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AMAZONIA ROAD MOVIES[1]

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Abstract

This article focuses on films about the Amazon that depict a trip through the region. It considers Amazonian travel films as a kind of "road movies" and discusses these films as part of "ecocinema." The article then undertakes an analysis of three Amazonian "road movies": Silvino Santos's *In the Land of the Amazons* (*No Paiz das Amazonas*, 1922), Jorge Bodanzky and Orlando Senna's *Iracema: An Amazonian Live Affair* (*Iracema: Uma Transa Amazônica*, 1974) and Ciro Guerra's *The Embrace of the Serpent* (*El abrazo de la serpiente*, 2015). The goal is both to reflect on the evolution of Amazonian iconography and on the different paradigms adopted to portray the environment of the Amazon in film.

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Resumo

Este artigo analisa filmes sobre a Amazônia que retratam viagens na região. O ensaio considera o cinema de viagem sobre a Amazônia como um tipo de "filme de estrada" ("road movie") e aborda estes filmes sob a perspetiva do "ecocinema." O artigo examina em seguida três "filmes de estrada" sobre a Amazônia: *No Paiz das Amazonas* (1922) de Silvino Santos, *Iracema: Uma Transa Amazônica* (1974) de Jorge Bodanzky e Orlando Senna e *O Abraço da Serpente* (*El abrazo de la serpiente*, 2015) de Ciro Guerra. O objetivo é refletir sobre a evolução da iconografia da Amazônia e sobre os diferentes paradigmas adotados para representar o meio ambiente da região no cinema.

Cinematic Travels in the Amazon

A large number of films set in the Amazon river basin revolve around a voyage. Movies from outside Latin America often portray the experience of foreigners who travel to the region, as in Harry Hoyt's *The Lost World* (1925), an adaptation of Conan Doyle's eponymous novel about a British scientist who journeys to Amazonia to find a plateau teeming with pre-historical animals. Later cinema follows this early pattern, with movies like *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954), which portrays scientists on a research trip threatened by an amphibious being from the depths of an Amazonian lake, and Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), where the protagonists travel in the area only to see their designs to

conquer and economically exploit it thwarted by the indomitable Amazonian nature, to name but a few well-known examples.

Films about Amazonia made by Latin American directors similarly resort to the trope of the journey as a key element of the plot. In Carlos Diegues's *Bye, Bye, Brazil* (1980), for instance, a troupe of vaudeville performers drives to the Amazonian city of Altamira in the hopes of finding a paying audience; in Luis Alberto Lamata's *Jericó* (1990) a Spanish priest travels to the Amazon to evangelize its Indigenous population and ends up acculturating into a tribe. Eschewing the more outlandish portrayals of the area as home to fantastic beasts and miraculous, disease-curing plants and animals, these and other Latin American directors, like their North American and European counterparts, depict the region as a space separated from the rest of the Amazonian nations, a place one travels to or through, but rarely abides in.

Cinema inherited, in this respect, a literary tradition that dates back to the first texts about the Amazon by European chroniclers. In the mid-sixteenth century, Spanish Dominican Priest Gaspar de Carvajal penned an account of his trip with explorer Francisco de Orellana traversing the length of the Amazon from the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean in *Descubrimiento del gran río de las Amazonas* (*The Discovery of the Great River of the Amazons*) and Jesuit Priest Cristóbal de Acuña narrated his journey accompanying captain Pedro Teixeira in a return trip from Quito to Belém in *Nuevo descubrimiento del gran río de las Amazonas* (*New Discovery of the Great River of the Amazons*) from 1641. These and other early texts, usually by missionaries, were followed by a second wave of travel writings on the area by naturalists like Alexander von Humboldt (*Personal Narrative of Travels in Equinoctial Regions of America*, 1814), Alfred Russel Wallace (*A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*, 1853), Henry Walter Bates (*The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, 1863), and Louis Agassiz (*A Journey in Brazil*,

1868), who emphasized the scientific significance of the region. The so-called "jungle novel," which flourished during the first half of the twentieth century in the wake of the Amazonian rubber boom[3] continued the tradition of narratives about journeys to the region in novels such as José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* (1924) and Ferreira de Castro's *A Selva* (*The Jungle* 1930), about young men who journey to the area and witness the hardships endured by rubber tappers. Later texts continued to emphasize different aspects of traveling in the region in novels such as Márcio Souza's *Mad Maria* (1980), which revolves around the eventful construction of a railway line that cuts through the jungle.

The centrality of traveling in literature and, then, in cinema about the Amazon can partly be explained by regional specificities. The world's biggest river, in terms of the amount of water that runs from it into the sea (and, possibly, also in length[4]), the Amazon and its many tributaries drain an area that corresponds to roughly 7% of the surface of the planet. The Amazon rainforest accounts for over 60% of the world's remaining rainforests, produces approximately 20% of the its oxygen[5] and is home to the planet's most important ecosystem, containing about half of all the earth's species of plants and animals. Amazonia's size, remoteness and biodiversity fueled the imagination of the reading public and, later, of moviegoers both in the metropolises of South America and abroad. Regarded by outsiders as an almost empty space—the area was dubbed "a

[3] The Amazon rubber boom took place in the last decades of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, when the demand for latex, produced from the sap of the Amazonian *Hevea brasiliensis*, or rubber tree, for industrial purposes grew exponentially. This was a period of rapid economic development and social change in the region, with the migration of large numbers of people to the area to work as rubber tappers. The price of latex was so high that it was dubbed "white gold" and rubber barons quickly amassed prodigious fortunes. Once rubber tree plants started to be grown in Asia at much less cost, the Amazonian rubber trade entered a period of declined from which it never recovered.

[4] There is some debate among experts about the length of the Amazon river; it is estimated to be somewhere between 4000 and 4300 miles long. If it is closer to 4300 miles, then the Amazon is the world's longest river, surpassing the Nile.

[5] The Amazon rainforest is often called the "lungs of the world" because it absorbs around 2 billion tons of carbon dioxide every year and produces 20% of the world's oxygen.

land without people" ("terra sem gente")[6] by the Brazilian government as late as the 1960s and 70s—the Amazon was easily exoticized and portrayed as a space where anything could happen.[7]

Travel literature and cinema about Amazonia capitalized on this fascination with the unknown. In the case of early cinema, the travelogue, which revealed hitherto unseen areas to avid viewers around the world, became a popular genre to depict the region in the first decades of the twentieth century. Movies such as Hamilton Rice's *Explorations in the Amazons Basin* (1930), which narrated his expedition to the Rio Branco, and those by the Marquis of Wavrin about his travels in the area from 1913-1937, including *In the Land of the Scalp* (*Au Pays du Scalp*, 1931), were widely viewed travelogues that included footage and information about the Amazon, and, often, the enactment of scenes (dance or other rituals) by the local population. Travel fiction films, for their part, tended to focus on journeys of (self-)discovery to faraway parts of the rainforest, in which the protagonists contended with potentially life-threatening flora, fauna and Indigenous populations. In movies such as *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (Hector Babenco, 1991), *Medicine Man* (John McTiernan, 1992) or *The Lost City of Z* (James Gray, 2016), the region beaconed with the allure of El Dorado in its various instantiations: hidden treasures, scientific breakthroughs and personal enlightenment all promised to reward the intrepid explorers who ventured into the forest.

But there is a deeper reason behind the centrality of traveling in cinema about the Amazon, and that drives the didactic impulse of early travelogues and later documentaries—such as those by National Geographic, for example—and the wish to capitalize on the exoticism of a

[6] This and all other Portuguese and Spanish originals are rendered in my translations.
[7] The Brazilian military dictatorship's slogan about the area was "a land without people for a people without land" ("uma terra sem gente para uma gente sem terra"), which alluded to the government's plans to encourage the movement of migrants from the drought-ridden Northeastern region of the country to the Amazon, which was perceived to be a nearly empty territory.

fairly far-flung location. In Amazonia, nature itself is permanently on the move and, therefore, it invites the movement of explorers. Brazilian writer Euclides da Cunha, who himself journeyed to the Amazon in 1904-5,[8] commented in his writings about his trip that the local nature is "incomplete" and marked by "volubility" ("incompleta;" "volubilidade").[9] The numerous rivers constantly reshape the land, changing their banks and sometimes even their course, and seasonal floods drastically alter the landscape. Cunha speculates that the Amazon river puts South American land itself in motion, in that it carries it deep into the Atlantic Ocean. He accuses the Amazon of defying "our patriotic lyricism" by being "the least Brazilian of rivers," since it robs the nation of its soil.[10] For Cunha, such movement passes on to humans, which is why, in his view, many Amazonians are nomads.[11]

The permanent movement of waters draining the Amazon river basin from the foothills of the Andes to the ocean is matched by the rapid growth of living matter in the rainforest. Staying with Cunha, we read in his Preface to a book of short stories about the region that "everything is life" in the Amazon, and life "reproduces itself easily, in the latent and unstoppable drive to always procreate" ("tudo é vida;" "reproduz-se fácil, na precipitação latente e irrefreável do procriar sempre").[12] Cunha's empirical observations are backed by scientific data, according to

[8] Euclides da Cunha journeyed the Amazon as head of the Brazilian team in the Brazilian-Peruvian Joint Commission to Map the High Purus (Comissão Mista Brasileiro-Peruana de Reconhecimento do Alto Purus) whose task was to define the Amazonian border between Brazil and Peru. His impressions about the region were collected in *Contrastes e Confrontos*, from 1907, and in *À Margem da História*, first published in 1909. All of his Amazonian texts were later published in *Um Paraíso Perdido* (1976).

[9] Euclides da Cunha, *Um Paraíso Perdido. Ensaios Amazônicos.* (Brasília: Senado Federal, 2000), 117; 126.

[10] Ibid., 120.

[11] Ibid., 126.

[12] Euclides da Cunha, "Preâmbulo," in Alberto Rangel, *Inferno Verde. Cenas e Cenários do Amazonas* (Tours, France: Tipografia Arrault, 1927), 16.

which the plant biomass and rate of growth in a tropical forest are five times those of a temperate one.[13] Living beings that constantly grow and reproduce in the Amazon, together with the flow of the rivers, create a natural environment that is perpetually changing.

A nature on the move finds its mirror image in the movement of adventurers and explorers traveling to the Amazon. Cinema, the art of the moving image, in turn, reflects these motions in its depiction of various journeys through the rainforest. In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which Latin American cinema has portrayed the Amazon river basin, its flora and fauna, in films about voyages. I will start with a reflection on Amazonian travel cinema as a variation on the road movie genre and will subsequently analyze three films about trips in the region that instantiate different stages in the cinematic representation of the Amazonian environment.

Amazonian Road Movies as Ecocinema

Films revolving around trips in the Amazon evoke the road movies that emerged in post-Second World War cinema. In his study about North American road movies, David Laderman identifies the "thrill of the unknown" as a core impulse of the genre,[14] together with a tension between rebellion and conformity and a focus on male protagonists.[15] Seen as inheritors of the American "frontier" ethos[16] and of the Western,[17] road movies frequently rely on an "open landscape

[13] John Hemming, *Tree of Rivers: The Story of the Amazon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008).
[14] David Laderman, *Driving Lessons: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 2.
[15] Ibid., 20-21; Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 143.
[16] Steven Cohan and Ina Era Hark, "Introduction," in *The Road Movie Book*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Era Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.
[17] Laderman, 23.

bordered by seductive horizons" as a key part of their iconography and make extensive use of traveling shots from the point of view of the moving vehicle.[18]

For Laderman, the automobile is a key component of genre,[19] but recent scholarship on Latin American road movies has questioned the centrality of the car in the region's version of these films. As Nadia Lie points out, Latin American travelers often choose public transportation, including buses and trucks, bicycles, donkeys, boats, and canoes or simply travel by foot.[20] Verónica Garibotto and Jorge Pérez interpret these forms of transportation as a sign of a broader social critique that defines the region's road movies, which shed light on the "tense relationship of Latin American countries with modernity as epitomized by the precarious infrastructures and the uneven access to motorized vehicles,"[21] an argument also espoused by Lie in her book about the genre. The use of nonprofessional actors, shooting on location, natural lighting and neorealist and documentary-style techniques all contribute to highlight the harsh social realities of Latin America.[22]

Cinema about travel in the Amazon shares many of the features of the road movie genre, including, thematically, a fascination with an unknown, "frontier" location, into which male explorers venture, leaving the comfort of their routine existence behind, as well as, in technical terms, the preference for open vistas and travelling shots. Like many other Latin American road movies, Amazonian travel films by Portuguese and Spanish-speaking directors often entail a

[18] Ibid., 14-15.
[19] Ibid., 13.
[20] Nadia Lie, *The Latin American (Counter-) Road Movie and Ambivalent Modernity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 8.
[21] Verónica Garibotto and Jorge Pérez, "Introduction. Reconfiguring Precarious Landscapes: The Road Movie in Latin America," in *The Latin American Road Movie*, ed. Verónica Garibotto and Jorge Pérez (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 2.
[22] Ibid., 16.

commentary on modernity and development in the area and frequently feature nonprofessional actors and shooting on location. In the majority of these movies the car is replaced by the canoe or, more recently, by the motorboat, which remain an important mode of transportation in Amazonia. Given that rivers have functioned, throughout the history of the Amazon, as its main connective paths, it makes sense to talk about *river* movies, as opposed to *road* movies, when discussing Amazonian travel cinema. If roads usually signal development and mastery over a given territory, the instability of rivers, with their waterfalls, rapids and occasional flooding, place modernity and the domination of the Amazon under constant erasure and draw attention to the precarity and the challenges of traveling through it.

The emphasis on the river and not the road as the primary enabler of mobility and the main avenue for movement in the Amazon also points to the centrality of the natural world in the region's travel cinema. Road movies typically portray open spaces as the opposite of a stifling civilization, but they usually depict these as places one passes through while on the road, a natural scenario pretty much the same as any other: adorning the sides of the road, contemplated while the car is in motion. In classical road movies, then, nature tends to work as a setting and not a landscape, in the useful distinction of Martin Lefebvre. A cinematic setting, according to Lefebvre, is "the place where the action or events occur," a background to what is happening, while the landscape emerges when the setting is set free from the story.[23] In Amazonian river movies, the natural environment, including the river, plants, and animals tend to function as an

[23] Martin Lefebvre, "Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema," *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 21. Lefebvre argues that that there are two modes of spectatorial activity, a narrative and a spectacular mode. Landscapes come to the fore in the spectacular more, when film foregrounds its natural or even social environments over plot development (Ibid., 29).

"autonomous landscape"[24] that takes center-state as a protagonist. The road does not function as the background of the natural world. Rather, the path runs *in* and *through* nature, which is therefore not an object contemplated by a detached observer but itself a participant in the voyage.

Films about travel in the Amazon are road movies with a twist. In this sense, they could be described as ecocinema, which, according to Scott MacDonald, who coined the term, hinges upon a retraining of perception.[25] By shifting the focus to the natural environment not merely as the surroundings of the road but as the road itself, Amazonian travel cinema makes for "new kinds of film experience." The attention to nature that is part and parcel of Amazonian cinematic journeys is reflected on traveling shots of the voyaging party on the river, close-ups of animals and plants, and point-of-view shots from the perspective of natural elements, all of which contribute to nurturing "a more environmentally progressive mindset," a hallmark of ecocinema, according to MacDonald.[26]

Other critics have focused primarily on thematic, rather than stylistic choices as the defining feature of ecocinema. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, for instance, distinguishes between movies that simply touch upon environmental issues without questioning the status quo and films that promote an ecological consciousness, the latter being the only ones that could be labeled

[24] Ibid., 28.
[25] The term "eco-cinema" was coined by MacDonald in a 2004 article published in the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature and Environment*.
[26] Scott MacDonald, "The Ecocinema Experience," in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt, (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 20. For MacDonald, "the fundamental job of an ecocinema is not to produce pro-environmental narratives shot in a conventional Hollywood manner (that is, in a manner that implicitly promotes consumption) or even in a conventional documentary manner (although, of course, documentaries can alert us to environmental issues)" (Ibid., 20). He focuses on the use of avant-garde or experimental film techniques as a means to nudge viewers out of complacency and draw their attention to environmental problems

"ecocinema."[27] While a large number of Amazonian "road" movies draw their viewers' attention to environmental destruction, I regard the term "ecocinema" to be more about the interpretative approach to a given film than about plot or cinematic technique. As Steven Rust and Salma Monani point out, "all films" subject to "productive ecocritical exploration and careful analysis can unearth engaging and intriguing perspectives on cinema's various relationships with the world around us."[28] In the rest of this chapter, I analyze three movies about trips in Amazonia through an ecocinematic lens: Silvino Santos's *In the Land of the Amazons* (*No Paiz das Amazonas*, 1922), Jorge Bodanzky and Orlando Senna's *Iracema: An Amazonian Live Affair* (*Iracema: Uma Transa Amazônica*, 1974) and Ciro Guerra's *The Embrace of the Serpent* (*El abrazo de la serpiente*, 2015). My goal is both to reflect on the evolution of Amazonian iconography and on the different paradigms adopted to portray the environment of the Amazon in film.[29]

In the Land of the Amazons

A central impulse of cinematic travelogues about the Amazon was to show its landscape, fauna and flora to viewers unacquainted with the region. Santos's *In the Land of the Amazons* appears, at first glance, to squarely fit into this mold. Produced under the patronage of Portuguese rubber baron J. G. Araújo to be shown at the International Exhibition in Rio de Janeiro in 1922 marking

[27] Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, "Shifting Paradigms: From Environmentalist Film to Ecocinema," in *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, ed. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 45.

[28] Stephen Rust and Salma Monani, "Introduction – Cuts to Dissolves: Defining and Situating Ecocinema Studies," in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 3.

[29] While the three films, and especially *Embrace of the Serpent*, provide rich material for a discussion on the cinematic depiction of Indigenous peoples in the Amazon, this chapter will focus on the portrayal of the environment in the movies and mention Native Amazonian cultures only in their relation to the representation of the natural world.

the centenary of Brazilian independence, the film aimed to make Amazonia known to the rest of Brazil and to the world.[30] Santos travelled over 6,000 miles with his camera to offer viewers an encompassing portrayal of the region. The movie was awarded a Gold Medal at the exhibition and was released commercially in Brazil, Europe, and the United States to great critical acclaim and financial success.[31]

Still, the film differs in several ways from travelogues and other early documentaries about the Amazon river basin. For one, it was not made by a foreign explorer such as Hamilton Rice or the Marquis of Wavrin, who, even though they knew the territory well, could not help but adopt an outside perspective when filming it. Santos was born in Portugal but moved to the Amazon at an early age and, therefore, in his movie, was revealing his home region to outsiders. This is perhaps one of the reasons why, unlike other films from the same period, *In the Land of the Amazons* does not present the area as exotic. While Santos does strive to underline the specificities of Amazonia, he goes to great lengths to emphasize everyday activities that could have taken place anywhere: people working in factories, doing sports such as rowing or swimming, enjoying a day off with their children, and so on. The Amazon is not pictured as mysterious or outlandish but as a place like any other, whose inhabitants try to make the most of their lives. The movie begins in the city of Manaus, showing its modern harbor, paved roads,

[30] As Márcio Souza points out, J. G. Araújo's goal "was that of institutional propaganda, or, in other words, to register indelibly the company's name among the visitors of the Exposition of the Independence" [Márcio Souza, *Silvino Santos: O Cineasta do Ciclo da Borracha* (Rio de Janeiro: FUNARTE, 1999), 229]. The celebration of Brazilian independence was perhaps the reason why the film ends with a group of horse-riding cowboys "screaming patriotically: Long live Brazil!" ("soltam o patriótico brado: Viva o Brasil!").

[31] Luciana Martins, "Silvino Santos and the Mobile View: Documentary Geographies of Modern Brazil," in *The Brazilian Road Movie: Journeys of (Self) Discovery*, ed. Sara Brandellero (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 4; 19. The film was produced by Santos and J. G. Araújo's son Agesilau de Araújo, who co-wrote the intertitles with Alfredo da Matta.

ample squares and European-style architecture, together with cars, trams and motorboats. A far cry from the fanciful images of impenetrable forests with menacing animals lurking in their shadows usually associated with the area, the initial impression viewers get of the land of the Amazons is that it boasts a thriving, modern city.[32]

Santos's efforts to demystify Amazonia, however, do not mean that he underestimates the centrality of the natural world in the territory. The very first image of the film is that of a sunrise over the river and the first intertitles explain that the area is "almost a continent" with "countless rivers," a "very bountiful variety of fishes," "the most charming of birds," "opulent forests" and "other precious treasures of nature" that amount to an "incalculable wealth" ("quase um continente;" "rios sem conta;" "fartíssima variedade de peixes;" "pássaros mais encantadores;" "florestas opulentas;" "outros tesouros preciosos da natureza;" "incalculável riqueza"). The film falls back upon staples in the representation of Amazonian nature—its immensity, variety and wealth—to introduce the area to its audience. Furthermore, the city of Manaus is first seen from the water, as though viewers were arriving to it by boat, a technique also used in later movies to stress the importance of the river in the lives of the local population.

The bulk of *In the Land of the Amazons* is organized around the various extractivist industries that make up the regional economy: fishing, rubber tapping, logging, cattle-raising and the harvesting and preparation of tobacco, Brazil nuts and guarana for export. Again, Santos

[32] Manaus contrasts with the Rio Branco area that, according to the intertitles, is: "a very wild region of the Amazon, a kind 'Far West,' where the wealth is enormous. All kinds of minerals, gold, precious stones, rubber trees and bovine and equine cattle show how prodigious nature is over there" ("região muito feraz do Amazonas, espécie de 'Far West,' onde as riquezas são enormes. Minerais de toda a classe, ouro, pedras preciosas, a balateira e o gado vacum e cavalar mostram quão prodigiosa é ali a natureza." Unlike the image of an undifferentiated region covered in rainforest, the film portrays the Amazon as a space that has cities and wild, frontier spaces, much like the United States with its Far West and frontier areas in the nineteenth century.

highlights the fertility of Amazonian nature, while also showing its productive, modern side. In one memorable sequence, the director films female and male workers leaving a factory that processes Brazil nuts, in a clear homage to the Lumière brothers' famous 1895 film. But the majority of the industries portrayed involve the gathering of the land's bountiful products. The capturing of manatees is a salient example of the area's rich natural environment. Now a protected species, manatees were so common at the time that they could easily be fished with simple canoes and harpoons. In a very striking image, we see rows of recently caught manatees, some still moving, lined up on the ground, lying on their backs with their fore fins crossed over their chests, as though they were human bodies.

The undertones of environmental critique were probably unintended in the case of the manatee hunting spree. In fact, the film depicts other scenes of fishing and hunting in a rather celebratory manner common in movies from the period.[33] Yet, *In the Land of the Amazons* already displays an incipient environmental consciousness. Close to the end, the movie shows a flock of white herons taking flight, together with several close-ups of the animals. These images are followed by intertitles, where we read that "men and women, with the same inhuman instinct, persecute the defenseless birds to remove their rich and delicate plumage" ("homens e mulheres, no mesmo instinto desumano, perseguem as aves indefesas para tirar-lhes as plumas ricas e delicadas"). After a few more shots of the birds flying and nesting, we again read in the intertitles that such a "war without truce, that makes millions of victims a year, is the result of fashion, and of ladies' vain caprice" ("guerra sem tréguas, que faz por ano milhões de vítimas, é fruto da moda, o capricho vaidoso das senhoras"). The slaughter of the birds, who are seen as

[33] Hunting scenes are also a staple of the film *River of Doubt* (Caroline Gentry, 1928) about American former president Theodor Roosevelt and Brazilian explorer Cândido Rondon's expedition in the Amazon in 1913-14.

"victims," amounts to an ongoing war that, according to the movie, is all the more cruel because it is groundless. The sequence ends with an opening iris that gradually reveals an adornment made of heron feathers and with a last shot of a heron taking flight. The ecological message of the film is clear. While activities deemed necessary for human sustenance are presented as morally justifiable and even laudable, the capture of animals for what are considered to be superfluous, futile reasons, such as the making of luxury items, is strongly condemned.

The ecological stance of *In the Land of Amazons* comes through at its most forceful in close-ups of plants and animals the filmmaker encounters in his journey: an orchid hanging from a tree, victoria amazonica flowers on a lake, a grasshopper on a stick, a sloth slowly crossing a road and another going up a tree, crocodiles waiting to feed on fish remains tossed by humans into the water, an otter with her young and another one feasting on a fish, a jaguar lazing on a tree branch, the list goes on. Most of these images are interspersed in the film without any commentary in the intertitles and they are usually not related to the main plot. One of the goals of inserting these close-ups into the fabric of the movie was certainly to display the flora and fauna of the region to outsiders. But these images of animals going about their business also create a compelling counterpoint to the human extractivist industries that structure the storyline.

This parallel is encouraged by the filmmaker who, at one point, shows the same activity being performed by humans and non-humans. A close-up of the machine used to peel Brazil nuts and of a woman's hands feeding the nuts into the machine—in a Chaplinesque moment *avant la lettre*[34]—is followed by intertitles explaining that "in the forest, Brazil nut peeling is more primitive" ("na floresta o descascamento da castanha é mais primitivo"). The next image is that of a monkey banging a Brazil nut against a rock, which then cross-cuts with more images of the

[34] *In the Land of the Amazons* preceded Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* by 14 years.

machine and the woman's hands, until we finally see the monkey eating the nut.[35] Rather than demeaning the woman's work or implying that the animal's way of doing things is inferior, the movie suggests that each uses the tools at his/her disposal to accomplish the same task. The film shows a continuum between the monkey's and the woman's activities and implies that both take advantage of the lavish products of the land to survive and thrive. These enterprises are justified as long as they directly contribute to human prosperity; Santos draws the line at the gratuitous killing of animals.

Amazonian extractivism has, since Santos's times, spun completely out of control and contemporary viewers would probably decry the more brutal fishing and hunting scenes of the film, as well as, in hindsight, the wisdom of promoting logging and cattle-raising in the region. Still, *In the Land of the Amazons*, with its care in depicting local plants and animals, highlighting the ties that bind humans and non-humans, and censoring of unwarranted violence towards nature could be regarded as proto-ecological. Or, to put it differently, it could be interpreted, as we have attempted to do here, in an ecocinematic key that foregrounds its attunement to the natural world. An ecologically-conscious approach to the Amazonian environment in cinema will only fully flourish in the wake of the post-war environmental movement, when the negative effects of decades of extractivism in the area became impossible to ignore.

Iracema: An Amazonian Love Affair

Santos's voyage through the Amazon was shot from boats, trains, and along roads, but the focus of his film was not on being on the road. The journey was a means to film the various aspects of

[35] Before, this sequence, the film had already shown monkeys eating Brazilian nuts in the forest, preceded by the intertitle: "In the forest, the Brazil nut also has its lovers" ("Já na floresta encontra a castanha os seus apreciadores").

the area and the vagaries of traveling were featured only occasionally. Unlike Santos's film, the core of Jorge Bodanzky and Orlando Senna's *Iracema: An Amazonian Love Affair* is life on the road. And not just any road but the Trans-Amazonian Highway, a project of the Brazilian dictatorship government (1964-85) that aimed to build a 2,000 plus mile-long highway connecting the country's Northeastern with isolated parts of the Amazon, purportedly to bring economic progress to the region. The highway, whose construction began in 1969, was never finished, and its economic benefits were dubious. Nonetheless it brought enormous ecological damage to vast stretches of the rainforest. *Iracema* shows the impact of the highway and, more broadly, of the government's developmental drive on Amazonian nature and the region's inhabitants.

Another difference between Santos's film and *Iracema* is that the former fit squarely within the documentary genre, while the latter is more ambiguous. In his "Notes for a Theory of the Road Movie," renowned Brazilian filmmaker Walter Salles names Bodanzky and Senna's film as a perfect example of the blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction that he believes is a defining feature of road movies.[36] For Salles, road movies are fictional films that nevertheless tend to be "driven by a sense of immediacy that is not dissimilar from that of a documentary film."[37] While Salles regards *Iracema* as a road movie that incorporates documentary techniques, one might also interpret is as a documentary that makes use of elements from the road movie genre. Garibotto and Pérez coined the term "docu-road movie" to describe

[36] Walter Salles, "Notes for a Theory of the Road Movie," in *The New York Times* (Nov. 11, 2007), 4.
[37] Ibid., 3.

documentaries "enriched by incursions of visual techniques emblematic of fictional road movies," which is arguably the case with *Iracema*.[38]

Leaving matters of classification aside, the success of Bodanzky and Senna's film lies in adopting documentary-style techniques—hand-held camera, shooting on location, use of non-actors and semi-professional actors—to turn a trip on the Trans-Amazonian Highway into a powerful indictment of social inequality and environmental devastation.[39] The two main characters in *Iracema* interact with people they meet on the road in unscripted dialogues that register the population's unfiltered opinion about the efforts to bring progress to the region. In *Once Upon a Time Iracema* (*Era uma Vez Iracema*, 2005) a documentary about the making of the 1974 movie, Bodanzky says that he filmed as inconspicuously as possible, without the use of a clapperboard, so that many of the locals did not even realize that a film crew was on site. The result is a raw, unfiltered portrait of life along the highway. A woman who came to the area with her family lured by the promise of a better life, for instance, complains that the Amazon is a land of misery and that people there are also miserable ("terra desgraçada;" "gente desgraçada"). Likewise, a client in a bar accuses the rich of stealing the land from the poor. The dire social situation of migrants who came to Amazonia from other parts of Brazil, encouraged by the government's promise of easy access to fertile agricultural land that, in many cases, never materialized, is mirrored by an ecological catastrophe that becomes clearer as the film progresses. In a long traveling shot, the camera drives past a seemingly endless stretch of

[38] Garibotto and Pérez, 19.

[39] Salles states that the success of *Iracema* lies precisely in mixing techniques from documentary and from fiction films: "Because of that ambiguity, *Iracema* is one of the most extraordinary cinematic experiences I have been fortunate enough to have" (Ibid.).

burning forest; another sequence shows chainsaws relentlessly cutting down trees; and aerial images reveal the massive deforestation of the region.[40]

The title of the film goes back to José de Alencar's eponymous novel from 1865 about the romantic relationship between Iracema, an Indigenous woman, and a Portuguese soldier in the early days of Brazilian colonization. In the text, Iracema—an anagram for America—is persistently linked to nature. She is described in comparison with plants and animals, and her tribal function was to prepare a sacred beverage made from a plant. Her death in the end of the novel signals the conquest of American land and the taming of its natural environment by European civilization. Similar to the protagonist of Alencar's text, in Bodanzky and Senna's film Iracema (Edna de Cássia, a local girl chosen to play the part in her first and only cinematic performance)[41] is a young woman with marked Indigenous features[42] that contrast with the light-colored skin of Tião (Paulo César Peréio, an established, flamboyant Brazilian actor), a truck driver from the south of Brazil who transports legal and illegal Amazonian timber.[43] The asymmetries between the two retrace those between the Amazonian region and the Brazilian political and economic centers of power: Iracema is a young, vulnerable and inexperienced girl,

[40] In *Once upon a Time Iracema*, Bodanzky says that, when *Iracema* was being shot, it was so common to see large stretches of forest burning that the crew did not even bother filming that at first.

[41] João Luiz Vieira states that Edna de Cássia was chosen to play the movie's main female role from among the audience of a local radio show that drew many teenage girls [João Luiz Vieira, "Women on the Road: Sexual Tourism and Beyond" in *The Brazilian Road Movie: Journeys of (Self) Discovery*, ed. Sara Brandellero (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 204].

[42] Iracema herself refuses to be associated with the Indigenous population of Brazil and gets upset when Tião tells her that she is "Indian" ("índia"), saying that the is the daughter of Brazilians. This rejection of Indigenous heritage points to the negative image that the Native Amazonian population has, even within the region.

[43] When Tião is buying Amazonian timber, he asks the seller to place illegal timber at the bottom and legal one at the top of his truck, which suggests that trade in illegal timber, probably from protected species of trees, was widespread in the region.

while Tião is a world-savvy, older man.

If, as Ismail Xavier has argued in his *Allegories of Underdevelopment*, many Brazilian "New Cinema" ("Cinema Novo") films from the 1960s and 70s can be understood as allegories of national socio-political challenges, *Iracema* can also be productively interpreted in an allegorical key.[44] Tião, who calls himself Tião "Brazil Grande" ("Large Brazil"), is politically aligned with the ideals of the dictatorship. He adorns his truck with popular political slogans from the period, such as a sticker saying "Brazil, love it or leave it" ("Brasil, ame-o ou deixe-o"), an ominous statement in light on the many political refugees forced to leave the country for criticizing the regime. When a local man tells Tião that "nature is a mother" and that the Amazon is a "rich land" where "everything thrives" ("a natureza é mãe;" "terra rica;" "tudo se cria") he replies that "nature is my truck, the road" ("a natureza é o meu caminhão, a estrada"). He adds that everyone is "withered" ("mirrado") in Amazonia, which will only become a wealthy land in the future, presumably when the government's developmental projects have been fully implemented. A little later in the dialogue Tião drops the pretense of nationalism and confesses that he is "after the money, the dough" ("atrás do dinheiro, da grana") and that he chose the timber business because it is so profitable. Tião embodies the drive to dominate and exploit the Amazon for rapid economic gain, disguised under the cloak of nationalistic rhetoric. He identifies with his truck and the road, symbols of a modernity forcefully imposed upon the

[44] Ismail Xavier, *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Xavier reiterates this argument in his article, co-written with Robert Stam, where they write that "any number of seventies and eighties films by Cinema Novo veterans [including *Iracema*] offer a globalizing vision of society expressed in allegories of underdevelopment and modernization" [Robert Stam and Ismail Xavier, "Transformation of National Allegory: Brazilian Cinema from Dictatorship to Redemocratization," in *Resisting Images. Essays on Cinema and History*, ed. Robert Sklar and Charles Musser (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 298].

region, and his business selling timber denotes both the destruction of the rainforest and the draining of the area's resources. In the end of the movie, Tião starts to sell cattle instead. As logging cleared large swathes of forest, timber became less abundant and cattle-raising farms occupied the newly deforested areas. Viewers are left to wonder what will become of the land when even pasture will no longer grow in the nutrient-poor soil of what was once a luxuriant rainforest.

The character of Iracema, like that of Tião, lends itself to an allegorical interpretation. We first encounter her on a boat coming to the town of Belém and, during a break in the trip, she bathes in the river.[45] Her connection to a traditional Amazonian lifestyle that revolved around waterways is progressively lost as she becomes a sex worker in the city and, especially, once she accepts a ride on Tião's truck and joins him in his trip on the Trans-Amazonian highway. Halfway through the journey, Tião tells her that he no longer wishes to provide for her and unceremoniously leaves her on a roadside bar. From then on her fortunes rapidly decline as she struggles to make ends meet. On a few occasions she is dragged off screen by a man or a group of men, presumably to be raped. The movie's final sequence stages a last encounter between the couple. Iracema is sitting together with a group of other drunken women—according to Bodanzky in *Once Upon a Time Iracema*, the other women were real-life sex workers—trying to stop trucks and make a buck on the side of the road. She is so now disheveled, with her clothes torn and a tooth missing, that Tião fails to recognize her at first and, when he does, he tells her

[45] The first image of the film is that of the dense Amazonian rainforest, but the first sounds are those of the engine of a boat while the credits are still being shown. The sound of the engine continues as viewers look at the forest and only after that do we see the boat transporting Iracema, which is the origin of the sound. The primacy of the sound of the engine, even over the images of the rainforest, suggests that modernity and technological development have arrived and taken over Amazonia.

she looks very different and a lot uglier. The abuse endured by Iracema, manifest in her rapid decline, goes hand-in-hand with the destruction of Amazonia by outside forces of which Tião is an example. The film harks back to the age-old association of the female body with nature[46] to denounce both gender and ecological violence. It suggests that the root cause of both is a desire to ruthlessly take advantage of humans and non-humans, no matter the cost.

Moving between allegory and raw snippets of reality, Bodanzky and Senna's journey through the Trans-Amazonian Highway is an unequivocal denunciation of the Brazilian dictatorship's policies in Amazonia. The film was produced with German funds, edited in Germany and, because of its open criticism of the Brazilian government, was at first released only abroad. It circulated underground, in private screenings, until 1980, when it was finally commercially released in Brazil.[47] An ecocinematic approach to the movie reveals that it brought the environmental cost of the drive for unbridled economic progress into sharp focus. In the film, the exploitation of nature and the more vulnerable elements of society run parallel, thus establishing a link between the degradation of human and non-human lives in the Amazon.

Embrace of the Serpent

Similar to Santos and Bodanzky and Senna's films, *Embrace of the Serpent* begins on the water. But while in the other two movies we slowly make our way from the river into big cities—Manaus and Belém, respectively—Guerra's film remains confined mostly within a natural environment. The largest human communities depicted are an Indigenous village, a small Catholic mission and a settlement populated by the last members of an Indigenous tribe. The

[46] See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. (New York: HarperOne, 1989), xiii.
[47] Jorge Bodanzky, dir, *Era uma Vez Iracema* (2005).

effects of modernization are intuited, rather than shown, as they impact the life of one of *Embrace*'s protagonists, the Native Amazonian Karamakate (Nilbio Torres, as the young Karamakate, and Antonio Bolívar Salvador as the old Karamakate). Of the three movies discussed here, it is the only one in which an Indigenous person plays a central role.[48] Karamakate is one of the few survivors of his people that were decimated by the encroachment of settlers and rubber tappers. The film revolves around his interaction with two foreign explorers: the German Theodor von Martius, or Theo (Jan Bijvoet), whom he meets in 1909, and the American Evan (Brionne Davis), who travels to the Amazon in 1940 in an attempt to retrace Theo's footsteps.

The movie skillfully interweaves historical fact with fiction. It portrays the horrifying working conditions of rubber tappers, who endured a slave-like existence at the mercy of rubber lords, the deleterious effects of Catholic missions, who brainwashed Indigenous children into renouncing their native language, customs, and traditions in favor of a foreign culture, and the proliferation of violent cults that coalesced around self-styled Messiahs in the wake of widespread social upheaval.[49] The plot and the main characters, while fictional, are based on the

[48] Santos's film includes a few sequences about daily life in Native Amazonian communities and in *Iracema* Indigenous peoples are mostly absent. In *Embrace of the Serpent*, conversely, the Indigenous population is central to the plot. According to the film's production notes, *Embrace* is "the first Colombian film to feature an Indigenous protagonist and to be told from his perspective" [Susannah Bragg McCullough, "Ask the Director. Interview with Ciro Guerra," in *ScreenPrism* (Feb. 17, 2016)]. For an in-depth analysis of the representation of indigeneity in the film, see Maria Chiara D'Argenio, "Decolonial Encounters in Ciro Guerra's *El abrazo de la serpiente*: Indigeneity, Coevalness and Intercultural Dialogue," *Postcolonial Studies* (21:2, 131-153).

[49] According to Guerra, "only the weirdest parts of the story are the ones that are completely true." The filmmaker explains that the sequence of the Messiah, who persuades a group of Indigenous people to worship him as an incarnation of Christ, is based on a real man "who arrived in that quarter of Colombia and proceeded in the late 19th century to claim [he was] the living Messiah. He was way crazier than what you see in the film. […] You cannot make this stuff up" (McCullough).

journals and photographs of German ethnographer Theodor Koch-Grünberg and American ethnobotanist Richard Evan Schultes. The character of Theo fictionalizes the final days of Koch-Grünberg, as described in his journals, but his last name, "Martius," alludes to another Amazonian explorer, Karl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, who traveled in the area in 1817-20. Karamakate is also, according to Guerra, "a combination of many people, several people […] some of them appear in the journals. Some of them I met personally"[50] and Karamakate's tribe is imagined as the amalgamation of a number of cultures.[51] Filmed in black and white, shot entirely on location and spoken mostly in Indigenous languages, *Embrace* strives to recreate the ambiance of Colombian Amazonia in the first half of the twentieth century.[52]

Bringing information about pivotal moments in the history of the Amazon to a broad audience is certainly one of the goals of Guerra's film. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is more important to note that the two interwoven narratives revolve around the quest for a plant, the sacred yakruna, the knowledge of which was once guarded by Karamakate's tribe.[53] Theo, who is very sick, hopes that the plant will cure him and allow him to bring the information he gathered in his expedition back to Germany. Evan says at first that he is looking for the yakruna both for scientific reasons and for personal fulfillment. Later in the film, however, he

[50] McCullough.

[51] As Guerra's interviewer explains: "Using fiction, Guerra felt he could avoid co-opting the voice or compromising the sacred knowledge of any one tribe while expressing a general yet important point of view" (McCullough).

[52] As Guerra points out, "[a]ll the cinematographic elements, we used them to create an altered perspective on life." The goal was to conjure up "another way of understanding the world. So you see a world that you can recognize, but everything is slightly off. Everything is slightly different. From the sound design to the black-and-white to … the way the film is told and structured, everything is taking you to a different logic. It's a way of bringing an audience into a different perspective on the world" (McCullough).

[53] The yakruna is a fictional plant but it is based on real plants. As Guerra explains, "[t]he Indigenous people asked us to not use the name of real plants, real rituals, to modify them — it's not something that you can learn about just from watching a film" (McCullough).

confesses to being an envoy from his government, which wishes to identify a pure source of rubber as part of the American military efforts to win the Second World War. *Embrace* jumps between the two storylines and historical periods, underlining the long-lasting effects of economic exploitation in the region.

The movie emphasizes the connection between Native Amazonian populations and local plants and animals and shows how the destruction of Indigenous communities means a loss of knowledge about the natural world. Karamakate is depicted as the guardian of his tribe's wisdom about Amazonian fauna and flora. As Theo asks for his help to find the yakruna plant, he says that the jungle is fragile and that humans need to obey a number of rules to be in tune with nature. Later, when Evan introduces himself as someone who has devoted his life to plants, Karamakate replies that the statement is the wisest thing he has ever heard a white man say. To Evan's offer of money in exchange for assistance to get to the yakruna, Karamakate replies that, unlike ants, he does not like money because it does not taste good to him, clearly referencing the different values that guide Western and Amazonian cultures. When Theo, Manduca (Miguel Dionísio Ramos) and Karamakate visit a Catholic mission, the latter tells Indigenous children not to forget their heritage and teaches them about the medicinal properties of a plant. The young Native Amazonian character epitomizes the symbiosis between local peoples and the environment, as when he is filmed from the back in a medium shot, surrounded by butterflies and looking at the river that viewers can also see from a vantage point behind his shoulder.

Despite Karamakate's efforts, local wisdom about nature is on the wane. His older self confesses to Evan that natural elements used to speak to him but that "stones, plants and animals

have grown silent."[54] He has lost his memory and no longer even knows how to prepare the hallucinogenic beverage that used to be part of his tribe's sacred rituals. Theo and Evan's search for the yakruna is an attempt, however limited, to counter this loss and preserve some of the Indigenous knowledge. Theo's Native Amazonian helper Manduca understands this goal. When Karamakate accuses him of having forsaken his tribe to serve a white man, Manduca replies that Theo can explain the jungle to others and that if white people do not learn about the rainforest, it will be the end. In the final moments of the film, Karamakate also realizes that he can only keep the memory of his tribe alive by showing Evan the power of the yakruna. He says his function was not to teach his people, who are all gone, but to become a mediator between his culture and the outside by teaching Evan about the secrets of the sacred plant.

The ending of the movie is bittersweet. Theo's quest ends in disaster when Karamakate reaches the last survivors of his tribe, who now cultivate the yakruna to feed their drunken stupor. Karamakate feels the plant has been desecrated, burns down its bushes and tells Theo he will not allow the soul of his people to be taken out of the Amazon. The Indigenous population scatters as the Colombian army enters the settlement, signaling that the remnants of the tribe will cease to exist. Evan's expedition does reach its destination when Karamakate leads him to the top of a mountain where the only remaining yakruna plant is still growing. Evan is allowed a glimpse into Indigenous culture by drinking a powerful drug made from the plant, but the last yakruna bush had to be destroyed for that purpose. The film suggests that Amazonian peoples' lived relationship with nature is slowly disappearing, as is their knowledge of the local flora and

[54] Work in critical anthropology has developed the notion of the pluriverse to describe the close relationship that South American Indigenous peoples establish with non-human forms of existence. See, for example, Marisol de la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond 'Politics,'" *Cultural Anthropology*, (25:2, 334–70) and Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy and the Making of Worlds.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018).

fauna. What remains is a recollection of such a connection, which survives in travel writings and journals like those of Theo and Evan, and in films such as *Embrace*. The movie is dedicated to the "memory of the peoples whose songs we will never know," a tribute to the many stories about humans and non-humans that will have disappeared without leaving a trace with the decimation of Native Amazonian cultures.[55]

From an ecocinematic perspective, *Embrace* underscores the imbrication of people, plants and animals. With the end of a human community and their cosmology, a certain view of nature also vanishes, which is tantamount to saying that a part of the natural world—the sacred yakruna in the film—dies along with the people who used to revere it. The movie is at once a sobering statement of what has already been lost in the Amazon and a hopeful reminder that the sharing of knowledge about the region may prevent further destruction. The film's nostalgic undertone, which hinges upon a sense of cultural loss, is countered by its critical and commercial success—it won an Art Cinema Award at Cannes and was shortlisted for the Best Foreign Language Film Academy Award, becoming the first Colombian movie to ever receive a nomination for an Oscar—that brought Amazonian culture and the recent history and challenges facing the region to a large international movie-going audience. *Embrace* is, at the same time, a call to action, so that the Amazonian natural world and its peoples will not become only a memory passed on through words and images.

[55] Ana María Mutis argues that one of the aims of the movie is to "concientizar al público sobre la necesidad de preservar el territorio Amazónico y proteger a sus comunidades, reafirmando con ello la impronta ecológica y poscolonial del filme" [Ana María Mutis, "*El abrazo de la serpiente* o la re-escritura del Amazonas dentro de una ética ecológica y poscolonial," *Hispanic Research Journal* (19:1, 29-40)].

Road movies are often as much about an inner, metaphorical journey, as they are about a physical one. Amazonian cinema about travel, such as the movies discussed above, depict trips through the Amazon that are simultaneously a journey to the heart of our extractivist culture. The three films share the goal of making the region, its peoples, flora, and fauna known to those outside it. Depicting a natural world that is perpetually in motion, they portray Amazonia beyond the clichés of an exotic location brimming with natural treasures and focus instead on the social and ecological problems brought about by the unbridled economic exploitation of the area's natural environment. They show that the problems facing the Amazon are the result of the relentless resource extraction that has been the engine of economic growth in our societies in the past few centuries. Through camera work, close-ups of animals and plants, traveling shots of the forest, and tracking shots of boats on local rivers, these movies on the move reveal another Amazon that resists the logic of domination. The enduring legacy of these films is to have portrayed this other Amazon, with the humans and non-humans who call it home.

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