

## ***BUS 174* AND POST-MODERN DOCUMENTARY**

### EL *BUS 174* Y DOCUMENTAL POSTMODERNO

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#### ABSTRACT

Documentary film has changed to such a degree that it is now approximating contemporary fiction film. In fact, documentary film borrows many features that belong to fiction, thus acquiring the same characteristics and becoming as popular as post-modern cinema. In this essay, I set out the characteristics of post-modern documentary, and secondly, discuss whether it is possible to think of Latin American non-fiction as post-modern. As an example, I analyze briefly the Brazilian documentary *Bus 174* (2002), which seems to present several of the elements described by the authors of the articles examined here.

**Keywords:** Latin America, postmodern documentary, film, cinema, politics, aesthetics, Brazil.

#### RESUMEN

El filme documental ha cambiado a tal grado que se aproxima al filme de ficción contemporánea. En efecto, el filme documental toma prestados muchos rasgos que le pertenecen a la ficción adquiriendo las mismas características y llegando a ser tan popular como el cine postmoderno. En este ensayo se establecen las características de los documentales postmodernos y seguidamente se discute si es posible pensar en la no-ficción latinoamericana como postmoderna. Como ejemplo, se analiza el documento *Bus 174* (2002), que parece presentar muchos de los elementos descritos por los autores que se examinan aquí.

**Keywords:** Latinoamérica, documental postmoderno, filme, cine, política, estética, Brasil.

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Documentary or non-fiction cinema has been considered a truthful representation of the real, as well as stylistically different from fiction film, given that the documentary has made use of a kind of voyeur cinema *vérité* camera with the purpose of capturing reality without interfering with it. Philip Dunne wrote in 1946 that the (true) documentary was usually limited in pictorial scope, made

little use of stock material, strived for uniformity, quality and mood, shot original material to represent its idea, and had a meager budget. Furthermore, he argued that the simplicity of production arrangements was an essential difference between documentary and fiction. The documentary was shot in natural exterior and interior settings and used real people –no actors– and a small

film crew, where the documentary writer performed an important semi-editorial function.

In addition, Ann-Louise Shapiro reminds us that Bill Nichols has defined documentary film as “discourses of sobriety” that represents the real and tells the truth, including different kinds of knowledge such as science, economics, politics, and history. However, according to Shapiro, when describing reality, the new documentary film has “quite different effects” which have to do with a certain tension between fact and fiction, art and document, entertainment and knowledge (81). Nowadays, the documentary film has changed to such a degree that it is becoming very similar to fiction film, borrowing its features, acquiring its characteristics and becoming as popular as contemporary cinema. My purpose in this paper is first to establish the characteristics of post-modern documentary from an aesthetic and narrative point of view. Secondly, I intend to discuss whether it is possible to think of Latin American non-fiction as post-modern documentary based on the Brazilian documentary *Bus 174* (2002) directed by José Padilha.

Post-modern cinema, according to Carl Boggs, represents the characteristics of the popular culture of post-industrialized society in the phase of globalization, developed especially in the United States. This contemporary “mediatic” culture emphasizes new technologies, mass consumption, and the society of the spectacle. The society of spectacle according to Douglas Kellner, is characterized by the use of spectacle as a device of promotion, reproduction and the flow of commodities. The author also argues that entertainment saturates all information such as the news, and that the relationship between information and entertainment, intensifies “the spectacle-form of media culture” (Kellner, 1).

Postmodern cinematography, Boggs argues, focuses on diverse experimental types

and intends to subvert the aesthetic rules, while it questions the hierarchies of the social system and the hegemonic discourses describing the chaos, fragmentation and violence of contemporary society. Post-modern cinema questions the social hierarchies and the established discourses, whereas at the same time it describes “a society in the middle of the chaos, the fragmentation, and the violence” – a social order that produces and maintains a “popular sense of anxiety, cynicism and impotence” (Boggs, 350). For the author, postmodern cinema reflects and facilitates this sense of chaos, fragmentation and anguish through the inclusion of incoherent narratives, dystopic images; the use of technological effects and motifs related to mutilation and ambiguity. Instead of the classic hero, we find an anti-hero who defeats the establishment and breakdown of cultural values in the dominating social relations. Boggs also indicates that, although this cinematic culture “questions certain dimensions of class and power structures,” it “denies collective prospects of identity and subjectivity” required for effective social change. He concludes that its “cultural radicalism” is never interpreted as “political radicalism.” On the contrary, postmodern cinema more than anything encourages a distancing from politics -a cynical attitude, detached and devoid of power, hostile to the public sphere-, which it is typical for an increasing depoliticized society (Boggs, 355-6).

The new documentary has also been affected by the cultural shift of global capitalism and has followed the trace of post-modern cinema. Authors like Linda Williams in her essay *Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History and the New Documentary*; Miles Orwell in his *Documentary Film and the Power of Interrogation: “American Dream & Roger and Me,”* and Jordan Randolph, in *The Gap: Documentary Truth between Reality and Perception*, agree when analyzing these docu-

mentaries as post-modern non-fiction cinema, placing them –as Boggs when describing fiction- in the context of post-industrialism (Orwell) or postmodernism (Williams), in which the enlightenment project of an essential truth and positivistic reason has come to an end. They agree that non-fiction features have undergone narrative and stylistic changes. They have become self-reflexive, authored and more popular than the traditional documentary, tending toward the representation of a traumatic past. In this discussion, one of the fundamental aspects is the notion of “documentary truth” (Randolph and Williams) as representation of reality. The authors state that what is understood theoretically as documentary has been distanced from the notion of “an inherent reality.” According to Randolph, “documentary truth might be understood as that truth which is found in the way” we organize our perceptions in our mind (1), which means that the perception of truth is a mental process. Reception of documentary, then, plays an important role in the “trueness” of documentary film. For Randolph, truth can be found within the filmic text, subsequently, there is a greater approach to how the text is read. The author states that the trueness of the text would be the breach between the intentions of the film-maker and the interpretation of the receptor. The issue is not the documentary itself, but the concept of “documentary truth” that is the result of the dialogic relation between the documentary and its reception. In other words, the elements, which are used for coming to a certain truth is the final purpose of the documentary, and they would be found in the text itself. Randolph states that there is an increasing acceptance of the documentary truth “as the objective construction of our perceptions” more so than the representation of a certain true reality (Randolph, 4).

On the other hand, Williams postulates that what is understood theoretically as

documentary has moved away from the notion of an essential reality, along with a certain loss of a naïve faith in the objectivity of the documentary image, since images can be manipulated, thus leading to different “graduations of fictionalized manipulation” (Randolph, 14). She suggests that the post-modern documentary has to be understood not as inherent truth but as a device designed to choose from among relative and contingent truths. She also states that this new notion of post-modern documentary is coherent with the post-modern awareness in that more than the existence of an objective observation of truth, there is a wide interest in participating in its construction.

One of the main characteristics of post-modern documentary cinema, according to Williams, is that the documentary film borrows many features from fiction film. In other words, the post-modern documentary reenacts historic events, using special effects, soundtracks, and dramatization, features that belong to fiction and could interfere in the process of the construction of truth. These features used in fiction appear to be for some film theorists a kind of abandoning of the pursuit of truth, which Williams considers on the contrary a “newer, more contingent, relative, post-modern truth” (11). Other characteristics of the post-modern documentary include its wide popularity among its audiences comparable to the popularity of fiction film, and the interest in the representation of “grim, historically complex subjects” (11). Furthermore, Williams indicates that post-modern documentaries take part in “a new hunger for reality” on the part of the audience apparently “saturated with Hollywood fiction”, but with a sense that “truth is subject of manipulation and construction by “docu-auteurs” who, whether on camera” “or behind it, are forcefully calling the shots” (Williams, 12). The postmodern documentary has gone from the voyeurism of *vérité* realism to the presence

of the documentarian. The documentary is obsessed with the traumatic and inaccessible past that is unrepresentable by that, which the author calls, "mirror with memory." In other words, since they occurred in the past, they could not be captured as they happened then, and so need to be reconstructed.

Conversely, Orwell emphasizes the political aspect of the new documentary and states that in describing political issues, non-fiction has the power of interrogation and that the documentary not only deals with the power or powerlessness of its subject but the power of the film-maker (11) as well, since the new documentary also reveals the struggles of the documentarian to get inside his/her subject. The author observes as well that in the new documentary there is a combination of the traditional observational mode with a more hybrid complex rhetoric, which results in a new narrative.

Williams, Randolph and Orwell analyze these new documentaries as a post-modern representation of the real, that is, as the representation of a post-modern world. Nevertheless, they do so from a different perspective. Williams' analysis interrogates the image as a true representation of reality and contends with whether the documentary is still capable of expressing (documentary) truth, or if a fragmented and subjective representation of the real is a truthful representation. In contrast, Orwell stays in the sphere of power and examines the different film-makers' approaches to the conditions of their subjects and themselves as film-makers in the post-fordist globalized world. Nevertheless, Randolph emphasizes the "in-between" of the director's intentions and the reception of the documentary and contrary to what Boggs argues, he endows documentary film with a political power.

Randolph states that contemporary documentary theory and practice attempt to define truth in documentary as a process of constructing meaning in the contradictions

of film instead of focusing on the representational power of it. Paraphrasing Umberto Eco, Randolph argues that between the author's intention and reader's intention there is a true intention of the text itself, "which exists between the gaps of [director's] intention and [spectator's] interpretation" (12).

Even though the documentary is not fiction, the choice is not between two entirely separate systems of truth and fiction, but rather between the strategies of fiction that help in getting at truths. "But the truth figured by documentary cannot be a simple unmasking or reflection. It is a careful construction, an intervention in the politics and the semiotics of representation" (Williams, 20). In other words, the issue is not the documentary itself, but a new concept of truth that is the result of the dialogic interaction among the documentary filmmaking, reality and reception.

The Brazilian documentary *Bus 174* is the story of the treatment of the mass-media, police and society of a failed robbery that ends with the hijacking of the bus 174 in the *Jardim Botânico* bourgeoisie neighborhood in the southern part of Rio de Janeiro. The hijacking elapses approximately five hours, and it gives the mass-media, especially television, the opportunity to transmit a live spectacle, getting the highest rating ever in the history of Brazilian television. At the same time, the documentary shows the events of the hijacking and attempts to portray the human dimension of the protagonist, Sandro, a street child, and responsible for the hijacking. The hijacker holds the passengers hostage for approximately five hours, while the television crew invades the scene, creating a scenario that allows them to film from the front line and from several angles.

The documentary interweaves shots *in situ* bought from Brazilian television with the director's own material, close-ups of the

*post facto* testimonies of the people somehow involved in the episode who are all narrating his life through their accounts. Every time we are with the interviewees, the sequence of the hijacking is suspended for a moment then brought back again and again. However, each flashback adds more information, which helps us to reconstruct Sandro's identity, humanizing him from a mere criminal to a desperate human being.

*Bus 174* is the first Latin American documentary that was shown in theatres and film festivals around the world even though it was not a fiction film. The reason for its popularity, like the documentaries that Williams and Orwell analyze in their essays, is the way the director chooses to make the film. He borrows narrative and aesthetic features from fiction, making a documentary that is full of tension among the intention of the filmmaker, the interpretation of the spectator and the contradictions as a result of the "in-between" of what we see and what we cannot see.

With regard to cinematic aesthetics, the documentary uses sophisticated techniques in such a way that the line between documentary and fiction is blurred, and the audience gets trapped in a narrative of suspense and tragedy, waiting for an end that would obliterate the spectacle of the hijacking, and at the same time, re-establish law and order. The liminality of this documentary establishes an ambiguity in the narrative and questions the documentary itself as a genre, which is expressed as the hesitancy between journalism and fiction, art and entertainment, and the opposition between truth and falsehood, fiction and reality. An ambiguity that Sandro perceives when he realizes that his action becomes a spectacle in the very moment that the television takes control of the place, and in a gesture of call to reality he declares: "this is not an action film, this is a serious matter." This statement operates also as a double signifier since it draws the

attention of the media crew and the spectators to the event; "it is not an action film" given that it is a real event that happens and not a fictional scene for the TV cameras. Furthermore, in the sense of cinematographic language, the intervention of Sandro, "it is not an action film," operates as a self-reflexive reference of authentication of the documentary as a truthful representation of reality. It is as if the film were conscious of the ambiguity of its own aesthetic language and it feels forced to make a statement to remind us and itself that it is in fact a documentary so as not to turn into a mere visual spectacle.

The intersection between reality and fiction in *Bus 174* is an aesthetic assumption that it contains self-reflexive elements —as mentioned before, special effects, sequence repetitions, voice-over, and slow motions, sounds effects, color and background music, along with the manipulations of the real and diegetic time, which as filmic techniques are also narrative elements that all operate as dramatic and suspense devices that capture the attention of the audience, and at the same, give intense sense of fiction. The documentary *Bus 174* also deals with what William calls "images that contradict the eyes of the law" (10). Images, that opposed to mass-media's and police's representation of Sandro as the "image of the devil," go against the official truth and reveal that, in spite of his death threats, his body language tells us something else. Despite the threats, his hand seems to caress instead of assaulting, his arm embraces in a semi-embrace as opposed to attacking, and he does not protect his body from the snipers in the park. Furthermore, the relationship established between Sandro and the hostages, in spite of the mimetic gestures of a death threat, does not reflect their fear we expect them to feel given the circumstances. Later on, in one of the film's dramatic high points, we get to know that between Sandro and the hostages



there is, in fact, a pact of simulation. He feigns the death threats, faking the killing of one of the women and they join the game simulating fear; it is a mere simulacrum as a negotiation strategy. However, from the outside and mediated by TV-cameras, it is a violent spectacle in which he has the main role. The spectacle culminates suddenly with Sandro's death by suffocation at hands of the police on air, live, after he surrenders. The television transmits his murder to the entire country, while the mass of spectators yells in unison; kill him! kill him! Padilha's approach to truth is here, as Williams calls it, strategic. "Truth exists because lies exist," and the goal of Padilha is to expose the lies and seek "the relative, hierarchized and contingent truth" (Williams, 13) showing the police actions of failure and the mass-media hankering after a reality show. Both require the image of evil ready for killing, but not an abandoned street child afraid of returning to jail who, in a desperate act, hijacks the bus.

The subversion of the aesthetic order in Padilha's documentary, the self-reflexivity, the search for the truth of a traumatic past, the description of the hijacking as a socio-political event are characteristic of the post-modern documentary, a locus where the gap between documentary and fiction disappears, giving way instead to a documentary of contingent truths represented by a strategy of visual narrative and organization of

reality that turns into an aesthetic spectacle subordinating the political to the aesthetic. The reason for the success of *Bus 174* is not its subject, but its intensity, dramatic effect, suspense and magnificent aesthetic.

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