

## Historical subjects and teaching from the perspective of Eduardo Coutinho: proposal for the training of history teachers <sup>1 2 3 4</sup>

### *Sujeitos históricos e ensino sob a ótica de Eduardo Coutinho: proposta para a formação de professores de história*

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#### Abstract

This paper presents reflections on the contributions made by Eduardo Coutinho's conversation films to outline reflections associated with the concept of historical subject, to be addressed in the teaching of history. This research presents a qualitative approach, applied nature and explanation, using bibliographic analysis, document analysis and systematic observations, from an ex-post-facto perspective. Coutinho's films feature women, the elderly, blacks, poor, peripheral and northeastern people, in order to treat their life experiences with significance. The pedagogical appropriation of these films is relevant for the construction of a training process that is guided by the approach of the historical subject from conceptions such as those of the excluded/subaltern/from below and which is aimed at teachers who teach History in Basic Education.

**Keywords:** History Teaching, Cinema and Teaching, Historical Subjects, Formative Process

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## **Resumo**

*O presente trabalho apresenta reflexões sobre as contribuições oportunizadas pelos filmes de conversação de Eduardo Coutinho para delineamento de reflexões associadas ao conceito de sujeito histórico, a ser mobilizado no ensino de história. Tal pesquisa apresenta abordagem qualitativa, natureza aplicada e explicação, mediante emprego de análise bibliográfico, análise documental e observações sistemáticas, segundo perspectiva do tipo ex-post-facto. Os filmes de Coutinho apresentam mulheres, velhos, negros, pobres, periféricos e nordestinos, de modo a tratar com significância suas experiências de vida. A apropriação pedagógica desses filmes é pertinente para construção de processo formativo que se pauta pela abordagem de sujeito histórico a partir de concepções como as dos excluídos/subalternos/de baixo e que é voltado para professores que lecionam História na Educação Básica.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Ensino de história, Cinema e Ensino, Sujeitos Históricos, Processo formativo*

## **Presenting the problem**

The popular adage that Brazil is not for amateurs is well known. In it, among the interpretative possibilities, there is one that stress the historical marks of the fortunes and misadventures of a country crossed by tensions, disputes, and social struggles in different shades (class, race, gender, work), however, cemented with the undisguised authoritarian, autocratic, elitist, and violent flair of dominant groups and classes.

In this society, becoming a historical subject (individual, plural, collective) and seeing oneself institutionally recognized was (and is still) an inglorious and, often, tragic task – see the practices of stigmatization, persecution, and murder against Black and mixed people, Indigenous people, women, workers or LGBT's. A daily life permeated by intense processes of delegitimizing these subjects in history. It is no surprise.

Originating from a spatial miscellaneous tributary of the captaincies and the harmful experience of slavery in labor relations, production, and sociability, Brazil became independent without concretely enjoying a modern State and, even less, configuring itself as a nation (Jancsó & Pimenta, 2000; Holanda, 2003) – except in the elitist discourses and practices of orderly progress (Hardman, 1988; Sevcenko, 2003).

In Brazil, since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, what has been witnessed within the State is the construction of historical narratives based on topics of national identity and the Brazilian being. A paradigmatic 19<sup>th</sup> writing was *História Geral do Brasil*, from 1850, by Francisco

Adolfo de Varnhagen, presented in a competition promoted by the Brazilian Historical and Geographic Institute (IHGB) (Reis, 2003).

The work, defining official historical landmarks of Brazilian national identity (Pinsky, 2009)<sup>5</sup>, was not limited to expressing the interests of narrow circles of the imperial elites of the time but also included initiatives and political-institutional actions aimed at the formal teaching of history to children and young people because “. . . these were the objectives of historiography committed to the State and its production reached school subjects through official programs and textbooks, prepared under the close control of those in power” (Fonseca, 2006, p. 24, free translation).

From Varnhagen’s work, although far from being restricted to it<sup>6</sup>, emerged the constitution of a cornerstone narrative, responsible for the invention of a tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1997), in general terms, presenting the following historiographical assumptions:

- Erasure (total or partial) of tensions, conflicts, and struggles of classes, ethnic, and regional groups in favor of the construction of a national feeling;
- Lack of appreciation for the historical specificities of people and/or communities living in Brazil for several centuries in favor of a written history that avoids (or hides) the approach to cultural diversity;
- Derogatory treatment of disturbing and subversive elements, synonymous with enemies of order – hence the use of expressions such as invasion or attack in the name of naturalizing nation-forming agents (the Portuguese colonizer).

While these issues have been faced in different ways by intellectuals such as Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Gilberto Freyre, Caio Prado Júnior, and Florestan Fernandes (Parada & Rodrigues, 2018), the fact is that the treatment given to historical subjects who do not belong

<sup>5</sup> Given that it met the interests of elites after the independence by establishing a narrative that guaranteed the desired national unity without shaking social hierarchies, political-economic forces, and the centralizing action of the State.

<sup>6</sup> Only in the field of education, one must also take into account the creation of the Historical, Geographic, and Genealogical Institute of Brazil and its regional counterparts, the creation of Pedro II College, the formulation of educational legislation divided by social exclusion, and the sharing of conceptions such as social Darwinism and racialist theories (Schwarcz, 1993).

to the dominant and ruling groups marked the historiography and teaching of history until at least the 1980s.

From that moment onwards, moving, to a large extent, in the wake of the re-emergence of subjects who were hitherto subordinated and politically disjointed during the civil-military dictatorship, in the struggle for the end of that regime, and the restitution of democratic guarantees (in the case of workers), a historiographic production in the field of school education began to criticize the authoritarian nature of legislation and the organization of teaching. At the same time, it brought to light the need for a school curriculum mediated by research and criticality and that valued the diversity of approaches and the multiplicity of historical subjects (Almeida Neto, Lourenço, & Carvalho, 2020; Bittencourt, 2006, 2009; Fonseca, 1993, 2009; Leite, 2010; Leme et al., 1986; Monteiro et al., 2019; Peixoto, 2015; Silva, 1984; Tourinho, 2008).

In this historical context, and against the delegitimizing practices of elites and hegemonic media, we can also infer the place occupied by filmmaker and director Eduardo Coutinho (1933-2014) within the scope of Brazilian documentary cinema and his possible contributions to the teaching history, through films that have been called conversation<sup>7</sup> – such as *Santo Forte* (1999), *Babilônia 2000* (2000), *Edifício Master* (2002), *Peões* (2004), and *O Fim e o Princípio* (2005).

A member of the *Cinema Novo* generation, Coutinho was part of a group of filmmakers living in the 1960s who were involved in the criticism of foreign cinema, the connection between cinema and politics, and the construction of film narratives centered on issues such as underdevelopment, popular culture and force of allegorization (Bernardet, 2003; Simonard, 2006; Xavier, 2004).

When working, from 1975, on the *Globo Repórter* program, on Rede Globo, and, amid this working condition, in the process of making *Cabra Marcado para Morrer*, a 1984 production, Coutinho discovered a paradigmatic way of filming the reality, which would maintain interstitial

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<sup>7</sup> Conversation films are understood as a set of films released between 1999 and 2005, marked by the recording of experiences of anonymous characters, reports of commonplace and apparently banal situations, more full of political, social, and cultural significance, and the presence of a differentiated notion of temporality, in which the past is captured in the heat of the present, retroactively. Furthermore, in these films, Coutinho technically refines his style, renouncing previous scripts; voiceovers; diversity of cinematographic shots and camera positions; use of a non-diegetic musical score; transitions; and other effects in the editing. Finally, it should also be considered that these are films where Eduardo Coutinho goes into the field, looking for his characters. (Lins, 2004, 2013).

relationships with ordinary people. Men and women from the popular classes, working classes, and impoverished middle sectors, all equally capable of telling extraordinary stories.

Averse to the aesthetic-narrative and cultural standards of the hegemonic media and the cinematographic productions with a sociologic bias present in Brazil since the 1950s and 1960s, the filmmaker would value the filmed word and sensitive listening to others by transforming the act of filming into a unique and unrepeatability opportunity of producing meetings and conversations<sup>8</sup> with characters who, in front of the cameras, assumed the position of historical subjects.

In this sense, this article proposes to expose and analyze some reflections focused on the pedagogical appropriation of ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological knowledge from Coutinho's cinema, seeking to articulate them from the perspective of problematizing historical subjects in teaching possibilities. It is about thinking of constructing approaches to the concept of historical subjects in training processes committed to the perspective of history seen from below and aimed at educators who teach history in basic education.

If Marx's assertion (2011, p. 25) that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please" remains a significant theoretical (and political) guideline for thinking about a conception of the historical subject – the dialectic between human actions and the synthesis of their multiple determinations –, we equally make use of the contributions by Edward Thompson (1981, 1998) and Carlo Ginzburg (1989, 2007a) to understand the historical subjects in Coutinho's conversation films.

From Thompson, his analyses of the historical categories of culture and experience are landmarks, primarily because they focus on the study of themes and objects dear to the realities of work and workers, subjects coming from below. For the British historian, if subjects are culturally determined by social relations, ways of life, and class belonging, no less important are the forms of appropriation and uses of a given culture in constructing and (re)elaborating of group and class experiences.

Regarding Ginzburg's micro-history, it is worth highlighting the critical reevaluation of the subjects (including their subjective and individual dimension) based on the evidentiary

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout their cinematic experience, meetings and conversations devoid of populist formulas, romantic class illusions, or moral complacency (characteristics of the dominant sectors). (Bernadet, 2003; Weller, 2012).

method and the reduction of the scale of analysis, insofar as it promotes – just like a foreground (or detail shot) of a cinematographic camera – a circumscribed and detailed look at the testimonies of men and women, to understand the experiences, world views, and networks of relationships of the subjects researched.

No less relevant, however, is the dialogue with the methodological conception of historical subjects present in some studies on historiography and history teaching in Brazil since the late 1980s (Davies, 2009; Leite, 2010; Tourinho, 2008).

Nicholas Davies, for example, questioned the treatment given to the popular classes in history teaching – whether by failing to explain their “living and working conditions” or by “emphasizing popular resistance to domination and seeking to find popular heroes, even to oppose the heroes of dominant groups” (Davies, 2009, p. 121) – although he warned that “history in the service of the popular classes is not necessarily a history that speaks well of them and places them on the altar of veneration.” (Davies, 2009, p. 124).

In another reading key, Maria Tourinho (2008) promoted a discussion about the diversity of subjects in history teaching, highlighting the significance of ordinary men. The author indicates that this approach is related to historiographical debates around the valorization of everyday life, such as the relationship between practices and representations and the perspective of the defeated and power relations, resistance, and appropriations.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Juçara Leite (2010) highlighted the importance of teaching history to include women, according to the perspective of gender studies. According to this scholar, reflecting on women in history teaching was something neglected or, when existing, presented according to a paradigm that insists on associating these characters “with the appropriate example of virtues, chastity, motherhood, and submission, i.e., a certain ideal of a woman for the Brazilian homeland” (Leite, 2010, pp. 195-196).

From different perspectives, the previous analyses help us to reflect on a teaching that seeks to redesign the concept of the historical subject into active, particular, and plural dimensions without losing sight of the limits of the approach. Thus, alongside them, we use research on education, teaching, and cinema (Duarte, 2002; Duarte, & Reis, 2008; Fantin, 2006,

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<sup>9</sup> However, Tourinho (2008) notes that this approach should not mean abandoning the treatment of heroes, as this would represent a loss of understanding of historical processes, including those responsible for valuing these characters.

2013; Fischer, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Fresquet, 2013, 2015; Setton, 2004, 2010), which has made it possible to expose problems and paths surrounding the role of teachers and students in training processes mediated by technology.

As for the scientific research methodology, we will work with the qualitative (Bicudo, 1993), applied, and explanatory dimensions of Coutinian filmography<sup>10</sup>, employing bibliographic and documentary analysis, and systematic observations, according to an *ex-post-facto* perspective (Alves-Mazzotti & Gewandsznajder, 1999; Gamboa, 1997; Gil, 1994, 2007; Minayo, 2000; Trivinos, 1987).

No less important, the article under analysis seeks to reference literature focused on the methodological treatment of the cinematographic language, with emphasis on analyses that aesthetically privilege the construction of filmic narratives and make it possible to understand the position and place of characters in such narratives in history and film theory (Aumont, & Marie, 2001, 2005, 2010; Bauer & Gaskell, 2015; Carrière, 2015; Stam, 2003; Vanoye & Goliot-Lété, 1994)<sup>11</sup>.

## The conception of historical subjects in Eduardo Coutinho

Debates around a new approach to historical subjects contained in Coutinho's documentaries have been promoted in the fields of history (Mager, 2020; Mesquita, 2016) and cinema (Bezerra, 2014; Mattos, 2019) in interpretative keys that have prevailed for analyzing the fabulous, performative, and proactive dimensions of Coutinian "characters." However, such debates still represent a novelty in the field of education and teaching – especially in the area of history.

In search of the characters in his documentaries, Coutinho visited several spaces. We watch him, for example, climb hills and head to the *favelas* in *Santo Forte*, invade (in his own

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<sup>10</sup> Qualitative research favors a problematizing approach to the subjects' subjectivity, that is, the senses and meanings they attribute to their experiences during filming. It is applied because it aims to generate knowledge to train history teachers in basic education using the filmmaker's filmography. It is explanatory, as it requires the mobilization of empirical data (films) to be reflected on based on concepts and content learned from reading bibliography and systematic observation of the assumptions and expedients used by the filmmaker.

<sup>11</sup> It is, therefore, a question of considering that the film comprises its own language, shots, camera angles, soundtrack, and editing, among other elements. In this set, characters play an essential role, that is, beings who are human or who present human traits, endowed with a particular characterization (ethnicity, age, gender, ways of dressing, speaking, and thinking), responsible for intervening in a work and who are, therefore, drivers of actions.

words) corridors, elevators, and apartments in *Edifício Master*, and roam the streets, residences and the São Paulo ABCD union in *Peões* – without forgetting the wandering through places in a rural neighborhood of Paraíba in *O Fim e o Princípio*. In conversation films:

Coutinho’s skill as an interviewer acquires exceptional precision here to highlight, with a minimum of intervention, **the universal character of particular stories and the performative nature of speech acts** (Bezerra, 2014, p. 30, emphasis added).

These characteristics went *pari passu* with his emphasis on portraying “common people” or the “life of infamous men,” as stated by Consuelo Lins (in dialogue with Michel Foucault), in a passage from the work about the filmmaker in which she explains: “the infamy in question does not concern the one who is ‘low and vile’, but the one who is not-famous, according to the Latin etiology of the word” (Lins, 2004, p. 32).

Not surprisingly, film critics, such as Jean-Claude Bernardet, say that Coutinho’s films provide a rich opportunity to think about cinematographic forms of image representation of the people insofar as they belong to a diverse set of productions inseparable from “stage of ideological and aesthetic conflicts among filmmakers in their relationship with popular themes” (Bernardet, 2003, p. 9), differentiating them, however, into two models of approach.

On the one hand, the anthropological model of cinema adopts direct statements, self-representations, and/or dialogical interviews, valuing subjectivity and personality. On the other, in the sociological model of cinema, based on presentations promoted by an off-screen narrator (the popular one: Voice of God), scholars considered authorities on the topic and/or illustrative and corroborative interviews.

In his films, Coutinho employed devices that affiliated him with the “anthropological model.” Because of this, he had a robust dialogue with the historiography responsible for valuing ordinary people and private stories. This is what we can learn from this filmmaker’s words when, in an interview, he stated:

Furthermore, in fact, the films I make are concerned **with everyday history**, with history on the level. . . history with a small h, history of the little people, you know? I’m not worried about making a film about the French Revolution, the Revolution. . . the Coup of 64, the History of Brazil, the History of. . . about. . . of the presidents, Tancredo Neves, I’m not interested in a historical film like that. . . **what interests is the everyday life, anonymous people** (Neiva, 2014, emphasis added).

In this context, we look at the selected films. For example, *Santo Forte* (1999) and *Babilônia 2000* (2000) show residents of Rio *favelas* under analysis, seeking to portray aspects of their lives. *O Fim e o Princípio* (2005) is dedicated to portraying residents of a rural neighborhood in the backlands of Alagoas, listening to what they propose to say. *Peões* (2004) gives voice to the former metalworkers of the strikes in São Paulo ABC whose experiences had not received greater attention. Finally, in *Edifício Master* (2002), we meet anonymous personalities from a world-renowned middle-class neighborhood, such as Copacabana.

We can identify excluded/subalterns/those at the bottom of history in all these works. By excluded, we mean the groups silenced by traditional historiography – such as women, workers, and prisoners – i.e., silenced by the male bourgeois perspective and accustomed to official documents (Perrot, 2017). Subalterns are understood as groups excluded from markets and political-legal representations (Spivak, 2010). In turn, the expression “those from below” is associated with people considered common (in the political and economic sense), whose understanding of everyday experiences proves to be relevant to understanding aspects of reality (Sharpe, 1992).

In texts and audiovisual records, it is possible to understand Eduardo Coutinho’s definition of these people and their relationships with history. In a text written by himself, the director stated that his films deal with “singular events and people, immersed in the contingencies of life” and that his interviews involve “the need I have for the ‘real’ of others as a springboard for associations and structures” (Coutinho, 2013, pp. 16-17). In the same text mentioned above, Coutinho summarizes his work:

Political and personal disappointments, among other factors, helped trigger an immediate passion for a simple thing – looking and listening to people, generally poor, from the countryside and the city – the **social and cultural other**. Trying to understand the country, people, history, life, and myself, but always fixed on the concrete and microcosm (Coutinho, 2013, p. 17, emphasis added).

Although treated as poor, the presence of the characters in Coutinho’s films involves different social markers. Race-ethnicity, position in the metropolis, age, class, regionalism, gender, and sexuality are combined.

It is no coincidence that the focus on women, older people, black people, the poor, peripheral people, and people from the Northeast predominates in the director’s

cinematographic productions. In front of the cameras, they present their experiences and their beliefs. In short, they describe the way they lived and live, far from approaches that focus on the search for the exotic, the picturesque, the overcoming, the life lesson, or any other objectification of the other, As Coutinho himself highlighted in another text:

How does one talk about looking, the supposed theme of this text, when people are seen on TV as a rare species of orchid that should be looked at with distant consideration, or else, very closely, as a naive repository of folklore and “wisdom”? (Coutinho, 2013, p. 19)

In a debate promoted in 2009 at Casa do Saber, located in Rio de Janeiro, due to reflections on documentaries, Coutinho explained the logic that moved him to interview people based on the observance of different social markers:

It is possible to speak beyond the differences if you admit that there is a difference. . . . You have to make the difference an asset. . . and people try to abolish differences. . . of social class, language, sex, condition, whatever. . . and what is rich is the difference, man! And that’s why I never hide the camera, you know? . . . And that’s why I do the montage, that’s why I do the editing, and that’s why I show it to them [interviewees]. (Moraes, 2015, our addition).

Significantly marked by the force of otherness in conversation films, Coutinho even coined the expression “understanding the reasons of the other” to summarize a methodological procedure associated with sensitive and committed listening to these historical subjects often ignored in society and the hegemonic media. (Lins & Mesquita, 2008).

There are several records<sup>12</sup> in which he opposes what he calls left-wing cinema, militant cinema, middle-class vision, or intellectual vision in approaching the excluded/subaltern/those at the bottom of history. In an interview, Coutinho explained his perspective and the one he rejects, respectively:

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<sup>12</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NobGhze9liE&list=PLP\\_uF-vdCKfPVubZbJSyp6-nbJhFndQSB&index=105](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NobGhze9liE&list=PLP_uF-vdCKfPVubZbJSyp6-nbJhFndQSB&index=105).

The other as a victim, the other as a poor guy, you'll only look for the guy who's a bit fabricated. . . All cinema – especially documentaries – worldwide. . . **it is done somewhat from the perspective of the intellectual who knows**. So I say: what should I do? Did you understand? The guy already wants to change the world through filming. . . he will only look for that guy whose speech will interest him for the purposes of what he wants (Moraes, 2015, emphasis added).

Coutinho presented orality as a unique raw material for accessing the past. According to Laécio Rodrigues (2011), this occurs through a point of view very close to the conceptions of history presented by Walter Benjamin (2020). This is because Coutinho's films contain "efforts to remove forgotten voices from the rubble, to remove the seal of silence from them and to give them the spotlight to express their desires and afflictions" (Rodrigues, 2011, p. 125). Doing so opens up an opportunity to build "historical knowledge that includes discontinuities and that includes the defeated" (Rodrigues, 2011, p.127).

The closeness between Coutinho and Benjamin also involves articulations between narrative, memory, and experience. The filmmaker seemed to start from the notion that "experience that passes from mouth to mouth is the source that all narrators resort to" (Benjamin, 2012, p. 214), as well as the idea that the best narratives "are those that are less distinct from the oral stories told by countless anonymous narrators" (Benjamin, 2012, p. 214). The narrators may be travelers or "the man who honestly earned his living without leaving his country and who knows its stories and traditions" (Benjamin, 2012, p. 214).

## **The meeting and listening to historical subjects by Eduardo Coutinho**

However, just as important as his concern for ordinary people is the way Coutinho promoted their records in films. These subjects were not approached as group representatives: such markings of group membership ended up being treated as *a posteriori*, which meant moving them from the moment of filming to the experience of watching themselves in the film. This happened because Coutinho did not aim to "define the character despite themselves, nor take them as a phenomenon of reality, endowed with rigid typical-social traits" (Lins, 2004, p. 24).

Thus, group delimitations form a starting point in the methodology outlined by Coutinho, never an arrival point. As a rule, he defined spatial delimitations (*favela*, building, and rural neighborhood) to compose his filming device, to position himself in the face of the social flow. However, when interviewing his characters, Coutinho provoked a kind of implosion of any collective identification and, instead, intended to “identify the variations, the inflections, and the subtle marks that show that these anonymous trajectories are not homogeneous” (Lins, 2004, p. 33).

On several occasions, the filmmaker demonstrated his concern about respecting the subjects in his films. Answering about *Edifício Master*, he highlighted: “It’s a building! And this **building will have a particularity that can allude to the general**, the neighborhood or the country. But the **concern is with the person who is there, who is unique**” (Rede Puc, 2013, emphasis added)<sup>13</sup>. Still regarding *Edifício Master*, but on another occasion, the documentary filmmaker once again expressed his difference in aesthetic-narrative treatment in the face of generalizing approaches:

The other thing that is also prohibited is the following: This guy is good, because he’s typical of the middle class, say that and it’s over, you don’t work with me, you know?! . . . when you film a person and say they are typical, **you were typical, you simply. . . from a symbolic point of view. . . you’re killing the person.** . . (Moreaes, 2015, emphasis added).

His attention was focused almost obsessively on marginalized subjects, those who faced difficulties and pressures imposed on them by the historical forces that constitute everyday life, whether through strategies (resistance expressed in the expenditure of time) or tactics (skills present in the use of time). In this regard, Coutinho himself mentioned:

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<sup>13</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKWejvKNhB4&list=PLP\\_uF-vdCKfPVubZbJSyp6-nbJhFndQSB&index=51&t=28s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKWejvKNhB4&list=PLP_uF-vdCKfPVubZbJSyp6-nbJhFndQSB&index=51&t=28s)

So, from this, this is the problem: feeling that there are, in all things, collective pressures, that the person repeats the ideology that exists, etc., but there is always something unique: no voice is the same as another, although it may repeat a lot. And try to find in this guy what he projects as his uniqueness, real or supposed. That's what justifies his life. And, from that, you accept the other. You have to accept others as you have to accept everything that exists in the natural world. It's a kind of assent, of agreement; it's not about giving reason to the other person; that's the problem. I want to know the other's reason, not mine (Valentinetti, 2003, p. 19).

From this approach, the objective of understanding the historical subject according to the hesitations, resistances, and appropriations they promoted emerged based on specific social fringes or conditions of possibility.

For example, João Moreira Salles (2013, p. 373) addressed one of the conversation films and stated categorically that “Coutinho inaugurated, with *Santo Forte*, a cinema whose characters resist the systems. Try to fit them in, and there will always be those who escape.” Marilena Chauí, in turn, identifies the use of this device in a previous period, in *Cabra marcado para morrer*, when comparing the 1964 film project with the version completed in 1984:

In the CPC's cultural line, the 1964 film intended to be exemplary: epic and pedagogical, a lesson in politics and the construction of heroes and fighters, a clear division between good and evil, and characters functioning more as archetypes than actual human beings. In contrast, the documentary places us in the **presence of creatures of flesh and blood, with doubts and indecisions, fears and hopes, meditating on the past and evaluating the present** (Chauí, 2013, p. 457, emphasis added).

The complexity of reality is not understood thanks to theoretical devices that fit the subject into categories defined externally by those who wish to know them. It is achieved by listening to the characters on camera and the ability to understand their narratives, the threads/voices/discourses present, and the constituents of reality (Saraiva, 2013). In this sense, scholars of his work recorded:

[In *Santo Forte*] Narrating is not reporting the world as already recognized; narrating is rising up in the face of the enigma of reality. And propose very delicately to **leave any monolithic project of country, State, or even cinematography obedient to any ambition of totalizing cultural and psychological identity with its pants in hand** (Bragança, 2013, p. 549, emphasis added).

As a criterion for accessing the narratives and experiences of the filmed subjects, Coutinho used a fundamental aspect in his cinematographic *method*, which he himself called prison. It was Consuelo Lins who, in our opinion, best outlined this concept of work when she stated:

. . . Coutinho realized that to delimit geography clearly was to stick – within the multiplicity of possible choices when making a documentary – to something essentially concrete; it was to create his own limits, to invent his own ‘prison’ (Lins, 2004, p. 65).

These not only spatial but also temporal sections of social life determined the moment of conversations. Hence the choice to film interviews with *favela* residents during the Pope’s visit to Brazil (*Santo Forte*), the passing of the year in one day (*Babilônia 2000*), an apartment building in three weeks (*Edifício Master*), the workers at São Paulo ABCD during the presidential election period (*Peões*); the country people for four weeks (*O Fim e o Princípio*).

Not a few times, he addressed this aspect of his method:

[answering the question: What is your method?] Look, first of all, *Santo Forte* is filmed in a small *favela* with 2000 people. . . *Babilônia 2000*, which is on Morro da Babilônia, at the end of the year, is a hill of 3000 people, so, for me, **it is important to choose a place that I will not stray from. . . it’s a kind of prison, a limit that I impose on myself. . . from this limit, to be entirely free** (Moraes, 2015, emphasis added).

[commenting on the difficulties of filming *Peões*] Another problem is that **I didn’t have an enclosed space**. . . ABC is huge, right?! Two million inhabitants . . . **very open**, it was starting to make me dizzy, you know? I no longer have focus! (Moraes, 2015, emphasis added).

Conversation films recurrently reveal how Coutinho presented the complexity of his subjects by observing them up close.

When interviewing characters like Fátima and Djanira in *Babilônia 2000* (2001), he contradicted the stigmas about *favela* residents, revealing that they were workers, had rich life experiences, and showed, in particular, reflective capacity.

Listening to characters like Socorro and Djalma in *Peões* (2004) provided an opportunity to broaden the understanding of the life and daily lives of metal workers by verifying the

difference between genders, the relationship between public and private life, and the cultural weight (rural, northeastern, etc.) in the construction of class consciousness.

## Eduardo Coutinho and micro-history

A point that we considered paradigmatic in Coutin's cinematographic work was the way adopted by the director of placing himself in front of the filmed subjects – which brought him significantly closer to the historiographical practice of Carlo Ginzburg (2002, 2007a, 2007b).

For Coutinho, every subject carried the history with them. However, interpreting it required reading it slowly, paying attention to the evidence, and being predisposed to recognizing fundamental elements in the constitution of social processes – such as cultural circularity and appropriations. In films, however, people expressed history as it crossed them according to their logic, whose understanding required sensitivity and erudition.

Many of the filmmaker's lines recorded on video reinforce a dialogue with Ginzburg. Commenting on the best way to film, the director highlighted the importance of the micro: “. . . the ideal would be to make a film about Brazil with one person. If not, with a family” (Mesquita, 2013, p. 238). On another occasion, he reinforced the significance of the micro by mentioning a quote referring to Aby Warburg, one of the Italian historian's references:

An art historian said the following: “God is in the particular.” And another said: “The heart of the totality is in the particular.” **So, I start from the singular, from the particular. This notion that one has of the totality, or of the class, or of the community, it comes or not later. Afterward, the film can reveal things about the general.** The vision of initial totality pushes me away like the devil from the cross (Valentinetti, 2003, p. 82, emphasis added).

However, if everyone is crossed by history, then can anyone be the target of attention from those who thirst for the understanding of men in time? Coutinho sought to resolve this dilemma through the selection of interviewees. Furthermore, from talking about conversation films, he defined a cinematographic *style* marked by great narrators.

Noteworthy, his films showed his predilection for great narrators because they demonstrated precisely the ability to share experiences that crossed them (Bezerra, 2014). In

our understanding, great narrators are subjects who, in addition to being full of threads/voices/discourses that reveal the history, are endowed with the competence to present them in front of the camera, making private experiences public, using *mise-en-scene* and fabulation.

There are guys who travel all over the world, get robbed in Egypt, become gods in India, and tell you about it, and you say: What a pain in the neck! There are guys who went to Sumaré, São Paulo. . . or they went to the [inaudible] *favela*, but you know, they lived a life of, of. . . postman, postman, 30 years. . . and he is wonderful, talking about life! Which is the same as every day, you know? . . . **So, knowing how to tell is essential!** (FlipFlop 013, 2013, emphasis added).

The option for competent narrators reveals the adoption of an artistic criterion, but which is also political. This is because the shared experiences reveal discordant views, strongly loaded with ambivalence, which guarantees the presentation of diverse voices marked by dissent, something fundamental for broad and plural experiences of democracy (Rancière, 2009). Therefore, we understand that Coutinho's films matter in formative processes because of **who says it, what they say, and how they say it.**

These films make it possible to see and hear excluded/subalterns/those from the bottom of history, learn about passages from their lives, and configure public spaces (in the political meaning of the term). Of the historical subjects, the filmmaker opted to choose those who could be the best narrators, which meant selecting people with a greater capacity to mobilize through language: the narrators enchanted (themselves) and, in doing so, captured the spectator's attention, provoking feelings and reflections in them (Weller, 2012).

Coutinho was close to Edoardo Grendi's concept of exceptional normal<sup>14</sup> by selecting great narrators. The characters presented in his films were *normal* in terms of the expressions of the stories told and the specific marks they contained, especially when observing the Brazilian

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<sup>14</sup> According to Carlo Ginzburg: “. . . There is also what Edoardo Grendi suggestively called the ‘exceptional normal.’ We can attribute at least two meanings to this expression. First of all, it designates documentation that is only apparently exceptional. . . . However, ‘exceptional normal’ can have yet another meaning. If sources systematically silence and/or distort the social reality of the subaltern classes, a document that is truly exceptional (and therefore statistically infrequent) can be much more revealing than a thousand stereotypical documents. Marginal cases, as Kuhn noted, call into question the old paradigm and, therefore, help to find a new, more articulated, and richer one. In other words, they function as spies or signs of a hidden reality that the documentation generally does not reveal. Starting from diverse experiences and working on diverse themes, the two authors of this writing are unanimous in recognizing the decisive importance of those traces, those spies, those errors that disturb, disorganizing, the surface of the documentation. Beyond it, reaching that deeper, invisible level is possible, constituted by the game's rules, ‘the story that men don't know they are making.’” (Ginzburg, 1989, p. 176-178).

reality and some of its historical corollaries, such as patriarchalism, racism, social inequality, the primacy of violence, the importance of religiosity and cultural richness.

Capturing the tension between the public and the private, or even the relationship between the big and the small history, was Coutinho's incessant desire:

**Combining the big history and the small history is wonderful.** In Brazil, where there is almost no citizenship, if you ask how a person experienced the 1964 coup, you will see that everything they experienced that year, apart from a politicized minority, are visions of family life. Milestones come from private life. If you talk about the 1950 World Cup, it has penetration; people connect with their real lives, but the historical milestones. . . I wanted to make a film just about that. I like to show (demonstrate is a word I don't like) and sharpen this separation between the real and the ideal (Coutinho, 2013, p. 228, emphasis added).

On the other hand, the characters were exceptional because they could present the threads/voices/discourses that linked them to the history, given the desire to speak in front of the cameras and do so with unique narrative qualifications. Such qualification, however, would not be incorporated – or not latently – if it were not for the filming production conditions guaranteed by Coutinho. Two small examples from conversation films illustrate these reflections and conclude our analysis.

In Braulino's report, in *Santo forte* (1999), it is possible to notice the use of words and expressions such as: *pito*, *negro da cozinha*, *negro de confiança*, and *marafó*: they all kept (and still keep) an intrinsic relationship with the culture of indigenous and African peoples, the historical process of enslavement, and the influence of Afro-Brazilian religions.

In *Edifício Master* (2002), a contradictory and surprising worldview emerges at a particular moment during the report of the character Maria Pia – a Spanish woman who has been living in Brazil since she was a teenager. For her, a domestic worker, there was no poverty in Brazil: poor people did not work because they were lazy and given to lying. It is intriguing because this fragment of the report reveals the incorporation, on the part of a worker, of a classical liberal conception and a certain Protestant work ethic.

## Final considerations

Recognizing this treatment of historical subjects by Eduardo Coutinho in his films makes one think about the use of these works in training processes aimed at teachers who teach history in basic education.

Such works seem to constitute a clear example of the maxim expressed in the phrase “everyone makes history,” endowing it with effectiveness. The characters in Coutinho’s films express this maxim because they reveal it in their daily lives when they deal with the different social situations they are part of (work, neighborhood, family, religious community, government spaces, and institutions) and share them with the spectators.

Teacher training courses dedicated to teaching history can significantly benefit from using Eduardo Coutinho’s films. Such works are capable of offering experiences of common and diverse historical subjects, considered excluded/subaltern/those from below, which brings them closer to historiographical and pedagogical theories that promote the appreciation of the daily life of concrete cases, which can even be identified in the social groups of the students themselves and among members of the communities that form the schools.

Unlike the established view of elites as protagonists of processes, the defense of an approach to the historical subject in teaching history has been going on for some time. Since the country’s re-democratization, which took place in the 1980s, this *method* has been present in teaching proposals and the organization of curricula and studies. Thinking about training processes with this goal made up of proposals beyond reading and discussing texts seems to be a better-nuanced task, aiming to take a further step in this direction.

Considering this context, using Coutinho’s films represents a promising path towards establishing formative processes of this nature. The works from the phase considered conversation films forcefully employ the parade of characters’ voices that clash with the association between history and elites. Watching and thinking about these films brings us encounters with anonymous characters who make history in their daily actions by living it according to the limits of possibility imposed on them.

Coutinho’s conversation films are not necessarily worth what their characters say. The important thing about these works is the effect of meaning they produce. Watching them and thinking about them implies the possibility of encountering a theory of history that insists on

the importance of things seen as small, everyday things that talk about living outside formally constituted centers of power. Hence, these films can establish different understandings of the notion of historical subject and history itself.

The concept of historical subject is paramount in teaching history intended for basic education. This demand reinforces the validity of appropriating Eduardo Coutinho's conversation films for initial and/or continuing teacher training. Such films provide the opportunity to address the concept of the historical subject and to do it in a potentially critical way, given the historical conception they contain and express. It is also in this impetus that these films contribute to making more dense and questioning the proposal of historical subjects contained, for example, in the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) (Brasil, 2017).

It is by containing this potential that conversation films provide the opportunity to break with the very long narrative tradition coined by Adolfo Varnhagen and resist/confront contemporary conservative and reactionary advances, which intend to hegemonize denialist discourses of history – in both cases, erasers of conflicts and struggles (class, ethnic groups), devaluing cultural diversity and disqualifying the art of listening to the narratives and experiences of subjects so often forgotten in history. Nothing could be more averse to Coutinho's gaze.

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