

**Luciana Martins, *Photography and Documentary Film in the Making of Modern Brazil*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press. 2013. Pp xvii + 248. Illustrations. Filmography. Bibliography. Index. £70.00 (Hardback).**

**P**

hotography and documentary film-making in Latin America have a long and

venerable history, the former having been studied and written about -- the contribution of Robert M. Levine (1989) remains a cornerstone -- more than the latter. Rarely are both pursuits studied in tandem, one of the many virtues of this absorbing monograph by Luciana Martins, whose keen eye and critical bent subject the two genres to rewarding scrutiny in the national context of Brazil. “National” is the key, operative construct, for Martins stresses throughout that photography and documentary film shaped the imaginary of the nation while at the same time recording for posterity events and circumstances pivotal to its creation.

A deft, theoretically informed Introduction – pertinent connections are made, among others, to the ideas of Deborah Poole (1997), Bill Nichols (2010), and David MacDougall (1998) – steers the reader from the outset. Her project, Martins tells us with apt use of a geographical metaphor, “maps the relationships between visual culture, nation-building, and global modernity

through an examination of a wide variety of still and moving images” (p.7). The period between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century is her temporal focus. The sources she consults, “produced across Brazilian territory” by assorted practitioners that include “filmmakers, explorers, adventurers, anthropologists, intellectuals, and missionaries,” are culled from research forays in archives and collections in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States besides repositories in Brazil itself. Over one hundred illustrations, the artful deployment of which the design team at Manchester University Press deserves credit, adorn the undertaking from beginning to end, lending the narrative (most appropriately) a rich, visual texture.

Martins’ engagement of the images she has selected to highlight, her interaction with protagonists, subject matter, and the motives of those who held the camera, is never allowed to detract from, or impinge on, what she has to say. Her myriad takes, rather, are threaded in to chapter content and argumentative thrust strategically and seamlessly, to illuminating effect. Early on, for example, she plays off brilliantly two images one after the other by way of making her case: in Figure 1.4, an undated photograph from the Rondon Collection of “a school in the interior of Brazil,” we see “regimented indigenous children statically posed before the camera, the national flag’s positivist motto – ‘order and progress’ – clearly visible in the background” (p. 5). The message relayed of “a nation, a people in the making,” is unambiguous. This view contrasts starkly with what Figure 1.5, a photograph taken by José Teixeira in May 1912, conjures up: here we peek inside a school in the northeast state of Piauí, where unkempt children “are in ragged clothes, the walls bare, with very few books in evidence” and the teacher staring “somewhat plaintively at the camera” (p.6). His pupils look as if they have been “asked to simulate the act of reading,” the smile of one boy “providing some relief in the gloom of the

image.” For Martins, photographs such as these “help to expose the immense gap between the metropolitan fantasies of national integration” and “the actualities of everyday life.” Cutting to the quick, she distils: “The camera was thus both agent of modernization and witness to its contradictions, material and ideological.”

Though her sweep is vast, there is commendable balance between the big picture and attention to detail, with six informative chapters “organized around a sequence of connected case studies” (p.12). In chapter 2, the Portuguese-born Silvino Santos (1886-1970), whose career began “under the patronage of the Peruvian rubber baron, Julio César Araña,” is hailed “as a pioneer of national cinema” (p.18), his 1922 documentary *No paíz da Amazonas* (In the Land of the Amazons) drawing on “footage made on his travels of more than 10,000 kilometres throughout the Amazon region” to expose not only Brazilian but also foreign audiences to a part of the world “that had not been seen in quite the same way before” (p.19). The première of *No paíz da Amazonas*, a gala occasion at an international forum in Rio de Janeiro, afforded Santos the opportunity to travel to and subsequently linger in the then capital one full year. There he shot material for a dramatically different second feature, *Terra encantada* (Enchanted Land, 1923), which celebrated “the dynamism of urban life” and “the cityscape of Rio, with its imposing buildings, boulevards, electric streetcars and automobiles, together with countless passers-by.” The immigrant who arrived in the country aged 14 “ended up producing remarkable images of the social, cultural, and natural worlds of Brazil under modernization” (p.35). Martins marvels: “No wonder a new generation of filmmakers and critics found his work an inspiration.”

The Amazon region that so enthralled Santos also lured to its embrace the U.S. explorer Alexander Hamilton Rice (1875-1956), whose seventh expedition took place in 1924-25 and is the focus of chapter 3. Endorsed by the American Geographical Society when Isaiah Bowman (1878-1950) was in presidential charge, Hamilton Rice's exploits produced a "rich visual archive" consisting of "maps, still photography, and film," the consultation of which allows Martins to re-tell his tale with "a more contextually sensitive understanding of the role of indigenous peoples and local agency in the history of exploration" (pp. 46-47). The Amazon and its native peoples figure prominently in chapter 4 too, perhaps the best of the pick, in which Martins pieces together a riveting "moral geography" (p.71) of the stern Anglican layman and missionary explorer, Sir Kenneth George Grubb (1900-1980), whose treasure trove of illustrated texts Martins mines assiduously. Blinded by faith to any realization that he and his ilk might be part of the problem, their antics nowhere better evoked than in Peter Mathiessen's novel *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1965), Grubb (p.81) has this to say of inexorable native demise:

The traditional conservatism of the Indian renders it difficult for him to make the necessary adjustments to the new order of things, and rather than compromise he withdraws farther into the forests. The group rapidly dwindles, the last family still persists in maintaining its aloofness, and soon the tribe is extinct. The writer has seen the whole tragic process complete itself within a few years.

It is Grubb's photographic albums, however, not his voluminous publications, that furnish Martins with particularly revealing glimpses of show and tell.

"They've got an awful lot of coffee in Brazil" so Frank Sinatra informs us. And an awful lot of compelling visual material about the origins and development of the industry, its economic and social history above all, which Martins scrutinizes in chapter 5. A photograph taken by Marc

Ferrez (c.1882) of “slaves harvesting coffee on a plantation in the Paraíba Valley” (p.118) reminds us of just how late the institution was abolished in the colony that absorbed the most blacks (some two out of five of between ten and twelve million) taken from Africa in a noxious enterprise that lasted four centuries. Documenting changes as opposed to recording continuities in the landscape sees Martins devote chapter 6 to “one of the leading figures in the São Paulo avant-garde in the 1920s,” Mário de Andrade (1893-1945), whose “travels to the Amazon and [the] North-east of Brazil” resulted in a “photographic experiment” that, by applying “the techniques of the modern novel, including parody, intertextual allusion, and self-referentiality” (p. 13), was an incisive critique of the nationalist project. Andrade’s spell as Director of the São Paulo Department of Culture saw him facilitate the visit to Brazil of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and his wife Dina, the couple’s sojourn in Mato Grosso in 1935-36 among the Kadiwéw and Bororo tribes yielding not just a cache of ethnographic objects for the Musée de l’Homme in Paris but a lifetime of field data. Lévi-Strauss shares the spotlight of chapter 7 with someone far less-known, “the Canadian-born explorer Aloha Baker, a “glamorous adventurer who claimed to be the first woman to drive around the world, having visited forty-nine countries on four continents in the 1920s” (p.160). Her film *Last of the Bororos* epitomizes “the popular ‘salvage’ ethnographic trope so common in representations of indigenous peoples in frontier regions in many parts of the world.” Fifty pages in length, Martins’ exercise in “Framing the Bororo” is a tour-de-force of painstaking research, replete with 28 illustrations and 150 endnotes, a contribution unto itself.

She bids farewell to the Brazil her work so poignantly frames by invoking its reinvention by the United States as part of the Allied war effort and Washington’s subsequent Good

Neighbour Policy, the “Brazilian Bombshell” Carmen Miranda and all. “The moment of modernity that provided the focus for this book, with its contradictory impulses and contrasting energies, reflecting the dynamism and heterogeneity of a nation in the making, had passed.” Something more exuberant, playful, and fun-loving -- the lens of photojournalist Genevieve Naylor (Levine 1998) helped pave the way -- was called for. In order to provide an escape for audiences “in Depression-hit North America and war-torn Europe,” Hollywood “reinvented Brazil as a melting pot of sounds and images, blending elements of tropical iconography and cultural rhythm to create an imagined, bountiful paradise.” Martins’ valediction, in contrast to the “homogeneous vision of *brasilidade*” ushered in, has a decidedly sombre ring. “A new, and darker, era had begun,” she concludes (p.215). Readers can only hope that Martins turns her gaze to that era next, and delivers the goods in comparable style, and substance.

**W. George Lovell, Queen’s University, Canada**

### **References Cited**

Levine, Robert M. 1989. *Images of History: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Latin American Photographs as Documents*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1998. *The Brazilian Photographs of Genevieve Naylor, 1940-1942*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

MacDougall, David. 1998. *Transcultural Cinema*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.

Matthiessen, Peter. 1965. *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. New York: Random House Inc.

Nichols, Bill. 2010. *Introduction to Documentary*. Second Edition. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Poole, Deborah. 1997. *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean World*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.

