

The Paradoxical Effect of the Documentary in Walter
Salles's *Central do Brasil*

Cynthia M. Tompkins
Arizona State University

Though Walter Salles's *Central do Brasil* 'Central Station' has garnered much critical attention, the debate regarding the impact of documentary techniques on the movie remains to be settled. Thus, Deborah Shaw argues that despite the "documentary approach ... used in the filming of key scenes, such as the letter writers at the station ... these talking heads never acquire the status of individuals worth caring about" (164-66). Similarly, Lúcia Nagib, who sets the movie in the context of the film revival of the mid-1990s, argues that Salles presents an aesthetically pleasing and sanitized view of rural migrants from Northeast Brazil that ultimately betrays the agenda of *Cinema Novo* directors, both by recourse to the salvational role of religion as well as by the closure resulting from the conventions of melodrama. Conversely, I argue that the infusion of documentary techniques exerts an affective impact on the audience. In other words, by presenting fiction as conveyed through the conventions of observational documentaries, the audience is led to care about the plight of the *Nordestinos* 'inhabitants of the North Eastern backlands;' furthermore, as the luminescent beauty of the close-ups reinforces the affective impact, the scant development of their stories becomes all the more frustrating.

In contextualizing the movie, and from Josué's (Vinícius de Oliveira) point of view, *Central do Brasil* continues the rich tradition of Latin American films focused on the plight of poverty stricken children, which began with Luis Buñuel's focus on the Mexican underclass in *Los olvidados* 'The Young and the Damned' (1950), and was followed by Fernando Birri's *Tire dié* 'Toss Me a Dime' (1960), a

neorealist approach to Argentine children begging for coins as they ran alongside the tracks. In Brazil, Salles's film has been compared to Héctor Babenco's *Pixote* (1981), a bleak portrayal of the predicament of children living on the street. Indeed, concern about the living conditions of Latin American youth is emblematic in the filmic production of the 1990s, and continues unabated.¹ Both Víctor Gaviria's *Rodrigo D no futuro* 'Rodrigo D No Future' (1990) and *La vendedora de rosas* 'The Rose Seller' (1998), dwell on the impact of drug trafficking among the underprivileged in Colombia. Similarly, Barbet Schroeder recreates the plight of Colombian minors as hit men in *La virgen de los sicarios* 'Our Lady of the Assassins' (2000). Likewise, Fernando Meirelles's *Cidade de Deus* 'City of God' (2002) exposes the ever-present violence in Brazilian *favelas* 'slums,' and María V. Menis's *El cielito* 'Little Sky' (2004) denounces the lack of opportunities for youth in contemporary Argentina.

Yet, more important perhaps is the effect of the movie on the incipient genre of the Latin American road movie, given that *Central do Brasil* was followed by María Novaro's *Sin dejar huella* 'Without a Trace' (2000), and that Salles's *Diarios de motocicleta* 'The Motorcycle Diaries,' Pablo Traperó's *La familia rodante* 'Rolling Family,' Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* 'And Your Mother Too,' and Carlos Sorín's *El perro, Bombón: El Perro* were all released in 2004. In terms of generic conventions, road movies "embrace ... the journey as a means of cultural critique ... seeking the unfamiliar for revelation [and/or for] refuge from social circumstances felt to be lacking or oppressive in some way" (Laderman 1-2). Characteristically, the "frustrated, often desperate" characters embark on a journey that results in an "open-ended, rambling plot structure" (Laderman 2). As a road movie, *Central do Brasil* shows the "opposition between the 'demoniac' city and the sacred countryside" (Xavier 59). The rambling plot that ensues after Dora (Fernanda Montenegro) leaves Rio with Josué in tow allows for the depiction of alternative lifestyles based on trust and sharing, such as the experience with César—the evangelical truck driver that gives them a ride, the sharing of food with the pilgrims on the truck, and the scenes with Josué's brothers. Cinematically, road movies "generally use frame compositions that incorporate the front or side windshields and rearview mirrors [to allow for] driver point of view shots," which is particularly evident

in the scenes involving the evangelical truck driver (Laderman 16). Since *Central do Brasil* also weaves the generic conventions of melodrama, let's review them.²

Melodrama, or the "aesthetics of affection," explains the box office success of *Central do Brasil* and reinforces the digressive nature of the plotline (Roston 68).³ The genre's "emotional shock-tactics" are apparent in the letters and in the pent-up violence unleashed in the execution of the youth (Elsaesser 167). Dora's remorse for having sold Josué to an organ trafficking organization is conveyed with much emotion and the ploy she resorts to in order to rescue the child is riveting. Sudden reversals of fortune—the lost knapsack, an unredeemable bus ticket, and César's departure—propel the action. Melodrama's "blatant playing on the audience's known sympathies" is evident each and every time Josué prepares to meet his father (Elsaesser 167). The final parallel scenes with Dora sobbing as she writes to Josué, and the child crying as he chases the bus she leaves in, certainly appeal to the audience's feelings.

Melodrama traditionally flourishes "with periods of intense social and ideological crisis" (Elsaesser 167).⁴ Its typical ambiguity is apparent in so far as both Dora and Josué's siblings miss their respective fathers despite the bad memories. But the nuclear family is reinscribed only to be subverted, since Josué's father is missing and Dora's is long dead. Yet, despite the film's "tearful ending," Ismail Xavier notes that *Central do Brasil* "looks for an aesthetic sanction in that collection of dense and revealing images that its documentary aspect is able to produce" (61); therefore, we will review the traditional synergy between these genres in the context of Latin American Cinema.

Like such foundational Cuban films as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* 'Memories of Underdevelopment' (1968), Humberto Solás's *Lucía* (1969), and Sara Gómez's *De cierta manera* 'One Way or Another' (1974), *Central do Brasil* draws on the fusion between fiction and the documentary (López, "An 'Other'" 135-56). Documentaries were instrumental for the Cuban Revolution and liberation movements across the continent, and most of its conventions, such as "a concern with the content and expressive richness of the actuality image, ... with the interpretative potential of editing, [and] the representation of social relationships" (Aitken 41), filtered

into the New Latin American Cinema. Indeed, the documentary's penchant for the didactic is perhaps most evident in the characteristic consciousness-raising of the movement. However, the New Latin American Cinema was also influenced by neorealism, which shares many similarities with the documentary. Neorealism represented the poor and the wretched. It often explored the point of view of children, which had been largely absent in cinema. Its interest in current social problems, non-professional actors and shooting on location gave precedence to documentary techniques. Though it was primarily aimed at audience reflection, it also strove for emotional engagement (Hess 106-107).⁵ Yet, as in the case of *Central do Brasil*, neorealism ultimately articulated conservative discourses (by playing down the role of the people and the state in the Fascist past, but mainly) by positing the unfeasibility of utopia through strategies of containment that allowed for the preservation of the status quo, both in terms of social class and of patriarchal capitalism (Rocchio).⁶

Fernando Birri, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, and Julio García Espinosa, who became aware of neorealism at the Centro Sperimentale di Roma, disseminated its features in their subsequent work. However, Brazilian filmmaker Alberto Cavalcanti preceded them in those efforts. Cavalcanti, who "worked with the French avant-garde of the 1920s," proved to be very influential in the British documentary movement, since he helped to develop "the documentary-drama" (Aitken, "British" 63). Indeed, Harry Watt's *The Saving of Bill Blewitt* (1936), a "story-documentary [that] made its first appearance while Grierson was still [in command included] scripted dialog, some studio sets, and ... a wholly fictional story. However, it also was made largely on location and employed nonprofessional actors, who were real people acting out events that might very possibly happen to them" (Swann 85-86). So, "in some respects this anticipated the production techniques and the aesthetic of Italian neorealism" (86). In 1936, upon Grierson's resignation, Cavalcanti took over (Aitken, "British" 63). At that point he led the "Film Unit away from theoretical discussions about public education and 'art' toward films that relied heavily upon the narrative techniques of the commercial film industry" (Swann 85). Cavalcanti would share these experiences upon his return to Brazil.⁷ Subsequently, influenced by neorealism

and the *Nouvelle Vague*, *Cinema Novo* directors focused on Brazilian subjects set amidst natural settings (West 6). Finally, the fusion with the documentary would resurface in the Brazilian film production of the 1990s, as a consequence of the intertextual references to *Cinema Novo*.⁸ To conclude, Salles implicitly acknowledges these influences as he states, “The people that you meet on the street and the stories that they bring can influence you directly [which is] not all that different from what the Italian neorealists did 50 years ago” (Andrew).

Salles had been making documentaries for ten years before he began to direct feature films (Andrew). In fact, he was working on a documentary on Socorro Nobre, a semi-literate female prisoner engaged in correspondence with a visual artist, when he conceived the main idea of *Central do Brasil* (Shaw 178, fn 45). The initial letter-writing scene begins with an intertextual allusion, that is, with a close-up of a sobbing middle-aged woman, Nobre, who proves her “exceptional talent as an amateur actress” (Nagib 40) by saying, “Querido, o meu coração é seu. Não importa o que você seja ou o que tenha feito, te amo. Esses anos todos que você ficar aí dentro trancado eu também vou ficar trancada aqui fora te esperando” ‘My darling, my heart belongs to you, no matter what you’ve done, I still love you. While you’re locked in there, all those years, I’ll be locked out here, waiting for you.’⁹ After a contrasting shot of the throngs of people passing by the station, the camera focuses on a scrawny old man, apparently riddled with Parkinson’s Disease, saying: “Seu Zé Amaro, muito obrigado pelo que você fez comigo. Eu confiei em você e você me enganou. Até a chave do meu apartamento você carregou” ‘Zé Amaro, thanks a lot for what you did to me. I trusted in you and you cheated me. You even ran off with my apartment key.’ Thus, in retrospect, we learn that the woman was dictating a letter, and her pathos is superseded by the irony with which the second character faces betrayal.

Then, the film’s nine-year-old protagonist appears with his mother, who dictates the third letter: “Jesus, você foi a pior coisa que já me aconteceu. Eu não tô te escrevendo pra te dar satisfação da minha vida. Só escrevo porque o teu filho Josué pediu. Eu contei pra ele que você não vale nada, mas ainda assim o menino pôs na idéia que quer te conhecer” ‘Dear Jesús, you’re the worst thing to happen

to me. I'm only writing because your son Josué asked me to. I told him you're worthless, and yet he still wants to meet you.' As in many other cases, Dora intervenes by requesting an address. Next, comes a young mulatto, who dictates, "Meu tesão ... Sentir o seu corpo junto do meu, carnes se unindo naquela cama de motel, nosso suor se misturando.¹⁰ Eu ainda me sinto, me sinto me" 'My hot pussy ... Your body against mine, rolling around in the motel bed, our sweat boiling, me, still ... I still feel ...' Montage is extremely effective. While in this case the address is suppressed, the next sequence stresses the lack of a precise address, since the young girl offers, "Terceira casa depois da padaria, Mimoso, Pernambuco" 'Third house after the bakery, Mimoso, Pernambuco.' The leitmotif of the address continues as the information of the next series is reduced to a close-up and a destination. Thus a middle-aged man states, "Cansação, Bahia," a very sweet old woman smiles, "Carangola, Minas Gerais," a young girl says, "Município de Relutaba, Ceará," and the last middle-aged man utters, "Muzanbinho, Minas Gerais."

Nagib notes that "the illiterate speakers are first shown in shot-reverse shot montage, but they soon monopolize the camera's attention, which closes in on their faces, while their speeches are reduced to the names of the towns and states they come from" (38). The Brazilian critic's excellent ideological reading is based on the director's interest in race: "this gallery of faces is so striking and became so famous because the eye that looks at them through the camera is clearly fascinated by their peculiar racial features, ranging from white European to black African" (Nagib 38). Moreover, Salles includes regional variations: "The characters' speeches, marked by their original accents and slang, are recorded with enhanced clarity, as if captured by an innocent ear that had never heard such a tongue before" (Nagib 40). Nagib, who contends that "old and young fraternize in the moving simplicity of poverty, and their speeches are invariably closed with a calm, tolerant smile" (40), draws on Marilena Chauí's critique of Brazilian foundational myths to argue that a portrayal of the country as devoid of prejudice, and its people as "peaceful, orderly, generous, cheerful and sensual" in spite of their suffering, "obstructs political action" (40).

Nagib buttresses her argument by adding that the "stunning images of Brazil's poor areas, captured in glorious color by the cel-

ebredated director of photography Walter Carvalho, have something strange, even uncanny about them” (42). Moreover, since Nagib adopts Ivana Bentes’s coinage of the “cosmetics of hunger” to contrast Salles’s representations of the New Brazilian Cinema vis-à-vis Glauber Rocha’s “aesthetics of hunger” (42), she infers, “Salles’s poverty is so clean and aestheticized that one immediately senses the narrator’s remoteness” (42).¹¹ In sum, Nagib concludes that, “by approaching a class other than his or her own, the filmmaker becomes the guilt-ridden ethnographer in search of redemption through a benevolent, idealized representation of the other” (42).¹²

However, despite and because of their sanitized representation, the close-ups draw us into caring for the illiterate who pay Dora to write for them (more on this later). Furthermore, as Salles incorporates the conventions of the documentary both into the screenplay as well as into the style, we shall take a short excursus to focus on the genre itself. In his seminal work on documentary, Bill Nichols acknowledges the recent trend to stress documentary’s link to narrative: “Documentaries are fictions with plots, characters, situations, and events like any other. They offer introductory lacks, challenges, or dilemmas; they build heightened tensions and dramatically rising conflicts, and they terminate with resolution and closure” (107). Yet, he adds, “They do all this with reference to a ‘reality’ that is a construct, the product of signifying systems, like the documentary film itself” (Nichols 107). Other critics echo these views. Thus, Trinh-H Minh-Ha states, “There is no such thing as documentary—whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques” (29). Similarly, Keith Beattie asserts, “the interpretation and manipulation of reality occurs at all stages of the documentary process” (13). Precisely because “the notion of any privileged access to a reality that exists ‘out there,’ beyond us, is an ideological effect” (Nichols 107), Juliane Burton’s definitions of the expository, observational, interactive and reflexive modes have made such a significant contribution to research on the documentary. As we shall see, the observational mode is particularly relevant to describe *Central do Brasil* because it “cede[s] ‘control’ over the events that occur in front of the camera more than any other” (Nichols 38).¹³

The documentary approach of the initial scenes is underscored

by the faces of the non-professional actors, ranging from Vinícius de Oliveira, who was a shoeshine boy, to those who asked Dora to write letters for them as she set her table on the first day of the shoot (Shaw 163).¹⁴ The fact that the initial letter-writing scene was shot with “a small camera, [which was concealed] as much as possible” (James 15), reinforces the effect of the observational mode in so far as it presents the “voice of the observed in indirect verbal address,” and it creates a sense of “synchronous sound and long takes” (Burton 4). Specifically, while the close-up scenes emphasize “impartiality,” the content of the letters suggest “intimate detail and texture of lived experience” (4). Since the letters are addressed to relatives, they represent the “behavior of subjects within social formations (families, institutions, communities), and at moments of ... personal crisis” (4). Lastly, the “interaction between observer and observed [appears to be] kept to a minimum” (4). Conversely, documentary aspects are woven into the picture. Since even non-professional actors such as Nobre and de Oliveira are following a script which is not too different from so-called “real lives,” “the film [blends its] realist base with the fiction superimposed on it” (Nagib 40). Namely, the audience is watching “social actors,” that is, “individuals [who] represent themselves to others [to the extent that] the sense of aesthetic remove between an imaginary world in which actors perform and the historical world in which people live no longer obtains” (Nichols 42).

The documentary inflects the screenplay further, as Salles admits: “the letters they came out with had a much more raw and honest quality—or should I say poetry? than the ones in the prize-winning screenplay. [They] were dictated by a need to be heard and they brought an incredible emotional charge we never expected” (James 15). However, ethical concerns would explain the omission of the content of so many letters.¹⁵ The fusion between fiction and the conventions of the documentary is particularly apparent in the sequences representing public expressions of devotion, since Salles acknowledges, “when we were location scouting I saw these religious processions ... that [were] inherent to that part of Brazil ... so we rewrote the screenplay” (Andrew).¹⁶ Thus, in accordance with the observational mode, this sequence shows “images of observation” (Burton 4). Moreover, Salles “decided to work with real pil-

grims and not with extras so half an hour into the shoot [the pilgrimage scene] stopped being a re-enactment and became the thing itself” (James 15). Following the parameters of the observational mode, it “is a single take, shot over the course of a night” (15), and so there is a “predominance of synchronous sound and long takes” (Burton 4). Finally, the “interaction between observer and observed is kept to a minimum” (4) because Carvalho, the cinematographer, relied “on the natural light from the pilgrims’ thousands of candles” (Shaw 165).

I have cited Salles’s interview at length to underscore the director’s awareness of the impact of the fusion of documentary techniques, which emphasize the illusion of objectivity as they draw an affective reaction from the audience. Paradoxically, features of the observational documentaries, such as the “three-dimensional fullness and unity in which the observer’s location is readily determined [underscore the similarities between] classic narrative fiction [and] the historical world” (Nichols 39). These traits are present in all of the pseudo-documentary sections, including the second set of close-ups, those of the gleeful messages of the pilgrims at Bom Jesus do Norte which appear to be set against the drama of the initial letter-writing scene. As in the first set of close-ups, the ontological status of the talking heads is not clear. Are these real interviews? Non-professional actors performing their own stories or those of others? Similarly, as in the initial section, while some offer a story, the elision of the content of some messages generates suspense. For instance, a young man states, “*Criselda, Criseldinha, vim lá de Itabaiana ... Até aqui, a pé pela estrada*” ‘Criseldinha, I’ve come here from Itabaiana ... I walked all the way. Along the road.’ A young bride says, “*Tou aqui em Bom Jesus pra agradecer a promessa que fiz do Benício aceitar casar comigo*” ‘I’m fulfilling the vow I made to come here if Bernicio agreed to marry me.’ Similarly, a mature woman wearing a blue polka dot dress beams with satisfaction, “*Obrigado, Bom Jesus, pela graça alcançada de o meu marido ter largado a cachaça*” ‘Thank you, Jesus, for answering my prayers. My husband has stopped drinking.’ The audience may wonder why an emaciated middle aged man rocking with laughter says, “*Leontina Emerentina ... Já posso ser o homem mais feliz do mundo*” ‘Leontina Emerentina, I am now the happiest man in the world.’ However,

in a melodramatic turn, another middle-aged man worries about his son, “Já faz quatro anos que ele já saiu” ‘It’s four years since he’s left.’ So, to the extent that the series of close-ups conjures up the conventions of observational documentaries, “these films invite the viewer to take an even more complex relation to the film’s referential dimension. ... Instead of the suspension of disbelief that could be put as ‘I know very well [that this is a fiction] but all the same ... [I will treat it as if it were not],’ the observational documentary encourages belief; ‘Life *is* like this, isn’t it?’” (Nichols 42).¹⁷

Mirroring the initial shot at the station, a montage of fragments follows. Thus, while a young girl says, “Lembrança para minha mãe” ‘Love to mother,’ Maria Adalgiza Bezerra,” a man wearing a cap addresses his letter to “Josefa Maria da Silva” in “São Bento do Una.” Similarly, a girl states, “Pra meu noivo ‘To my fiancée,’ João Pedro da Silva” in “São Paulo.” And two brothers wearing almost identical straw hats address their father, “José Alves da Silva.” The section ends with a bang, as the last client takes his hat off, almost bragging, “Obrigado, Menino Jesus, pela graça alcançada, de ter feito chover esse ano lá na roça. Vim a Bom Jesus e soltei dez foguete colorido em sua homenagem. Sebastiano” ‘Thank you baby Jesus, for answering our prayers. Thank you for bringing us rain. I came to Bom Jesus and set off ten colored rockets in your honor. Sebastiano.’ In sum, the details of these letters reinforce the delight of the faces, the object of the close-up. The suppression of the content of a number of letters in both series of close-ups whets the audience’s curiosity, but also places those letters “under erasure” (Spivak xiv). In other words, since we expect each subject to dictate a letter, the fragmentary nature of these texts underscores the elisions that preclude interpretation.

Two more instances of close-ups complement those of the letter-writing sequences. The ride the protagonists share with pilgrims in the back of the truck is presented as a panning shot, suggesting the real time of documentary. However, the illusion of the documentary is built on a montage of shots focusing on the behavior of the pilgrims: some chant, others pray, some eat, others remain silent. The other sequence takes place as Dora chases Josué through the tide of pilgrims in so far as the camera focuses on different individuals whose chants are associated with a message typical of the

repertoire. Thus, a woman prays, “Obrigado, obrigado, Jesus, eu tô te pedindo, te orando, com todo o meu coração. Jesus, com toda minha alma, Jesus. Abençoa o meu povo” “Thank you, Thank you, Jesus. Here I am, Lord. I beg of you. I’m praying with all my heart, with all my soul, Jesus. **Bless my people. Bless my pilgrims.**’ Similarly, a man follows, “Me perdoa, Senhor, que sou um pecador. Pelo sangue de Cristo, Senhor. Olha as minhas dificuldades ... o meu sangue na veia ... no meu corpo” ‘I’m a sinner, Jesus. Pardon. For the blood of Christ, look at the hardships I must bear! I suffer in my flesh, my bone, my blood, in my body.’ This device also appears in shoots within the sanctuary under the guise of Dorá’s point of view as she is about to faint.

The affective impact of these scenes is heightened by the techniques deployed in “observational cinema [which] convey the sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the world,” which paradoxically, “hinges on the presence of the filmmaker or authoring agency as ... an [unacknowledged] absent presence” (Nichols 43). Indeed, the exploration of the contemporary *sertão* ‘backlands’ is so compelling because “the mise-en-scène of the film is not fabricated on a set but ... the arena of historical reality [which] imposes more constraints on the ideal observer than we find in fiction” (Nichols 44).¹⁸ That is, the documentary technique draws an affective impact from the audience. Yet, even though Nagib’s ideological interpretation resonates with Salles’s personal account, I would argue that both because and despite the purportedly “sanitized” representation, the close-up exerts a powerful affective impact on the audience. Furthermore, the exploration of the affective resonance of the close-up is all the more relevant given Shaw’s dictum regarding the effect of the “long shots of passengers hurrying to get off and on the trains [which are] interspersed ... with the close-ups of customers at Dorá’s stall [in order to set] them among the backdrop of the crowd and prevent their character development” (Shaw 166). In other words, according to Shaw, the close-ups are neutralized to such an extent that “with the obvious exception of Josué and Ana ... these talking heads never acquire the status of individuals worth caring about” (Shaw 166).

Conversely, film critics such as Minh-Ha acknowledge the apparent partiality of the close-up (34), and Gilles Deleuze states that

the close-up gives “an affective reading of the whole film, [which results from] the combination of a reflecting, immobile unity [the face] and of intensive expressive movements ... which the rest of the body usually keeps hidden” (87-88). Deleuze traces this fascination back to the painting tradition, noting that it focuses either on “the face as an outline, by an encircling line which traces the nose, the mouth, the edge of the eyelids,” or on “dispersed features taken globally,” such as “the quivering of the lips” or “the brilliance of a look” (88). Thus, admiration is conveyed by “a minimum of movement for a maximum of unity, reflecting and reflected on the face.” Similarly, “what is called *desire* [is] inseparable from the little solicitations or impulses which make up an intensive series expressed by the face” (Deleuze 88). Later, however, Deleuze contrasts the “reflexive face,” which reflects a quality, such as admiration or wonder, with the “intensive face,” which expresses power, defined in terms such as desire or the conflict between love and hate (90-91).

Thus, following Deleuze’s articulation, the close-ups in the initial letter-writing series show “intensive faces” that convey desire or power by representing an overriding emotion, such as sorrow, irony, annoyance or sexual arousal. Naturally, the audience’s interpretation of facial expressions is reinforced by an awareness of the content of the respective letters; therefore, the audience can only surmise the emotions conveyed by the close-ups of those subjects whose letters are pared down to an addressee or a destination. Thus, even though the audience cannot establish a link between the subjects’ facial expression and the content of their respective messages, the fact that most characters are beaming with satisfaction, and that their messages refer to the fulfillment of their vows, would allow us to consider these close-ups in terms of Deleuze’s reflective faces, which express different degrees of happiness, bliss, or admiration. As in the first series of letter-writing, these close-ups on the back of the truck and at the pilgrimage scene stress one main aspect of the protagonist’s behavior; in short, they emphasize the myriad facets of desire. With Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* in mind, Deleuze asserts that the “serial aspect is best embodied by several simultaneous or successive faces,” the function of which is “to pass from one quality to another ... to carry out a qualitative leap” (89). Thus, the series emphasizes both the poignancy of the plight of the

letter writers and the passionate beliefs of the pilgrims.

Yet the subject of a close-up is not necessarily restricted to a face. Along these lines, Deleuze notes that directors transfer their penchant for the close-up as a reflective or intensive surface to things, which tears them away from their spatiotemporal coordinates and/or converts them into icons (96-97). That would seem to be the case regarding the close-up of the letters that Josué's parents wrote to each other, which are placed beneath a picture of the couple. Since the letters failed to reach their respective addressees, they signal the frustrations of the past; however, since they finally arrive at the home of the siblings, they imply closure and signal a new beginning. Ironically, while the diegesis establishes a clear-cut line between good and evil, Josué suspects that Dora may have added the words about his father's wish to meet him. Therefore, the truth/falsehood dichotomy is deconstructed by the Derridean supplement, that is, the pious white lie (*Of Grammatology*, 144-45).

The quest for the father involves that of national identity, for as Salles notes, "in Portuguese, the words for father (pai) and country (pais) are almost the same" (Andrew). Yet, the main journey also "becomes the locus of a reverse migration that establishes a dialogue with *Cinema Novo* films" (Xavier 61), which depicted the *sertão* as a "land ... in crisis, where desperate or rebellious characters live or wander" (Bentes 123).¹⁹ Indeed, while Pereira dos Santos's *Vidas secas* 'Barren Lives' (1963), portrays "the dry and deserted land, and the cruelty of the white sun," Glauber Rocha's *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* 'Black God, White Devil' (1964) presents the *sertão* "as a land in crisis and in trance, shown as violence and violation, ... with its scorched, rough, barren scenery, and its wizened, twisted, prickly flora" (Bentes 124). In so far as Salles reinscribes and subverts the tradition of *Cinema Novo*, his portrayal of the backlands catachrestically continues with the project of the articulation of a Brazilian imaginary.²⁰

In conclusion, we have argued that the synergy between the fiction film and the conventions of the documentary is a legacy of the New Latin American Cinema, influenced as it was by Italian neorealism and the Cuban Revolution's emphasis on the documentary. Upon his return to Brazil, Alberto Cavalcanti heralded this synergy, which would reappear in *Cinema Novo*. Therefore, by dwelling on

illiteracy, senseless violence such as the killing of the youth at the station, and organ trafficking, Salles follows Grierson's advice about focusing on stories taken from the raw. Furthermore, Salles's multi-layered reinscription of *Cinema Novo* includes Dora's "trance ... in the procession, with the camera spinning around her;" however, the *Cinema Novo* trait of recounting "the fiction ... in a documentary way" (Bentes 126) is fundamental in underscoring the textual [and referential] similarities between fiction films and observational documentaries (Nichols 42). Moreover, since observational documentaries highlight the referential dimension by creating the illusion of transparent access, they exert a powerful affective impact on the audience. In other words, these movies provide "a vital forum for ... an affective form of learning" (Nichols 42), which is in turn reinforced by the deployment of the close-up in the pseudo documentary sections of *Central do Brasil*. In sum, at this critical juncture when the documentary is being re-evaluated, it is particularly important to shed light on the effect of its fusion with fiction films.

While these techniques speak to Salles's indebtedness to Neo-realism and *Cinema Novo*, the affective impact emphasizes the audience's frustration at the melodramatic denouement. For, even though the fraternal reunion implies a happy ending, Josué's brothers are squatting in a government house. Therefore, despite their apparent well being, their prospects are determined by the nature of the development, about which Salles notes, "the land structure is so impossible that the government has to create towns—like the ones at the end of the film—that are absolutely artificial. They're in the middle of nowhere and there's no work around so they become ghost towns in five or six years" (James 15). In sum, given the dire poverty of most of the *Nordestinos* Dora and Josué meet on their way, and especially the high rate of illiteracy suggested by the clients at the station, we could argue that all is not well in the *sertão*. Indeed, as Tânia Pellegrini notes, the audience takes stock of the fact that in *Central do Brasil*, "não existe a retórica da denúncia, permanência apenas a da (re)descoberta ... Se já não existe a utopia de uma ação política transformadora, existe a sua recuperação fantasmática nas imagens do país e sua gente, que continuam ali, intocadas, como há cinquenta anos ou mais" 'in the absence of a rhetoric of denunciation a discourse of (re)discovery barely remains ... Though the

utopia of a transformative political action is no longer viable, its fantasmatic recuperation results from the images of the country and its people, that remain, frozen in time, as they were some fifty years ago' (225). To conclude, the affective impact resulting from the fusion of the fiction film and the observational documentary, which is reinforced by the subjective engagement of the close-up, intensifies the audience's empathy toward the *Nordestinos*, thus calling for a more urgent resolution of their plight.

Notes

1 On the comparison between *Central do Brasil* and *Pixote*, see Deborah Shaw, *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America*, 158-60 and Ismail Xavier, 60.

2 Xavier notes that the film's "tearful ending is indeed a piece of melodrama, but it looks for an aesthetic sanction in that collection of dense and revealing images that its documentary aspect is able to produce" (59).

3 Melodrama may be defined as "a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects," or as "a particular form of dramatic mise-en-scène, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories," in which "dramatic situations" are orchestrated to "allow for complex aesthetic patterns" (Elsaesser 172-73).

4 John Hess notes that Cesare Zavattini contended that the objective of neorealism "does not consist in bringing the audience to tears and indignation by means of transference but, on the contrary, ... in bringing them to reflect (and then, if you will to stir up emotions and indignation) upon what they are doing and upon what others are doing; that is to think about reality precisely as it is" (107).

5 On the impact of neorealism on Latin American Cinema see Ana M. López, "An 'Other' History," 135-56. Hess argues that Latin American directors changed neorealist "style and mode of production to make them more suitable to the revolutionary movement that was sweeping their continent in the 60s [because they saw] their work as directly participating in [the] struggle, as a direct intervention into social and historical reality" (105; 111).

6 For a brief treatment of the conservative ideology of neorealism, see Hess's article; for a book length discussion of the topic, see Vincent Rocchio's *Cinema of Anxiety*. My appreciation to the anonymous reader for this tip.

7 On Alberto Cavalcanti's contribution to the documentary in the UK, see Ian Aitken 179-214. For the stages of Cinema Novo, see Randal Johnson 2-3.

8 On the influx of the documentary in the New Latin American Cinema see Michael Chanan, "The Documentary in the Revolution," 184-217; Juliane Burton, *The Social Documentary* and López, "At the Limits of the Documentary," 403-32. Sergei Eisenstein's comments shed light on the initial convergence between the New Latin American Cinema and its Soviet antecedent: "the Soviet film serves the mass of people, their interests, their organizations; it is the expression of the collective strivings of various organized units. [D]irectors, cameramen ... realize that they are the voice of this collective mass demand ... We are opposed to 'constructing' sets ... If we need a factory for a film ... we go to an actual factory" (30-31).

9 My appreciation to Clarice Deal for the Portuguese transcription of the screenplay.

10 Though the term "Mulatto" is considered offensive in the United States, that is not the case in the Brazilian context.

11 Aesthetically, *Cinema Novo* directors resorted to "the dry cut, the nervous framing, the overexposure, the hand-held camera, [and] the fragmented narrative which mirrored the cruelty of the *sertão* [to propose] an ethics and an aesthetics for the images of pain and revolt" (Bentes 124).

12 Nagib appears to attribute the deployment of documentary conventions to an interest in "the geographical exploration of the country, [defined in terms of a] renewed curiosity about the human element and its typicality" as well as a device to provide intertextual allusions to "moments of radicalism in Brazilian cinema [such as] films by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Ruy Guerra and Glauber Rocha" (33; 36). Indeed, Nagib notes that: "the film's journey begins in Rio, whose slums and train station, ... had once been the locations of ... dos Santos' *Rio, Northern Zone* (*Rio, Zona Norte*, 1957), and it culminates in the Northeast in such locations as Milagres, already utilized by Ruy Guerra in *The Guns* (*Os fuzis*, 1963) and Glauber Rocha in *Antonio das Mortes* (*O dragão da maldade contra o santo guerreiro*, 1969)" (38). In terms of ideology, Nagib notes, since "reality is adapted to fiction" evil is concentrated at the station, and "logical causality is replaced by fate" (40). More importantly, "the lack of class conflict ... and/or an oppressive power allows for the action to be transferred from the collective to the individual" (Nagib 41).

13 A caveat is necessary here because Nichols describes the different modes at great length, so to that extent, my quotations are partial.

14 In Salles's film the "mix of actors and non-actors and its setting among the urban poor of Brazil" is reminiscent of *Cinema Novo* (Cowan 72). Indeed, Salles has acknowledged the influence of "Pereira dos Santos' *Vidas secas*, which dealt with those people thrown off their land into a life of nomadism and exile in the city" (Cowan 72). Finally, in the interview included in the DVD version

of the film, Salles states that the close-ups are a homage to Pereira dos Santos's *Vidas secas*.

15 Nichols notes that "Observational filmmaking gives a particular inflection to ethical considerations. Since the mode hinges on the ability of the filmmaker to be unobtrusive, the issue of intrusion surfaces over and over within the institutional discourse ... Does the evidence of the film convey a sense of respect for the lives of others or have they simply been used as signifiers in someone else's discourse?" (39).

16 "A place that was the harsh setting for insoluble contradictions in the 1960s emerges in the 1990s in a different guise. ... Religious faith, previously thought of as nothing more than a distraction, is now part of the human landscape. Poverty may still exist, but it is dignified, more moderate and rectifiable. Pre-revolutionary fervor has been replaced by the quest for social happiness ... What was once a battlefield has become a stage for cathartic reconciliation or existential redemption" (Oricchio 156).

17 Nichols notes that the observational filmmakers first posited their kinship with fiction in relation to Italian neorealism (43).

18 "Observational filmmaking and the social science approaches of ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism have a number of principles in common. All three stress an empathetic, nonjudgmental, participatory mode of observation that attenuates the authoritative posture of traditional exposition. Observational cinema affords the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of others, to gain some sense of the distinct rhythms of everyday life, to see the colors, shapes, and spatial relationships among people and their possessions (for instance, the home of the first father, the ranch), to hear the intonation, inflection, and accents that give a spoken language its 'grain' and that distinguish one native speaker from another. If there is something to be gained from an affective form of learning, observational cinema provides a vital forum for such experience" (Nichols 41-42).

19 Ivana Bentes's description of the *sertão* includes that of the *favelas* (123).

20 For a Derridean approximation to catachresis see *Margins* (256; fn 60).

Works Cited

- Aitken, Ian. "The British Documentary Film Movement." *The British Cinema Book*. Ed. Robert Murphy. London: British Film Institute, 1997. 58-78.
- . *The Documentary Film Movement*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998.
- Andrew, Geoff. "Interview with Walter Salles." *The Guardian Interviews at the National Film Theater*, 26 Aug. 2004. <<http://film.guardian.co.uk/inter>

- view/interviewpages/0,,1291387,00.html>
- Beattie, Keith. *Documentary Screens: Non-Fiction Film and Television*. Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Houndmills, 2004.
- Bentes, Ivana. "The *sertão* and the *favela* in contemporary Brazilian film." *The New Brazilian Cinema*. Ed. Lúcia Nagib. London: I.B. Tauris, 2003. 121-37.
- Burton, Juliane. *The Social Documentary in Latin America*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P: 1990.
- Central do Brasil 'Central Station'* Dir. Walter Salles. Perf. Fernanda Montenegro, 1998.
- Chanan, Michael. "The Documentary in the Revolution." *Cuban Cinema*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004. 84-217.
- Cowan, Noah. "Special Delivery." *Filmmaker*. 6. 2 (January 1998): 72.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The movement-image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, c 1986, 7th printing, 2003.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.
- . "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy." *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. 207-71.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. "Soviet Cinema." *Film Essays and a lecture*. Ed. Jay Leyda. New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1970. 20-31.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama." *Movies and Methods*. Ed. Bill Nichols. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994. 165-89.
- Grierson, John. "First Principles of the Documentary." *The Documentary Film Movement*. Ed. Ian Aitken. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998. 81-93.
- Hess, John. "Neorealism and New Latin American Cinema: *Bicycle Thieves* and *Blood of the Condor*." *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*. Eds. John King, Ana M. López and Manuel Alvarado. London: British Film Institute, 1993. 104-18.
- James, Nick. "Heartbreak and miracles." *Sight and Sound*. 9. 3 (March 1999): 12-15.
- Johnson, Randal. *Cinema Novo x 5*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1984.
- Laderman, David. *Driving Visions*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2002.

- López, Ana M. "An 'Other' History." *New Latin American Cinema*. Ed. Michael T. Martin. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1997. 135-56.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. "The Totalizing Quest for Meaning." *When the Moon Waxes Red*, New York: Routledge, 1991. 29-50.
- Nagib, Lúcia. "The Center, the Zero, and the Empty Utopia." *Brazil on Screen: Cinema Novo, New Cinema, Utopia*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007. 33-57.
- . *The New Brazilian Cinema*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003.
- Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Oricchio, Luis Zanin. "The *sertão* in the Brazilian imaginary at the end of the millennium." Nagib, 2003. 139-56.
- Pellegrini, Tânia. *Despropósitos: Estudos de Ficção Brasileira Contemporânea*. São Paulo, Brasil: Annablume Editora, 2008.
- Rocchio, Vincent. *Cinema of Anxiety: A Psychoanalysis of Italian Neorealism*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1999.
- Roston, Tom. "Art with heart." *Premiere* 11. 4 (December 1998): 68.
- Shaw, Deborah. *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America: 10 Key Films*. New York: Continuum, 2003.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Translator's Preface." *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974. ix-lxxxvii.
- Swann, Paul. *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-1946*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- West, Dennis. *Contemporary Brazilian Cinema*. University of New Mexico: The Latin American Institute, 1993.
- Xavier, Ismail. "Brazilian Cinema in the 1990s: The Unexpected Encounter and the Resentful Character." Nagib, 2003. 39-63.