



Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology

ISSN: 1809-4341

Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (ABA)

Cunha, Edgar Teodoro da; Novaes, Sylvia Caiuby
Landscapes of memory: the first visual images of the Bororo of Central Brazil1
Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology, vol. 16, e16202, 2019
Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (ABA)

DOI: 10.1590/1809-43412019v16a202

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Landscapes of memory: the first visual images of the Bororo of Central Brazil¹

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Abstract

The opportunity of exhibiting in a Bororo village in Central Brazil the film *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness* (1931), and translating into Portuguese this typical travelogue and widely considered to be the first documentary with synchronized sound, led the authors to analyze visual images on the Bororo society made in the first decades of the XX century. The article focuses on how visual images – films and photographs – frequently show the intentions of the author and on the other hand may enhance memories and create a particular relationship with the past and history of a people.

Keywords: visual anthropology; Bororo Indians; Brazil; documentaries and travelogues; photographs; Penn Museum archive.

Paisagens da memória: as primeiras imagens visuais dos Bororo do Brasil Central

Resumo

A oportunidade de exibir o filme *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness* (1931) numa aldeia Bororo no Brasil Central e traduzir para o português esse *travelogue*, considerado o primeiro documentário com som sincronizado, levou os autores a analisar imagens visuais da sociedade Bororo realizadas nas primeiras décadas do século XX. O foco do artigo é entender como as imagens visuais – filmes e fotografias – frequentemente mostram as intenções de seus autores e, por outro lado, podem ativar a memória e criar uma relação particular com o passado e a história de um povo.

Palavras-chave: antropologia visual; índios Bororo; Brasil; documentários e travelogues; fotografias; Acervo do Penn Museum

¹ This article is one of the many results of the grant 2009/52880-9 from São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) and the grant 308257/2014-6 from CNPq, by Sylvia Caiuby Novaes, and the grant 2008/56438-6 from FAPESP holds by Edgar Teodoro da Cunha. We want to thank Leo Fuzer for diagramming this article. The authors dedicate this article to the memory of Beatriz Kiga.

Landscapes of memory: the first visual images of the Bororo of Central Brazil

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Introduction

Cabinets of curiosity or “wonder rooms” (*wunderkammer*) emerged in the sixteenth century and included in their collections a great variety of artwork, artifacts and different kinds of objects from exotic people, shells, rock samples, botanical specimens, zoological species. It seems that we Westerners have always had a passion for collections even before museums became part of the landscape of big cities in Europe, around the seventeenth century, as public cultural institutions. “Wonder” is a continuing part of the museum experience; nowadays, “Museums as media produce more than coherent messages; they sometimes create magical, excessive effects” (Henning 2006 in Bouquet 2012:4). This is the case with the film *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*, a pioneering film project sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

In 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, E. R. Fenimore Johnson, son of the President of Victor Talking Machine - the great phonograph company and largest manufacturer of Victrolas in the United States, which was sold to RCA in 1929 - was persuaded to finance a zoological and ethnological expedition to Mato Grosso. This expedition was among the largest ever sent out from the US and employed at various times as many as thirty employees, equipped with the most modern appliances (an airplane, automobile, radio, etc.). This four-month expedition included an ethnographer, Vincenzo Petrullo and a film crew, whose work produced the film *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*. Its three directors Floyd Crosby (who had worked with Murnau and Flaherty on the 1931 film, *Tabu*), Clarke, and Newell created a 50-minute film that was a combination of science and adventure. It was also a pioneer in the use of synchronized sound in a documentary.² It has recently been restored by the University of Pennsylvania’s Penn Museum in the United States. A narration of the lengthy expedition, the film reaches its height with the arrival of the North Americans at a Bororo village where the natives welcome them with a hunt for the jaguar, which has enormous importance in Bororo funerary rituals. Additional footage was later edited to produce another 9-minute film entitled *The Hoax*.

The two films, *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness* and *The Hoax*, are the property of the University of Pennsylvania’s Penn Museum (Pourshariati 2013) and were sent to the authors by Kate R. Pourshariati for translation of the parts spoken in Bororo. She also forwarded the yet unpublished article “The beginnings of sound in documentary film: *Matto Grosso* (1931)” in which she analyses the importance of this film, considered to be the first documentary with synchronized sound.³

² Regarding sound, see, from an article titled *Talkie cameras taken*; “For the first time, according to Mr. Johnson, talking motion picture apparatus is being taken in to the field to record the voices of people and animals in their native locale. The expedition expects to bring back a permanent record for future use of ethnologists and naturalists”. See also: “Explorer shows sound film of primitive Brazil tribe” *Washington Post*, 1/31/33 p.7 “Presenting the first sound moving pictures ever taken of primitive people, Vincenzo Petrullo of the University Museum of Philadelphia last night took members of the Archaeological Society of Washington on a two hour trip into a lost world of Brazilian wilderness...Dances and other amusements of the primitive people were revealed, and one heard their language recorded on the sound film”. All these notes can be found in Pourshariati <https://www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso/>

³ The full article is found at www.penn.museum/sites/mattogrosso.

In July 2011, Edgar Teodoro da Cunha and Sylvia Caiuby Novaes took these films to Mato Grosso where they were shown to the Bororo in the village of Tadarimana, located in the São Lourenço River basin in an area delimited by the Vermelho River. It is the same region where the original films were shot. The two anthropologists were able to observe the natives' reactions first-hand, and at the behest of the Museum, the parts of the film spoken in Bororo were translated and subtitled in the field. It is to the memory of Beatriz Kiga, the translator of the film, that the authors dedicate this article.

Figure 01: Beatriz Kiga translates the film and Edgar Teodoro da Cunha subtitles it in the village of Tadarimana.



Photo Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.

According to the IBGE census (2010) the Bororo are 2.348 people and they currently reside in six indigenous lands demarcated in the state of Mato Grosso, in the central region of Brazil. Films about the Bororo had been made prior to the arrival of the above-mentioned North-American expedition at the beginning of the 1930s, and it is worth taking a look at these and other images from that period, as there are interesting resonances between them and the 1931 film. Most of these films present the same characteristics Henley pointed out when analyzing Haddon's and Spencer's films made toward the end of the nineteenth century: they were made with the sense "to preserve as many typical physical manifestations as possible of a soon-to-disappear 'primitive' stage in the evolution of human society" (Henley 2013:386). The same was the purpose of those people who decided to fund the expedition to Brazil: Horace Jayne, director of the Museum and Fenimore Johnson, the son of Victor Talking Machine Co. founder, E. R. Johnson. Besides being a way "to expand the Museum's holdings primarily by sponsoring expeditions, rather than purchasing objects from third-party vendors" (Attridge 2017:16), "the expedition should serve the purpose of documenting what he [Johnson] perceived to be the last vestiges of the primitive world. He saw the film as an opportunity to record a dying breed of indigeneity before it vanished forever, either through cultural assimilation or complete annihilation". (Idem:17). In a sense, these films and the museums behind them were quite similar to the cabinets of curiosity: they "engaged in aggressive collections practices in order to stockpile indigenous material culture before indigenous cultures, and with them the market for their artifacts - disappeared" (Attridge 2017:18).

Films and photographs, although produced at the same time, frequently show the intentions of the author and may present totally different realities. The purpose of this article is to analyze these first visual images of the Bororo of Central Brazil. Our goal is an analysis of how films may be understood considering the cinematic era in which they were shot, their relation to each other in the period and the different purposes for its production. On the other hand, films may enhance memories and create a particular relationship with the past and history of a people. An analysis of the film's narrative structure and development may throw light on why these images captivate viewers when exhibited by the time the film was produced and today, for the descendants of the people originally filmed.

Films as part of the State strategy to raise funds

The first of these was the 1917 film *Rituais e Festas Bororo* (Bororo Rituals and Feasts), by Luiz Thomaz Reis, a major in the army and cinematographer who was responsible for the Cinematography and Photography Section created by Cândido Mariano Rondon⁴ in 1912 as part of the Commission for Strategic Telegraph Lines that explored territory from Mato Grosso to the Amazon. Rondon was fully aware of the power of images, just as the Russian statesmen of his era were, and this and other films by Reis were shown in large urban areas in order to raise funds for the Rondon Commission's activities, which included gathering geological, botanical, zoological and ethnical data. The exhibition of these films was also seen as a way to validate the Commission's work for the Brazilian State in the interior of the country, principally in Mato Grosso (Tacca 2005). Moreover, the film was part of Rondon's strategy to demonstrate the importance of occupying the borderlands of Brazilian territory.

Theodore Roosevelt, former President of the United States, went on an expedition accompanied by Reis and Rondon between December 1913 and May 1914. Reis was also the director of the film *Expedição Roosevelt a Mato Grosso* (The Roosevelt Expedition to Mato Grosso), which according to Tacca (2001), appears to anticipate the 1931 film in that it also pairs the search for the exotic with an interest in the scientific, thus the images of the taxidermists who came along on the expedition to treat the specimens being collected for the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

Figure 2 e 3: Shots from the film “Bororo Rituals and Feasts”, by Luiz Thomaz Reis.



⁴ *Rituais e Festas Borôro* is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ein6eKqMBtE&t=309s> For more on the film *Bororo Rituals and Feasts* as well as the work of Major Reis and the Rondon Commission, see Tacca 2002 and Caiuby Novaes, Cunha and Henley, 2017.

In 1918, immediately following the release of Reis's film on the Bororo, the National Geographic Society sponsored his trip to the United States where *Bororo Rituals and Feasts* was shown as part of their "Wilderness" program at Carnegie Hall in New York. It is important to point out that this film was unrealistic in its depiction of the types of contact with the outside world that the Bororo had had at that time. It would not have been a great strategy to show the Bororo wearing clothes or working in the fields if the main goal of the films was to raise funds for the Rondon Commission's activities. Therefore, Reis never mentioned the Salesian missionaries who had been working among the Bororo since the beginning of the 20th century in areas further to the north of Mato Grosso. In the film's version of Bororo rituals, the natives are portrayed as primitive savages with no apparent sign of contact with non-Indians, which does not correspond to historical reality. The term noble savages immediately come to mind. Reis's camera views the Bororo from bottom to top, from an epic perspective; the film depicts them as Indians living in isolation, when in fact their first contacts with European outsiders date back to the beginning of the 18th century. Reis's photography, however, reinforces the idea that the Bororo have not yet been made commonplace by the process of civilization.

Photographs as part of the missionaries' strategy to raise funds

While researching the Salesian archives in São Paulo, Sylvia Caiuby Novaes discovered a series of photographs of the Bororo which were taken by Catholic missionaries during the same time period when Reis's film was being shot. These photos, which acted as a calling card in their fund-raising efforts to demonstrate the benefits missionary work could bring to the Indians, show the Bororo taking part in a variety of activities: planting crops, working in the sawmills built by the missionaries, women (all wearing the same type of clothing) weaving on big looms under the supervision of a nun, couples engaged to be married receiving trousseaus from the mission, and a football team with the Brazilian flag in the background.

Figures 4, 5, 6, 7, 8: Arquivo Salesiano







Contrary to Reis's film, there are no primitives or savages in these pictures, whose aim is to portray the principal values that the Salesians tried to instill in the Bororo: work as a virtue, the importance of the nuclear family, the basis of Christian morality, and citizenship (Caiuby Novaes, 2006). As we said at the start, images, far more than texts, reveal the author and his intent.

Major Reis's film is consistent with the philosophy of the Rondon Commission, a project inspired by the doctrine of Positivism and initiated in Brazil shortly after the new Republic was established in 1889. It is important to have in mind that Rondon himself was of indigenous descent: his mother was of mixed Bororo and Terena descent and his father had Guaná ancestry. The institutional character of the group of films and photos produced by the Commission is irrefutable and is a reflection of how the latter's actions aimed to promote the taming of the interior of the country and its then little-known borders. Contrary to the Salesians, Rondon thought that "the process of incorporation of the indigenous people into the national society should take place without the need for them to pass through the process of being 'catechized' by missionaries" (Caiuby Novaes, Cunha and Henley, 2017:118).

However, the film *Bororo Rituals and Feasts* is in direct contrast to the treatment given to other indigenous groups who came into contact with the Commission, which always put forward ideas of assimilation and professed the desire to incorporate the Indian into civilization while going through the process of expanding Brazil's borders and occupying its territory. In this film, which represents Bororo society as being untouched and "savage", the objective is to relegate their existence to the past all the way back to the "origin of nationality," a typical feature of the Indian tradition found in Brazilian romantic literature.

As mentioned before, the Commission for Telegraph Lines produced visual material with the objective of documenting and divulging its activities, but it also aimed to procure alternative sources of funding for the latter through the circulation of films and photographs. One aspect of Reis's work that has received little attention is the initiatives he undertook to exhibit and circulate his films. Reis presented a report to the central office of the Commission in 1918, in which he listed the receipts from the exhibition of Commission films in several cities in Mato Grosso such as, Campo Grande, Aquidauana, Cuiabá, Cáceres and Corumbá, demonstrating that the amount nearly covered the costs of three of the expeditions already undertaken, including the expedition to the São Lourenço River, which resulted in the film on a Bororo funeral. Another interesting aspect of the Reis report is the contrast between what he says about his plans in relation to the production of *Bororo Rituals and Feasts* and the actual film that was made. In some ways his intentions anticipated what would only fully be realized in 1953 with Heinz Foerthman's film on the Bororo funeral in which he managed to bring together all of the images that Reis described so well in his report (Lasmar 2002; 2008). Even more important is the way Foerthman's film managed to approximate the tone and drama of Reis's original description of the ritual cycle (Cunha 2005).

Although the film is based on external shots and there is a preference for focusing on the ritual activity taking place in the village courtyard, Reis always has a camera nearby and when his heavy equipment and tripod permit, he uses long, generous takes as he visually closes in on various aspects of Bororo life.

The film sequences are captioned with title cards in a "picturesque" way, which is in contrast to the more sober, descriptive tone used in the report. The film does not follow the actual sequence of the funeral activities, but rather strives to engage viewers through the economy of its narrative and editing, which synthesizes actions and feelings. For example, at the end of the narrative there is a primary burial filmed as a culmination of the ritual sequence; it has been edited to look like the end of the funeral in an inversion which probably serves as a simplification of the theme of the film, as the very significant final title card suggests: "We had the sensation that we were back in the remote Age of Discovery."

In this film the image of the Bororo is one of the untouched savage, who comprises the roots of nationality. However, the concept of the Bororo as contributors to the origin of a collective identity is made possible only by removing them to a distant past, a time immemorial as is the case with all origin myth. The Indians, as they actually were, had been incorporated into “civilized” society and no longer fit the bill.⁵

For this reason, the Indians in *Bororo Rituals and Feasts* are portrayed as “savage”⁶ and “untouched,” maintaining the perception that they have had little contact with the outside world. We cannot discern any diacritical sign of change in the film: only a few of the Bororo are clothed, and the inclusion of any of the elements pertaining to the white man’s world is kept to a minimum.

For anyone who is aware of the history of contact with the Bororo people, it is easy to see the degree to which the above mentioned image has been fabricated. We need go no further than the comments made by Karl Von den Steinen at the end of the 19th century in his appraisal of the situation of the Bororo in the Military Colonies. The former were submitted to a complex system of tutelage and worse, were kept under control by the extensive use of alcohol. The photographic evidence produced by the Salesians during their evangelistic, civilizing missions with the Bororo, who lived in the region under the former’s influence, also speaks for itself.

Films as part of the exotic adventure

Another film, *Last of the Bororos*, by Aloha Baker (1931)⁷, an American adventuress, records an expedition to a Bororo village, most probably Pobore, which is located on the margins of the Vermelho River in the same region where Reis’s films were shot. The film documents several aspects of Bororo daily life and ritual. It was filmed during an extensive hunt for the British explorer, Colonel Fawcett, and his son, who had disappeared during an expedition in the area of the Xingu River tributaries in 1925. We first see Baker meeting Rondon in Rio de Janeiro; this is followed by her train journey from São Paulo to Corumbá and ends with her first contact with the Bororo in Pobore, where she is welcomed by a group of Bororo men in front of the *baimanagejeu*, or men’s house.

Figure 9 e 10: Shots from the film “Last of the Bororos”, by Aloha Baker.



⁵ This line of thought is developed in Cunha (2005).

⁶ A fine analysis of this film is in Tacca (2002).

⁷ More references to Baker’s film can be found in Cunha (2005, p.53 and 2016, p. 247). The director is also known as Aloha Wanderwell Baker; the film can be found with its original title modified to “The River of Death” and can be viewed online at the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuV7Z17NPtM>

Baker, a filmmaker who made several adventure films, appears in many scenes interacting with Bororo, as, for example, when she dances in the courtyard with the men and women or when she appears alongside a child who is dancing in the yard or next to a couple inside a Bororo house. Her narration watching the music and dancers is “*I could hardly believe that the music scene before me could be part of this world.*” The film transmits an aura of enchantment with an exotic place, a remote place full of piranhas, capybaras, and the most diverse birds, such as macaws, parrots, as well as anteaters, deer, pumas and monkeys. Baker communicates with the Bororo only through sign language, but even so she manages to have a man light the fire by rubbing two pieces of wood together. Baker leaves the Bororo village saying “*We left this land of mystery, of beauty and of danger, untouched by civilization.*” The white woman seems truly attached to the Bororo she meets and she is portrayed as an intrepid explorer of new worlds using her hydroplane as means and method.

The early history of Bororo films shows that women were filming a lot, and in quite different ways, as we will see next.

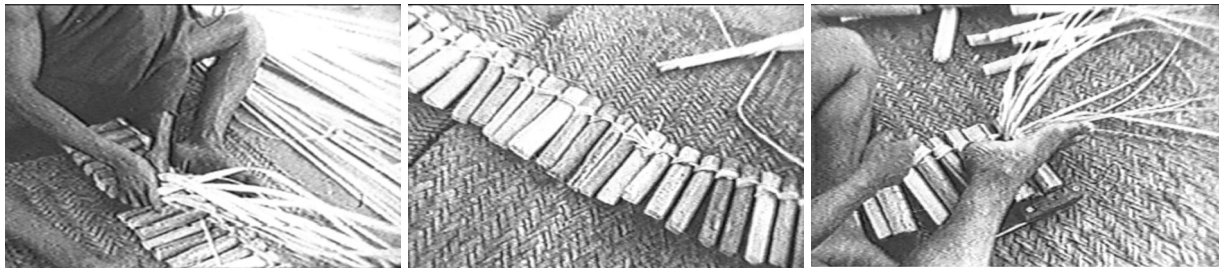
Film as part of ethnography

Dina and Claude Lévi-Strauss arrived in São Paulo, Brazil in the beginning of 1935, as members of the French Mission in the recently founded Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras, at the University of São Paulo. Between November 1935 and March 1936, Dina Dreyfus Lévi-Strauss accompanied her husband on an expedition to contact the Kaduveo and the Bororo, both indigenous societies located in Mato Grosso, Central Brazil. The photographs and ethnographic films she made clearly highlight the scientific objectives of the expedition: *Aldeia de Nalike* (*Nalike Village I and II*, shot among the Kaduveo); *Cerimônias Fúnebres entre os Índios Bororo* (*Funeral Ceremonies among the Bororo I and II*); *A vida em uma aldeia Bororo* (*Life in a Bororo village*) and *Os trabalhos do gado no curral de uma fazenda no sul de Mato Grosso* (*Cattle work in a farm in southern Mato Grosso*). Each film runs 8 minutes and they were all shot in 16mm.

This expedition was partly funded by the Departamento de Cultura da Cidade de São Paulo, which had a remarkable partnership with Anthropology (Peixoto 1998:94). More than anybody else, it was Mario de Andrade, director of this Department, who defined cultural policies for Brazil in a time the country was undergoing huge transformations. (Amoroso 2004:65). Soon after this first expedition of the Lévi-Strauss couple to the Kaduveo and Bororo, in April 1936, Mario de Andrade decided to honor Dina with the foundation of Sociedade de Etnografia e Folclore (Society for Ethnography and Folklore). The films that resulted from this expedition should be understood in the context of the Course on Ethnography that Dina offered to members of the Society for Ethnography and Folklore. Her course is an answer to the complaints of Mario de Andrade, about the absence of scientific approach in the collection of data in ethnographic studies. Their goal was to ground anthropology in the systematic and comprehensive collection of field data and at the same time to create an archive of the diversity of Brazilian culture as desired by Mario de Andrade.

The 1935 film *Cerimônias Fúnebres entre os Índios Bororo* (*Funeral Ceremonies among the Bororo*), presents yet another view of the Bororo's world. Here there is no need to engage the reader as the Reis film does. The film's shots are hesitant, as if its author is using the viewfinder to search for the right elements to film in such a visually complex world. The camera is hand-held and when a zoom lens is used, the resulting images are quite shaky. Nevertheless, compared to Reis's work, it is camerawork that is concerned with “description” and detail.

Figures 11, 12, 13: Shots from the film “Funeral Ceremonies among the Bororo”,
by Dina and Claude Lévi-Strauss.



Dina's films about the Bororo were often shot without a tripod and always at eye level, as if to show the objectivity of its author. Unlike Baker's film, Dina or Claude never appear in the scenes. Part of the film focuses on the ceremony of the *Marido*, ceremonial wheels made from the stalks and leaves of the buriti palm, and the ritual dance, *Bakororo*. The film captures aspects of material culture and the construction of the ceremonial wheels. There are no close-ups and no sense of intimacy with the people being filmed. Title cards explain the ongoing action. This is descriptive filmmaking containing long wide-angle shots in which several men who are meeting in the central plaza can also be seen. Dina Lévi-Strauss's film is a good example of the type of ethnography being practiced in the 1930s: objective gathering of data without the interference of subjective information, while maintaining distance between the subject and the observer.

Figure 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19: Shots from the film “Funeral Ceremonies among the Bororo”,
by Dina and Claude Lévi-Strauss.



In her course Dina stressed the need to be precise and to record details in the gathering of field data. She valued the use of audiovisual equipment as the only possible way to register gestures, attitudes, techniques, patterns of movement and the like (Valentini 2010). For Dina it was a priority to look at details, as in a face, or the pattern of movements, as shown in these shots of the films presented here. There are sequences that slowly get closer to the technique: from a general view which shows the position of the person approaching the job, moving through a mid-plane, which still includes the head of the practitioner, ending with a close up on the hand, the instrument and the work in progress.

The ethnographic research expeditions led by Claude and Dina Lévi-Strauss were guided by the scientific criteria of their time. Besides the films and ethnographic data they produced, they also assembled a large ethnographic collection of material culture that was sent to Musée de l'Homme in Paris and at the Museum of Archeology and Ethnology at the Universidade de São Paulo. For Dina, material culture provides a unique access to the expression of human cultures: men leave their traits in the things they do and it is possible to translate the facts of life through material objects, Dina used to say in her lectures. For her, the material object has its own life. To understand it, it is important to describe all the phases of its fabrication, to know the raw material in it, the techniques to do it, its decoration, how it is used and why it is destroyed. Then it is possible to classify it. The same object may be classified in many different ways, and it is important to gather all the information related to the object. For the object to keep its life it is necessary that it be accompanied by all the beliefs that surround it, by everything that is related to it in its original context (Amoroso 2004:68-69).

Dina Dreyfus certainly had an impact on the work of her husband. She followed Frazer and Boas in emphasizing that the knowledge produced by ethnology is essentially general and theoretical, but it is supported by the ethnographic description that encompasses, in a systematic and comprehensive way, the whole group. According to Amoroso (2004), Marcel Mauss was a major reference in all her classes.

Recurring themes in the first visual images of the Bororo

It is interesting to note that many films about Arctic Inuit and Alaskan Eskimo were made before Nanook. "In almost all these films, the narrative centers on a whaling expedition or an arctic exploration. Footage of Inuit and Alaskan Eskimo polar bears and paddling in kayaks were 'picturesque' details which, as in other films of the period, lent an air of authenticity to the representation" (Tobing Rony 1996:108). In the same way, several themes recur in early documentaries on the Bororo, whether these are the central or secondary focus of the films. Up until the 1940s, the hunt for the jaguar is present in every film. The difficulty in such an undertaking, however, often meant that no successful kill was filmed, which the Thomaz Reis report as analyzed by Tacca (2007) demonstrates.

The Bororo are superb hunters and place great value on hunting this feline, which also plays a central role in several of their myths. When we showed the film *Matto Grosso* to the Bororo in Tadarimana, the audience responded to the scenes of the jaguar hunt with great enthusiasm.

Another recurring theme related to the hunt is the funeral itself, which is the principal rite of passage in this society. Following someone's burial, the killing of a large cat such as a jaguar, catamount, or ocelot is the main responsibility of the person who represents the departed, and the period of mourning comes to an end upon presentation of the animal's hide to the deceased's family. The Bororo funeral impresses all non-Indians as a most eloquent expression of otherness. The funeral rites may last up to 2 months, from the death of an individual to the final dressing of the bones, which are carried to a river bay in a large basket. The final three

days are the most intense and dramatic as the bones are taken from a provisional grave in the center of the village, washed, and finally, adorned. These activities occur in the midst of many high-pitched lamentations from the grieving relatives, who score their bodies letting their blood drip over the bones.⁸

Reis made reference to his frustration in attempting to film this phase of the funeral, which is almost impossible not only because of the tension of the moment, but also due to the fact that the bones are washed secretly at dawn; in addition, the adornment of the bones would have to be filmed from the interior of the men's house where the lack of light, insufficient space for heavy camera equipment and the slow speed of the film would make it difficult to obtain good shots. Heinz Foerthman who travelled to the Bororo with Darcy Ribeiro is one of the few cinematographers who managed to clearly capture this phase of the funeral, but not until 1953, while filming the funeral of Cadete, a great Bororo chief.

A third recurring element in these images of the Bororo is the absence of contact with non-Indians, with the exception of the photographs produced by the Salesians. Bororo society has been the focus of anthropological literature at least since the work of Karl Von den Steinen (1894) at the end of the 19th century⁹. In addition to the large bibliography produced by the Salesians, anthropological literature has continually analyzed the complex social organization of this dual society and its cosmology (Lévi-Strauss 1936; Viertler 1976; Crocker 1985), its intricate cultural material (Dorta 1981), funeral rites and their effect on social life (Viertler 1991; Caiuby Novaes 2006), as well as the impact of outside contact and the way the Bororo have interacted with society on a national level since the 18th century (Viertler 1990; Cunha 2005).

Yet from the first films of Thomaz Reis onward, the impression given has been that the Bororo had practically no contact with society on a national level: only a few Indians appear to be clothed, work tools are not shown, and in the 1931 film, when daily life in the village is depicted, the Bororo house is substituted by an image of an enormous house from the Xingu, an entirely different cultural region in Central Brazil. The non-Bororo house may have been inserted because it represents a more powerful ethnic ideal in the minds of western audiences than the less appealing houses the Bororo built.

Figure 20: Xingu Indian house in the “Bororo village”. Shot from the film “Matto Grosso”.



8 See Caiuby Novaes (2006) for more on this phase of the funeral.

9 For a critical examination of the bibliography on the Bororo until the 1970s, see Viertler, 1976.

Film as travelogue - Some aspects of the structure of the narrative of *Matto Grosso* film

The film *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness* is a typical travelogue, in the sense that it documents a journey exploring distant, exotic places, guided by a main character who establishes the narrative focus of the film. In this case it is a travelogue with the distinction of having been partly financed by the University of Pennsylvania's Museum, which contributed to the project's positioning as both science and adventure. Oddly the Museum appears nowhere in the credits.

The travelogue is generally defined as a film genre (Benelli 2002; Ruoff 2006) that precedes so-called documentary filmmaking, whose first example is attributed to Robert Flaherty's famous 1922 film *Nanook of the North*, and whose development was consolidated in the 1930s with the advent of the Grierson method of filmmaking. An outstanding feature of travel films is the recurrent ingredient of landscapes and exotic panoramas, which are traversed by a character /traveler / narrator who describes his impressions and experiences. They are narratives in which the "picturesque" is frequently the guiding element, influencing narrative choices as well as the components selected to construct the film.

Figure 21: Floyd Crosby and the experimental Mitchell camera.



Figure 22: Ainslee Davis in foreground with sound mixer, Floyd Crosby in rear while filming the staged tent scene.



In Brazil in the 1920s films of this genre were called *natural films* or “*digs*”, evoking the active role that filmmakers played in the search for possible clients who were needed in order to get their films made. This practice resulted in recurring themes, such as scenes linked to local politics, commercial establishments and coffee plantations, burgeoning industrialization, or the world of machines as opposed to fields and life in the country, and included documenting various aspects of social life associated with these areas. Nevertheless, the guiding element of the takes and the choice of objects and situations that were filmed continued to be the “picturesque.”

The term “picturesque” is associated with other narrative forms that preceded the travelogue film, but which were equally linked to travel stories. Travelers from the 19th century, and of course, even much further back, produced innumerable texts that narrated expeditions, journeys and quests to experience different physical and cultural spaces. These narratives relay new images of distant, unknown lands, where the natural landscape gains form and is linked to a human landscape. This association with landscape has its roots in the term “picturesque,” which originated in the field of fine arts, particularly painting, and refers to that which is considered “worthy of being painted,” an allusion to landscapes and scenes that were particularly expressive, fascinating and original from a pictorial point of view. The eye of the traveler searching for the picturesque is a way of constructing the narrative and focuses the attention on the natural and human elements in the world, which can be translated as the search for the exotic. In this search the natural landscape is superimposed upon the human landscape and distant cultures are viewed as much closer to nature than those who are observing them.

The travelogue, therefore, is a genre that presents the journey as an undertaking which involves risk and emotion, the unexpected and the surprising; it frequently resorts to grandiloquent language, which stresses the picturesque, as seen in Baker’s film. This comes through even in silent films like the documentary about the Bororo directed by Major Reis; despite the lack of sound, title cards comment on the images and constitute one of the key elements that articulate the narrative of the film. The commentary, while external to the context presented on film, helps to build the spirit of adventure, creating the sensation of taming the unknown, facing challenges, and overcoming obstacles in the same vein as the travel narratives of the 19th century.

The narrative point of view in *Matto Grosso* is defined by a unique individual: Uncle George Rawls, the real name of a character who plays himself in the film as a guide who leads the expedition and who is always in the front lines regarding the relationships that are formed along the way, particularly with the Bororo. He is no “ordinary white man,” but rather someone who comes from a singularly North-American context: the “Florida Cracker,” a descendant of the first settlers who arrived in Florida in the 18th century. A rustic character, he is also good-natured and fun-loving.

According to Attridge (2017:11-12), although claiming to blend science and action, “ethnographic adventure films, also sometimes referred to as expedition films, served as a form of touristic cinema, located somewhere between anthropological inquiry and popular culture”. Shot in the state of Mato Grosso (which was spelled with a double “t” in the thirties) in central Brazil, a place represented as totally unexplored, the last refuge of primitive tribes, *Matto Grosso* is a documentary-style travel film. It focuses attention on the landscape, the animals, and the people met along the way – the Indians, all characteristic of the exotic, tropical scenario that the film strives to depict.

The presence of Uncle George Rawls is elemental to this travel film’s narrative: in scene upon scene he instigates and guides the action, establishing a narrative focus, a point of view. He functions as a mediator with the public, providing them with the chance to immerse themselves in and engage with the film, to project themselves into the action. What is unique in this case is the fact that the narrative focus that drives the film is based on a rustic character who is not contaminated by progress and urban life in an era that was marked by the Great Depression.

Figure 23: The tent scene with George Rawls and Tari.



Another important aspect in the construction of the film's narrative is the editing process, which shines light on some of the project's key elements. The directors were banking on a final cut, which would have a specific narrative, implying editing choices that lean towards naturalistic language and that result in imperceptible cuts that can be summarized as follows:

- The actor who plays Uncle Rawls guides the narrative and is the link that allows for continuity between different situations, contexts and events, thereby focusing attention on the story being told rather than on the techniques and methods of editing being used.

- An example of the use of the narrative to cover up cuts in editing is the river scene in which a large fish is being caught with a bow and arrow. The fish is struck and thrown into the boat; however, there is a cut between these two actions which have been edited to seem as if the shot is continuous. Here the narrative serves to mask the discontinuity, a technique that is typical of naturalist narrative forms which strive to convey an authentic, un-contrived feel to a take and which is also used for the benefit of dramatization, which could be adversely affected by any hint of discontinuity. Flaherty used a similar technique in *Nanook* during the episode of the seal hunt; this allowed him to dramatize the scene, which would not have been possible had he used the images as they actually occurred during filming.

Figure 24: Staged scene of boat arrival, George Rawls greets shaking the chief's hand.



Figure 25: George Rawls in a staged scene, trading American goods for Bororo goods.



One last point that bears mentioning about the film in question is the fact that the same footage was edited and used to produce three distinct versions. Whereas *Matto Grosso the Great Brazilian Wilderness* is without a doubt an adventure film whose narrative elements add emphasis to this idea, the other two films ¹⁰ *Primitive Peoples of Mato Grosso: The Bororo* and *Primitive Peoples of Mato Grosso: The Xingu*, both edited in 1941, including new images and changes in the soundtrack, substitute the original audio with a revised narrative in voice-over narration done by Lowell Thomas, a famous radio announcer. The explanatory narration gives the material a different connotation: whereas the first film is a typical adventure with an epic tone to its narrative, the other two films take on the form of a scientific endeavor; what changes is the tone of the narrative, which is epic in the case of the travel film and more objective in the case of the scientific film.

All three films convey an experience of modern cabinets of curiosity. The Mato Grosso expedition returned “with thousands of feet of film and a number of zoological specimens, including five snarling jaguars, a half tamed puma, two ocelots, two anteaters, two porcupines, a cuati, a 70 pound turtle, and a stork, known as the tu-u-u-” (Attridge 2017:33). If those wonder rooms of the sixteenth century could display collections of artifacts from exotic people, samples of fauna and flora of their habitats, these films add technology to the cabinets and show moving images and sounds of the same items: artifacts, exotic people, fauna and flora. Our passion for collections seems to be endless.

Some present-day reactions

Although it is not the main goal of this article, it is interesting to point out some present day reactions to the exhibition of *Matto Grosso to the Bororo*. In June 2011 we took these and other films to the Bororo village of Tadarimana. The exhibition of the film was announced over a loudspeaker in the village by one of its leaders. We set up a “screen” made from white sack cloths that were stretched and hung on the beam of a large palisade with the use of some twine. The Bororo arrived with their stools, chairs, and strollers as well as towels and blankets to ward off the chill air of the Mato Grosso nights at this time of year. Men, women and children made up the audience on the three evenings we exhibited these films using the data show projector we had brought with us from São Paulo. All paid great attention and it did not appear that the audience minded the film being narrated in English. A lot of exclaiming could be heard whenever an animal appeared on screen, and there were many in the film: jabiru storks, tapirs, capybaras, monkeys, otters, anteaters, armadillos, a jaguar and a puma. The hunt for the jaguar, as we mentioned before, was the cause of much emotion among the audience.

It bothered us to be showing scenes which supposedly depicted the daily life of a Bororo village, but which contained images that had been inserted from a Xingu village with the Xingu Indians and their enormous oblong houses; it seemed to us that we were duping audiences who had no knowledge of Bororo life. The Bororo, however, were fascinated by these scenes and were frustrated that the film did not show other facets of Xingu life.

¹⁰ These two films are available online. *Primitive Peoples of Mato Grosso: The Bororo* is available at https://archive.org/details/upenn-ft6-4012_1941_Primitive_Peoples_of_Matto_Grosso.

Figure 26: Scenes from the exhibition of the film *Matto Grosso* in the village of Tadarimana, in Mato Grosso.



Photo Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.

Exhibiting these films for the Bororo made us realize that there are many ways to look at a film and that we certainly had not viewed it in the same way as the Bororo had. They saw the film as a series of small, self-contained scenes, which did not necessarily form a continuous narrative. In this sense, it may be correct to associate the Bororo's reaction to the film to the way in which they structure their mythical narratives, which are also composed of small, self-contained scenarios.

Figure 27: Scenes from the exhibition of the film *The Hoax* in Tadarimana village, Mato Grosso.



Photo Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.

The film *The Hoax* made by the director of *Matto Grosso* is only 9 minutes long and especially charmed the children, although it also got some good laughs from the adults. The main character is a boy of about six who is introduced by the narrator as a “great hunter.” In the first scene he comes out of a large basket and sits on the lap of a man who is making him an arrow. The boy leaves to go fishing but catches nothing; he feeds two otters and returns to fetch the two arrows, which are now ready for him. He “rides” on a tapir, encounters an anteater and a possum, and going into the bush, practices with his bow and arrow, all the while being closely observed by a monkey who appears to be laughing at his troubles. Next, he has the idea to use one of his arrows to hook a dead lizard that he finds on the path. He takes the lizard back to show the men, proud of his deed and demonstrating with his bow and arrow how he had hunted it down. But while holding the animal up for them to see, the boy is undone by the smell of rotting flesh, which causes the men to wrinkle their noses. In the final scene the monkey laughs.

Figure 28: Scenes from the exhibition of the films in Tadarimana village, Mato Grosso.



Photo Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.

It is easy to see why this film, which was obviously made according to a concept that had been developed with the help of the local Indians, is so pleasing to the children, who can identify with the main character. The editing process allowed the author to insert scenes featuring numerous animals that, in fact, appear as if the boy has encountered them on his way through the bush. The Bororo have a keen interest in the animal world, and the images depicting them were always greeted with enthusiasm.

The monkey’s supporting role is reminiscent of the characters in Aesop’s fables; on the other hand, it could also very well be a character from one of the Bororo’s own tales. In the myths collected by Albisetti and Venturelli (1969) there are two in which the main character is *juko*, the monkey. In the first of these myths, *juko*, tired of living alone, begins beating the ground with his magic wand, giving birth to the civilized beings that become his subjects. There were so many of them that they had no place to live; in order to solve this problem, *juko* uses his wand to bring forth wooden sticks from the peppertree which the civilized beings used to construct their houses. They then decide to steal the monkey’s magic wand, which is subsequently

recovered by the parrot, *reko*, who is *juko*'s great friend. In the second myth the Salesians collected about the monkey, *juko* is an astute swindler, who deceives everyone, including the great jaguars, and he cleverly manages to escape from all of the traps that are set for him. In the North American film, the situation is reversed: the monkey does not deceive anyone; he laughs at the boy's troubles and at the deception that he tries to pull on the men who made his arrows.

Figure 29: A young Bororo sets the TV for another exhibition at Tadarimana village.



Photo Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.

Raimundo Itogoga, a great Bororo leader from the village of Tadarimana, lived at a distance from the group of houses that formed the circular village and he asked us to show the film in his house, which we did. A large group of people got together in an open area of his home and we showed the films there on a large television screen.

The films brought back memories and there is a true fascination with images from the past. Raimundo actually recognized one of the people in the *Matto Grosso* film: the Bororo man with the painted face who he identified as the *bari* (shaman) called *Tiriacu Arequiri Ópogoda*, a *bari aroe toarari* (shaman of the souls), known for his bravery and for killing both men and jaguars.

According to Raimundo, the film takes place in an ancient village called *Pogubu Çoreu*, which is located about 10 or 15 kilometers from the city of Fátima. During the first half of the 20th century a missionary took the Bororo from this village to the Teresa Cristina Colony where sugar cane processing had been established. Raimundo believes that the products appearing in the film distributed by the North Americans among the Bororo were a stratagem for ensuring a friendly welcome rather than being met with the hostility for which these Indians were known. This idea is in contrast to the situation put forward by Marshal Rondon and the missionaries, all of whom insisted that pacification and cessation of hostile behavior towards non-Indians were the norm.

In 1931, *Matto Grosso, the Great Brazilian Wilderness*, succeeded in bringing North Americans closer to people from distant, exotic lands and the film's soundtrack made explicit how it was possible for the Penn Museum expedition to arrive at these places and document the diversity of fauna and exuberant vegetation to be found

in Mato Grosso, with its great rivers and exotic people. The expedition returned to the Museum with the images it filmed as well as with indigenous artefacts and innumerable fauna samples that went to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and the live animals that went to the Philadelphia Zoo.

The exhibition of this film in the present day permits the Bororo to take a look at their past, their memories and their customs. For us these films can be seen as landscapes of memory; they are documents that also speak to and about us, whether it be about the foreign as an object of desire and danger, about our interest in the exotic – and what this notion of exotic consists of – or about how our institutions make use of collections (images, artifacts, samples of flora and fauna) to create history. “Museums select what they choose to collect, preserve and display. [...] They simultaneously remove us from and then reconnect us with the outside world” (Bouquet 2012:4-5). In a sense these films do the same, presenting us a remote world with their exotic people, fauna, and flora.

Figure 30 e 31: Photo Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.



Translated by Beth Martin Carlão

Technical Review of the English translation: Beth Conklin

Received: November 08, 2018

Approved: February 15, 2019

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