

## METAFILMIC DEVICES IN EDUARDO COUTINHO'S *BOCA DE LIXO*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Boca de lixo* is one of Eduardo Coutinho's most important documentary texts. This essay examines the metafilmic devices in that documentary: the use of narrative voice; the incorporation of the director and film crew in the visual text; the incorporation of the inhabitants of the garbage dump as they see themselves being filmed and as they see themselves having been filmed; the use of background sounds; the use of accompanying still photographs. It is important to underscore how such devices are not part of an aestheticizing impulse on Coutinho's part, but rather they serve to bring out the complexity of the lived human experiences being depicted.

**KEYWORDS:** *Boca do lixo*; Eduardo Coutinho; metafilmic devices; human experiences

### RECURSOS METAFILMICOS EM *BOCA DE LIXO*, DE EDUARDO COUTINHO

**RESUMO:** *Boca de lixo* é um dos documentários mais importantes de Eduardo Coutinho. Este artigo examina os recursos metafilmicos por ele utilizados: a voz narrativa; a incorporação do diretor e da equipe técnica de filmagem no texto visual; a incorporação dos habitantes do lixão enquanto eles se veem sendo filmados e enquanto se veem na e após a filmagem; o uso de sons de fundo; o uso de fotos justapostas. É importante frisar que esses recursos não constituem um impulso estetizante de Coutinho. Servem, sim, para revelar a complexidade das experiências humanas vividas que vão sendo mostradas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Boca do lixo*; Eduardo Coutinho; recursos metafilmicos; experiências humanas.

O que vocês ganham pra ficar botando isso na nossa cara? (Unnamed scavenger)  
É um trabalho legal como os outros. (Coutinho replies)

In a text that precedes the credits to his 50 minute video documentary, *Boca de lixo* (1992), on the garbage dump of Iaçoca in the Rio suburb of São Gonçalo, Eduardo Coutinho

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(b.1933)<sup>2</sup> announces that there are hundreds of similar dumps in Brazil, in which tens of thousands of individuals work.<sup>3</sup> As we have just seen in his documentary, these individuals, which range from young children to the elderly and include both men and women (although one woman affirms that the work is easier for women), rake through the garbage for anything can be salvaged, crowding around the arriving dump trucks to have first access to its contents and then wandering the terrain, scraping through the accumulated materials. They vie with birds and animals for what is edible, and in one moving scene, we see the scavengers eating food as they pick it out of the garbage, although what they depend on for survival are the objects that can be sold for salvage, like tin cans, bottles, plastics, and assorted manufactured goods. While some fabrics may be recyclable, they also avail themselves of discarded clothing to dress themselves, including protective headgear and, in some cases, face masks. It is amply apparent that the detritus of capitalism, which provides for many sectors of prosperity in Brazil, especially in the half-dozen major cities of the country, yields up enough goods to support an important demographic of Brazilian society.<sup>4</sup>

Countinho's short film, which is mostly an unflinching eye and ear on the dynamic of the dump, eschews any propagandistic contextualizing regarding the phenomena of garbage, what it represents in terms of the unequal distribution of wealth in Brazil (90% percent of national wealth is held by 10% of the population), and how the garbage of the prosperous necessitates that a significant, if in reality quite small, sector of the population is required to live off of garbage, while yet availing themselves of a perverse sort of welfare system, whereby privileged consumption generates an excess, a surplus value, that enables this sector to survive. The only reflex of such sermonizing is to be found in the expressions uttered by the scavengers themselves that they are grateful to have such work. One woman avows that it is far better than working as someone's servant, while a man, who has joined his wife in the dump after losing his job, says with pride that he is a Brazilian, and therefore is free, free to live how he wants and free to say what he wants. Such expressions make it clear, against any

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<sup>2</sup>For information on Coutinho's career, see Souza and Ramos; Lins, "Eduardo Coutinho."

<sup>3</sup>Reynaud places the film in the context of Western representations on junk, trash, and garbage. Although from one point of view, her comment on how *Boca de lixo* "exposes the immiseration and abjection in which a vast sector of the population lives on the outskirts of Rio" (148), I will go on to show how Coutinho's documentary underscores the dignity of their work. Stam, Vieira, and Xavier, in their brief commentary, emphasize how *Boca de lixo* avoids "tak-[ing] a miserabilist approach" because of the direct participation of the scavengers in recounting their own lives" (451-52).

<sup>4</sup>Lins's take on the film is that it is designed to discomfort the viewer--indeed, her short essay contains the phrase in the title "a estética da crueldade." Yet she goes on to note that the documentary is much more than that, and we both agree on its human dimension, a position that I develop in this essay with reference to the metafilmic nature of *Boca de lixo*.

lamentation that middle-class spectators might wish to articulate, that these individuals see themselves as part of a social dynamic that allows them to survive.

To be sure, Coutinho has no interest in romanticizing the lives of the garbage pickers, and the dangers of their work are very apparent, from the diseases that may lurk in the garbage to the danger of certain materials, such as discarded hypodermic syringes. Not only is there the omnipresent stench of the garbage, of which we are reminded, as though it were really necessary, by the improvised face masks some of the scavengers wear, but also the smoke and fumes that arise from the rubble, which would also include noxious gases that result from certain materials baking in the sun. One might well remark that such endangering elements are no worse than many industrial work places, or that the dumps are an extension of the omnipresent slums of the city. Indeed we see that places such as Itaoca have their own improvised residential space, which may differ in no substantial ways from the better known slums wedged between other undesirable patches of the urban sprawl.

But these are issues that are not directly addressed by *Boca de lixo*, except to the degree that the attentive spectator will extrapolate them from the images that are presented, pondering on what the boundaries are, in any functional sense, between the various sectors of the city and the way in which garbage dumps must be an integral segment of the city's economy. There are today, almost two decades after Coutinho's film was made, various attempts at recycling along the path between the generation of garbage and its dumping in places like Itaoca, such as the much vaunted practices pioneered in Curitiba. Strictly observed, such practices would, in effect, diminish the economy of the scavengers, by eliminating, for example, the gathering of metals, glass, plastics, and paper. Yet to the degree that such practices are not universal, one doubts that there has been little diminishment in the wealth of garbage that allows for the scavengers, in their own way, to capture. At one point of *Boca de lixo*, we see the salvaged refuse being weighed, receipts being issued, and those receipts being cashed in for negotiable currency. It is a moment that reminds the spectator that this is hardly a marginal world, but one that is fully consonant with the established commercial world.

A documentary on a garbage dump would be an ideal topic for a traditional documentary, narrative or otherwise, since the visual impact of the site and the scavengers vying with each other amid alternatively smoldering and putrescent heaps could serve as a potent metaphor for the devastations of capitalism, the social injustice of a system that makes highly dangerous work meaningful for survival, or the social microcosm that is forged within such a context. All of these are immediately recognizable subtexts for Coutinho's film, but

they are not directly the principal thrust of it. Rather, the primary and foregrounded feature of *Boca de lixo* is the metatextual nature of this documentary.<sup>5</sup> The way in which Coutinho goes about making his film and the extent to which he includes within the film allusions to its construction constitute the most important filmic dimension of his text.

Such an artistic decision contributes to the effectiveness of the film for the ways in which it makes the subjects of the film conscious collaborators in its elaboration, affording them the opportunity to speak for themselves and to register the manner in which the documentary has inscribed them. In the process, Coutinho breaks with the so-called classic rhetoric of the documentary, in which the camera is an impassive witness of events. Although the camera is customarily accompanied by a sound track, the microphone is equally impassive, recording the words of subjects who may often be unaware that they are being filmed. Voice-overs may accompany the impassive reporting of camera and microphone, but it is customarily far removed from the universe of the latter, being a voice that becomes part of a dialogue between the film and its projection, between the director and the spectator at various removes from the material being presented.

An excellent example of this are the opening sequences of Raymundo Gleyzer's *México, la revolución congelada*, where an aerial camera records the movement of Presidential candidate Luis Echeverría's motorcade through the Mexican countryside, while a disembodied omniscient narrator explains to the viewer why it was filmed at all. The fact that Gleyzer filmed much of his documentary in a clandestine fashion without official approval addresses itself to the sort of documentary that establishes crucial discursive and analytical distance from the object of its interest (see the study of the film by Foster).

By contrast, Coutinho and his crew install themselves within the universe of the garbage heap and mingle with the scavengers, whose actions and speech we observe in life-size immediacy. All that is lacking is the olfactory dimension: we see the trucks dump the oozing refuse at the feet of the scavengers and we see them begin the scramble to find something of value in the guck. We hear the sound of their feet trampling the garbage, while at the same time we see the blur of their hands as they quickly go to work tossing items into the black bags they drag or carry with them. And we see them become covered in the liquid component of the garbage. Although it is not clear from what is presented, one assumes that different individuals are specialized in what they scramble for, and there is the knowledge that

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<sup>5</sup>Chanan, in his brief but excellent overview of Coutinho's documentaries, speaks of their "estética...autorreflexiva" (60). However, he does not go into any analysis of the details of what this means and what sort of filmic processes such an aesthetic principal generates.

every iota of refuse will be gone through in very quick fashion before the next delivery arrives. Were the olfactory dimension available to the film, the rapprochement between garbage and scavenger would be even more unmistakably established. As it is, when we see Coutinho's cameraman and sound man pushing their way forward in the throng of scavengers – ginterfering, to be sure – in the total efficiency of the operations, there is little difficulty in imagining, in addition to the impact on their freshly washed clothes and body, the assault on their sense of smell.

But what is important is that, in order for the spectator to see Coutinho's assistants doing their best to jockey themselves into an advantageous position to report the operations of the dump, it is necessary to have yet another crew filming the first crew, although perhaps without a second mike boom. Such a practice has a double effect. On the one hand, it affords the viewers the impression that, because they are actually seeing the filming in the person of the foregrounded crew, they stand in direct relationship to the scene itself, as though they were standing next to the director himself rather than watching a projection screen.

Yet paradoxically, it is as though the foregrounded crew were there to remind viewers that what they are seeing is, if not a staged reality, a reality mediated by the presence of the film crew, which vies with the scavengers for access to a front-row position with the object of attention of both groups, the garbage that has just been dumped out before them. While in other moments we are reminded that filming is taking place because the scavengers both look toward the camera and speak to it (either spontaneously or as prompted), at the moment of the delivery of the garbage, all attention is directed toward that potentially useful resource, and the first crew is jostled along with everyone else, while the second crew is pointedly ignored. This moving in and out of contact with the filming event becomes a correlative of the importance of the garbage. Just as we see some individuals rinsing their arms and hands after their scouring of a segment of garbage is complete--a moment in which they are willing to entertain the presence of the camera crew--they are oblivious to the crew when the moment comes for them to compete with each other for the treasures a new load of garbage might yield up.

The amount of refuse generated by contemporary life, even in a country of uneven capitalism such as Brazil, is truly staggering. The importance of the accumulation of garbage and its enormous diversity is confirmed by another metafilmic dimension of *Boca de lixo*, which is the decision to film in high-definition color. There is something of a hyperrealism that surrounds the mounds of trash. That trash possesses socially meaningful importance vis-

à-vis the complex ways in which it is handled by the scavengers, and it is abundantly clear that there is a closely observed infrastructure that drives their handling of the trash. This infrastructure extends from the way in which they pick through it, the way in which they bag it, the way in which it is transported in large containers to collection stations, where it is weighed and exchanged for subsequently redeemable coupons or chits.

There is, in a word, a entire subeconomy that convinces the viewer of the importance of garbage, and this importance is reinforced by the production decision to make use of expensive photographic resources to capture it in high-definition color. There is here none of the distancing effect of traditional black and white and often grainy documentary filmmaking, a distancing effect commonly driven by the fact that the viewers are presumed not to be sharing the social subjectivity of what is being documented, such as the unjustly imprisoned, the mistreated, mentally ill, the forgotten lumpen of the city, the abandoned peasants of the outback.<sup>6</sup> I will return in a moment to the way in which, by contrast, the denizens of the garbage dumps are also spectators of their social place.

Yet even as Coutinho is portraying in vivid color the interaction of the dump with its everyday workers, the camera also focuses on the mounds of garbage as objects of interest in themselves. In a very real sense, Coutinho aestheticizes the garbage, and the use of color is essential to this aestheticization. Thus, the opening scene of the film is the dump against the distant image of the Corcovado monument to Christ that is one of the signature features of the Rio landscape, and we also see animals and birds calmly grazing on its surface, as though it were a bucolic garden. Now, one should not think that Coutinho suffers here from a lapse of hard-edge social commitment, as would be the case in the aestheticization of phenomena such that their link to the harsh realities of social life are lost. This might be the case, for example, with so-called junk art, where the spectator is asked to contemplate objects detached from their social origins and reassembled as isolated works of art, shown in contexts that are also dissociated from their social origins. The revaluing of junk suppresses the value of human work that went into its creation; the privileged art venue suppresses the exploitative work -

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<sup>6</sup>Such as one senses occurs in Sebastião Salgado's enormous black-and-white photographic prints of the wretched of the earth. This is not to say that Salgado does not have a human relationship with the objects of his camera, gathered in large volumes such as *The Children; Refugees and Migrants* (2000), *Migrations; Humanities in Transition* (2000), and *Workers; An Archeology of the Industrial Age* (1993), but only that the scope of these works and the artistic quality of the prints, while it may intend to put the subjects on the same plane as the viewer (that is, one gazes at a photograph in which the human subjects are almost the same size as the viewer), also generates a distancing effect because of their static museum quality. There is something scary about viewing scenes of the wretched of the earth in a posh installation. This was the case when the opening of the new quarters of the International Center of Photography in 2001 at a midtown address on New York's Sixth Avenue and 43rd Street, just down from Rockefeller Center, was turned over completely to a retrospective of Salgado's work. Salgado's photographic

place.

I would suggest that we reject, however, any aestheticizing intent on Countinho's part. His opening shots of the dump devoid of human presence serve, rather, two purposes integral to his documentary intent. On the one hand, these shots underscore the vastness of the Iaoca dump, a vastness that is rendered in comparison to the famous skyline of the city in the background. The hills and the Corcovado monument fade before extension of the mounds of garbage. Moreover, the backdrop is bathed in uniform morning light, while the foreground of the garbage is characterized by the diversity the play of colors brings out. At the same time, the quietistic portrayal of the dump in the opening moments of *Boca de lixo* is dramatically interrupted by the yelps and cries of the scavengers as they suddenly appear to leap forward into the avalanche of garbage being dumped by a truck that has just arrived. The feigned locus amoenus has abruptly given way to the unimpeachable reality of the work of trash, and the contrast, in a sense, grabs the attention of the spectator.

A similar phenomenon occurs with reference to the use of sound. As one might expect, the microphones, including the hand-held booms that become thrust in the midst of the scurrying scavengers, capture the sounds of the dump: the voices of the workers, the sounds of the trucks coming and going and dumping their contents, the turning over by hand and stick or rake the refuse in search of the salvageable, along with the sounds of the garbage itself as it sounds together as what appears at times to be a living mass. Yet, these verisimilar auditory details are complemented on the sound track by an amplified and expressionistic scraping and clanging sound. But lest one think this is another gesture as aestheticization, something like an anvil chorus of junk, a symphony built on the percussive possibilities of detritus,<sup>7</sup> this dimension of the sound track does little more than amplify the sounds of the concentrated work of the scavengers. We see them intently focused on the trash, as though panning for gold, and the sounds of their intense scrutiny are an integral part of their work effort. Coutinho's added sound track here, like the color he uses, heightens spectator awareness of the seriousness and the systematicness of this undertaking.

There is much about Countinho's documentary that is a direct and unstinting survey of the economy of trash and social dynamic that it engenders, as in the case of the infrastructure that I have sketched above. A fixed and neutral camera could capture much in the way of a

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ideology is critiqued in Evaldo Mocarzel's documentary *À margem da imagem* (2003).

<sup>7</sup>In fact, as Lins points out, these portions of the soundtrack are from a composition by Tim Rescala, "feita de sons concretos--latas batendo, ancinhos separando os detritos--, que, na verdade, são a intensificação de ruídos ambientais" (93). Lins goes on to point out three moments in the film in which musical compositions are used; one of these compositions is actually sung by the daughter of one of the scavengers who has aspirations to be a singer.

strongly off-putting *tranche de vie* by simply following the comings and goings around the dump. However, as much as there is the superficial image of the alienating effects of individuals crawling as so many large insects over the mounds of garbage, consuming items drawn from it as they salvage others for sale, Coutinho wishes to delve into the humanity of these workers, whom he sees as essentially no different than the more visible workers of capitalism. Thus, not only does he set out to interview, often in considerable detail, the scavengers, but he does so in such a way that they are never contrasted with his immediate present.<sup>8</sup> It is true that we hear his disembodied voice speaking from behind (more exactly, alongside) the camera, but his questions are held to a bare minimum, and the extent of the responses to him outweigh his presence.

Those whom his voiced camera addresses vary in their responses to him. Some do not wish to be photographed, and cover their faces, while others hide behind their makeshift face masks or draw their clothes up around their faces in an attempt to impede a direct view of them. However, others are willing to be exceptionally forthcoming in their responses, telling their own stories, introducing friends and family, philosophizing about their lives (as when one woman avows that it is easier for women than men to work the dumps), and taking the viewer into the confidence of their living spaces on the margins of the dump. Yet at the same time, these individuals impose their own limits, such as when for example, one worker proudly introduces members of her own family, several of whom lean against and out from within the frame of the pane-less windows that are a feature of the homes of modest resources. At the same time, this woman denies the camera permission to enter her home. The exercise of this right marks the sense of self and dignity the camera must respect, just as it records on another occasion the assertion mentioned above by a young man that he is a Brazilian, and as such has certain rights.

On other occasions, individuals speak of the dangers of their work, while one woman avows the solidarity that exists among them, such that they do not steal from one another. And I have already mentioned, the woman who claims that working the dumps is immeasurably better than being a domestic servant, with the implication that the abuse, injustices, and indignities of the latter are absent from the work place of the dump. None of this, to be sure, implies any attempt to generate a cheeriness about the working conditions of the subjects of Coutinho's documentary, but rather also not to engage in platitudes about human workers who are virtually on the same level as the garbage they are processing. It is imma-

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<sup>8</sup>Reynaud makes the very insightful observation that what is going on here is "a kind of oral history [of] the



terial whether a different sort of socio-economic system would obviate the scavengers, as much as one might like to envision a world without garbage and, therefore, those destined to extract their survival as human beings from it. Neither turned into aestheticized objects of the camera's gaze or deprived of their humanity through their reduction to subhuman victims of the horrors of capitalism, Coutinho's human subjects survive with a sense of self and self-worth whose portrayal is accomplished in large measure by the way in which the director and his crew interact with them.

Another detail of the way in which the director interacts with his subjects is through the use of still photographs--or what appears to be xerox copies of still photographs, often several to a single piece of paper. These photographs seem to function for the director to keep track of individuals whom he has interviewed, as well as to ask other individuals about them. Not only does this sort of record keeping signify that these individuals are being taken seriously as human subjects--who they are and where they are come off as genuinely important to the director--but they also serve to insert individuals into a network of human society and the consciousness of others: they belong to a particular time and space, they have history, they have social meaning, and they are, in a word, important for Coutinho's account. The fact that the images are in black and white and are xeroxed copies gives them somewhat of a ghostly effect, but that impression is displaced by the actual individuals as they come into the camera's frame of reference and interact directly with the director--in living color, as one says--and, indirectly, with the spectators as the director presents them to us. The interplay between the stills, often accompanied by the names of the subjects (mostly women) being framed on the screen, and the moving images of the subjects of the documentary reinforces another dimension of Coutinho's metafilmic devices for giving dimensionality to what he is presenting as something truly worthy of human interest.

One of the most engaging metafilmic devices Coutinho makes use of is the way in which he plays back for these workers the images he has gathered about them.<sup>9</sup> In a reprise of the duplication of the filming crew, we see the spectators seeing themselves, just as before we have seen the camera filming them. Moreover, toward this end, Coutinho must bring in one of his vans and mount a receiver on top of it so that it can be seen by an audience at large. Not only is the van an explicit element of the project of filming, but the receiver calls attention to them of the fact that, as we the spectators know from the circumstances in which we view the

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dispossessed" (149).

<sup>9</sup>Lins, in her brief commentary on the film (*Documentário*), which includes information about its making, comments that the interplay between "filmar e ser filmado" is a constant in Coutinho's extensive filmic production (89).

documentary, a record of their lives has been made. Needless to say, the workers are entranced with the images of themselves, and probably even more so because of the way in which Coutinho's camera has taken them seriously as human subjects. Many documentaries are not shown to the subjects of them because, in many cases, they are not in a position to see or even comprehend them, and it is questionable whether they would appreciate the ways in which they are portrayed. Coutinho's subjects, on the other hand, are delighted to see themselves, a circumstance that be taken to gesture, in a metacommentary fashion, toward how we should appreciate Coutinho's undertaking. As the film ends, there is a *mise en abyme* effect, as the screen of our vision shows the garbage dump workers seeing themselves on the mobile monitor, in which they see themselves seeing themselves on a receding mobile monitor.

As I have attempted to show, metafilmic and metacommentary devices in Coutinho's film provides it with a depth of meaning that would not be possible if all we saw was what a fixed camera might see circumstantially. Such a depth of meaning, which takes the garbage dump seriously as a place of human work and in which individuals with dignity and a sense of self-worth that comes from knowing they are participating profitably in a sustainable economic subsystem that allows them, while certainly unwittingly and certainly not benevolently, to survive on a continuing day-to-day basis,<sup>10</sup> gives *Boca de lixo* considerable cinematographic distinction.

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<sup>10</sup>One of the scavengers, Jurema, presents to us the eight children she has raised working in Itaoca. Reynaud comments in detail on this moment of the film (152-32) and the legitimacy of this apparent sexual excess. It is also worth transcribing Lins's overall comment on Coutinho's work: "Si Coutinho hace películas que deconstruyen la idea de que la vida de las personas es un horror, no deja entretanto de señalar la dimension intolerable de los que estamos viviendo" ("Eduardo Coutinho" 235).

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