lech Wałęsa? He was a sell-out before he even came to power. I met him in 1980, in Rome. Wałęsa left there with $60 million, to set up a printing press for Solidarność; I left there without even my airfare. Why? Because the entire West wanted to overthrow the Communist regime. I had far more rank-and-file workers than Wałęsa, but he was wined and dined the whole world over. He came to power not because of his organization, but because the conservative Church put him there—and he didn't do anything at all. Wałęsa was the result of a conservative Catholic Church. I was the result of liberation theology and trade unionists. A totally different story.

No political party, Lula insists, has elected as many peasants and rank-and-file workers as the PT. The great parties of the European left, the

[11] 'Entrevistas'. Salles's appreciation of the theatrical possibilities of documentary is evident in *Santiago* (2007), his extraordinary portrait of the family's *major domo*.

Italian Communists, the Swedish Social Democrats, would 'send young intellectuals into the factories—proletarianize them. The PT is the first opportunity in history for the workers to come out of the factory to lead politics.' And once in power? 'The PT should be the conscience of the government; it should keep up the pressure on us. But it shouldn't think it can tell the President what to do.'

Back to São Bernardo

That Videofilmes, the Salles brothers' production company, put out *Entreatos* together with a companion film on the 2002 election, Coutinho's *Peões* (2004), is a striking illustration of the strategic self-awareness of the Brazilian documentary movement.[12] Taken together, the two comprise an unmatched portrayal of the PT's trajectory and that of its base. Salles gives Lula free rein to set out his own account, while Coutinho gives voice to those who stayed behind in the factories or returned to their original homes in Brazil's northeast. *Peões* combines two documentary strategies: first, the interview; second, re-assembling a now-dispersed collective to watch film footage of its earlier existence, as in *Twenty Years After*. Coutinho seeks out some two dozen former car-factory operatives, the men and women from São Bernardo whose struggles had raised Lula to national prominence as the workers' candidate. Most had either been fired for organizing, during the 1980s, or made redundant when the plants were automated in the mid-90s. Since then, they have worked as domestics or taxi drivers; one is a community organizer: 'It's hard to get work when you're over forty.'

Coutinho brings the ex-São Bernardo workers together to look at photographs and film footage—including Hirszman's *ABC da greve*.[13] *Peões* stages a comparison of the two historical moments, cutting between the birth of the workers' movement in the late 70s and its critical condition in 2002, with the PT about to form its first government under Lula's presidency, and thereby posing the question of its future. The workers' sense of pride when they speak about the old militancy, the

[12] The English-language title of *Peões* is *Metalworkers*, but a better translation would be 'Peons', 'Hired Hands' or 'Day-Labourers'.

[13] Besides using the images of the strikes to trigger the workers' memories, Coutinho also inserted into his own film some long sequences taken from 1970s documentaries: as well as Hirszman's *ABC da greve*, Tapajós's *Linha de montagem* and Andrade's *Greve!*

times they shared with Lula, is very strong. Nearly all had been driven to São Paulo in the 1970s by the poverty of the northeast: 'I had five kids crying from hunger—if I'd stayed here, I wouldn't even own a mule.' Bodily memory plays an important role. For some the experience of being replaced by a machine, when the factories were automated, felt like a continuation of the damage that industrial accidents had inflicted: 'They always said it was our fault.' 'In a way I never got used to it', one man muses. 'We were treated like slaves', says another. 'The struggle was like warfare—they shot at us, they beat us!' Yet: 'Everything important in my life happened in São Bernardo.'

In *Twenty Years After*, the reunion of film-maker and peasants meant the reactivation of shared memories. In *Peões*, the gulf between different class experiences appears more unbridgeable, despite Coutinho's evident empathy with the workers' lives. In the final interview, one man describes the effects of the dispersion of factory sites: 'We are peons. We have to go wherever they tell us—tomorrow Bahia, the next day Rio Grande.' 'What is a peon?' Coutinho asks. 'All who wear overalls, who have to punch in a card every morning.' There is a silence, which grows until it becomes uncomfortable. 'Have you ever been a peon, Coutinho?', the worker asks, turning the tables on the interviewer, who replies: 'No, I never have.'

The footage of the young, charismatic Lula performing his unique leadership role in workers' assemblies of the late 1970s shown in *Peões* produces a striking contrast with the pragmatic candidate of 2002 in *Entreatos*. We are reminded of Lula's acute sense of the political conjuncture at that stage of the dictatorship, long before historical conditions and his own vicissitudes in politics turned him into the pragmatic 'moderate'. Some of the workers interviewed by Coutinho in 2002 saw this new turn as acceptable, and retained their trust and admiration for Lula; but this was not always done full-heartedly. Others were sceptical that Lula as President would mean the victory of what the PT had been fighting for. Yet profound feelings of identification persist without illusions or much tangible hope: 'Lula is my brother, my father', says one man, calmly and factually. 'It's a deep feeling, because we were fighting for a better life.'

Interrogating the media

The hegemony of the powerful TV corporations is a central strategic problem for the new documentary movement, in Brazil as elsewhere; but the mass of non-fiction footage the industry produces can also be a vital resource. José Padilha's *Ônibus 174* (2002) is a powerful example of the reverse perspective that documentary can offer by looking through and beyond mainstream media coverage.[14] *Ônibus 174* takes as its subject a *fait divers* that electrified the country: the hijacking of a bus in central Rio de Janeiro, in which a gunman was seen menacing the young women hostages for several hours, live on TV, before finally surrendering to the police, who killed him on the spot. Padilha's film uses the minute-by-minute footage from the TV news cameras on the scene, the tension heightened by the noise of the crowd gathered behind them. The hijacker is a 21-year-old, Sandro, a Rio street kid who had been in and out of reformatory and jail. Through the bus window, the silhouette of the masked gunman can be seen, holding his pistol to a girl's head, dragging her by her hair, forcing her to write in lipstick on the windscreen: 'He is crazy'—'He will kill us all'. The Special Forces Battalion colonel in charge of the operation gets instructions on his cellphone from the State Governor, who is watching on TV. There is a debate about what tactics BOPE should use: negotiations or a sniper's bullet. Suddenly a shot is fired inside the bus, a young female hostage pushes open the window and screams, 'He killed a girl!', provoking hysterical reactions from the crowd.

But the shooting turns out to be a bluff. The soundtrack of *Ônibus 174* dubs the thoughtful, retrospective reflections of the young hostages and of Sandro's street-kid friends over the newsreel footage, providing a radically different interpretation of the hijacking. Padilha's documentary peels back the layers of Sandro's past: born in the *favela*, he had witnessed his mother being killed by drug dealers when he was eight. He had been one of a group of homeless children who used to sleep rough outside the church of Candelária and were subjected to a notorious police massacre in 1993. Traumatized, Sandro started doing drugs and glue, was sentenced to a reformatory, then to jail. His friends and neighbours

[14] José Padilha, b. 1967, director of *Elite Squad* (2007) and its sequel (2010), as well as the documentaries *Garapa* (2009) and *Segredos da tribo* (2010).

from the *favela* testify to a gifted, gentle child. Those who knew him were convinced that 'he didn't have it in his nature to kill'—'otherwise, as a street kid, without anything, he'd have killed before.' *Ônibus 174* pieces together the mosaic of Sandro's life: footage of the Candelária children after the massacre, the brutal reformatory regime, the Rio prison where men are crowded like animals, in darkened, windowless cells.

Sandro's experience as a street kid 'doomed to die' had sharpened his sense of performance. He has a speech to make, shouted out of the bus window: a press conference, addressed to the entire country, glued to the TV screens, watching the drama being acted out around the bus: 'This is no action movie! This is serious shit. Didn't you terrorize me when you could? Didn't you kill my friends in Candelária? Go ahead, check it out, Brazil! I was at Candelária. They murdered my friends. I have nothing to lose.' The pretence of shooting a hostage is just to increase his bargaining power with the police outside—although the most Sandro ever asks for is $500 and a taxi-cab to take him away. In the documentary, one of the women explains that 'parallel conversations were going on, one for the cameras and the people outside, and one for us inside the bus.' Sandro had told her, 'I'm not going to kill you, but I'm going to shoot and I want everybody to scream'—'we all understood, and everyone cooperated by screaming and crying, beyond the despair we really felt.' His friend's diagnosis: 'Sandro was really high on drugs, but he was also frightened. That was the problem.' He was frightened to leave the bus, he told the hostages, because 'the cops will kill me.' At last he decides to go, pushing one of the girls in front of him. As they step down, a police gunman charges in to shoot him in the head. Sandro turns, and it is the girl who catches the bullet, as the lynch mob roars forward. The last shot of Sandro shows his tiny, frightened face as the police throw him into the back of a police car and beat him to death themselves. The film ends with an aerial view of the police car, Sandro's hearse, speeding up the empty road towards the police station.

Anthropological turn

The films discussed above represent only a tiny fraction of the documentaries produced in Brazil over the past decades. This brief survey cannot attempt to do justice to the breadth of the movement. But no account can fail to mention Eduardo Escorel and José Joffily's *Vocação do poder* (2005)—'Lust for Power', as it becomes translated during the

film, which tracks candidates in the election to Rio's City Council, providing a revealing portrait of the underside of machine politics and evangelical organizing in the city. Another account of political malaise, Erik Rocha's *Intervalo clandestino* (2005), alternates a cacophony of voters' voiced complaints with outstanding close-up shots of expressive, silent faces and apprehensive eyes. In 1987, Tetê Moraes had made *Terra para Rose*, documenting a struggle for land reform in southern Brazil (Rose was a peasant militant who had been killed by the police); in 1997, Moraes returned to make *O sonho de Rose: dez anos depois*—'Rose's Dream: Ten Years Later'—documenting the evolution of their struggle, stymied by the federal powers. Evaldo Mocarzel's *À margem do concreto* (2006), on the homeless movement in São Paulo, focuses on the lived reality of the experience and the sense of community created in the squatted buildings.

How do these new documentaries fare in comparison to those of pre-dictatorship Brazil, or to the feature films of today? The modernist brilliance of Cinema Novo productions and the aesthetic modesty of the current 'listening' documentaries seem to belong to different worlds—separated by the gulf of the 1964–84 military dictatorship. Cinema Novo sprang up at a time of pre-revolutionary cultural and political ferment, which was also the age of film; the new documentary movement matured during the years of a slowly stabilizing capitalist democracy, in the age of TV. But despite the seeming disjuncture, intelligible lines of descent, debate and divergence can be traced between them. The relationship might be summarized like this. The Cinema Novo film-makers had shared, broadly speaking, a belief in a national-political project; they felt they had a mandate, as spokesmen for an imagined community they were helping to bring into being. Their aesthetic radicalism was based on their confidence that the people would grasp the message of their bold experiments in conceptual cinema. The 1964 military coup—and, above all, the absence of mass popular resistance to it—came as a shock defeat for them. As film-makers, they experienced it as the failure of Brazilian cinema to forge a genuine connection with the masses; political certainties had got in the way of actual social perception.

It was at this point that the turn to listening began. Already in films like Geraldo Sarno's *Viramundo* (1965), exploring the experience of northeastern migrant workers in São Paulo, or Arnaldo Jabor's *A opinião pública* (1967), social theory and empirical reportage—interviews, documentary

footage—are set up in dynamic opposition to each other, creating interesting tensions and reverberations. Roughly speaking, the idea was, and still is, a move from politics to anthropology—an anthropology from below, 'giving voice' to the subject in an era of authoritarian-capitalist modernization. The goal was to deploy the resources of cinema, above all of documentary film, to investigate and engage with popular outlooks and experience, in order to clarify and renew political strategies. This approach lay behind Coutinho's seeking out the Teixeira family; its logic has played an important part in the Brazilian documentary movement ever since.

This is clearly an oppositional cinema; the aim is to illuminate the enormous problems facing the country by exploring how particular subjects experience their social predicament and what they have to say about it, when 'given voice'.[15] The film-makers see their task as posing questions: to make people think, not to offer solutions. Ambitions are modest: to explore the ways in which personal life-stories can suggest collective experiences symptomatic of the present conjuncture. The same approach is applied in films focusing directly on Brazilian political life, like *Entreatos* or *Vocação do poder*: the idea is still to get close to the subjects actually engaged in the process, to see what a candidate's lived experience of the campaign can reveal about the national political system. The films draw no overt conceptual or structural conclusions from the evidence they offer; the approach is phenomenological, serving to reveal the fragility of the ideological dynamics of Brazilian society and a political structure in which the parties' programmes do not count that much. The voters' decisions spring mainly from personal identification with a candidate, as was the case with Lula.

The principal building-block for these 'listening' documentaries has been the interview; yet the words and voices of the subjects are often most effectively deployed as soundtrack and commentary, layered over, and counter-pointing, images of public life and collective experience, as in *Ônibus 174* or *Notícias*. One major strength of this tradition is the lucidity and directness with which the poorest Brazilians will express the deepest truths about the country, sometimes effecting a *détournement* of the film-maker's self-conception in the process. In *Boca de lixo* a ragged

[15] One exception is Maria Augusta Ramos's *Justiça* (2004), a rigorous observational documentary on the ritual formalities of court sessions and cross-examinations, which ends by exposing the abstract nature of the justice administered there.

young scavenger, barely into his teens, confront Coutinho's camera crew with the question: 'What do you get out of holding that thing in our faces?' Slightly taken aback, the film-makers reply: 'We want to show how your lives really are.' The boy hits back: 'You know who you should show this to? President Collor.'

Coutinho himself has described his work as conversational cinema: the method is to look and to listen to people, mostly the rural and urban poor; remaining connected to the microcosm. The approach represents an affirmation of the subject, as narrator of his or her life-experience; it aims to produce a counter-discourse to TV chat shows, overturning conventional stereotypes. Yet the notion of 'giving voice' to the oppressed is problematic when thought of as a panacea. Different social experiences and facts require different strategies, and such an approach would make no sense in the moment from *ABC da greve*, mentioned above, when the camera becomes a part of the mass of workers, capturing a moment of collective action in which the strikers already have their full voice.

Sometimes the documentary subjects themselves seem to be challenging the film-maker to come up with a more adequate, perhaps more agonistic strategy, by questioning the supposed authenticity of personal experience, subverting or satirizing the voice they are 'given'. A slum dweller in Coutinho's *Babilônia 2000* explains that the Rio *favela* is visited by four or five film crews every month. Another asks whether the documentary will be shown in the United States—'if so, I should change my clothes'—or whether it is 'poverty and the community' they want to film: 'If that's it, come on in, our poverty's all here if you want to see it.'

Unlike *Peões*, which deploys more complex strategies, some of Coutinho's films of the late 1990s and early 2000s—*Santo forte*, *Babilônia 2000* and *Edifício Master*—are based almost exclusively on 'talking head' interviews, generally filmed in the subjects' homes rather than in a workplace or a collective setting. The approach might be defined as a sort of self-effacing anthropology, with discreet political overtones. Often, as in *Edifício Master*—where the lower-middle-class residents of a Copacabana apartment block offer their own self-narrations—the results are surprising and revealing. Yet the documentary-as-anthropology approach, as Coutinho knows, runs the risk of a certain slackness once the project of 'giving voice' is no longer shaped and energized by the need for a fresh

perception, to foster a renewal of political strategy. It may simply give us a register of the present—what people do and say when facing the camera—without creating any new challenge that might recast our analysis of the determinants of their experience. The shaping of a scene, the force of speech and gesture during a long take and the minimal, although present, work of montage represent only a fraction of the resources of documentary cinema, which also include the use of contrasting visual materials and genres, the juxtaposition of conflicting class viewpoints, a complex and contrapuntal soundtrack.

Aesthetic impoverishment is a risk, but it is also a challenge, and in their own ways the films discussed above rise to meet it with aplomb. Notably, there is the magnificent closing flourish of Walter Carvalho's camera in *Entreatos*, withdrawing from the scene with the bow of a great actor as the global media swarm around the newly anointed President of Brazil. There is the astounding three-minute idyll in *Boca de lixo*, structured by the soundtrack—a lilting pop melody on a crackling transistor radio—as the scavengers take their lunchtime break in the shade. There is the dazzling juxtaposition of different genre footage in *Ônibus 174*: grainy, claustrophobic images of the stranded bus, mechanically filmed by the nearest traffic camera; acres of TV newsreel; vertiginous aerial shots looking down on the Governor of Rio's hilltop mansion; the thoughtful retrospectives of the young hostages, reflecting on the multiple layers of misunderstanding.

Favela blockbusters

Brazilian documentaries face another challenge from a much more powerful cinematic rival. Over the past ten years, the country's most pressing social problems—the gaping inequality of the *favelas*; police corruption; drug-trafficking and gang violence; the poverty of the interior—have become staple fare for the country's biggest international box-office hits. Walter Salles's *Central Station* (1998), Fernando Meirelles's *City of God* (2002), Hector Babenco's *Carandiru* (2003) and Jose Padilha's *Elite Squad* (2007) cover some of the same critical issues as the documentaries, but their modes of representation are melodramatic, deploying the fast cutting of the music video or TV advertising, and the mechanical violence of the action thriller. *City of God* plunders the pages of Paulo Lins's novel of the same name, dramatizing the careers of a group of slum kids drawn into drug dealing and shoot-outs with rivals in Rio's *favelas*. It is

shot on much the same territory as Coutinho's *Santo forte* and *Babilônia 2000*, and comparison with the documentaries offers an illuminating critique, pointing up the experiences that the action thriller—or the culture industry—does not want to discuss: the exhaustion of menial work; the experience of loss; networks of support and consolation. There is a tacit political message in the blockbuster movie: collective amelioration is not on the agenda but individual escape from the tragic violence of the slums may be possible—through an accommodation with the benevolent mass media: Buscapé, the teenage narrator, confers a happy ending on the film by landing a job as photographer with a news corporation. The dramatic structure of Meirelles's *City of God* stages the archetypal counter-position of gang violence versus a humanities education, fitting the conceptual framework of the NGOs' 'apolitical' approach to social inequality.

Elite Squad draws even more closely on themes already explored by documentaries, above all *Notícias de uma guerra particular*. It is based on personal accounts written by BOPE officers, including Rodrigo Pimentel, who had made a central contribution to *Notícias*. But whereas Salles's documentary made a point of paying equal attention to the experiences of the *favela* dwellers, the dealers and the BOPE, Padilha occludes the first two and focuses entirely on the tough-guy cop, narrowing the perspective to the protagonist's point of view. *Elite Squad* is a 'law and order' action film, deploying the standard melodramatic tropes. These were not absent from *Ônibus 174*, but the force of its critical view of Sandro's tragedy made them a minor misdemeanour; in *Elite Squad* they come to the centre. It is astonishing that the same director could have made both films. In the latter, the dramatic conflict is polarized between the authenticity of those who recognize the need for brute force, as against the naive or hypocritical stance of those who try to create a space for social negotiation in the *favelas*. The hero, Captain Nascimento, is a John Wayne character who kills and tortures as part of a moral mission, whose suffering demands recognition as he 'cleans up' the social environment so that ordinary people can live in peace. *Notícias* had shown, of course, that it was ordinary *favela* dwellers who suffered most from BOPE operations or regular invasions by the police.

Documentary emerges as the more powerful genre in two contrasting films about São Paulo's most notorious prison. Hector Babenco's blockbuster, *Carandiru*, draws on an account by the jail's doctor, Drauzio

Varella, and aims to evoke sympathy for the prisoners by portraying the full brutality of the military police assault that killed over a hundred inmates there, one of the bloodiest police operations in São Paulo State. The film is constructed around Babenco's melodramatic view of the conflicts involving inmates and jailors, making the confrontations too personal, sometimes idiosyncratic. In the end, the massacre comes as an abrupt, apocalyptic event not clearly linked to the repressive dynamics of the institution, assuming the tone of a quasi-religious sacrifice. By contrast, in Paulo Sacramento's *O prisioneiro da grade de ferro* ('Prisoner of the Iron Bar', 2003), a documentary about Carandiru, economy of means again produces richer, more complex results. Sacramento draws on the footage produced by Carandiru inmates themselves, offered the use of video cameras in a prison workshop. It dwells on the routines the prisoners invent to help structure their everyday life, and presents some astonishing self-portraits. A striking shot portrays the world outside, seen from the prison, as an inmate holds the camera up to film through the iron bars. The workshop was an occasion for self-assertion, both in opposition to the barriers that keep justice a virtual system of rules not applied to those in jail, and to the network of numbers used by the institution to make everything impersonal—realities the blockbuster never penetrated.

From this perspective, Brazilian documentaries reaffirm their connection to the critical tradition coming from the country's modern cinema. They explore new approaches to the problems of representation, not least in relation to the culture industry and the commodification of subjectivity promoted by the mass media. It may not be too much to claim that, in the hands of its best practitioners, the documentary has emerged as the leading form for the critical representation of social experience in a country whose problems have not lessened, but only grown more complex, under the now well-established hegemony of its Workers' Party.