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Darlene Sadlier’s *A Century of Brazilian Documentary: From Nationalism to Protest* offers an accessible guide to the nonfiction output of one of Latin America’s most vibrant and prolific audiovisual industries, the most wide-ranging published in English to date. The book’s organization is at once chronological and thematic, which allows it to cover a tremendous amount of ground while anchoring the reader by grouping its detailed case studies around particular themes or approaches. *A Century of Brazilian Documentary* opens with a study of two silent-era features that depict Brazil’s wealth of natural resources (Silvino Santos’s *No país das amazonas* [In the land of the Amazons, 1922]) and its booming industrialization (Adalberto Kemeny and Rodolfo Lustig’s *São Paulo, A sinfonia da metrópole* [São Paulo, symphony of the city, 1929]). The opposition between rural and urban returns in the book’s closing chapter, which traces, on the one hand, depictions of modernist architecture and urban social/spatial exclusion and, on the other, images of daily life in the arid Northeastern *sertão* (backlands) in Brazilian nonfiction films since the 1960s.

The remainder of the book comprises six chapters that can be loosely divided into two sections. Three largely historical chapters each consider the intertwining of aesthetics and politics. The first examines Vargas-era nonfiction, including government-sponsored educational film and depictions of the dramatic opposition to state authority posed by the *cangaceiro* (usually translated as bandit) Lampião and his partner, Maria Bonita. The second explores documentary practice by precursors to and members of the leftist Cinema Novo movement, while the third discusses the fate of these filmmakers and their work under the military dictatorship that seized power in 1964. Two chapters of the following cluster look at documentary portraits of individuals in two historical moments (the 1970s and 1980s and the 1990s through the 2010s). A third, intervening chapter discusses works that express (marginalized) collective identities, including the work of Indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, and Jewish filmmakers. A coda to the book addresses two recent documentaries on the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2015-16, which raise urgent questions about the future of Brazilian democracy in the face of rising authoritarianism.

Sadlier offers concise, thoroughly researched, and clearly written treatments of each title’s social context, production history, aesthetics, politics, and reception. These case studies are ideally suited for the needs of a researcher interested in a particular film, or for classroom use. Specialist readers looking for a comprehensive history of Brazilian nonfiction film, however, may not be
fully satisfied by this volume. Sadlier assembles compelling thematic clusters of films produced in a given historical period, such as the portraits of major political figures like Getúlio Vargas and Juscelino Kubitschek that, intriguingly, became some of the nation’s all-time top-grossing documentaries in the 1970s. However, the book could have gone further in explicitly identifying and commenting on major tendencies in Brazilian nonfiction film, which are not always clear from discussions of compelling individual works or cyclically recurring themes/approaches. Additional references to relevant films would also have contributed to a fuller sense of the scope of both historical trends and enduring preoccupations in Brazilian nonfiction film.

Relatedly, the principles of selection that guided the choice of case studies and the degree of attention accorded each film are not always clear. While their significance is noted in the text, “classics” of Brazilian documentary like Cabra marcada para morrer (A Man Marked to Die, Eduardo Coutinho, 1984) and Ônibus 174 (Bus 174, José Padilha and Felipe Lacerda, 2002) are not accorded prominence of place, but rather given more or less equal real estate to more “minor” works—albeit by celebrated directors—such as Nelson Freire (João Moreira Salles, 2003) and A música segundo Tom Jobim (Music according to Tom Jobim, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 2012), each of which profiles a prominent Brazilian musician. This strategy is refreshing in a sense, as it allows readers to encounter the films relatively unencumbered by preexisting critical judgments or by the filmmakers’ established reputations. However, it can also leave them without a firm notion of why particular titles have been viewed as milestones in the history of Brazilian cinema.

The overall scope of the book and its inclusions and exclusions also raise questions at times. Why, for instance, mention TV Cultura and Glauber Rocha’s program Abertura as instances of Cinema Novo filmmakers’ incursions into television, but not the Globo Repórter program? (In the interest of full disclosure, the latter is a topic of interest to me, but also one that has garnered considerable attention from scholars of Brazilian cinema due to the involvement of Eduardo Coutinho, in particular). Why include, for instance, Iracema: Uma transa Amazônica (Iracema: An Amazonian Transaction, Jorge Bodanzky and Orlando Senna, 1974) and Recife frio (Cold Tropics, Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2009), which are fiction films that incorporate nonfiction footage and/or tropes, but not other well-regarded documentary-fiction hybrids like Branco sai, preto fica (White out, Black in, Adirley Queirós, 2014)? Of course, such choices ultimately come down to the author’s discretion, but here they can contribute to a sense that individual case studies do not always cohere into a panoramic view of Brazilian documentary history.

With regard to the inclusion of hybrid documentary-fiction films, the author rightly acknowledges the slipperiness of the concept of documentary itself but devotes limited attention to differing variants of nonfiction film and their distinctive histories and characteristics. In the introduction, Sadlier states, “I discuss a wide variety of documentaries—anthropological, propagandistic, biographical, autobiographical, instructional, educational, state-sponsored, independent—without worrying too much about employing the term ‘documentary’ to cover them all, but I trust readers will accept my use of it” (p. 1). Indeed, non-film studies specialists would likely have no objection to this choice, as it corresponds to the term’s use in everyday speech. Nonetheless, this approach glosses over not only influential perspectives on documentary—including Bill Nichols’s contention that documentary as such did not emerge until the late 1920s, informed by interwar avant-garde cinema and nation-states’ ambitions to use film for the social good—but also the insights offered by studies of, for instance, ethnographic film and
“useful cinema” marshaled to serve governmental, institution, and corporate ends.[1]

One could argue, of course, that nonspecialists need not be concerned with these nuances, and admittedly, “A Century of Brazilian Nonfiction Film” (a term that has the advantage of being more capacious than “documentary”) doesn’t have quite the same ring to it. Yet at some points, historically situated understandings of nonfiction genres seem key for a full understanding of the chosen case studies. For instance, the book’s opening chapter on the silent era does not mention how, in the period, the press (particularly Rio de Janeiro critics) defined nonfiction film negatively against the fiction feature, using the terms film natural or film de cavação, a term that is roughly equivalent to the notion of “sponsored film” in English but implied that filmmakers were deceiving or exploiting the sponsors (cavação can be loosely translated as “hustling”). The notion of the film de cavação would seem to be pivotal for interpreting No país das Amazonas, which was commissioned by a “rubber baron” (p. 8), and the “city symphony” São Paulo, A sinfonia da metrópole, which had the backing both of a Hollywood studio (Paramount, its distributor) and local titans of industry (p. 27). Perplexingly, the latter film is defined against the “film natural” as a poetic work in a text from the period cited in an epigraph (p. 23), but after the former term is explained as synonymous with “feature documentary” (I would contend that these early filmes naturais are not in fact documentaries, nor are they necessarily features), it is not further discussed (p. 9). While it may not be reasonable to expect the author to grapple with shifting notions of documentary across ten decades, such perspectives could have further historicized and thus enriched the case studies.

While it could have delved more deeply into the heterogeneity of nonfiction film and been more explicit about how its case studies contribute to a broader understanding of Brazilian cinema history, A Century of Brazilian Documentary will find a place on the bookshelves of scholars and students of Brazilian cinema, culture, and history as well as documentary film and media, and serve as a valuable reference for years to come.

Note
