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Imaging Amazonia in the 21st Century: Recent Brazilian Documentaries on Socio-Environmental Conflicts

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Vale dos Esquecidos ("The Valley of the Forgotten," 2011), directed by Maria Raduan, produced by Rodrigo Teixeira and Maria Raduan.

Nas Terras do Bem Virá ("In Search of the Promised Land," 2007), directed by Alexandre Rampazzo, produced by Tatiana Polastri.

In his 2007 book *Scoping the Amazon*, Stephen Nugent set out to critique the often distorted or stereotyped authoritative claims made through non-fiction filmic representations of Amazonia. Nugent finds a disturbing correlation between the professional output of 20th Century anthropologists and the figures of savage half-humans circulating in popular books, movies, and posters in the U.S. and Europe. Further, Nugent claims that even contemporary accounts of the region, such as documentaries on development or deforestation, are

[c]ontinuously nested within a recurrent, and often mythologized, notion of the frontier: the frontier of green hell, the frontier of Brazilian nation-building, the advancing frontier of commercial agriculture...conjuring up a pristine remoteness just out of reach that overwhelms indigenous societies (222).

The dramatic sweep of the frontier, with its fatefully unsettled territories and historicities, has seduced many filmmakers; who have used it as a vehicle for morality plays or nation-building dramas. Nugent's critique here falls on depictions of Amazonia where the camera was trained from the outside looking in from the vantage of the Global North. Two recent films are similarly ensnared in the over determined figure of the frontier, but attempt to describe the socio-environmental conditions of frontier life from a decidedly local perspective. I do not argue that these Brazilian documentaries, *Vale dos Esquecidos* (2011) and *Nas Terras do Bem Virá* (2007) are more authentic than the foreign-made documentaries on violence and biodiversity from the last several decades. Rather, I am interested in teasing out some of the themes and modalities of representation that stand out when Brazilian artists grapple with the social and environmental realities of Amazonia. Both *Vale* and *Bem Virá* speak from distinct vantage points as they approach their material; the results are films that expand our understanding of quickly-changing Amazonian society that also offer new ideas about how to tell stories that do not collapse under the narrative weight of frontiers, eden/hell, victims/villains, or a litany of other familiar figurative devices.

The most recent film, *Vale dos Esquecidos*, by Maria Raduan (2011), takes as its subject an ongoing dispute over land tenure in northeastern Mato Grosso state. The parcel in question, the old Fazenda Suiá Missú, is located within the municipalities of Bom Jesus de Araguaia and Alto da Boa Vista, two towns which emerged in the 1990s

for logging and, subsequently; soy farming. Interviews and visits to villages and squatter camps reveal that the ranch is claimed by an indigenous aldeia (the Xavante Marãiwatsédé), consisting of a landless worker collective, ranchers, and land speculators alike.

As the film opens, the voice of the director, Maria Raduan, describes how the same “fire and violence” that marked her youth in the region continues to be its defining characteristic; this is “a piece of Brazil at war with itself.” It is the last time Raduan’s voice is heard, as the film proceeds without voice-over or written narration. Raduan seems content to let interviews with principal actors, as well as stark images collected from around the old Suiá Missú ranch, speak for the history and contemporary dilemmas of this place. The result is a film that unfolds judiciously before the audience, carefully piling on images and interviews as evidence, refusing the editorial voice of interpretation.

The land’s history is revealed through its people. Cacique Damião (Xavante) recalls being forced to board planes for missions in the south of Mato Grosso during his childhood. A graying pensioner fights back tears as he describes the role he played in Suiá Missú (at the time the world’s largest ranch). A defiant land speculator describes how he purchased pieces of the ranch from a multinational petroleum conglomerate and then proceeded to “do what not even the government has done around here: real agrarian reform!” A squatter who occupies a piece of the old ranch testifies that his colleagues are not to blame for violence or deforestation, but rather that “the Indian is the biggest threat to sustainability in Amazonia these days.” An American-born rancher tries desperately to rise above the fray with a disinterested diplomacy, but decides to burn a squatter’s hut on his property because “we can’t let them tear down our forest.” Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (bishop with the Pastoral Land Commission) provides some historical perspective on how Brazil’s development policies have favored the well-heeled, while an aspiring politician admits that he hatched a scheme encouraging landless squatters to invade ranchlands, asking “if the Indians get that land back, what happens to the constitutional rights of the white man?”

Raduan returns to each of these voices several times throughout the film, and the emerging complexity lends the film dramatic depth and uneasiness. The Valley of the Forgotten is up for grabs because in 1993, Xavante activists were successful in having their land declared an indigenous territory (of 165 hectares), but in the years since have only been able to occupy 10% of this land with improvised villages. The Valley had previously been purchased by a land speculator content to haul out valuable timbers and then sell fraudulent title deeds to landless workers. These smallholders or squatters would then be used—by powerful ranchers or ambitious politicians—as foils to block the Xavantes’ hopes that the federal government would demarcate and enforce the boundaries of their territory. As years passed, tensions flared. Throughout the 2000s, injunctions piled on top of injunctions in state and federal courts. Meanwhile, far from the legal delays, the stalemate between indigenous and non-indigenous interests occasionally gave way to violence. *Vale* documents the edginess shared among the groups in the Valley, and leaves the sense that violence and environmental destruction are the byproducts of a droning fatalistic logic in the region. Despite having been vindicated in the courtroom, the Xavante grow more outnumbered by the day on their lands.

Though a land-grabbing, petty official reminds us near the film’s conclusion that “this is a fight that will last another hundred years,” the drama of the old Suiá-Missú ranchlands reached a climax in the months after *Vale dos Esquecidos*’s release. In August 2012, a federal court issued a definitive order of eviction for the 1,100 squatters living on indigenous territory. This ruling was a reversal of an earlier ruling, which itself was a reversal of another. Though the squatters threatened violence, a detachment of the Brazilian Army worked for four months to evict colonists from their improvised camps. By February 2013, even the town of Posto da Mata, a dusty frontier settlement on Xavante land that had boomed with loggers, no longer existed. All that remains is a series of questions for Marãiwatsédé and for thousands of similar situations in the

Brazilian Amazon, where violence or post-facto land legalizations are still prevalent means of dispossession. Though the film leaves us wondering about the ultimate fate of the Valley of the Forgotten, the recent conclusion to the land dispute there makes the film more poignant.

Most notable about *Vale* is its specificity. The director commits to this particular story and coaxes from it a singular view of the complexities of land ownership and rural culture in the Brazilian Amazon. The film never loses its focus nor opts for generalizations. Therein lies its value as a documentary, *Vale* succeeds in focusing our attention on a single piece of land through time and through the eyes of its many claimants. The film refuses narrative closure, just as it refuses to settle on one point of view. The result is not an objective portrait of “facts” but instead a document that reveals evidence of emergent social phenomenon, collected and displayed from the point of view of an engaged listener. It is perhaps the most thoroughly ethnographic account of contemporary Amazonia to have been committed to film.

Like *Vale*, *Nas Terras do Bem Virá* (2007) has also been featured prominently in the annual Brazilian documentary festival *É Tudo Verdade* (It’s All True). If its counterpart focuses on one contentious patch of earth, *Bem Virá* pans out to offer a broader—and at times sprawling—portrait of land conflicts and the social dynamics of violence, inequality, and impunity in rural Amazonia. Filmed in twenty-nine municipalities across five states, *Bem Virá* opens with the story of labor migrants from Brazil’s northeast, then pivots to explore debt slavery in Pará, the consolidation of land in the hands of ranchers and agribusiness, the rise of the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), the massacre at Eldorado dos Carajás in 1996, and the murder of Sister Dorothy Stang in 2005. While *Vale* is tight, coming in at 72 minutes, *Bem Virá* runs to almost two hours.

Bem Virá is dedicated to portraying the systems of exploitation, violence, and inequality that work upon the bodies and spirits of migrants to Amazonia. Lured with visions of wealth and ease on the agricultural frontier, these migrants soon find themselves in a world of “*gatos*” (intimidating labor recruiters), “*grilagem*” (illegal land deals), and “*pistoleiros*” who enforce the will of a privileged elite. Director Alexandre Rampazzo uses textual narration to connect the disparate interviews, cut-away shots, and archival footage that *Bem Virá* collects. Rampazzo stands firmly with landless workers and dispossessed migrants, and has produced a film that admirably portrays their point of view. The film does not venture into indigenous politics, but rather remains focused on a narrative that shows how migrants who are initially ignorant of conditions in Amazonia find the means to organize and respond to the persistent violence and injustice perpetrated upon them. *Bem Virá* presents a moving description of how debt and distance make the perfect machine to keep workers in chains, and how agribusiness stands on the legacy of the concentration of property, devastation of the environment, and continuation of oppression in Amazonia. Perhaps the film’s most noteworthy material is the gripping footage—some of it never before publicly available—of the massacre of nineteen landless workers at Eldorado dos Carajás and interviews with the victims’ families.

One finishes a viewing of *Bem Virá* both outraged and exhausted. It concludes with the murder of Dorothy Stang, and explores how the version of agrarian justice Stang (and others) championed threatens the established ranching and logging interests of southern Pará state. This footage will prove invaluable for scholars and students wishing to understand what happens when sustainable development policies encounter legacies of fraud, violence, and dispossession. *Bem Virá’s* account does not reach for “lawless frontier” rhetoric to explain away murders or slavery. Instead, *Bem Virá* shows us the ranchers and lawyers who construct worldviews that justify or even require the actions they take. In the pursuit of justice, the film wants us to take these actors seriously, and to understand the danger in viewing agrarian crimes as isolated incidents rather than as part of a larger constellation of attitudes and collaborations among the local Brazilian elite.

Nas Terras do Bem Virá and *Vale dos Esquecidos* are strikingly different films that nevertheless share a sensibility that is welcome in the tradition of documentary filmmaking in Amazonia. They each have their merits, and both would be useful in introductory-level classes or in more advanced courses on Amazonia or visual ethnography. What sets them apart from other films on violence and land conflicts in the region is that each film speaks from a Brazilian perspective. Absent from these films is the courtroom drama and espionage-like intrigue of the U.S.-made *They Killed Sister Dorothy* (2008), or the grotesque gold miner on the wild frontier that Geoffrey O'Connor conjured in *Amazon Journal* (1995). The audience for these Brazilian-made documentary features is thoroughly Brazilian, though all are eagerly invited in if we check our preconceptions at the door. It is an audience which likely knows and cares about the fact that between 1985 and 2010, nearly 1,700 homicides linked to agrarian conflicts were committed in Brazil, but only 76 of these cases went to trial bringing just 16 convictions (CPT 2011). It is an audience attuned to the complexities and ambiguities inherent in a country where, according to the 2010 census, nearly 30,000 poor squatters occupy lands on some 505 indigenous territories. These territories exist in law but still await regularization. This audience, and these filmmakers, has a richer view of the socio-environmental consequences of Brazil's economic expansion than many outsiders who continue to affix narrative framings from elsewhere to the dramas of Amazonian life. *Vale* and *Bem Virá* commit to telling true stories with uneasy or altogether absent endings, and expose the challenges that indigenous groups and the marginal poor face while confronting a political-economic elite content to promote violence-or engage in figural fantasies of development and nation-building.

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