

# Interview with Debora Diniz about the film *The House of the Dead*

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## Abstract

The present interview with the anthropologist and documentary filmmaker Debora Diniz discusses her film *The House of the Dead*, a narrative about institutions for the criminally insane in Brazil. In this conversation, Debora Diniz explores several topics: the idea of the film; the construction of the script based on a native poem; and the ethical, aesthetical and political perspectives involved in an ethnographic activist film. The interview describes her fieldwork in the mental asylum, exploring the ethical challenges of representing the pain of others. The tension between truth and reliability in an ethnographic film is also explored among the technical features of the film.

**Keywords:** The House of the Dead, madness, crime, visual anthropology.

# Interview with Debora Diniz about the film *The House of the Dead*

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*Debora Diniz is an anthropologist and professor at the University of Brasilia, feminist researcher, and human rights activist. She has directed six films: Severina's Story (Uma História Severina, 2005), co-directed with Eliane Brum; Habeas Corpus (Habeas Corpus, 2005), co-directed with Ramon Navarro; A disembodied woman (À Margem do Corpo, 2006); Four Women (Quem são elas? 2006); Alone and Anonymous (Solitário Anônimo, 2007) and The House of the Dead (A Casa dos Mortos, 2009). She has received several national and international awards for her films. On June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012 we met Debora Diniz for an interview about The House of the Dead, a film about institutions for the criminally insane that has received 25 awards and was nominated as a finalist for the Grand Prize of Brazilian Cinema (Grande Prêmio do Cinema Brasileiro). The following text summarizes the encounter.*

*Érica* – How did you come up with the idea for *The House of the Dead*? Why did you want to make a film about crime and madness?

*Debora* – Actually, the idea for the film came from a proposal from a former manager at the Ministry of Health. The Brazilian Ministry of Health has a technical area specialized in inmate health. She approached me and said: “I need people to see what I think just a few know. Instead of supporting research in the traditional academic style, I would like you to make a documentary”. Her stories at that moment were the starting point for my field diary for the film. She said: “We have institutions for the criminally insane. We can find people suffering from mental disorders, who can also be called ‘lunatics’, who have commonly been charged with misdemeanors. In all of these hospitals, you will find a bicycle thief, a man who stole a bicycle. He is left by the wayside and forgotten in the hospital”. The bicycle thief was the first image in my mind and it became the character that I looked for in all the units where I visited.

*E.* – How did you decide to make a film about an institution for the criminally insane in Brazil?

*D.* – The film did not come about in the traditional way, where the anthropologist does the fieldwork and then the film emerges as part of the knowledge. My ethnographic debut in an institution for the criminally insane already included the objective of making a film. I had to do an initial ethnography and then think about how to build a visual narrative. For the first few months I simply immersed myself in the files. Initially, I visited almost all of the institutions in Brazil just to have an idea of where I could make the film. The landscape was very diverse throughout the country. There were hospitals, such as one in the south of Brazil, with 800 patients. I would not get to know those 800 patients, would not be able to approach them, to tell them about the idea of the film and to read the 800 patient files in advance. Other hospitals were very small. Some were psychiatric wards in prisons, where I would encounter safety problems. I was sure about one thing though: I would only work with a minimal team – the cameraperson and the producer, but in general, just the cameraperson and me. I did not want any mediation from the prison security staff, or from the health care teams. I wanted to be alone with the patients and also wanted a place where I had a population size whose stories I would be able to know, and to know who would accept or reject participating in the film before turning the camera on. The hospital in Salvador, a city in the northeast of Brazil where I made the film, embodied all these advantages, including the architecture of the hospital. It was built in the style of early 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture, representing one of the first institutions for the criminally insane in the country. Salvador was a good geographic spot; it had a typical sample of the racial composition of the population of many of these institutions, an aesthetic aspect of the uniforms, and a population of 158 individuals. I spent the first few months just studying the files, learning who was who, where they came from, and how long they had been inmates, before turning on the camera. It was a hospital for both men and women, although I have recorded both, but only shown men. Before that, there was the matter of all the necessary authorizations before I could proceed. You can imagine how much red tape is required to gain access to a security unit such as that.

*Rosana* – Did you also do fieldwork in the female section?

*D.* – Yes. But the institutions for the criminally insane in Brazil are a problem

generally due to the men. Without any irony, I could see that crime and madness is a male-related bias. We estimate that there is a ratio of one woman for every 14 men in such institutions in Brazil. Also, in Salvador, the hospital was originally designed to shelter only men. The patio, the sections, the organization of the inmates they labelled “the most dangerous”, “the most dependent”, - everything was under a structure planned for men. In Salvador, there was an annex, typical of almost all of the hospitals in Brazil, where one could find women. There were 11 women. I recorded many hours of the women’s lives, their relationship inside the institution, but they presented very specific challenges for a film. The first is that there were two non-connected geographic spaces, and I would have to show two segments of a non-communicating life, except for party and social events. The second is that the women were very weak, very fragile for the camera. It was a relationship that I was not able to build through language. I would have had to come up with other methods to get closer to them before I could film them.

R. - What type of fragility was it that the women demonstrated?

D. - They had been kept captive for long periods of time, under the effects of medication for many years, already silent by their long involuntary confinement. I would have had a hard time building an empathic narrative, which would make the audience feel closer to them. Madness expresses forms of sociability. We do not go mad detached from culture. We go mad maintaining the symbolic and social relationships surrounding us. One of my current studies is about women who have killed their own children, a crime known as infanticide. These are stories that no one wants to see or to know. My hypothesis - which brings up the question of the video ethnographic field - is that not all ethnographic stories are appropriate to be represented by image. The story of a woman who has committed infanticide would require resources that I do not have since I would not be able to make a link with political activism, which is my motivation in doing ethnographic films. Those were women who had been weakened by the institution and with very delicate stories for a visual narrative.

E. - And how can you show someone else’s suffering? How can you bring that to a film?

D. - Actually, I would say that narrating someone’s pain is a crucial issue for

anthropology itself. Not only because it brings challenges about the authority the narrator has regarding one's pain, which is always something very critical in the ethnographic encounter – it is an encounter of discursive authority in which we start to speak for and about the other; we become their voices. That is why I was fascinated when Bubu, one of the patients, handed me the poem that lends its name to the film and said: “Here is the script for your film. I want to show you what you must see in here”. That was crucial because it allowed me to shift my authority slightly on the construction of the script for the narration. But there is still a difficulty about the pain of the other that is captured and displayed by the film. They are confined individuals, alienated by madness, alienated from their rights by an order that does not grant them a place in the world. My encounters were mediated by a camera, a very powerful tool for that mediation. The first scene of the film is, in fact, the first moment in which the camera was on. We had already been visiting the hospital for some months and the patients already knew me. I knew about their stories, but I waited for a special day when there would be a soccer game between two psychiatric institutions, it was a party day. There were families, cameras, food... And that was the first day I turned the camera on. And they came to an imaginary boarder that was a bump they could not trespass, a line the security staff prohibited them to cross. The camera was behind that bump, and they, on the other side, started to repeat the legal and psychiatric anamnesis before the camera: “I have killed; I have kidnapped; I have raped, but I have done the time”. They reproduce the whole anamnesis to which the regime of power submits them.

*E.* – Those people who committed crimes and are considered to be mentally ill are unimputable or semi-imputable. They are there fulfilling a security measure, another concept for confinement. Was the initial proposal evaluated by a research ethics committee?

*D.* – Yes, an evaluation was conducted by a research ethics committee, which is a great challenge for visual anthropologists. The research ethics committees asked me: “What story are you going to tell? What is your objective? What is your hypothesis? What data collection techniques are you going to use?” I had no idea about that. I knew I would ethnograph life in an institution for the criminally insane. I did not know who the “subjects of my research” would be. I did not have a script of questions to ask them. My first

idea originated after meeting two men that are shown at the end of the film (a gentleman in a wheelchair and another gentleman standing beside him). It was this encounter that motivated me to tell the story of the film, besides the bicycle thief, Almerindo, the last character in the film. Mr. Bolinha, the character in the wheelchair, had a story that provoked me intensely: a diagnosis of intellectual disability and a record that said he had never committed any crime. Mr. Bolinha had been there since he was 18 years old, and, at that time of the meeting, he was almost 50 years old. He passed away two years ago. He represented a limit-case that I wanted to show about such madness segregation and abandonment regimes. Mr. Bolinha, however, did not interact with anyone anymore. He did not interact with me, did not interact with the camera, he was speechless. He was just a body whose mediation with the camera would cross the limits that I could tell as a story, as a narrative of the pain of others, because he did not express himself. That was the story that I had in hand to present to the committee: "I do not know what I will do; I just know I will tell a story there". And a very understanding committee allowed me to inform them as I developed the ideas of what I would like to do came to mind. But I think that today, for the visual anthropologists in this country, the ethics committees are an insurmountable barrier because they ask questions about a series of requirements that we do not know before going out to do fieldwork - especially in relation to madness, since it resists any attempt for rehearsal. If I had not run across the fleeting moments while pursuing those encounters with the camera, the fleeting moments would have been gone - lost. Madness refuses any attempt to rehearse. So, a direct cinema willing to reproduce a likely-to-happen scene was impossible in that space. I am very sympathetic to the challenges that visual anthropology faces with this system of ethical review.

E. - How was the filming process? What was the camera's eye?

D. - We decided to enter with a minimal team: a single camera in hand, without tripod or artificial light. That decision was justified by some aesthetic preferences of mine, but also because we were filming at a hospital. We tried to keep disturbances to a minimum as much as possible to maintain order in the hospital with constant supervision. I wanted their glance mediated by my eyes, so the camera had to be a secondary background. In other words, I wanted to approach the individuals, have them look at me so that I could

talk to them. I did not want to be behind the camera in our encounters. This is part of a very important issue in the field of visual anthropology: is the anthropologist supposed to hold the camera and conduct the interview, or can the tasks be divided? I do not have any doubt to say that I cannot do both. My eyes, my voice, my senses need to be connected to the individual, and someone has to be able to be my extension, mediated by this recording device. A considerable distraction that we had in the film was a directional boom microphone that disturbed the routine, but sound reception was fundamental because we did not conduct interviews. It was an observational film. I chose a narrative in which I am not shown, except for a moment, almost as a spectrum: the patients are singing and I am in the background showing the safety device that the hospital made me wear – the white coat. My desire was to unveil that mediation device that the hospital put on me: without a security person, but always with the white coat on. For an ethnographic experience, this mediation device has several symbols. I needed to rebuild my position with the patients: show them I was not a psychiatrist and that I was not there to represent the hospital staff. The coat was the armor for my passage in that security system, but it required many relational reconstructions between the inmates and me due to what it represented. And that is why I decided to show it in the background of one of the most playful scenes in the film.

R. – In several moments the residents, the inhabitants of the house, make self-portraits, create narratives about themselves that are captured by the camera. What does this self-narration in filming situation say about the construction of the film?

D. – This is a very peculiar encounter. Maybe I cannot talk about the abstraction of the encounter to make a film because in the encounter of *The House of the Dead*, we have individuals on constant medication, under the label of madness, and under the stigma of the crime. They are individuals with layers of permanent silencing. That is why the interview could be left out. I did not have to conduct interviews. I did not have to introduce anybody, in the same way as I did in the film *Severina's Story*, my earlier film. Severina narrated her own history. In *The House of the Dead* I did not need interviews and introductions. The patients passed in front of the camera to make their debut. My first impression was that sometimes they reproduced the anamnesis for which they had been committed – psychiatric and legal anamnesis. They

would stand in front of the camera and tell who they were without my asking. The only moment in which there is a simulation of an interview is in the first act, with Jaime. Jaime was labeled a “dangerous individual” in the hospital. The director of the hospital warned me when I arrived: “You can talk to everybody here but Jaime”. Well, saying that to an ethnographer or to a documentary filmmaker, is to say: “He is the one you have to talk to!” One of the first scenes of the film is the entrance of the camera into the solitary cell where Jaime lived. Jaime was a fabulous man. His records indicated that he had committed two homicides, but his inmates reported 21. He is an individual who challenges psychiatric penal control through medication. His background included two homicides, and a history of drug abuse. He was young, with a psychotic diagnosis and suspected of psychopathy. These psychiatric diagnoses are very questionable categories in the records. They never bothered me that much. I wanted to understand them as narrative signs. And that encounter that we captured in the film was one of Jaime’s first outings to the patio. One of the inmates behaved as if he was my filming assistant, and he told me: “I am your filming assistant”, “now it is time for you to talk to Jaime”. He sat down and started: “Jaime, what is your story?”, “who are you?”, performing his character intermediated by the camera. We had this unique moment, almost like an interview, conducted by an inmate trying to figure out what I would like to know about Jaime. “Where did you kill?” “Why did you kill?” “How were you feeling?” Later Jaime committed suicide and, again, it was the “film assistant” who told me how the suicide happened. And it was a very intense scene because the architecture of the suicide, the engineering of death, of how to commit suicide inside a psychiatric hospital was demonstrated there: the way he made the knot, the way he pushed the bed, the way his neck broke, and the way the guards arrived. Jaime represented my doorway. He represented the destiny of those individuals: either he kills someone, kills himself, or he is forgotten. Jaime was the accelerator, he was a dangerous individual that killed people and could not stand living there, so he killed himself.

R. – What is the ethical and political responsibility of showing us these lives full of suffering? What was the feeling of being near lives full of suffering such as these, taking the position of someone who will show us their experiences?



*D.* – Taking Bubu’s poem as my script was an attempt to divide voices, although the responsibility is mine, not his. It is a film that has a director’s style, but my shots were guided by the poem that Bubu gave me. My ethnographic starting point is essentially political. Neither the security staff of the prison nor the general office of public safety has ever imposed any kind of censorship regarding what to film. The censorship, if I were to adopt such a strong word, was imposed by me and my crew. I would not show individuals in extremely precarious situations, just as I would not show these situations with other populations. For instance, I would not show their nudity or forms of moral degradation. Scenes like that would be on the threshold of a freak show, beneath an appealing approach about human suffering. I wanted statutes of a shared dignity, which is a big aesthetic challenge, not only ethical, to film somebody who is regimented by restriction of freedom and contrition of existence. In Salvador, the moments of humanity’s exacerbation, understood here as the humanity present in all of us, came with the music. There were moments in which the camera appeared and the inmates got together and started to sing, and those were moments of recognition of the other as a possible other. Madness creates an estrangement. It transforms the other to vileness, and criminal madness is the vileness that we do not want to see. This film circulated widely, was present at many festivals, won many prizes. There were some festivals where people left the room during Jaime’s scene and waited outside. They waited for me and said: “I am here to tell you that I did not come to this movie theater to see Jaime. He is unbearable. I came here to have fun! I did not come to see that”. The idea of the documentary film as a piece of entertainment makes the film, especially Jaime’s scene, something that is unbearable.

*R.* – Thinking about the audience, the film has several scenes that make us laugh. Was that intentional? How was the experience with laughter in the field?

*D.* – Laughter was intentional. It was a permanent expression of mine and of the crew in the field. And in contexts where language or reason is not the main vehicle to promote encounter among people, there are other devices available, like silence, glances, gestures, and humor. The humor was permanent, by the crew with the inmates, among the inmates themselves, and from the inmates with us. The character that shows up explaining

everything that he is, that he wanted to participate in TV show, Big Brother, that he is “Windows, Word, Excel”, he was constantly trying to get my attention. He kept telling me: “I am a gynecologist; I am Windows, Word, Excel”. When we turned the camera on, there he was. That scene had to be part of the film, and he always made me laugh. And every time I laughed, he did more things for us that made us laugh. Laughter is a way of communication, at least in Salvador. I did not find that to be the case as much in other units. They made me laugh, and I wanted people to laugh too. Laughter is a form of humanizing, and of humanizing the danger. Those are individuals we are afraid of. People are afraid of the insane. They are afraid of madness, even if it is not accompanied by crime. To laugh at him was a way of getting close to him, like singing with him. During the exhibition of the film, in places where the songs they sing are more popular, the audience sings along, they stomp their feet, and that is a beautiful experience, you are singing with the insane, people who are rejected. The laughter was intentional, and it tests the audience for me. Recently, I discussed the film at a renowned law university in the United States and nobody laughed. There, laughter is not authorized. It is an audience that shows all the marks of imperialism, of cultural insensibility, trained not to laugh when confronted with the pain of others, because this is politically incorrect. When I show the film to judges and lawyers, nobody laughs. When I show it to students, however, laughter is everywhere. On the internet, the film has a few thousand views, and the comments vary a lot.

E. – Is laughter, then, an ethnographic experience?

D. – Laughter is an ethnographic experience. It is ethnographic data. This is a key point. It is not only an aesthetic tool for closeness. It is loyal to ethnography. It is an ethnographic fidelity, a permanent form of communication inside such spaces. This is a kind of challenge that only image can meet. I would not be able to represent the experience of laughter in a text. The image allows me to show ethnographic shots that would require from me a textual aesthetic that perhaps I do not have.

R. – *Titicut Follies* is a documentary by Frederick Wiseman from the 1960s about an institution for the criminally insane, similar to *The House of the Dead*, but the former has a completely different focus. I wanted you to talk

about the similarities and the differences between these two views, two ways of representing these universes.

D. – I studied *Titicut* extensively. It is a cornerstone in documentary filmmaking related to madness and crime. It represents a moment of documentary history, of the idea of the observational film, “a fly on the wall” that beholds the scenes. It is a camera that is set to see the scenes. And the world passes by the camera. But there I could find my anti-mirror. I took notes about what I did not want to do, about what I could not do and about what type of madness I did not want to show. Of course, that film was made 50 years ago. It is easy to use it as a mirror for the things I do not want. Some of the things depicted there represented the insane asylums of the 1950s and 1960s, not only in the United States, but in many places. It was a moment of critique, of the appearance of anti-insane asylum critique. It was a political film about what was happening and what was not seen. Therefore, it had its importance. But the historical moment in which I was living was different. It was in the late 2000s. There was a consolidation of psychiatric reform in Brazil, of the recognition of individual rights and a life of freedom and dignity. But the film was a very important mirror for what I did not want. I did not want the characters in the film to be part of a landscape. I wanted, as much as possible, that they would be participants with some interaction, of a possible construction of themselves. *Titicut Follies* is a film in which the insane are part of a larger insane asylum landscape. Madness is part of the history of documentary tradition, but they are always very singular and difficult-to-make films.

E. – Can we say that you applied the technique “filming the relationship”, as Consuelo Lins characterizes the Brazilian documentarian Eduardo Coutinho’s films?

D. – If “filming the relationship” is similar to what anthropology calls making an ethnographic film, I would say so. I did not follow a script. The script arose from an encounter with Bubu. Bubu was an individual that, when I filmed *The House of the Dead*, had already been confined 12 times. As far as I know, the last time I went to the hospital, it was his 14<sup>th</sup> time. The records indicated that his legal infraction was public disturbance. He was the son of a town counselor in a town in the outskirts of the state of Bahia. And he campaigned against his mother. He is a big, strong man, with a

psychiatric diagnosis that would justify his admission in a mental hospital. He was the intellectual in that institution. He was the one who said words in other languages, sent letters to a newspaper... His dream was to start a political party, in which I would be his running mate. He had ambitions in the hospital. After several days of filming, during which he observed me, I went to film his cell. He said: "Hey, we are going to change roles. I am the one who will ask you questions". He took the camera and started to ask me: "Who are you? What do you do? What do you want with this film?" That was the first time that he said: "This is one of the cells of the dead". He was a character who stimulated me. I went back to study what he had said. On the following day, he had a poem written on a piece of crumpled paper. It was a poem in 96 verses, called "The House of the Dead". That is a title that I would never be allowed to give to someone's life, about someone's space or dwelling. But, by him, it was a legitimate description. There is an intertext with *The Cemetery of the Living*, by the Brazilian writer Lima Barreto, and by the Russian writer Dostoyevsky's *The House of the Dead*. Some people asked me if Bubu had already read them. I cannot answer that. If I ask, he will say yes. It was an individual testimony that he calls poetry. Therefore, I assumed the native category of poetry. In that poem, he says: "This film-documentary has three acts: of the deaths without bells tolling, of the usual and - so said - legal overdoses and of the lives without changes out there". He says: "Those are the three acts of the film". The following day, I had to return there and I said to myself: "Where are the three acts of the film? Who are the characters of the three acts?" It was as if I had turned off the camera and turned it back on for a new ethnography. After that, the characters started to appear. Almerindo already existed for me. He is the one who closes the film, someone who stole a bicycle and has been there for 30 years, with a diagnosis of intellectual disability. Jaime announced himself. He was a dangerous individual, so I knew I had to start the film with him. No one could accuse me of a narrative of the *beau savage*. And I had to wait for the second, the one who would come and go. That is when Antonio made his appearance, handcuffed to the back of a truck. Bubu was the first to watch. He approved the final edition. We showed it to the inmates and to the hospital staff, the first ones to see the film. They all authorized it, all approved it.

E. – What is your interpretation of Jean Rouch’s “shared anthropology?”

D. – I think that is one of the most successful things that Rouch created. It is what most affords me the experience of sharing the ethnography with the ones I made the ethnographic study about. That was very clear to me in *Severina’s Story*, which I co-directed with Eliane Brum. It tells the story of a woman who was forbidden to perform an abortion by a Supreme Court decision. Severina is illiterate, a farmer from the outskirts of Pernambuco state. She would never read an ethnographic text. And I could show the final timeline to her and her husband, Rosivaldo, before closing it and ask them: “Do you agree with the film? Do you want this to be your story?” For me, that was the strongest experience of sharing an ethnography. And I did the same thing with *The House of the Dead*. I think this is not only an ethical creation, but a methodological and aesthetically possibility of the ethnographic film. Taking “shared anthropology” seriously was to take what Severina could tell me seriously. “There are some scenes I do not want you to show”, Severina told me, although the direction is mine and the responsibility for the film is mine, and not theirs. That is the same for *The House of the Dead*. It is about taking them seriously, as people who have something to say.

E. – Then, is it a film “with the other”, and not “about the other” in the sense given by Eduardo Coutinho?

D. – Yes, it is. At least, I hope so. But that is something the participants themselves have to tell me, the individuals that I shoot. That was very clear to me with *Severina*. It was a film with her. After having made the film, in 2005, with the Brazilian Supreme Court’s decision about anencephaly, Severina left the film and started to be the protagonist of her own history. She came to speak before the Court. She was featured in all the newspapers telling the history about her pain shown in the film. Severina, for me, is an example that the film was made “with her.” In the case of *The House of the Dead*, it is a little more difficult to state because the characters are individuals who are still segregated from society. They are still silenced. But, to the degree that Bubu’s poem allowed me that, I would give an affirmative answer to your question. But that is certainly something the others and the subjects themselves have to answer.

R. – How was the editing process of the film? Did you apply any ethical principles to it? Is there anything you would not do? Or do you always decide on the spot, at the specific encounter, in the specific field, how you will do the montage?

D. – There are methodological, ethical, and technical procedures for each stage. In relation to ethnography, some of them are very clear to me. I do not pay for the interviews, a tradition in documentary filmmaking. I will never alter their speech. I refuse to train them for the interview scene. In general, it is in fact the first and genuine encounter. I try to film the fleeting moments. Those are the disputed procedures, especially on the frontier of documentary tradition. The documentary tradition in Brazil sees no problem in paying for an interviewee's time. For anthropology, it would be a big ethical issue. The second point is that I commit myself to showing the participants my timeline before finishing the film and to give them the right to negotiate points of view. I will try to convince them of my choices. And they will try to convince me of theirs. But, ultimately, I recognize their sovereign voices. Severina asked me to cut some parts. I did it. It was the same with *Alone and Anonymous*, a film about a man who wanted to die. It was a much more dramatic film for me. I do not put my hand on the mouse to edit; I select the timing and sequences, in constant discussion with my editor. I do not give him a script and say: "Put it together". I sit next to him during the whole montage. But I do not alter scenes. I barely make use of image fusion procedure, only when it is not possible to give sequence to a text, to a scene. I do not use music, except when it is incidental.

E. – Would visual anthropology be a theoretical-methodological project that would facilitate and make a dialogue with the world possible? What status do you give to visual anthropology?

D. – I would give visual anthropology a status very close to the capacity of visual narratives in general, like the documentary. Visual anthropology has the power to let me communicate with people in a manner that my books and my articles do not. Some people would not give me three hours to read a book, but they give me 20 minutes to watch a film. All the films I make, by an agreement of the whole crew, are open to the public. They all appear on YouTube. People who would never meet me can watch, copy, edit. That allows certain democratic access to the stories that other forms of textual narrative

do not. What is most sensitive in anthropology is potentiated by visual anthropology, which is where we can tell good stories.

R. – And how is the relationship between video advocacy and ethnographic video?

D. – If I say that the two are synonymous in a special issue on visual anthropology, I know that I will receive letters of criticism. But I will take the risk and say that they are synonymous: I do not dissociate anthropology from a political glance. I do not dissociate anthropology from intervention. I am sure that I have many colleagues who will dissociate, maybe not from politics, but from intervention. By not dissociating those three pieces - politics, intervention and engagement - I am assuming that I am not a neutral anthropologist. I do engaged anthropology. I have my feet on the ground as a human rights activist and a feminist. But I am reliable as an anthropologist, but not neutral. And being reliable and being impartial are two different paths. I see the difference between neutral anthropology and reliable anthropology. I believe that the procedures that I follow, the techniques that I use, make me a reliable narrator, besides being engaged. I do not make a film about madness that will show the importance of a mental institution. It will be a film to be used in favour of an anti-insane asylum campaign. My feet are set on the ground. And that seems to be something that is possible in anthropology for me. It is not only in activism, but also remarkably in the field of human rights activism.

E. – Jean Rouch, when proposing the idea of “*cinéma vérité*”, affirmed that the truth of filming is not the filming of the truth. Do you agree with this proposition?

D. – Yes, I do. First, there is irony here in the idea of truth itself. Truth is a narrative construction. Certainly another anthropologist, with the same 48 hours that I have, would make a different film, which would have another narrative concept and another truth concept. But the reliability of filming is the reliability of the encounter. I did not want the truth label for my films, but the reliance on what I tell. That is what I need to use a film as a support for political activism. Those people live the stories I tell. They are told under my point of view, by my hand, by my sensibility, and after my encounter.

E. – Your films have already been exhibited in 136 festivals, in 27 countries. You have already received 81 prizes for films and research. The film *The House of the Dead* received 25 prizes and, as you said, was the finalist in the Grand Prize of Brazilian Cinema.

D. – It can be understood as a feedback process. After receiving these prizes, it is easier for people to believe that I have something to say. When I made *Severina*, I did not have any experience. I was supported by an anonymous sponsor. I am thankful for that anonymous sponsor to this very today, someone who believed I could make the film. He or she thought there was a good story there. In other words, someone believed. And the prizes are like this: not only do they serve as a doggie treat, but they also have the role of providing feedback in a field in which it is difficult to overcome barriers, since I do not define myself as a filmmaker. I am an anthropologist that tells stories. All my stories have a political connotation. All my stories are linked to a human rights campaign. This business card is not enough to make a living. And I thank whoever evaluated me one day, believed in me and said that it was worth it.

E. – And are there new film projects in view?

D. – Yes. The next project, for which we are still waiting for financial support, is on homophobia. It is the story of an adolescent who was killed by homophobic rage, by three homophobes. And I would like to tell the story of the absence experienced by the mother, a woman who still misses her son a lot. I would like to tell what homophobia is in the voice of a mother.

E. – Thank you, for the interview Debora!

D. – My pleasure, Erica! My pleasure, Rosana!

### **About the interviewers**

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\* Both authors equally participated in the paper. They thank CAPES for the Post-Doctoral National Program Grant.