

Mediático is delighted to present an entry from one of its distinguished contributing editors, Professor Catherine L. Benamou who teaches Film and Media Studies, Visual Studies, and Chicano-Latino Studies at the University of California-Irvine and is the author of [It's All True: Orson Welles's Pan-American Odyssey \(University of California Press, 2007\)](#). She is currently working on a book manuscript about transnational television and its diasporic Latinx audiences.

Featured Image: Nelson Pereira dos Santos flanked by Jon Vickers, director of the Indiana University Cinema (left) and Esteve Rimbau Möller (Photo courtesy of Rimbau Möller)

Vidas Abundantes em Terreno Difícil, reflections on the loss of Brazilian cineaste Nelson Pereira dos Santos (22 October 1928 -21 April 2018), and community member and film participant in Orson Welles's *It's All True*, Maria do Carmo de Souza (30 August 1935-24 April 2018)

By Catherine L. Benamou, *Mediático* contributing editor

As film scholars and critics, we often consider the relationship of filmmakers to the physical world they encounter and the technical apparatus they work with to generate audiovisual images. We also often contemplate filmmakers' complex relationship to the human subjects, both trained and non-professional, that participate in their projects. However, we seldom think about the human subjects themselves beyond the film's release, unless they are performers who have gone on to become recognized creatively, either as performers or media makers, in their own right.

The loss, in late April 2018, of two Brazilians who were born and raised in very different circumstances, yet who were born within a decade of each other has given me pause to reconsider the way we think of the actual contributions of film subjects and how they can have a transformative influence, not only in relation to the shape of film texts, but of our

grasp of film history. Certainly, perhaps especially in documentaries, strong images of film subjects stay in our minds: the earnest, nearly screaming face of the barefoot and partially toothless boy who runs alongside the train, looking up at a well-dressed young girl chewing gum in Fernando Birri's *Tire Dié* (1959), the unrehearsed pathos in the faces of certain performers in realist narrative cinema, such as the mixture of pain, anger, and confusion in the face of young Jean-Pierre Léaud in Truffaut's *Les 400 Coups* (1959), upon discovering his mother's infidelity and hearing his schoolteacher's reprimands, the gaunt look of hunger, humility, while conveying an inner sense of resistance, briefly congealing into anger in Átila Iório's (cowhand Fabiano's) face as he approaches the ranch owner to discuss his pay in Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Vidas Secas* (*Barren Lives*, 1963), the look of wonder, worry, and excitement on the face of a young Afro-Brazilian street merchant of a Rio favela in *Rio 40 Graus*, who, straying from his group, follows his pet lizard into the Jardim Botânico, the grief, fear, and ambivalence on Vanessa Bauche's (the young, abused mother, Susana's) face in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores perros* (2000), the disquieting indifference and self-chastisement, barely masking the deep inner sadness of Marcelia Cartaxo the Northeastern migrant typist in Suzana Amaral's *A Hora da Estrela* (1985), the gawky, unruly, contorted facial expressions, of Cristina Pereira in Ana Carolina's *Mar de Rosas* (1978), nearly a decade earlier, speaks less to a disturbed individual consciousness than to the disarray of Brazilian society during the dictatorship, even as it remains as an indicator of the actresses's agency and resistance to the naturalist or illusionistic performance.

Filmmakers make decisions about who they cast, they exhibit varying skill in eliciting compelling performances from these actors, and they make editorial decisions about what to retain of performances and actors' images in the body of the film, what to leave out, so we look for what they tend to emphasize, where they choose to take our attention away from the actors' performance. It is to the credit especially of the neorealists, including more recent generations of Latinx directors, that they leave in spontaneous gestures, the quirky, syncopated, or idiosyncratic facial expressions that help root actors' performances in the

affective matrices of everyday life, in more fluid and vernacular, rather than highly structured cultural forms. (I am remembering here how Karim Aïnouz commented on how his decision to work with theatrically trained actors, such as Lazaro Ramos and Marcelia Cartaxo in *Madame Satã* guided camera movements and positions, as he did not wish to constrain the actors' performances). Béla Balász had insight into what he called the "microphysiognomic" dynamics of film performance, thanks to camera framing and the close-up, which "gives us the subtlest play of features, almost imperceptible, and yet so convincing..."^[1] Nelson Pereira dos Santos, was one of the rare filmmakers who could make the transition, seemingly effortlessly, from an emphasis on microphysiognomie to the sociogeographical landscape that defines a region, a nation, a bundle of social relations within a given community.

There are several questions that arise from these images: first, although film scholar Adriano Aprá said of post-war neorealism in Italy that the non-professional actor doesn't "interpret" a role" but simply "is" (meaning, embodies the role), are these expressions not acts of creative *interpretation*, regardless of what level of awareness is involved? Second, I am wondering about the eventual relationship between the performers and their images, their cultural heft and durability, and also how the act of film performance might affect the lives of these performers, especially the ones that we tend not to see after the film's release, the ones that disappear from the public eye. I would like to think that Pereira dos Santos, "*grande cabeça*" that he was as an artist, also genuinely cared about his actors to the extent possible, long after films were made, so that he might even have tried to stay in touch with their lives and careers, creative or otherwise. In this respect, it can be said that he created gentle films in that they provided a habitable universe for performers, who regardless of training, at the very least, were enabled to navigate pro-filmic space with a dose of their own free will, even to lead the director himself to perhaps change his mind about what to film, where and how, just as the filmmaking experience he invited them into might have enabled them to think and relate differently, perhaps more self-reflectively, about the world they inhabited.

Nelson Pereira dos Santos was an internationally acclaimed director and screenwriter, as well as teacher, who was born in São Paulo, Brazil in 1928, but he spent most of his working life between Rio de Janeiro, where he shot two of his films, and the mostly arid, yet richly multiethnic Northeast, where *Vidas Secas* and *Tenda dos Milagres* (1977) were filmed. The move of filmmaking activity from Rio to the *sertão* in the early sixties was bold - even though it was loosely aligned with the politics of land reform and alphabetization in the fifties and early sixties, it departed radically from mainstream audiovisual practice in Brazil at the time. Notably, for example, *Vidas Secas* has little dialogue - drought and hunger have eliminated the possibility of making intelligible verbal sounds with any frequency - indeed, dos Santos tended to avoid the use of a nondiegetic musical soundtrack, preferring to let the sounds of the physical ambience from the sweet to the gritty seep in. Schooled in cinematic neorealism at the Italian Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, dos Santos helped to shape a new wave of Brazilian cinema, dubbed Cinema Nôvo, that featured real locations, mobile film technology, and marginalized protagonists, which allowed his casts of actors to reflect the mixed, diverse, and AfroBrazilian spectrum of race in Brazil. He allowed film scripts to be shaped by the experiences of his often untrained actors, and these open-ended plotlines at the beginning of his career were complemented by an unhinged and freely moving filming style that helped viewers experience with a certain intimacy a world that was nearly entirely overlooked in the habitual navigations of the more privileged classes in the country.



As one of the most influential of filmmakers affiliated with Cinema Novo, he took his mentoring role seriously, and helped to found the film school at the Universidade Federal Fluminense in Niterói, across Guanabara Bay from Rio. As he once stated in an interview, the ability (and commitment of his generation) to participate in Brazilian society, to address national problems was only possible by “creating our own form of expression, not using a pre-existing one...this synthesis between making cinema and discussing our reality was found in the Italian model, in Neo-realism.” **[2]** His work is distinguished from that of others precisely by his steadfast commitment to social empowerment through open participatory cinematic practice and on the other hand, a timely accommodation of history and cultural geography in his work that would allow him to narrate stories that were relevant to viewers.

I had the rare opportunity to meet Nelson Pereira dos Santos in October 2015, while attending an event in the honor of one of his distinguished biographers and critics, Darlene Sadlier, at the Academia Brasileira de Letras.

His multidimensional use of the city in Rio de Janeiro in *Rio 40 Graus* remains one of the inaugural films of neorealism in the Latin American fifties, and in it he brings touristic locations, such as the Sugarloaf, into stark yet intensely interactive relationship with *favela* dwellers, and his foregrounding of the labor inequities in Rio’s samba radio and recording industry featured in *Rio Zona Norte*, which stars Afro-Brazilian actor Sebastião de

Souza Prata, also known as Grande Othelo, who also was slated to star in the “Carnaval” episode of Orson Welles’s semi-documentary *It’s All True*, shot in several of the same locations as *Rio Quarenta Graus* prompted me to ask him if he had received any inspiration from *It’s All True* or whether he had noticed an influence of the film upon the work of his generation.

Nelson said that although he didn’t have any direct contact with Welles’s film endeavor as it unfolded from the Northeast to the South of Brazil (February-July 1942), he and other filmmakers in the *Cinema Novo* group knew of it and its legacy within the Brazilian filmmaking community, especially in Rio - he identified with Welles’s interest in blending spontaneous documentary coverage of the annual Carnaval and artisanal footage with staged scenes, using non-professional actors, and agreed that the aesthetic premises of the film in some way prefigured the strategies and textures of Brazilian *Cinema Novo* films.

What I always found to be particularly striking about Pereira dos Santos’s working method was the manner in which he was able to lend dignity and freedom of expression to his actors, together with instilling a strong desire to create in his students while continually elevating the stature of Brazilian filmmaking on the international scene (a brief multilingual bibliography will follow). This brings me back to the loss of **Maria do Carmo de Souza Santos**, who was the youngest daughter of Jerônimo de Souza Santos, the proud captain of the *jangada*, named the “São Pedro,” which was featured in the last filmed episode of the abovementioned Orson Welles’s unfinished semi-documentary *It’s All True*. De Souza Santos was one of four *jangada* fishermen who made the voyage from Ceará to Rio de Janeiro to petition then-President Getúlio Vargas for inclusion in social security legislation that had been introduced by the Vargas government. Although De Souza Santos was not given credit for the effort, he would go on to lead two additional voyages, one to Porto Alegre, in the deep south of Brazil in 1952, and another to Buenos Aires in 1959. Maria do Carmo appears in Jerônimo’s arms in a photograph of the victorious *jangadeiros* that was taken by a local newspaper, *O Pôvo*, upon their arrival by plane in Fortaleza in November, 1941, upon return

from Rio de Janeiro.

The archivist who saved this photograph was not employed by the newspaper, nor the by local geographical or cultural archive, but was Maria do Carmo herself. When I first went to Fortaleza in 1989, my method of locating the survivors of Welles's film involved using printed photographs (frame enlargements) to find people through conversation with local residents. This proved very effective with Jacaré (Manuel Olimpio Meira's) family, who were more numerous and resided in a more central urban neighbourhood. It was more difficult in the case of Jerônimo, because his children had migrated to Rio de Janeiro, had been married more than once, and his only daughter in Fortaleza, Maria do Carmo, resided in a hilltop favela that developed out of dunes that are visible in the film's funeral sequence. Significantly, Welles had chosen to include members of the entire fishing colony in the sequence which was intended to honor Jacaré, so it is the most remembered of the entire film project.

It was Jerônimo's widow who told me about Maria do Carmo, who lived a few shacks down the street with some of her children and her grandchildren. When I arrived, she wasn't home, but the abject poverty in which she lived was immediately apparent, she lived in a tarpaper and newspaper shack, and her barefoot grandchildren were wearing T-shirts for the gubernatorial candidate, Ciro Gomes. When I finally met Maria do Carmo, she showed me the place where she cooked outside, spoke a little about Welles's filming at that location, and then asked me if I were interested in her father's subsequent trips in the 1950s. She had kept an archive inside the walls of the shack that included pictures from the voyage in the early 1940s, and articles that I could not locate anywhere else on the trips to Porto Alegre and Buenos Aires. These acts of preservation underscore just how the caring exhibited by Maria do Carmo, who worked countless hours as a laundress and traveled mostly on foot throughout the city to her various jobs could translate into a form of personal history and intergenerational, regional Northeastern, and even national remembrance. She was also the mother to her grandchildren, when her own children were unable to care for

them. As her now college-educated granddaughter Isabel recently wrote, “my grandmother was the most decent woman that I met in my life, she wasn’t ambitious for anything in this life, with her simple way, she taught me to live, to struggle for dignity in life, I will follow her example, the photographs of her father, I will keep everything that brings me good memories of her.”



Maria do Carmo

The living, moving image of this woman in her front yard, with her broad, kind face and capacious arms, surrounded by her grandchildren and their neighborhood friends, all of who had high hopes when we filmed on the hill in the documentary in January 1993, is in the first portion of the film.

To return to Balász, when we read the faces of both Nelson Pereira dos Santos and Maria do Carmo de Souza, we find a gentle physiognomy that also bears the mark of hard times, that carries the firmness of a commitment to honesty in relationships, always welcomes a conversation and gestures towards an expansion of self into community. Their legacy is abundant in trust, compassion, creativity, and courage.

Useful links including to Nelson Pereira dos Santos’ last interview (on the web at

oscars.org) and obituaries in publications around the globe

Last Interview with Nelson Pereira dos Santos by Mateus Araujo Santos, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, <http://pstlala.oscars.org/interview/nelson-pereira-dos-santos/>

<http://creatorsnews.org/the-pioneer-of-rights-dies-nelson-pereira-dos-santos/>

<https://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/filmes/cineasta-nelson-pereira-dos-santos-morre-aos-89-anos-22616847>

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/03/nelson-pereira-dos-santos-obituary>

<http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2012aprjun/santos.html>

https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/04/23/cultura/1524475481_194922.html

<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2018/04/morre-nelson-pereira-dos-santos-diretor-de-rio-40-graus.shtml>

https://www.lemonde.fr/disparitions/article/2018/04/22/le-cineaste-bresilien-nelson-pereira-dos-santos-estmort-a-rio-de-janeiro-a-l-age-de-89-ans_5288874_3382.html

<http://revistapesquisa.fapesp.br/en/2006/04/01/an-immortal-filmmaker/>

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/great-directors/nelson-pereira-dos-santos/>

Notes

[1] Béla Balázs, *Theory of Film* (Dover Publications, 2012)

[2] Special issue, *Neo-realismo na América Latina*, *Cinemas* 34 (abril-junho, 2003)

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