

**University of Texas Press**  
**Society for Cinema & Media Studies**

---

"Bus 174" and the Living Present

Author(s): Amy Villarejo

Source: *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Autumn, 2006), pp. 115-120

Published by: University of Texas Press on behalf of the Society for Cinema & Media Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137155>

Accessed: 12/07/2010 17:44

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=texas>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Texas Press and Society for Cinema & Media Studies are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cinema Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

owe a bow and debt of thanks to my colleagues in the Program in Social Documentation and Community Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Particular thanks for conversations on these topics to my community studies colleagues Marcia Ochoa, Renee Tajima-Peña, Mary Beth Pudup, Nancy Stoller, and David Wellman; to the staff for its support, especially in arranging Hubert Sauper's visit; and to the first cohort of social documentation graduate students, the 007s, in particular my teaching assistant Florencia Marchetti. Special thanks to Lisa Rofel for her suggestion of the Wu Wenguang essay.

1. So many names to reference here! A hopeless task, no doubt, and a dangerous one. In addition to those already referenced via Visible Evidence(s), the founding fathers of our current thinking about, through, and around documentary include Eric Barnouw, Bill Nichols, Alan Rosenthal, Jay Ruby, Thomas Waugh, Brian Winston, and the late Sol Worth. After the paternity, the deluge: Paula Rabinowitz, Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, Stella Bruzzi, Rosa Linda Fregoso, Fatimah Tobing Rony, Patricia Zimmerman, and so many others. And all the documentarians who have passed on their wisdom and theoretical perspectives, whether today on the D-word website or, notably, in book form: David MacDougall, Edgar Morin, Jean Rouch, Trinh T. Minh-ha. Thanks to my documentarian friend Danielle Beverly (*Learning to Swallow*) for her many conversations with me on the subject.
2. For an up-to-date view see the "New World of Documentary," the exhaustive special section with introduction by Julia Lesage in *JumpCut* 48 (Winter 2006). Indeed, *JumpCut* has been a central player in documentary debates across three decades and shows no sign of stopping. In particular, note cofounder/editor Chuck Kleinhans's essay on audio documentary in the same issue.
3. I have borrowed the term *samizdat* from the vocabulary of the former Soviet Union. In a Library of Congress glossary on its website the term is described: "Literally, self-publication. Russian word for the printing and circulating of literary, political, and other written manuscripts without passing them through the official censor, thus making them unauthorized and illegal." I am aware that by employing a term from this era and location I am making a claim concerning media access, freedom, and strategy in the United States of 2006 that may be contested.
4. On this subject see Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour, eds., *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film* (Toronto and Cambridge, Mass.: Alphabet City and MIT Press, 2004), including my essay on this theme, "To Read or Not to Read: Subtitles, Literacy, and Monolingualism."
5. *Darwin's Nightmare* is distributed on film and video by the International Film Circuit and is forthcoming on DVD from another company.

---

## **Bus 174 and the Living Present**



by Amy Villarejo

Jose Padilha's 2002 film *Bus 174* brings the resources of vigilance and clarity to the medium of television. Focusing on the hijacking of a bus in Rio de Janeiro on June 12, 2000 (Valentine's Day in Brazil), *Bus 174* sets into motion an analysis of the "incident" or "situation" as it was seen widely on live television in order to understand its constellation of rage, fear, poverty, and despair: all among the

elements cut or occluded from television's frame. This is a film that makes a fierce argument against Anglo-American strains of individualism in documentary cinema (exemplified in subsequent years by the bad and the good, both Morgan Spurlock's indulgent *Supersize Me* [2004] and Jonathan Caouette's riveting *Tarnation* [2003]) and an argument in favor of a form capable of complicated social understanding. I therefore understand the film as a type of pedagogy: an essay on the future of cinema and on the limits of representation.

In what follows I put the film into conversation with the work of Jacques Derrida, whose passing in 2004 sent me to a book of his that television scholar Lynn Spigel had, in print at least, discouraged me from reading. *Echographies of Television*, more or less a series of transcripts of filmed interviews between Bernard Stiegler and Jacques Derrida, despite Spigel's warning about its discussion of the "waning of the TV object," helped me to think about the effects of television liveness alongside a number of themes that preoccupied Derrida in his writings over the past decade or so: justice (versus law or right), the archive, hospitality, democracy to come, and so on.<sup>1</sup> I think his insights from those interviews about media and "on film," as it were, can guide a reading of *Bus 174*, a film that might be seen to invoke a number of these themes, if obliquely. Since Derrida's work on and around "visuality" remains, as Spigel rightly points out, largely untested in the domain of film and media studies, we have in *Bus 174* an opportunity to explore this nexus. We inherit a beginning from Derrida, an archive (what Akira Lippit calls a "virtual archive on the subjects of visibility and invisibility") to build upon.<sup>2</sup>

*Bus 174* investigates the production of *hypervisibility*. On that June day cameras swarmed into the Jardim Botânico neighborhood, where a public city bus had come to a stop after a hijacker's robbery attempt. The bus remained there for what would eventually total four and a half hours. VIVO (live) television feeds, date-stamped and time-coded, showed several different angles of the stationary bus from a relative long shot, while camera operators from newspapers and television approached the bus from virtually every possible trajectory on the ground. Glare from the windows of the bus prevented unmediated access to the events involving the hostages unfolding within. Racking their focus in order to frame events through partially opened windows, the television camera operators, later lodged directly adjacent to the bus, trained their lenses nonetheless on every part of the bus's anatomy: the number and destination on its front banner, the door (through which all transactions would take place), the driver's seat and steering wheel, the seats row by row. Amidst the crowds of the initially unsecured scene, the cameras offered complete spatial coverage and consistent orientation according to the broadcast ideals of transparency, reportage, and information. Throughout the bus-passenger hostage crisis the people of Brazil stopped to watch what was importantly a national drama, one that earned the highest television ratings of the year.

The film is aware of the borders and contours of the nation-state, contradictorily represented as a tourist oasis (the beaches of Copacabana) and as a coagulated *favela* (slum). It begins, in fact, with a beautiful (majestic, awe-inspiring) aerial shot of Rio that ultimately cedes to lower altitude visuals of the slums out of which come the street kids who speak the film's first words (an index of the esteem or care in which Padilha holds them). *Bus 174* is a story, from its very first moment, about Brazil and particularly its dense cities that breed *invisibility*, about kids who come

from somewhere but are going nowhere, about streets filled with homeless and penniless kids everywhere. "It's a cold floor," we hear over images of those streets. "Can I talk about my dreams?" If these words travel in global circuits, and they do immediately by way of television itself as well as via DVD and other formats, *Bus 174* remains vigilant about its national location as it probes the failed state institutions (law, social service, penal, educational, media) that can provide no justice for its young citizens such as the hijacker, Sandro Nascimento. The street as nation as locus of mediatized violence: this is the film's opening gesture, one it continues through the motif of aerials that anchor our vision to those *socially and nationally marked* streets. By contrast to the U.S. media's use of aerials both to foreground the power of the cameras to perform surveillance and to render space generic, Padilha rewrites the geography of Rio in insistently social terms.

In order to mount a critique of its own conditions of possibility, then, *Bus 174* draws upon the resources of documentary. How to make sense of this televised drama of the hijacker and the hostages? Its mise-en-scène and its actors, especially its protagonist? Its frame and its out-of-frame, its context, its iterability (possibility of repetition with a difference)? What of such drama can be represented, and what of its violence remains stubbornly unrepresentable? What of this event makes it timely, "newsworthy" of being selected from the "noninfinite mass of events" of its time or of its moment?<sup>3</sup> These are the questions Padilha raises, and it behooves us to note that he poses them largely through conventional documentary filmic strategies, including talking head interviews and an expository treatment of the story's main constituents (the police, the hijacker, the hostages, and so on). His most startling innovation comes in his treatment of the televisual material, an element João Luis Viera tells me is important to much Brazilian cinema after Hector Babenco's *Pixote* (1981).<sup>4</sup>

Padilha frames television, then, as a national medium, but he also draws attention to its mediatized effects and functions beyond or beside it. First, Padilha foregrounds how television acts as a witness, one that shapes what it incessantly records, and, second, how television functions as a conduit that also codifies performances of power. To the extent that his film (here meant as an interrogation of media effects) answers the televisual image, it seeks to make visible a prior dramatization that television acts as though it records. In other words, the life of Sandro Nascimento, all of that which led him to that bus and into the situation constituted as an event, cannot enter the televisual frame. It is a life marked by the trauma of witnessing his mother's murder as she was butchered in front of him at the age of six. It is a life spent on the streets, narcotized by addiction and hardened by the experience of prison. The "reality," what Derrida might have called the "artificiality," of his situation on bus 174 is that of an actor with only one role to play: a man who will be dead. This begs the question, How do we mine the effect of liveness to understand this occluded drama of death within the living present?

We should never forget that this "live" is not an absolute "live" but only a live effect [*un effet de direct*], an allegation of live. Whatever the apparent immediacy of the transmission or broadcast, it negotiates with choices, with framing, with selectivity.

— Bernard Stiegler and Jacques Derrida,  
*Echographies of Television*

**Deconstructing Liveness.** Derrida repeats what television scholars have known since Jane Feuer's essay, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," noticed it in 1983.<sup>5</sup> Recall that Feuer's essay argues that the less that television is a live medium in the sense of an equivalence between the time of an event and the time of its transmission (and now, with the capacity for "time shifting" via TiVo and DVD recorders, the time of its reception), the more television seems to insist upon the *ideology* of liveness (the immediate, the direct, the spontaneous, the true). A circuit of meanings therefore lodges in the idea of the live, conflating an ideological claim for lack of mediation with a denial of death with a boastful sense of a technical feat of presence. Or, to put it slightly differently, the "live" both describes the actuality of a convergence between global capital and digital technology *and* the ideological effect of that convergence, which is to mystify the conditions of its own emergence and hegemony. Much television scholarship on the topic of liveness has subsequently been devoted to Derrida's descriptions "ad infinitum" of the interventions through which the live is produced as an effect.<sup>6</sup> Chief among these interventions is the mere declaration that it is so, whether through time coding, announcements from anchors on location, or graphic assertions.<sup>7</sup>

*Bus 174* advances a different relationship to televisual liveness than ideology critique. Sandro Nasciemento, the film insists over and over again, is but one among many; *Bus 174* is not a film about an individual who became a protagonist but about the mediated and mediatized effects of social invisibility and anonymity multiplied a thousandfold. To speak about those effects, however, is never to lose sight of his singularity as well as his loss.

One touchstone for that multiplication is the massacre at Candelária Church in downtown Rio, where police killed seven street children (who first approached their car anticipating nighttime soup). Sandro was one of the sixty-two children sleeping at the church that evening who survived the assault, and he invokes this prior "incident" and its ghosts to his national audience as he waves his gun on bus 174: "Brazil, check this out. I was at Candelária. This is serious shit. My little friends were murdered by cowards."

The social worker Yvonne Bezerra de Mello, herself a mediatized construction, asks on-screen, as though it had been the stuff of dreams or films, "Who could imagine that there'd be a massacre downtown?" Downtown, where business and tourism mingled in the shadow of a Catholic church, seemed an impossible location for police to slaughter children? She summarizes the fate of the sixty-two survivors: thirty-two were subsequently murdered, several disappeared, and the remaining group survives precariously, marked with the distress of having witnessed the massacre and having survived continuing violence at the hands of Brazil's police.

But the incident on the bus is not the same event as Candelária, just as the multiplication of deaths does not liquidate the specificity of each:

The question—or the demand—of the phantom is the question and the demand of the future and of justice as well. We confuse the analogous with the identical: "Exactly the same thing is repeating itself, exactly the same thing." No, a phantom's return is, each time, another different return, on a different stage, in new conditions to which we must always pay the closest attention if we don't want to say or do just anything.<sup>8</sup>

To recognize Sandro's psychobiography is to grant the specificity of his experience, including the trauma of his mother's murder, which he incessantly repeats, but it is also to locate him within a wider social world upon which *Bus 174* dwells in order to refuse the personalization of social antagonisms. "The same way [glue addiction] fucks him up, it fucks up lots of other kids," Coelho, a former street kid, explains. "Many of them are just like him." Former and current street children populate *Bus 174* in intimate and proximate interviews, reminding the viewer of two things: first, that the film's construction of the idea of the multitude takes place at the level of the production *process* as much as at the level of its meaning and, second, that the living and the dead populate this "live" moment.

This movie is also a morgue. The "return on a different stage," then, requires a type of paying attention to the phantoms even as they are conjured away through mediation. How to restore the dignity of singularity to those who have been rendered marginal and anonymous? How to recognize the event as wholly other?

Many street kids will have died since their images were captured, just as Fernando Ramos Da Silva, star of Babenco's *Pixote*, was murdered after his only leading role. In the end, this is *and* isn't a movie. Its living present is accessible through the image of the dead. "You think that this is a movie?" Sandro yells from the bus. "This ain't no fuckin' movie!" "This ain't no action movie. This is serious shit." Sandro's moment on the bus fuses contradictory positions together regarding the politics of visibility. If he appears, becomes the protagonist, renders visible the lives of the street kids who long for social recognition (as the sociologist interviewed for the film alleges), that gesture is doubly illusory. "All those people around the bus were worried about us," recollects one of the hostages. "Not about him. It was him against everybody." If the lenses trained upon his towed head seemed to guarantee his life, the moment they could no longer access the action he would be suffocated, as he is at the end of the ordeal at the hands of the incompetent and aggressive police. And if the movie that is *Bus 174* presents Sandro in the living present, the film nonetheless "bears death within itself and divides itself between its life and its afterlife, without which there would be no image, no recording."

Yvonne Bezerra de Mello insists that the incident is *not* a movie for a different reason: "If he were really that violent, he wouldn't only have shot the hostages but the people around the bus. People would have died like in American films." That is, if Sandro were a character in a Hollywood film, he would be the pathologized criminal of North American fantasies rather than the frightened street kid with no options, no recognition, no future. Here the counterlogic to visibility obtains: Sandro cannot be rendered visible within the image repertoires of dominant media. To do so would only be to repeat the gesture of the television footage in its claims to transparency, spontaneity, direct access.

Within these binds there is no easy answer, no set of filmic or media strategies to counterbalance the social effects of globalization and neoliberalism or to demystify, as Jacqui Alexander puts it, "the state's will to represent itself as disinterested, neutered, or otherwise benign."<sup>9</sup> Part of his agenda embraces radical cinematic traditions that seek to defamiliarize those institutions that collude in the society of control, from *Hour of the Furnaces* (Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, 1968) to *Performing the Border*

(Ursula Biemann, 1999). In his serious treatment of the live television feed, however, Padilha treads upon new ground in the denaturalization of the mediatized spaces that are themselves effects of the same rhythms of neoliberalism and globalization. The gift he offers is a multilayered vision of a future to come, democracy to come, justice. Its vehicle is a vigilant and clear assessment of the living present.

## Notes

1. Lynn Spiegel, "TV's Next Season?" *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 85.
2. Akira Lippit, "The Derrida That I Love," *Grey Room* 20 (Summer 2005): 85.
3. Bernard Stiegler and Jacques Derrida, *Echographies of Television*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).
4. Personal conversation, Vancouver, B.C., March 2006.
5. Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches: An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, Md.: University Presses of America, 1983).
6. See Jerome Bourdon, "Live Television Is Still Alive," *Media, Culture & Society* 22, no. 5:531–56; Sean Cubitt, *Timeshift* (London: Routledge, 1991); John Ellis, *Seeing Things* (London: IBTauris, 2000); as well as the discussion in performance studies inaugurated by Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993) and continued in Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).
7. See *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*, ed. James Friedman (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
8. Derrida in Stiegler and Derrida, *Echographies*, 24.
9. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 23.

---

## Cinema Solidarity: The Documentary Practice of Kim Longinotto



by Patricia White

U.K. filmmaker Kim Longinotto has long been a practitioner of transnational feminism, though the term would probably sound too academic to her. Working primarily in cinema verité format, with funding from Britain's Channel 4, she has documented the stories of women ordinary and extraordinary—often both—in Egypt (*Hidden Faces* [1990]), Iran (*Runaway* [1991], *Divorce Iranian Style* [1998]), Japan (*Dream Girls* [1993], *Shinjuku Boys* [1995], among others),<sup>1</sup> and sub-Saharan Africa (*The Day I Will Never Forget* [2002], *Sisters in Law* [2005]) for exhibition largely (but not exclusively) in the West. She has also made numerous films back home in England, including her first, *Pride of Place* (1976), an indictment of her boarding school that helped close the place down.

The reception of Longinotto's latest film, *Sisters in Law* (a prizewinner at Cannes that was showcased in North America at the Telluride and Toronto film festivals