



## ***The End and the Beginning: chance and poetics of listening in Eduardo Coutinho***

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**ABSTRACT – *The End and the Beginning: chance and poetics of listening in Eduardo Coutinho*** – This text discusses the pleasure of filming and researching, focusing on the documentary *The End and the Beginning*, by Eduardo Coutinho. The aim is to articulate affirmations by the director about his creative process, with scenes and statements from the people interviewed in the film, most of whom are over 80 years old. In dialogue with Didi-Huberman, Foucault, Rancière, and Marie José Mondzain, as well as partners of Coutinho such as Jordana Berg, João Moreira Salles, and Consuelo Lins, issues related to the craft of academic research are discussed: the relations between truth and montage, real and imaginary, listening to the other and poetry of the word, image and ethical commitment.

Keywords: **Eduardo Coutinho. Research. Listening. Cinema. Documentary.**

**RÉSUMÉ – *La Fin et le Début: le hasard et la poétique de l'écoute chez Eduardo Coutinho*** – Ce texte traite du plaisir de filmer et de rechercher, autour du documentaire *La fin et le début*, d'Eduardo Coutinho. L'objectif est d'articuler les discours du réalisateur sur son processus de création, avec des scènes et des témoignages de personnages du film, dont la plupart ont plus de 80 ans. En dialogue avec Didi-Huberman, Foucault, Rancière et Marie José Mondzain, ainsi qu'avec les partenaires du cinéaste, comme Jordana Berg, João Moreira Salles et Consuelo Lins, les questions liées au métier du chercheur, dans le domaine académique sont discutées: le rapport entre vérité et montage, réel et imaginaire, écoute de l'autre et poésie du mot, de l'image et de l'engagement éthique.

Mots-clés: **Eduardo Coutinho. Recherche. Écoute. Cinéma. Documentaire.**

**RESUMO – *O Fim e o Princípio: o acaso e a poética da escuta em Eduardo Coutinho*** – Este texto trata do prazer de filmar e pesquisar, tendo como foco o documentário *O fim e o princípio*, de Eduardo Coutinho. Busca-se articular afirmações do diretor, sobre seu processo criativo, com cenas e depoimentos dos personagens do filme, a maioria com mais de 80 anos. Num diálogo com Didi-Huberman, Foucault, Rancière e Marie José Mondzain, além de parceiros do cineasta, como Jordana Berg, João Moreira Salles e Consuelo Lins, discutem-se questões que remetem ao ofício do pesquisador, na área acadêmica: as relações entre verdade e montagem, real e imaginário, escuta do outro e poesia da palavra, imagem e compromisso ético.

Palavras-chave: **Eduardo Coutinho. Pesquisa. Escuta. Cinema. Documentário.**

“It's a privilege for me to film and to live”, Godard said slowly in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988). I echo him. It's a privilege for me to write about cinema - the cinema of Eduardo Coutinho and the possible relationships with academic research. Scenes from Coutinho's work always come back to me. We know that memory is mobile. There is Bergson's cone, that point that can't be fixed, that runs along a plane composed of presence – political, social, cultural, and existential – and which, in this endless dance, mixes fragments of a life, windows that were once open, traces of meaning, and revised emotions.

The invitation to write about Coutinho reached me at a time of an irremediably aging body, witness to old and serious issues in a Brazil that insists on being divided. The invitation also arrives in a whirlwind of academic restlessness, amidst a slow process of farewell (or rather, a change of direction). I am writing about *O fim e o princípio* (released in English as *The End and the Beginning*). This is a documentary in which Coutinho lets himself be led by Rosa, not me, but Rosilene Batista, a literacy teacher who draws life maps for him, hers and that of her elders, acting as a mediator, a guide to stories, a translator of sensations, and ways of speaking that are at times difficult to decipher.

In the story entitled “Quase tudo monta”, Jordana Berg, who worked with the director for many years, says that during the filming of *The End and the Beginning* (2005), Coutinho's health was already weak, and in his contact with elderly individuals in a village in the interior of Paraíba “he dared to approach the subject of death”, so much so that “the editing was touched by this ghost. The title seemed to say something, an omen, a prophecy, the closing of the cycle” (Berg, 2013, p. 353).

It's the last work in which the director shoots in a real location – unlike *Jogo de cena* (Playing) (2007) and *As canções* (Songs) (2011), for example, in which he used sets and dramatizations – which was something of a departure from previous works, in the words of the scholar Consuelo Lins (2013, p. 376). In the random search for characters, without any prior research, what mattered was finding a rural community “that we like and that accepts us”, the director says off-camera in the very first minutes of the film. What follows are tales from elderly men and women, most of them over 80. To watch the film is to see the filmmaker “in full form, that is, *in the exer-*

*cise of doubt*, questioning the paths of a film while making it” – write Cláudia Mesquita and Consuelo Lins (2014, p. 53, emphasis added).

“Chance, the flower of reality”. These are Coutinho's words. Yes, randomness and chance cannot be excluded, they are the raw material par excellence of his work. He films the imponderable, he listens without a priori ideas about the other. He wants the event itself, alive. With his team coming from the urban experience of Rio de Janeiro, he walks the paths and rustic dwellings of the village Sítio do Araçás, in the municipality of São João do Rio Peixe, in rural Paraíba state. And he discovers charismatic subjects, each in their own way. Every effort is made to avoid as much as possible the sticky and facile practice of an interviewer who is only at peace if he gets confirmation of what he already knew.

I visit Coutinho's documentary *The End and the Beginning* once again and imagine articulations of the filmmaker's ways of working with theoretical and methodological choices, which I think are welcome in the métier of an arts and education researcher. I draw on interlocutors such as Didi-Huberman, Michel Foucault, Marie-José Mondzain, Jacques Rancière and Ismail Xavier, among others, to think about issues relating to topics such as: truth, montage and invention; the real and the imaginary; poetry, words and images; the arts of the question; ethics, political commitment and creation; writing (and speaking) about oneself, and caring for the other. The discussion is punctuated by the director's own words about his work, taken from various sources, as well as references to scenes and characters from the film chosen.

### **The unheralded of The End and the Beginning**

Dona Zefinha, saying a blessing over Rosa, who was sick with the evil eye. Dona Mariquinha, also a *rezadeira* (prayer healer), curing headaches and back pain, the one who had a violent husband. Seu Assis, the womanizer who *policed* his wife. The couple Rita and Zequinha, who *got along with each other*. Seu Leocádio, a reader of the Holy Bible and Camões, an inquirer of words. Seu Vigário and the little white donkey, husband of Dona Antônia, the cheerful woman. Maria Borges, the midwife, at ease with life. Zequinha Amador, the poet, happy to recite sonnets. Aunt Dôra, who raised her three daughters on her own in the fields. Seu Nato, with the troubled soul, who trusts only his mother. Dona Neném Grande and her

cigarette, rocking restfully in her hammock. Zé de Sousa, the deaf man sitting in the shade of a tree who can hardly see, who is aware of people coming and going in the yard. Seu Chico Moisés, who says he is a divided man, *hot-cold*, happy to philosophize with the director.

I follow each of Coutinho's characters, and I am immediately reminded of Foucault's passion for anonymous people, recorded in one of his most beautiful texts, "The Lives of Infamous Men". Both Foucault, Bourdieu and, here, Eduardo Coutinho had a special affection for less noble people and subjects<sup>1</sup>. I imagine that the director of *The End and the Beginning* actually experienced a secret pleasure when listening to those stories, "an emotion, laughter, surprise, a certain astonishment" (Foucault, 2010, p. 203) – feelings that the viewer of the film certainly shares with the filmmaker.

I think that the unheralded people captured by Coutinho, in their poor and simple homes, bear witness to trajectories without any consolation or heroism, in images that become bigger, capable of producing "great subversive and lyrical *poems*" – writes Didi-Huberman (2018, p. 170, emphasis in the original), referring to documents of Nazi barbarism. It's as if Eduardo Coutinho reassembled for the viewer images of the suffering and poverty of immense populations in rural northeastern Brazil, convoking a look that goes beyond individualities and becomes immersed in history.

It is not only the *representative content* of the trajectory of Dona Mariquinhas or Seu Chico, and all of them, but every detail of a gesture, a look, a framing, an instant of tense questioning between Coutinho and his interviewee. All these details of cinematographic language reinforce that "making an image is fundamentally *making a gesture that transforms time*" (Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 170, emphasis in the original). It's possible to look at each of those faces for a few seconds or minutes, choosing a *frame* here, another there, as I did several times, agreeing with Roland Barthes (1999) that a third sense, erratic and obtuse, comes over me. I can't let go of the image of Dona Mariquinha, laughing nervously yet happily and covering her face with her hands, while saying: "*Nóis gosta de prosa...*" ("we like to talk", in a free translation of a quite colloquial expression).

**What is the truth addressed by research? What truth is made in a documentary?**

Coutinho prefers to talk about the *truth of filming*, rather than the truth that is supposedly spoken and shown. His invitation is to genuinely pay attention to the random, to everything that can happen: “a phone that rings, a dog that comes in, a person who protests because they don't want to be filmed anymore” (Coutinho, 2013e, p. 23). The mooing of a cow. The crowing of a rooster. Or even his own feelings, as a director, when faced with situations he doesn't like, and which lead him to abandon a path, as happens when he hears the first characters presented by Rosa, people with whom he had a conversation that “didn't go beyond working relationships, they didn't create intimacy” – he says in minute 9' of the film.

Independently from the fact that Coutinho points out that filming is not science, I think that in academic research we are also not after the truth that supposedly comes to us from an interviewee, a theatrical scene, a theoretical study or the analysis of images. It's difficult to come to terms with this: that the *truth of a thing* may not matter in the slightest... What counts is the truth of the filming. I would say: the truth of the research, the truth of the researcher in action.

So, how can we respond to the trust of the interviewees, and how can we say that we want the truth of the process, if an editing, an edition will always and somehow be done? Coutinho replies: “Every montage presupposes a narrative, every film being a narrative presupposes a strong element of fiction, and this also happens in history” (Coutinho, 2013e, p. 27). The idea is therefore to recognize that we fictionalize. By selecting what will be sought, who we will talk to, when and where – we construct, we make a kind of fiction. And we will face something of the same order when the time comes to narrate. But the question returns: what is the commitment to truth that is being defended here?

In another interview (for the journal *Sexta-feira*), Coutinho broadens the discussion, talking about the extraordinary accounts that some interviewees give him, about facts from their private lives and even from the country's history; it doesn't matter to him that they are invented scenes: “the person projects themselves into the role they didn't play, and that memory has constructed”, which is not completely fictitious, because it has a basis in reality. The idea is that the film can show this movement, which

goes back and forth, from the imaginary to what was *actually* experienced and vice versa (cfe. Coutinho, 2013g, p. 229).

As in so many other testimonies, the filmmaker returns to the question: “There is no documentary cinema that is real”. The opening to the other captured by the camera means welcoming what they say, not as an attestation of a supposed truth, but as a sharing of an experience: “it's the memory he has today of his whole life, with insertions of what he's read, what he's seen, what he's heard; and that is a truth, at the same time as it is imaginary”. And Coutinho concludes: “I'm not concerned with the pedestrian truth of things, that's why his word interests me” (Coutinho, 2013g, p. 223). Without citing theorists, the filmmaker ends up exemplifying in just a few words fundamental aspects of Bergson's theory of memory<sup>2</sup>. Coutinho definitely doesn't want *pedestrian* truth – he prefers the encounter, the heat of present action, which triggers the past and brings memories to life.

This doesn't stop him from sometimes resorting to metaphors or quotations, such as in *O fio da memória* (1991), in which he pays homage to Walter Benjamin and Paul Klee's allegory of the angel of ruin<sup>3</sup>. Coutinho says he finds the poetics of the discontinuous fascinating in this and many other passages by the German philosopher. As his friend João Moreira Salles writes, the “idea of a shattered past would become an obsession for Coutinho”; but, unlike Klee's angel, dragged far away and prevented from lingering over the ruins, “the men who arrive after the gale are given the chance to go to the survivors to hear what they have to say” (Salles, 2013, p. 368).

### **A cinema that questions, a researcher who wants to know**

There is a tragic past in Brazil's history. A past in ruins that still burns in the images of homeless people in big cities. A past in ruins that burns in the homes of the characters found by Coutinho in the village of Araçás, in Paraíba. There are people there like Dona Mariquinha, Seu Assis, Rita and Zequinha, years of life working in the fields, subjects who carry the surviving marks of a fragmented country on their hands and skin. And it is vital for the filmmaker to listen to what they have to say. To go to them with a master idea: to propose questions, but not just questions of an interviewer; questions for the whole team, for himself, questions that will resonate with the viewer. Questions ranging from the simplest: “What was your child-

hood like?”, “Did you get married? How was your marriage?”; to those of greater intensity, “Do you have hope, do you have faith?”. They all resonate with viewers, who will possibly expand them into others of their own, of a philosophical, sociological or even existential nature.

Dona Mariquinha’s emotion at the end of the interview, saying “*Nóis gosta de prosa*”; (we like to talk); Seu Zé de Sousa, happy to say goodbye: “the conversation was good for me”; Seu Chico, amused by his own boldness: “If you let me, I’ll keep going”; “I’m happy now, talking to a man of knowledge!”. The images register what Eduardo Coutinho said in an interview about his film *Edifício Master*: “There is no greater impulse in human beings than the interest in being recognized and listened to”. And he adds something that is invaluable to me: “*I need them to speak*” (Coutinho, 2013h, p. 286, emphasis added). That is, the director (and the researcher) shows himself to the world as a subject of desire, someone who takes on an existential urgency: someone who genuinely wants to listen and, above all, *wants to know*. He’s not interested in grandiosity, but in themes such as human loneliness, longing and melancholy, the obstacles, joys and pains of communication between people, husband and wife, parents and children. He wants the unfinished things, the gaps, the petty things of life. He films the gaps that are never filled. And perhaps that’s why they become beautiful, filled with a different kind of grandeur. “I have to try to find the normal in the singular and the singular in the normal. Deep down, you have to be desperate to have hope” (Coutinho, 2013h, p. 286).

Coutinho says that “the more open the documentary is, the better. Fiction is exactly the same, good fiction is that which poses questions, which poses questions and leaves things open; so, in that respect, they are the same, with different mechanisms” (Coutinho, 2013e, p. 40). The filmmaker talks about the *curse* of the documentary, that it exists to teach, to be pedagogical, educational, a product made to *tell the truth*. He advocates just the opposite: a cinema that breaks with this scheme, that works with the imaginary and subjectivities. And that, above all, poses questions. “I make things that are far from me, about what I don’t know” (Coutinho, 2013c, p. 175).

In *The End and the Beginning*, this method is taken to its ultimate consequences, to the point of showing the moment when characters like Leocádio, Chico Moisés and Mariquinha start to provoke the director, ask-

ing him to speak, questioning him about the dimension of life after death or an ethical issue. Dona Mariquinha: “Prayer is not for sale (pause). It is?”. “I’m very afraid [of death]. Aren’t you?”. Seu Leocádio: “Do you believe in God?” (“It’s complicated”, replies Coutinho); “Do you think that believing in God is an illusion?”. When Seu Chico Moisés is advised by Coutinho to have faith and take care of himself he responds: “Faith?” and gives a challenging look and a laugh full of irony.

It is perceived that the sense of the political takes on a very distinctive shape in Coutinho's cinema, precisely because of the way he questions people and allows himself to be questioned by them. How can you not be moved by these scenes? Seu Zé de Sousa saying that he has nothing more to say, he knows few things, and his life is really about feeling, from his chair under the tree, that people come and go, some he doesn't even know. Seu Chico Moisés interrupting the director (who asked him “Do you have dreams?”): “In what sense of a dream?”. Zequinha Amador raising his arms, proud of his memory, paying homage to women in his verses – “I will always praise them!”. Seu Leocádio, with a sweet and nostalgic expression, telling how he used to read poets like Camões: “such a beautiful book...”. Seu Vigário saying that he doesn't know what anger is, “nor do I *curse myself*”. Dona Maria Borges, describing a simple, peaceful daily life, with her grandchildren close by, and doing only what she wants: “When I want to, I stay here in the chair; when I don't, I put the pillow on the floor and *sleep*”. In the evening, she makes dinner and watches a soap opera: “*Dispareço* tanto...” (Dona Maria seems to combine two verbs, one to say she forgets her cares “*espairecer*”, with another to say she disappears “*desaparecer*”). We hear new words, twists on the so-called cultured language, yet we welcome them. We understood perfectly well that Seu Leocádio couldn't give an interview, when the team first contacted him: “*I don't have the punctuation for anything today*”.

With their very individual and unique issues, the scenes with these characters end up producing the arrival of the political in a very particular way.

I don't want answers, I want questions. I don't want to talk about paradise. I want to talk about the world that exists. I don't want to know how the world has always been, but how it is now, to collect fragments of the world as it exists [...] Purity and perfection are the only things that revolt me. Purity and perfection are fascist (Coutinho, 2013d, p. 321).

Instead of completeness and paradises, Coutinho claims brief utopias, found in people who weave individual stories, their own ways of facing the hardships of life. The singularity of strangers in Coutinho's films enters into a complex relationship with something bigger, showing much of today's Brazil, but always without the pretension of sociologically representing groups or social movements.

The documentarian's choices (and, I think, those of any researcher) inevitably involve ethical decisions. "You have to control chance. You have to judge whether or not it matters for the dignity of the person and for the dramaturgy" (Coutinho, 2013h, p. 288). His films are like a manifesto against the arrogance and dominance of the director (wouldn't that also apply to the researcher and the intellectual?). "You have to create a void in order to learn through the contact" – this is wonderful wisdom. Give it time, pause, wait, and give yourself in to the other person. "And let's see how this encounter turns out" (Coutinho, 2013h, p. 290).

I couldn't imagine anything wiser. When researching, even if it's an essay or a theoretical study, and especially if it's an empirical investigation, with people being interviewed, the idea is to suspend the arrogance that *we already know*, of confirming what we knew beforehand, and leave ourselves for a moment in a vacuum, in a necessary silence to finally make ourselves available to the other (another that can be a theorist, a book, a text; the voice of a woman, a man, a child; perhaps a video, a movie, a theatrical scene; or a song, perhaps a work of art).

### **Images that last**

Learning through contact, not being afraid of voids and gaps, being open to confrontation. This has to do with the coexistence of art and politics, a relationship we learned from the philosopher Jacques Rancière. Both are alive in the smallest registers of dissent, which occur in several scenes in the film, such as those with the characters Chico Moisés and Mariquinha. The viewer follows a man like Seu Nato without judgment, saying that "Every woman is a woman, but what's good is a mother, [because] a mother doesn't betray her child". He also participates in dialogues that mix tension and affection, especially around issues involving religion: Seu Leocádio asks Coutinho if "there is a God in heaven". The response is "I don't know, I'd

like to know”. Leocádio concludes: “Prayer is almost poetry”, and we hear the director's voice off-camera: “Prayer?...”. It could be said that Coutinho exercises a politics of aesthetics by offering us so many new ways of circulating words and affections in his documentary fiction.

Fiction is not the creation of an imaginary world opposed to the real world. It is the work that creates *dissent*, that changes the modes of sensitive presentation and the forms of enunciation, changing frames, scales or rhythms, constructing new relationships between appearance and reality, the singular and the common, the visible and its meaning (Rancière, 2014, p. 64, emphasis in the original).

When I chose the movie *The End and the Beginning*, I realized that I had a kind of *day-residue* when I looked in the mirror and said, “Well, I'm 73,” which has me think a little more seriously about the inevitability of time passing. But that's not all that's at stake. As a viewer, I realize that there is an immense unknown, the most imponderable of all, in the faces and voices of those residents of the community of the Sítio Paraibano, who talk about the proximity of death. And that moves me. Like the director, I also don't know. I don't know. Coutinho's camera captures what I don't know. And then I enter into conversation with Didi-Huberman's texts and his passion for Aby Warburg, questioning myself about the so-called cycles of life and death. I discover that the enchantment provided by the old people of Araçás isn't exactly about birth-life-death, but about times that express themselves in specific complexities, survivals, reappearances, “traces of evidence and traces of thoughtlessness” (Didi-Huberman, 2013, p. 25)<sup>4</sup>.

There are condensations of hybrid states of pain, longing, joy, fears, and desire, both private and historical, in the figures and speeches of these people. Seu Vigário and his wife Antônia accept each other as they are (“I already knew that he drank”) and she doesn't stop dressing up, *cleaning her feet*, and wearing pretty clothes. Dona Neném Grande talks about the end of the world, which will be with fire, “then no one will be left”. Seu Nato advises: “Nobody ever thinks they're going to die. But it's good to pray”. Rita and Zequinha disagree about thinking about death: she says no, there's no need, because it's “what we're sure of”; her husband disagrees, and they exchange serious looks: yes, he thinks we do because “everything in the world we have to think about, we have to think about it a bit”. As you can see, there are many examples. I find intensities there.

“What *captivates* us empathically in every image – 'free', 'artistic' or 'modern' – would be a force of attraction coming from its own *obscurity*, that is, from the endurance of the symbols that work on it” (Didi-Huberman, 2013, p. 357, emphasis in the original). The wrinkles, the at times inaudible or indecipherable words of the human figures of Sítio do Araçás, the clatter of pots in the kitchens, the singing of women crossing the paths chanting “Ave, Ave, Ave Maria”, the emotional gleam in the eyes of those reminiscing or saying goodbye – all these visual and audio images compose an enigmatic and simultaneously delicate world in the eyes of the viewer.

“If you're not surprised by what you do, it's better not to do it” (Coutinho, 2013e, p. 25). That's what this is all about. As I noted in another text on academic writing (Fischer, 2005), I too want something alive, vibrant, a certain wonder at what I discover, without romanticizing it. I want to find myself enchanted by the gaze of an interlocutor, curious about their life, their story. Coutinho's joy with Seu Chico, the mutual pleasure in the exchange of affection, however fleeting – all this is captured by the viewer. Years after making the film, Coutinho speaks enthusiastically and movingly of that encounter – “an extraordinary guy, absolutely incredible”.

Chico has a very sharp intelligence and he's not thinking about cinema, he's not thinking about the camera. He's thinking about a dialog with an outsider – who could be an anthropologist, someone interested in oral history, a person without a camera – and suddenly, very laconically, he begins to outline theories about the world due to the fact that he's ill and is going to die (Coutinho, 2013d, p. 313).

Reminiscing about encounters he had while making his films often leads the director to this indescribable state of happiness; and that's what I'm talking about when I affirm that research is linked to the joy of thinking and creating. The director tells of the absolute pleasure he had, for example, when filming *As canções* (*Songs*), or when his characters would sing in front of the camera, like one of the ladies in *Edifício Master* (*Master: A Building in Copacabana*) (2002). “Without a band, a guitar, nothing: that was the human voice. Human voice! It's absolutely marvelous” (Coutinho, 2013d, p. 319). The bodies, the voice and the word, in all their variations – that's precisely what matters.

In *The End and the Beginning*, I remember the words of Seu Chico: “You can't say everything you know. Everything is a secret”. Dona Ver-

melha, quite old in her hammock, remembering her friend Dôra - “She's old, *isn't* she?”. Dôra remembering her son who died of an “*atacação das presa*” (this expression indicates a severe pain, or fever, which in this case was associated to the child's teething), Seu Leocádio talking about the “right word”, from the dictionary, as opposed to the “common word”, and “so many words written, in vain”. These are statements that sometimes emerge from a disturbing silence, or that recall a poem; enigmatic sayings that are never deciphered, accents and slang, the word harboring “subtexts that pulsate between the lines of a good conversation”, as Maria Campaña Ramia writes (Coutinho, 2013d, p. 308).

Perhaps it could be said that, when advising master's, undergraduate or doctoral students, this enchantment with the other is also part of a broader process of transmission, in the Benjaminian sense of the word. In other words, the academic and subjective histories of one and the other are intertwined, always in a mutual exchange, in which each one matters, in the search for knowledge, in personal and professional desires, in theoretical passions.

In fact, Walter Benjamin is a constant presence, not only in the director's statements but also in his conception of lived time and narrated time. The director tells us: “Lived time is poorer because what someone says after twenty years combines lies, truth, memories that intersect, what could have been and wasn't. It's a construction” (Coutinho, 2013d, p. 316). It occurs to me that by listening to people's memories, memories of an origin and a past, Coutinho records a real event, an experience, and the things said become something more. It's art. Art as a fire that “rises from what burns” – as we heard Godard poetize in his *Histoires du cinéma* (Godard, 2022, p. 61).

### **For an ethics of art: “film for me is a way of life”**

Filming garbage, poverty, love, longing, old age. Filming lives that narrate themselves. Coutinho (2013e, p. 26) starts from the idea that it is necessary to reach the other by asking the simplest and most prosaic questions, as he did for the documentary *Boca de lixo (Scavengers)* (1992): “What's it like to live in garbage? Is it good or bad?” – questions perhaps unthinkable for a traditional documentary maker, a left-wing filmmaker, or a militant researcher. It's important to note the gesture of reaching the other, without ideological ties, so that the interviewee doesn't feel pre-judged,

let alone penalized for being what they are. It's about an ethical openness, a willingness to listen that allows someone to speak perhaps more freely about a specific way of existing, a life strategy (or tragedy). Coutinho (2013e, p. 26) asks: “Is it that the garbage, is a hell? Or is it that all of Brazil is a hell for the excluded, a hell made banal?”

It would be a huge injustice to reduce Coutinho's work to a cinema of denunciation, of mere attachment to the poor and oppressed. But, like Lanzmann and the famous *Shoah* (1985), one of the most beautiful and shocking documentaries ever produced, Coutinho is part of a group of artists who are politically determined to affirm in their work that the sensitive necessarily goes hand in hand with the critical (cfe. Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 171).

The zeal and sensitivity towards the people of Araçás is allied to an ethical option by which the filmmaker seeks equality, which is achieved precisely through difference. Guided by Rosa, the school teacher, Coutinho treats her like a member of the film crew, recognizing that without her he wouldn't be able to make the film. If he doesn't understand something that was said, he asks, repeats, but doesn't insist on what the other person might want to keep silent. He wanted to know what was the “*atacação das presa*”, the pain and fever of the final teething, which took the life of Tia Dôra's eldest son. Rosa helps to mediate between interviewer and interviewee. But the uniqueness of both is preserved.

When I talk to a northeasterner, apparently I am not at all like him. And I don't try to falsely diminish this difference. Of course I use colloquial language, but I don't try to pretend that I'm equal. I'm not equal in two ways: because I'm behind the camera and because I'm not equal socially. It is on the basis of this assumed difference that a certain equality can be established (Coutinho, 2013g, p. 224).

“I would love to have faith, I would love to believe, but I don't” (Coutinho, 2013d, p. 315). More than once in his interviews, Coutinho refers to his fascination with people who believe, with the religiosity they express, precisely because this is perhaps the crucial point of the difference between him and his interviewees. And the farther he is from those people, the greater his desire to listen to them. And by listening to them, that's when the encounter takes place. Equality in difference. “Do you believe in God?” – he often asks this question. And in some cases, as we've seen, the interviewee answers: “Do you?”. This is how Coutinho respectfully listens

to Seu Assis, who is confident in the metaphor he invented: “Life is a screw, the only one who twists it is Jesus, when the time comes”.

At the base of Coutinho's ethics is the care he takes to be worthy of the trust placed in him – which translates into gestures such as showing people the image captured by the camera, during filming or afterwards, when the film is finished. The image of Dona Mariquinha with her pipe was recorded in a photo and kept as a souvenir (“I'd never seen that, only on television”). Or the choice not to speak on behalf of large groups (*the* Northeasterners, *the* people who live in favelas), but of people who have a name: “When you typify a person, when you objectify them, you kill the uniqueness of the person. It's the moral and civic destruction of the individual and the character” (Coutinho, 2013h, p. 283-284).

As several scholars have taught us (Serge Daney, André Bazin, Alain Badiou), to speak of an ethics of cinema is also to speak of a heterogeneous and impure art that invents time; it is to speak of an art dedicated to showing the imponderable of life, an art of the present and simultaneously of absences. In this sense, Coutinho is interested in cinema that shows a world that does exist, but that cannot be exposed carelessly, in just any way. This, in itself, raises a moral issue - which reminds us of Godard's famous statement: *les travellings sont affaire de morale*<sup>5</sup>.

Like the ancient philosophers researched by Michel Foucault, Coutinho offers us a body of work that has become a real “spiritual exercise” for him, “the happiest thing I have in my life” (Coutinho, 2013b, p. 246). “Film for me is a way of life” (Coutinho, 2013b, p. 250). Perhaps it's a way of giving maximum luster to existence, making it an object of art (cf. Foucault, 2014). In this exercise of life, cinema became for Coutinho an ethical work of questioning the excesses and redundancies of words and images.

Perhaps the strength of his films lies in the care he takes not to show literally what is said, not to accept unnecessary images or words, using them “either in a mannered way or in the form of evidence”, as he puts it (Coutinho, 2013f, p. 253). Still images that move from one interviewee to another, sometimes unpainted façades of houses that we will enter along with the camera - these are some of the resources that the director uses, in a kind of economy of language, simplicity and invitation to the viewer to take a longer look. I'm reminded here of the beautiful ending of one of the in-

terviews, after 60 minutes of the film: Coutinho films Tia Dôra's silence, brief seconds from a beautiful evening light, a wall and a rectangular mirror, a burgundy curtain and her sitting on the edge of the bed, elegant. A pause. A breath.

Not excesses, never totalities - but the idea of micro-realities:

[...] the totality is Brazil, I choose Rio; the totality is Rio, I choose a favela; it's not a big favela, it's a small favela. I mean, I'm reducing as much as possible, I'm abolishing totality as an answer, as a universe that interests me (Coutinho, 2013f, p. 274).

In *The End and the Beginning*, right from the start, the viewer has access to recordings that lead to a change in the direction of the filming. Or at least to the exposure of a certain anguish: will this documentary ever be realized? Professor Rosa emerges as a guide. A guide who doesn't prevent us from diving into unthought-of possibilities. That is: she, like a good reference author in a research project, doesn't signify a restriction, much less the imprisonment of the already known. Rosa is certainly a voice of authority, but not the voice of a specialist – a voice that wisely encourages the encounter with the unknown. And gently and lovingly she can even fill in a missing piece of information in someone's memory, or write down questions in a notebook for Seu Zé de Sousa, who can no longer hear.

For Coutinho, what is unbearable in any documentary is the powerful voice of the expert narrator, who “says the meaning of things, that old thing about being the voice of God. This narrator is unbearable, because he's the one who closes the doors, deep down he's the one who opens and closes the doors” (Coutinho, 2013f, p. 275). Perhaps we could think that a researcher, by resorting to the voice of theorists, is someone who has the finesse not to *murder* his collections – the statements of possible interviewees, the elaborations of a thinker or the recordings of scenes and images. What matters, rather, is that this voice is incorporated in a living way into the thought produced in the process of the study.

Coutinho's documentaries have no narrator to organize the data for viewers, artificially assembling what people say. It is important to mention here an observation made by essayist Mateus Araújo, regarding the tension between the singularity of Coutinho's interviewees and the serialization to which these people are commonly subjected. In *The End and the Beginning* there is a community of older people who live in the same region, thus or-

ganized in *series*. Araújo emphasizes that, in this structuring of the film, it is as if “the uniqueness of the characters sought by the filmmaker could emerge more strongly, not less”, precisely because of the way he listens (Araújo, 2013, p. 442). Meanwhile, this doesn't mean that each one of those people appears to be exclusive.

I believe that Coutinho's art consists of a capacity for modulation and nuance, for moving from the particular to the broad, glimpsing, in that group of people listened to, as Araújo says, a “community of experience” (Araújo, 2013, p. 443). Each of them ends up appearing with their own style, without ever being there as an illustration or representation of a group. This certainly has important consequences for us, who want to learn with the director a little of his art. The data from our research does not illustrate or represent. They are the living matter of our collections (a kind of community we invented) and compose something more with the theorists we have chosen as intercessors. The academic report is our voice, woven from these other voices.

### Returning the research

“Returning an image” – this is the title of a text by Didi-Huberman on the filmmaker Harun Farocki. The question raised by the scholar is: if there is a *what* and *how* of the image, shouldn't we also talk about the *to whom*? After all, I ask, to whom are the images in *The End and the Beginning* intended for? We could perhaps say that Eduardo Coutinho aligns himself with the ethical position of the artist Farocki – filming bodies and voices, getting to know places and people, just to *make them known*. He films to return the images “to those who have the right, that is, to the public good”. Didi-Huberman (2015, p. 209) adds: “In short, to emancipate them”.

I think that, in the specific case of *The End and the Beginning*, the act of restitution of the images does not exist just because the director and his crew returned to the filming location a year later to show the finished work. Yes, there is a *return* to the residents of Araçás, which is a desirable practice in research dedicated to listening to and recording stories. But it's not just a question of giving back something that will then become the property or acquisition of those people. There is something more. There is Coutinho's generosity and modesty, beyond simple moral virtues.

Modesty towards work and modesty of work – the work of the image or of thought – insofar as it is always work about the work of another. Restoring to this title human labor in general in the sphere of the common good, which does not belong specifically to anyone (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 219).

As Didi-Huberman says about Farocki, this is a political positioning, a choice about the way of knowing (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 212). In this sense, making those narrated lives available to themselves and for common use by spectators is a way of calling on all of us to go beyond the merely contemplative gaze of the arts. As Benjamin claimed, an artist who acts in this way is not afraid to give up the success of a career, but does so in the name of opening up to new forms and spaces of restitution of images.

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises for me was watching the “extras” of the film and realizing that those people, now a select audience, were vibrating to the very scenes that had touched me so much. A year after filming, on an evening that was certainly unforgettable for the residents of Sítio do Araçás, they were there with their families, alternating between discreet laughter and moved silence. There was a lot of laughter at the antics of the couples: the story of the husband who drank too much, the wife saying that her husband was “*very disgusting*” but she liked him; and at hearing Seu Chico saying that he likes *people who gossip* like Coutinho. On the other hand, there was a lot of emotion when seeing once again a resident who had died after the filming, Seu Zé de Sousa, that man who was so alone, sitting in the yard: “we cry, because it's powerful,” says Rosa, the teacher-guide who visited him regularly, took his blessing and wrote for him in the notebook...

### **An erotic cinema? A poetic narrative?**

I think that everything that is said is expressed by the human body, which is basically composed of the movement of the arms and face. This is essential for me; I make films about the human body, about relationships between human bodies, in this case, me and the crew with the others. That's why in a broad sense they are erotic films. This is what interests me in movies, I live through it. What is someone speaking when I don't see the face of the person speaking? I know almost nothing about the person afterwards. The human body is absolutely connected, you can't turn it off. Each human being is different, and this is the human mystery (Coutinho, 2013c, p. 179-180).

Capturing singularities is related to the gesture of listening and, above all, looking. The verbal and the non-verbal are amalgamated in the record-

ing of memories, because, after all, “language is everywhere”, as Barthes teaches (2004, p. 227.) “The verbal itself is extremely rich: you have intonation, digression, rhythm, words that deceive, lapses, incredible things. And the non-verbal? It can be here, at the commissure of the lip, in the eye. The eye is essential” (Coutinho, 2013b, p. 248). Perhaps that's why the encounters with Dona Mariquinha and Seu Chico Moisés move us so much. Coutinho is always looking for those pairs of eyes, leaving the photographer *to fend for himself*. And the viewer is presented with a type of gestures and looks, serious or laughing, hands clapping in a *slap!*, punctuating a speech rich in bodily expressiveness.

The affective relationship with the theme, the searching and the people with whom he interacts is perceived at every moment in Coutinho's documentaries. He is there in a world that is not his; he is someone who arrives *from the outside* and also has something to do and say, something different from what the *insider* does. In a technical and above all ethical choice, Coutinho affirms the need to construct in advance a baggage of knowledge and experiences, so that he can see the *thing*, even from *the outside*.

But what seems most relevant to the director's process of research and artistic creation is what he says about his choices of people and places to film: “When I film a person, I love them more than anyone else [...] when I turn on the camera and glue my eyes on the person, that's what's worth it for me” (Coutinho, 2013g, p. 229). The interview method is thus related to a profound openness to the individuality of people, which does not mean seeking intimacy or even friendship with them. It could be said that that a wave of affection circulates in the filming, because he places himself there as a mediator, between the camera and the people: “it's as if they were looking at me, feeling the magnetic wave, the interest in my gaze, but as if I were transparent” (Coutinho apud Mesquita; Saraiva, 2013, p. 389).

I learn with each film, with each statement by Coutinho, that to arrive from the *outside* at an author, a work of art, a literary text, a group of people, an interviewee, a place or a historical document – requires preparation, study. But it especially requires desire, a loving commitment to a theme and, at the same time, a willingness to disappear from oneself. My passion for Michel Foucault and Eduardo Coutinho leads me to imagine ethical and aesthetic kinships between the two. Both writing (Foucault) and film (Coutinho) only make sense if, in making them, you wind up finding what

you didn't know. That's the pleasure of being alive. Because they allow themselves to be surprised, to become others, to be transformed.

For both, the method of creation takes place in process, in the movement of the hand that writes, in the act of thinking, of looking and listening to bodies in their expressiveness and memory. On the other hand, we have learned from them to think about the erasure of the self, of the figure of the author, not out of some supposed modesty, but because of an existentially assumed position: the philosopher tells us that, since the last century, “the subject who writes continues to disappear”, and that “the mark of the writer is nothing more than the singularity of his absence” (Foucault, 2009, p. 26-2); Coutinho, on the other hand, tells us that, since the last century, “the subject who writes keeps disappearing”, and that “the mark of the writer is nothing more than the singularity of his absence” (Foucault, 2009, p. 26-2). 268-269). Meanwhile, Coutinho never tires of affirming the director's evanescence, as present as he may be in the filming. These two artists seem to obey a law, the obligation to do something that is imposed on them, to write or make films, because life around them, after all, isn't that pretty, it's full of problems, pain and loathsomeness. As Foucault says in an interview with Claude Bonnefoy, he writes “to no longer have a face”, assuming a fragility and the “mortification of the self in the passage to signs” (Foucault, 2016, p. 66-67).

Much has been written about academic text, especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences, discussing the possibility to include not only a first-person account in articles and theses, but also a poetic and even literary look. Once again we face the complexity of the role of authorship, together with the insidious and insistent separation that still exists today between science and life, art and everyday life, fiction and reality. Coutinho, answering a question about *Santo forte* (1999), says that the artistic that interests him is that which is in the speech of the characters. He seeks to “treat the prosaic poetically and the poetic prosaically” (Coutinho, 2013a, p. 234).

So, for the director, it wouldn't make sense to invent special resources for a speech that is already poetic in itself. “Poetry comes from what the people say, not from the filming” (Coutinho, 2013a). In all the work he has done, he identifies a constant in the human figures he has encountered: it is always, in some way, the presence of existential, ethical questions, the relationship with the limits of life and death, magic and dreams, religiosity, af-

fections. The magic of the testimonies is related to the intensity of the creative process that takes place between the director, the camera and the subject invited to speak. Each of those people, by entering into the proposed dramatic game, invents a character for themselves, such as the philosopher from Araçás, Chico Moisés, or the midwife Maria Borges, “very coveted for this dating business”. What is interesting in this dynamic is the encounter with a singularity, with someone who shows themselves as they are, unique. Simple people, people from Araçás, poetic and even erotic.

### **The spectator: an imagining subject**

Finally, I think it's important to include in these considerations about Eduardo Coutinho's cinema the figure of the spectator, this other, equally unique, who also participates in the creative process of the film as a whole. I often repeat in seminars and workshops, inspired by Bourdieu, that research involves establishing relationships. And that an image is a relationship - a film only exists to the extent that there is a body, a gaze, a physical willingness to see and surrender to the story being told. It could be said that those who see and hear the words of Coutinho's interviewees, precisely because they are faced with an open and unassuming narrative, enter into a game, as proposed by Jacques Rancière, of the *emancipated spectator*. There is a kind of *equality of intelligences* in Coutinho's relationship with his characters, which is multiplied in the figure of the spectator.

Everyone is simultaneously in a position of ignorance, in a genuine work of translating signs, communicating, and building hypotheses about each other, in an adventure of “understanding what other intelligence is trying to communicate to you” (Rancière, 2014, p. 15). “This poetic work of translation is at the heart of all learning” (Rancière, 2014). It's as if Coutinho really did take on the figure of the *ignorant master*, walking the path from assumed knowledge to ignored knowledge, shared with his characters and the viewer. In this sense, there is a suspension, at least temporarily, of the boundaries and fixity of positions of subject, characteristic of relations of prejudice of class, gender and social condition, especially in a country as fragmented as Brazil.

The lives filmed by Coutinho exist on their own, and the best way to look at these images, following Didi-Huberman and Jacques Rancière,

would be “to know how to observe them without compromising their freedom of movement; therefore, to *observe them* would not be *to keep them* to oneself, but on the contrary, to let them be” (Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 163, emphasis in the original). The idea is to emancipate the images from the desire to know, the almost unbridled desire for a supposed integral, totalizing vision. The characters in *The End and the Beginning* do not represent a certain sociological classification. By accepting the incompleteness of the images, scenes, and dialogues, which resist any standardization, the viewers can also *emancipate themselves*. As subjects of the vision, they will give themselves over to a film that requires them to abandon their desire for power over the images. Every detail of the looks, the settings, the articulation of the voice and the answers given to Coutinho will be an invitation to leave behind any rule of meaning or interpretation of the filmic images. That is, it is an invitation not to give in to easy intelligibility.

“The spectator is the subject of equality,” writes Marie José Mondzain (2013, p. 65 translation by the author). Against any *logic of brutalization*, Coutinho's films, in my view, invite the spectator to a kind of new birth, a new life, from the experience of images and testimonies that allow them to share a bond with desiring and speaking subjects, imaginative and imagining, questioners of a world given to inequalities and dominated by fear. As Godard affirmed (2002, p. 83): to make films is to make poetry, “and poetry is first and foremost resistance”. Dona Mariquinhas, Seu Leocádio, Seu Chico are characters invested with poetry, they are existences put into art. And the spectators resist. They resist because they are born again with them. Because images are fertile, writes Didi-Huberman.

In their discontinuities, the visual and sound images of *The End and the Beginning* are constantly referred to networks of temporal and spatial contexts. They are the eyes of history and the eyes of the spectators. Eyes that shout, resist, stand up against the intolerable – in the words of the author of *What we see, what looks at us* – because the eyes of history are not just sensory organs. They are eyes that question the image, observer's eyes, as Ismail Xavier writes, which incessantly refer us from the field of the visible to what is outside the frame and vice versa. “The montage suggests, we deduce” (Xavier, 2003, p. 33). Multiple questions come into play, invitations to the viewer to also enter the scene.

It's not about militancy or ideologies. Rather, it involves the courage of a desiring subject, the creator of images (visual, literary, theatrical, or cinematographic), to invent and provide a form of freedom for those to whom it is addressed. Otherwise, “when the image is annihilated in its egalitarian and generative force, it is the spectator who may die” (Mondzain, 2013, p. 66 translation by the author). And this is clearly not what Eduardo Coutinho wants. “I think that if you can still think about the movie the next day, it's wonderful. That's why we make movies” (Coutinho, 2013c, p. 176).

If it is true that images participate in an embodied and historical gesture, someone who takes the time to watch a film by Eduardo Coutinho, such as *The End and the Beginning*, enters this wheel of signs and is also a witness to a past, now present. They become part of a place, a time, of conflicts and luminosities, of loves and losses, of the remains of a very Brazilian world, of something that this viewer has certainly never seen as such, in its particularities, but which in the tiny details of those precarious lives finds something of freedom, of refusal and of desire. Voluntarily or not, Coutinho's images are political. Above all, an invitation to solidarity.

I imagine that researchers can work on their investigations in attentive and critical ways, like Coutinho and his adorable characters. The idea is to build an inventive position in relation to looking and listening, both in the apprehension of the things read in authors we love, and especially in the elaboration of our collections, the so-called *empirical materials*. A mobile position, never univocal. A dialectical, non-standardized position, far from all consoling syntheses: a “restless, infinite, unattainable, irreconcilable dialectic” (Didi-Huberman, 2018, p. 164-165). And restlessness is not lacking in Eduardo Coutinho and the elders of *The End and the Beginning*.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bourdieu is even mentioned by Coutinho in one of his interviews, citing the book *The Weight of the World*, in which the sociologist writes about the interview technique, affirming the need to put oneself in the other person's shoes, not to make judgments and to truly respect that singularity (cfe. Coutinho, 2013f, p. 277-278).
- <sup>2</sup> In *Matter and Memory*, Henri Bergson writes about the sensitive memory of the present as inseparable from the memory of the past. His drawing of the

cone of memory is well known. From it Bergson concludes that “[...] it is from the present that the appeal to which remembrance responds comes, and it is from the sensory-motor elements of present action that remembrance gets the warmth that gives it life” (Bergson, 1999, p. 179).

- <sup>3</sup> In the film *O Fio da Memória* (The Thread of Memory), there is a scene in a cemetery showing Gabriel's bag of bones and the figure of an angel: “Placing that angel looking at Gabriel's bones was a way of allegorizing the destruction of his past and that of the Blacks. Like the angel looking at the ruins, in which the past is a catastrophe of ruins and the wind of progress sweeps the angel away” (Coutinho, 2013e, p. 226).
- <sup>4</sup> In *The Surviving Image*, Didi-Huberman (2013) deals with the work of the German historian Aby Warburg on art history, image, and memory, among other topics. I'm interested here in a way of dealing with the visual arts that helps me think not only about the film itself, but also about the relationship I'm establishing with Coutinho's work.
- <sup>5</sup> “Travellings are a question of morals”. Statement by Jean-Luc Godard during a round table discussion on the film *Hiroshima mon amour* by Alain Resnais. Text published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* n. 97, July 1959. For Godard, the specific formal resources of cinema always have a social use, they are always an ethical choice.

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