

## Major Reis and the visual constitution of Brazil as a nation\*

**Paulo Menezes**

Universidade de São Paulo – Brazil

### RESUMO

Este artigo analisa o filme *Ao Redor do Brasil*, do major Thomaz Reis, partindo dos fundamentos teóricos explicitados por Paulo Arantes em *O Sentido da Formação e por Foucault em The Order of Discourse*. Nessa direção, interpreta o filme como um discurso inserido no debate de sua época, de constituição do Brasil enquanto nação, que permeava várias dimensões da vida e do pensamento brasileiro nos anos 20-30 do século passado. Em consonância com o que se discutia na literatura e nas artes plásticas, o filme de Reis é cuidadosamente montado, utilizando-se para isso inúmeras cenas de filmes anteriores seus, no sentido de explicitar visualmente uma nação não em vias de constituição, mas, ao contrário, com seu território pacificado no interior, o que lhe daria estatuto de civilidade e, portanto, de uma nação inserida do processo civilizatório, ao mesmo tempo em que segura em suas fronteiras, pela presença visual incessante e inquestionável das instituições fundantes do Estado moderno, a família e o Estado, este último por meio de suas reconhecíveis instituições: a escola, a polícia e o exército, entre outras, realidade muito diferente de sua efetividade prática na época.

**Palavras-chave:** filme etnográfico, major Reis, nação, processo civilizador.

### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the movie *Ao Redor do Brasil*, by Thomaz Reis, taking as main theoretical references Paulo Arantes's, 'O sentido da formação' and Foucault's 'The Order of Discourse'. It interprets the movie as a discourse immersed in debates of its time about the constitution of Brazil as a nation, a constant theme in everyday life and intellectual circles during the 1920's and 30's. In parallel to what was being discussed in literature and plastic arts, the movie is carefully assembled, using several scenes from Reis's previous movies to visually denote a Nation, not on its way towards consolidation, but with its hinterlands already pacified. This would lend it a label of civility, therefore inserting it in the civilizing process and, at the same time, showing definitive frontiers secured by the presence of institutions characteristic of the modern State: schools, police, army and others (an image very different from what could be effectively verified at that time).

**Keywords:** civilizing process, ethnographic movie, major Reis, nation.

---

\* I acknowledge Fapesp's (São Paulo State Research Foundation) and CNPq's (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development) support for this research.

À la memoire de mon ami  
Didier Dormoy

In his preface to the first edition of *Formação da Literatura Brasileira (momentos decisivos)*,<sup>1</sup> Antonio Candido ([s.d.]) asks how to approach Brazilian literature, “a secondary branch of the Portuguese, on its turn a second-rate shrub in the garden of muses”. This question is a chronic problem fueling the concerns of Brazilian intellectuals between the 1930’s and 50’s, and even the 60’s: how to think Brazil beyond its reference as a former colony or former Empire (Candido, 1997). It is also present more generally in all fields of the arts and humanities. If the former’s chief manifestation was the 1922 Week of Modern Art in São Paulo, in the latter it comprises an avalanche of studies dedicated to the search for Brazil’s roots, its formation, for the constitution of Brazil as a nation. It is important to highlight that it is not about thinking any nation. It is about thinking a nation with an eye fixed on modernity, as manifest in the name of the abovementioned art week. Numerous works have trodden this path: Gilberto Freyre’s *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1930), Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s *Raízes do Brasil* (1936), Caio Prado Jr.’s *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo* (1942), Antonio Candido’s *Formação da Literatura Brasileira* (1959), Celso Furtado’s *Formação Econômica do Brasil* (1959), Paula Beiguelman’s *Formação Política do Brasil* (1967), among others.

One cannot help but to see such proliferation of kindred phrases, titles and subtitles as flagging a basic intellectual experience, the general outline of which more or less goes as the following: great interpretive schemes registering real trends in society which nonetheless involve a kind of congenital atrophy which insists in aborting them; that corpus of essays spoke to the collective purpose of endowing the inchoate environment with a modern frame capable of supporting its own evolution (Arantes, 1997, p. 11-12).

The titles are indeed indicative of a lack of European roots; once in Brazilian ground, these roots seemed rather to unfold as an unbroken and endless search for formation, or, from another perspective, as the construction of this same formation finally peaking in the constitution of Brazil as nation, and of the nation as modern state – if not industrial, at least industrializing.

In the arts, there were various movements. In the plastic arts, two weeks – 1922 in São Paulo and 1931 in Rio de Janeiro – celebrated the perspective according to which modern art should oppose tradition, embodied in the classical and academic arts. Modern art incorporates the “Brazilian” as form (as in anthropophagy), as color (the exuberance of purer, clearer and stronger tones – an expression of the dazzling lights of the tropics), and as theme (representing the aboriginal man in his own home and celebrations – as opposed to Debret’s Indians inserted in historical scenarios). Canonic expressions of such perspectives are the paintings *A Negra* (the Black Woman) by Tarsila do Amaral, the many and frequent *mulatas* (mixed race women) by Di Cavalcanti, as well as *O Mulato* (Mixed Race Man) and *Os Caipiras* (Festa Junina) (Yokels, Saint John’s Celebrations) by Portinari.

In literature, the denial of Portugal becomes evident as a forceful refusal of any dialogue or any influence. Brazilian literature has always been re-constructed as rupture,

---

<sup>1</sup> The Preface dates from 1957.

at the same time it has also been possible to think of it, and construct it, as continuity (cf. Teixeira, 2007).

Foucault (1971, p. 3; 10) once asserted that

in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality [...] We must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose upon them.

Curiously, if, on the one hand, and despite the discourse to the contrary, the movement of affirming Brazilianness is not freed from Portugal, on the other hand it denies Portugal while remaining shackled to Europe – this time, France.

Among these extraordinary efforts, one cannot fail to include the arts' younger child, cinema. Its ability to symbolize had been extolled since Soviet cinema for Lenin's support for Vertov, as well as for the arousing and educational skills of Eisenstein – manifest in the former's *Man with a Movie Camera*, and the latter's *The Potemkin Battleship* and *Strike*. Also Grierson had convinced the Empire Market Board – the British Empire propaganda manager – to invest in cinema as a privileged means for broadcasting worldwide the empire's qualities, as seen in *Drifters* and *Industrial Britain*.

It is from this background that the 1932 film *Ao Redor do Brasil – Aspectos do Interior e das Fronteiras*, by major Thomaz Reis (Ao Redor..., 1992), will be looked at. This picture was made using scenes from other Reis's films, such as the whole sequence going up the Ronuro River and several of the Carajá images.<sup>2</sup> This movie was Reis's firm step toward constructing a visual "register" of Brazil as a nation.<sup>3</sup> If the idea unfolds *pari passu* with the modernists', the hurdles will be however quite diverse.

Reis's problem is similar to that inherited by Debret when he conceived of his paintings as a representation of the Portuguese Crown transferred to the former colony, now acceded to the statute of United Kingdom. The smoothness of such endeavor did not reflect the situation of the kingdom's new capital, Rio de Janeiro. The city faced serious sanitation and urbanization problems that had to be rapidly solved – at least as far as painting was concerned. Debret's challenge was to bring to the canvass a provincial Rio de Janeiro looking like a metropolis worthy of receiving a Court that, even though fled from Napoleon, still kept European aspirations and preferences. In this sense, major Reis's task was to turn "a secondary branch of a second-rate shrub" into a nation with a capital "N", and make this continental and poorly industrialized nation a modern and sovereign state.

The film opens with a shot of Reis besides his camera, and soon after a map of Brazil highlighting its river basins and sizeable dimensions, as compared to European countries. A simple "special effect", solarization, is used here, as well as at other moments when the same map is shown. A cursor follows the trajectory of the Reis and Vasconcellos expedition throughout the Brazilian hinterlands, heading North through rivers in the states of Mato Grosso and Goiás. Major Reis thus attempts at effecting the visual construction of a nation whose organization as a republican state had just began.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Ronuro, Selvas do Xingu* (1924) and *Os Carajás* (1932).

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting analysis of Marshall Rondon's project, see Fernando de Tacca's *A Imagética da Comissão Rondon* (2001).

This would-be nation bore the burden of being an ex-colony, ex-deterritorialized kingdom and ex-empire, showing low economic development and even lower urbanization – at the time, eighty percent of Brazilians lived in rural areas. His problem was to turn this social and economic reality into something that could be acknowledged as a modern state, where the community was tightly united as nation, and society as state. He hoped to actualize the positivist trope underlying Brazil’s unifying bent, “order and progress”.

Reis therefore sought to tackle this problem from a double perspective, a double explanatory key. On the one hand, by proposing that nation-building be seen as the incorporation of all its inhabitants into a necessarily modern communitarian social body. On the other, by lending visual form to this positive modern state through the construction of a foundation providing the social body with its fullest, most effective and harmonious societal functioning: solid and efficient institutions.

Let us then follow Thomaz Reis’s canoes. His expedition starts in the lower Rio Ronuro, after transposing parched backlands and lush woods. His hinterlands images show the enterprise’s hurdles: difficult access to places where men and mules transpose inhospitable land, opening their way with machetes. The expeditionaries, as Major Reis called them, traveled along with Indians from various – to use the film’s terms – ‘tribes’.<sup>4</sup> Among these, the Bacaêri stood out for their mastery over canoe-making techniques using fire for molding the *jatobá* tree’s thick bark. It is worth remarking that these Indians appear all dressed up like the other men. But this characterization goes further. The following shot shows a moment of rest after the hunting of a tapir (there were no fish in the river). All travelers, Indians or not, happily enjoy a generous meal by a riverbank, showing quite ‘civilized’ manners: they all eat from their full plates using spoons, as Elias (1994, p. 97) would note a propos etiquette manuals, “One should never drink from a plate, but use a spoon”.

Abundance and good manners seem to be daily features of the expedition. This however contrasts with scenes to be discussed below when, going up the Coluêne River – as the Ronuro, a Xingu River tributary – the expedition runs for the first time into the indigenous inhabitants of that area. These unmentioned peoples are shown from a different light: bare naked, wearing *botoques* on their lower lips. This is in stark contrast with a fully dressed expedition Indian who appears alongside them. Interestingly, Vasconcellos appears fixing the long hair of one of the Indians so that the scene runs perfectly – this will be repeated several times during the film. In this sequence, the Auêti are presented in the intertitle as “not fully pacified”<sup>5</sup>, such as many other of “the region’s indigenous nations”.<sup>6</sup> They are also shown walking about their *ocas* (huts) naked – in all ages and genders, and for the first time, in significant numbers. The following scene with the Ianahuquá is even more telling. The first take is exemplary of the visual concepts making up Reis’s cinematic narrative. An Indian man appears in the foreground, shoulders up, directly facing the camera as if in a photograph. A blunt cut brings the sequence to another, almost static plane where the same Indian man, now on his back, shows his nape to the camera. Finally, this triple sequence concludes with the man turning his head towards the camera in order to show his profile – as is done in mugshot photographs.

---

<sup>4</sup> For the reader’s convenience, I have chosen to keep the film’s terminology throughout the text.

<sup>5</sup> The original intertitles are in 1930’s writing; I chose to use their contemporary version.

<sup>6</sup> As noted by Bill Nichols (1991, p. 34-38), intertitles play the role of God’s voice in silent movie, fulfilling the same function of organizing the narrative. Speaking from nowhere, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent, they speak from a universal knowledge standpoint which, due to its explanatory characteristics, reinforce for the spectator the truth claims of the filmic discourse.

What follows categorically completes Thomaz Reis's conceptual framework. It is another meal scene, but this time Reis and Vasconcellos sit on a fallen log, alongside various Indians. Their chief sits to the left of Vasconcellos, who appears eating from a gourd directly with his hands. At some point, Vasconcellos grabs a piece of food and passes it on to the chief at his side, close to his mouth, as one would do to a child or animal.<sup>7</sup> The chief, on his turn, reaches for the food with his own hands, deflecting Vasconcellos from putting it in his mouth – refusing therefore to be placed in that position, in spite of Vasconcellos's insistence in repeating the gesture. The intertitle adds, "The Indians are pacific, but quite reserved". From that follows a series of medium-long shots of Indians, some of them couples, that, added to the numerous almost static close-ups permeating the whole film and all ethnicities,<sup>8</sup> make up a sort of taxonomy of indigenous peoples inhabiting the region. They are not yet Brazilians, for they are not yet part of the nation, unless they are pacified and forsake their native customs. It also echoes the taxonomy of endangered animal species, as well as of birds and insects in natural history museums – interestingly enough, where collections dedicated to "primitive" peoples are also included.

Finally, a bit further the anthropometric caliper scene is again telling: the officer is seen measuring the dimensions of an Indian who stands quietly in front of the large scale. His height is taken, and then the dimensions of his frontal and lateral skull. In order to show that the Indians were comfortable with this, to say the least, 'pictoresque' situation, a series of five two-shot filmic 'pictures' of Indians is shown, alternating between an American shot and a close-up. It ends repeating the same procedure, but now having as the 'model' a female Indian from the same ethnicity. Differently from the men's, the women's stony faces manifest the awkwardness of the situation, the sensation of being looked at from a probing, scrutinizing manner, like a laboratory guinea pig.

These scenes underscore some of the foundational concepts of Reis's narrative meant to acquire filmic form through images. Firstly, there is the composition of a taxonomy of indigenous peoples through the filmic 'pictures' and measurements. That had been done before by drawings of Brazilian Negros, from Debret to Rugendas, or by photography, as Curtis had done with United States' Indians. This shows that the incorporation of these peoples to the nation is done by means of their continuous visual and metric classification, as well as by its adjectival reclassification from savage to civilized, passing through the pacified. Secondly, a conceptual and visual hierarchization places the Indians closer to nature, animals and children. They are seen as imperfect adults, thus lacking civilization or being still in its infancy.

Finally, the idea of pacification is refined as the first step towards shedding off 'savagery' and being incorporated to the nation. By showing some 'not fully pacified' Indians, Reis places them, along children, at the infancy of civilization, closer to nature and therefore to animals. It is worth highlighting that Reis does not use here the concept of civilization – it will only come up in the movie's final scenes. Nonetheless, it is evident that he is working with this idea in his early reflections through the almost equivalent concept of pacification.

As Starobinski (1993, p. 2) asserted, the idea of civilizing was, in the thirteenth century, linked to the status of civil being. In the sixteenth century it was "used to express the action of civilizing or the tendency of a people to polish or rather correct its

---

<sup>7</sup> On the constitution of the hierarchical relation that broke off with the original parallel between men and nature, men and animals, introducing a hierarchy between them, and between adults and children, see John Berger (1980).

<sup>8</sup> This concept is not used in the film.

mores and customs by bringing into civil society a luminous, active, loving morality abounding in good works”. Finally, from the eighteenth century on, civilization comes to include among its meanings the notion of progress, the driving force of development, as Durkheim would expand on in the following century. In the same vein, Starobinski (1993, p. 4) points out that the idea of civilization seeks to make sense of a final state of a process which, in its hierarchization and explicitation, will demand the creation of its antithetic double opposing it as a supposedly primeval state – in this case, and depending on the situation, barbarian, savage, or primitive (Starobinski, 1993).

It is therefore evident, in Reis’s filmic sequence, this approximation of Indians to nature, infancy, and savagery. They appear undressed, and eat using their hands. This perspective reaches its highest – or lowest, depending on the conceptual reference – at the end of the movie, when the frontier expedition goes up the Guaporé River and one of its tributaries, the Caxibis, and meets the Nhambiquara. The latter are presented not only at the end of the expedition and of the filmic narrative, but of the social scale. An intertitle explains, “The tribe is pacified, but it nonetheless maintains its warring habits”. From then on, Indians quite different from the previously presented are shown. They are filmed the same way, American shots of groups of four or five. But they are toothless and disheveled children and adults. The primitiveness of such perspective is stressed by an intertitle stating that they “are still nomad, with its gardens spread through the woods”. Another one reinforces, “they prefer to lie on the ground; they don’t use hammocks nor cover themselves with any piece of fabric”, and is followed by a shot of the Indians lying on the dusty ground alongside children and dogs. Finally, another intertitle announces that they live off wild pineapple, one of their staple foods. The sequence shows it being smashed by a malformed and rudimentary pestle into a huge mortar from which the fibers are pulled out; the remaining juice is drunk immediately and collectively. Obviously, another construction of the Nhambiquara would suggest an alternative point of departure. I am referring here to Lévi-Strauss’s pictures of the same Nhambiquara in his *Tristes Tropiques*. There, similar images are shown of Indians lying on the floor drinking wild pineapple juice, but with radically different meaningful propositions (cf. Lévi-Strauss, 2004).<sup>9</sup> If Reis’s intertitles underscore the distance separating these Indians from civilization, in spite of their being already ‘relatively’ pacified and therefore clearly manifesting absences in their native customs, Lévi-Strauss’s photos and their subtitles aim at putting the same customs in perspective through retrieving their cultural dimension. Subtitles such as “matrimonial play, affectionate merriment, siesta, intimacy, women breastfeeding in indigenous position”, among others, invite the reader to see those people prostrated on the floor as performing a kind of sociability involving play. They also suggest that, given their nomadic lifestyle, pineapple cultivation is not so much a matter of sloth or primitiveness – as Reis’s intertitles seem to suggest – but a necessary cultural form to sustain the de-territorialized way of life of those who need to move in order to survive.

The hierarchical scale from warrior to pacified, savage to civilized – even if episodically still primitive – therefore becomes clear. The analogy is straightforward between Indians and nature, whereby the latter drew closer to animals not only in terms of the civilizatory scale but, more strongly, in terms of the pattern of filmic re-presentification.<sup>10</sup> A coming scene sheds light on this question. It should be recalled that

---

<sup>9</sup> Images 19-46.

<sup>10</sup> I have discussed the concept of re-presentification in cinema in general and documental cinema particularly in *Representificação: as Relações (Im)possíveis entre Cinema Documental e Conhecimento* (Menezes, 2003). A refined version was published in *O Cinema Documental como Representificação:*

early on I remarked the first filmic “photo” shot of an Ianahuquá Indian. In it, one sees the frontal close-up, the second shot is done from the back, and, finally, his head turns towards the camera. Towards the end of the film, when the expedition is coming to its threshold, crossing flatlands towards the Paraguai River, Reis will repeat the same scene with minor variations. The first shot is a profile, and then the head turns right towards the camera. A blunt cut leads to the second shot, which is the same shot from behind making visible the rear part of the head; it then turns left, stopping again at the lateral profile. This would be no more than a variation on the same theme if the model in these shots were not quite different from the one in the beginning of the film. If early on he placidly filmed a Ianahuquá Indian, now he placidly filmed, with the same almost-static poses and the same head movement, something that, as much as the latter, was an important part of the regional workforce supporting the soldiers: *a llama*. I do not believe it was by chance, as some have claimed, that Reis made use of the same filmic concepts when filming Indians and animals. As I have argued, Lévi-Strauss did it in a radically different manner. If Reis did it, it is because his framework of visual interpretation is the same. There is a subliminal identification between Indians and animals which, in his filmic discourse and narrative, only confirms the persistent hierarchy in which the former are repeatedly ranked. This is due less to chance than to a pattern of visual construction of the “other” that unambiguously hinges on a conceptualization of the civilized white in opposition to the pacified, or to-be-pacified, Indian.

Here, Reis introduces yet another discriminating element mediating between his idea of nation-building and the possibility of thinking the nation as a modern state.

After the anthropometric caliper scene, two intertitles make this perspective explicit. The first says of the Indians accompanying the expedition that they “lay comfortably in their hammocks waiting to receive gifts”, followed by images of cheerful Indians laying down, swinging in their hammocks. He first shows a laying Indian man looking at a woman carrying a baby in another hammock. Then, the same characters are shown standing up in what looks like a typical bourgeois nuclear family. Other Indians are shown squatting besides gourds and pans where food is being cooked over a fire, and the sequence is closed with other Indians resting in their hammocks after the meal. It should be remarked that in spite of the subtle movement of the hammocks, these shots look more like a sequence of photographs than a film. This is evidence of the extent to which Reis’s filmic photography in this film draws on the forms of composition inherited from early photographs, which stemmed on their turn from forms of composition in painting. These are scenes whose texture and visual organization conjure up an atmosphere echoing the photos of Peter Henry Emerson or Julia Margareth Cameron. It is interesting to reflect on what is being suggested by this intertitle, which is quite similar to one used by Flaherty in *Nanook of the North* to explain the Inuit’s activities in the trading post, the only point of contact between them and the civilized world – in Flaherty’s own words, further qualified as the ‘precious store’.<sup>11</sup> Flaherty explains that they went there to trade the fox and white bear furs they had amassed during the entire year for “knives, bullets, and colored beads”. It is worth noting that the same evaluative mechanism is deployed here – in fact, the same

---

*Verdades e Mentiras nas Relações (Im)possíveis entre representação, Documentário, Filme Etnográfico, Filme Sociológico e Conhecimento* (Menezes, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> For an in depth discussion on the relations between images and “civilization” and their implications in the beginning of documental cinema, in particular reference to the Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* and in lesser degree to Reis’s, see *O Nascimento do Cinema Documental e o Processo Não Civilizador* (Menezes, 2005).

deprecating mechanism, as the Indians seem to follow the expedition because they do not have anything better to do. This would account for their early expectations about receiving “gifts”, thus putting them again alongside children and animals, which live off of others’ generosity and good will. But Reis’s perspective soon becomes clearer: “When the journey was over, Indians were given gifts of machetes and clothes in return for their work”. This intertitle is very elucidative. Before, Indians would lay comfortably in their hammocks while waiting for undeserving “gifts” from the expeditionaries. Now, from a different angle, they are to be paid for their work – the gaze is that of the civilizer, even if a curious and strange symbiosis ends up seeping through Reis’s use of words, who gives “gifts of” clothes and machetes in exchange for their work. In this sentence two antithetic concepts appear side-by-side: work does not go along with charity, at least in a filmic construction that seeks to show the embryonic constitution of relations typical of a modern state, and not of feudal or pre-capitalist polities.

The scenes we see then are symptomatic of the construction of this perspective. Nude Indians are put in line, and the camera makes a panoramic, American shot of them always up close, as if to highlight the intimate and trusting relationship that the expeditionaries have been able to build. Many of the characters previously seen in close-ups are now found in line, glancing at each other, wary and amused about what is going on. Vasconcellos walks in front of them as if inspecting a troop, if it were not for the large, unusual grin on his face. A blunt cut leads to the image of an Indian man, now wearing pants and looking down trying to button them up so they do not fall – but evidently jumbled with the number of buttons to which he is surely not used. Vasconcellos helps him, while putting on an almost entirely buttoned shirt through the Indian’s head, and then pulling it down his body. The man is visibly amused with the unexpected situation. The captain carefully tides it up, doing the last buttons close to the collar while trying to teach the Indian how to put it on and tuck it within his pants. Another quick cut, and half the Indians appear dressed, with other people helping them. The intertitle announces that “the women were also dressed with men’s clothes”. The next scene is picturesque: the Indians themselves appear dressing up their “wives”. They first put on the shirts, within which they do not seem to feel very comfortable. Immediately, an intertitle comes to our (or the women’s) rescue: “While small, the women are happy with the clothes”. The following scene shows the same Indian woman with a stingy face who does not show any satisfaction or contentment. Much to the contrary, the scene is bizarre as the woman, who had already shown difficulty in dressing that (in her view completely unnecessary) implement, now, the harder she tries, she is not able to button up the pants – she is then aided by her “husband” while contracting her stomach. A new intertitle helps the spectator, “Here there are Indians from the various Corisevu tribes. Today, they are in contact with the Simões Lopes outpost, and soon we will have these workers coexisting in our society”. Two medium-long shots of couples follow, where the same displeased Indian woman reappears. Her image now introduces some unsteadiness, as her left collar appears stiffing up, making the white buttoned-up shirt look more like a strait-jacket than a pleasing object. It is important to remark that these same two “couples” have already appeared in the movie in different scenes. The displeased Indian woman had appeared before, while her “husband” had been shown in the filmic “photographs”, and the second man is the same who had appeared along his son in the hammocks waiting to receive “gifts”. This filmic strategy is exemplary: it is constructed to show a typical nuclear family as the basic structure of “the Indians”. Here, stripped of all differentiating cultural elements, they are turned by Reis’s lenses into a single social category -- shown as ultimately similar to



our own, where fathers, mothers, and children prevail, without heterodox crossings. This resonates with Nichol's (1991, p. 34-38) discussion of the expositive type of documentary cinema, characterized by the presentation of the "other" from the safe parameters of our morality. This stratagem is not new. Flaherty had used it in *Nanook of the North* when he showed, with no foreword (as Reis did) and right in the beginning of the movie, the filmic "photographs" of Nanook and Nyla – therefore presenting to the spectator a projection of the familiar sense of this filmic union, rather than the Inuit kinship relation.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, at some points of the pacification process, it is not necessary that the Indians be different than what they are; it is enough that we see them from the parameters established by Reis. Pacified and organized on the screen, appearing to have abandoned their original nudity and adopted the white civilization's "higher" values, these Indians are prepared by Reis to appear as taking a step towards the social safe haven, namely, the nation. This is what is expressed by the unlikely intertitle reproduced above. Clothing, plus contact with the outpost, are the first step towards acceptance in the world of work – understood as paid labor – in which they will no longer receive gifts as "pay", nor presents in exchange for their good will. Thus, that intertitle showing a symbiosis between offering gifts as pay for the work done. It is as if Reis showed us that, even though the Indians were in a position of gift-receivers, and therefore non-workers, the expeditionaries, as the builders of Brazil from within its territorial and socio-cultural entrails, were making explicit their civilizing project of incorporating all into the national community. This meant, on the one hand, the incorporation to the modern division of labor society, and, on the other, a reinforcement of national cohesion by the primordial power of organic solidarity, in Durkheim's terms hegemonic vis-à-vis mechanic solidarity.

But there is more to the film. A scene towards the end, after the visit to the Nhambiquara, brings back the lack of civility persisting in some indigenous groups more reticent to the civilizing process – to use Elias's terms. For no apparent reason, they resist being incorporated to the world of clothes, fixed territoriality, and domesticated labor. This scene becomes very important in the conception of society and nation the film aims to build through its narrative. The scene that follows contrasts with the previous one, while lending it its expected evolutionary meaning towards nation-building. It begins with an explanatory intertitle: "A visit to the Pacahás Novos Outpost. There, one can see the located Indians receiving from the Service the influence of civilization". It is important to highlight that this is the first time the narrator uses the word 'civilization', even though the idea was implied in the whole discussion of pacification. It is also interesting to note that the Protective Service for the Indians (SPI, Serviço de Proteção ao Índio) unambiguously takes on its role in the civilizing process, subtly denoted in the intertitle under the term 'influence'. The contrast with Nhambiquara nomadism is evident here: their successive displacements, combined with the wild pineapple and their preservation of warring habits, are singled out as decisive factors of their lack of civility. A shot from the river shows some cabins, which are presented as the outpost. Significantly, some unequivocally Indian women wearing colored dresses are shown, processing food with a mortar and pestle, as if peeling rice for their next meal. Soon afterwards, two other women appear alternately pounding the same mortar; then, one of them, shown in middle-long shot, appears proudly holding the pestle as if it were a gun or a trophy to be publicly exhibited. Here the contrast with the

---

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1983), drawing on Kuleshov's experiments, affirms that the construction of meaning of any filmic image by the spectator emerges from his linkage between the image seen, and the images immediately preceding it and following it – and from these three and everything that was seen in the film up until then.

Nhambiquara scene is telling, for in it the pestle was quite rudimentary, almost a stick of virgin wood, while now the pestle is carefully sculpted. This expresses wisdom in its use, which is no longer naturalized. Not by chance, the following scene shows six men laboriously hoeing the land in synchrony, as if to show that work is not only needed, but that collective, communal work is the basis of possible and future societal relations.

The following intertitle effects yet another union, also significant for the national project proposed by the film: “An already civilized Indian married to Mr. Manoel Mendes de Souza, public official”. Here it becomes evident that incorporation to the world of labor is not enough if not accompanied by a simultaneously incorporation to the social world. This brings into relief the union between the nation and the modern state, to be reached through civilization on the one hand, and labor on the other. The already civilized Indian woman – therefore no longer an ‘Indian’ in the strong meaning proposed by the film – finds the doors of citizenship open, from where she may marry and legally enter civil society in the Christian form of a nuclear family. Moreover, she marries a symbol of financial and social stability of the time, a public official – something which might seem strange to contemporary eyes, given the gradual and apparently irreversible depreciation of this social category. The following scene adds visual consistency to this proposition. It is a waist up shot of the couple where neither of them seems to know very well how to behave; they are solemn, as if waiting for instructions. Again, the composition of the shot is photographic. Both are well dressed; she wears a neat dress with a round collar, and he dresses a uniform-like outfit buttoned up to the neck. The Indian woman no longer shows any sign of ethnic identity, no painting or differential haircut that could allow us to trace her origins. As the other women in dresses before her, this one has already been rescued from her specificity of origin and dissolved into a homogenizing collective where the generic category ‘Indian’ prevails. She looks to the side, as if looking for a way out of the situation, while he whispers something we cannot understand but which certainly pleases her, as she appears smiling, even if disconcerted, while he continues to speak. Next is an image of the man in disaccord with his high symbolic role, as it shows the lack of three lower teeth – which is in even sharper contrast with her open smile. Therefore, in terms of the film’s structure, the Pacahás Novos outpost is the site of reuniting the symbolic elements making up the nation, understood here as a great family warmly embracing, through indissoluble bonds, all Brazilian citizens and workers. Society and community are then joined together as a solid foundation for thinking the possibility of a modern state.

The film’s second analytical key becomes evident: to think Brazil means thinking of it as a nation, but it should also be thought of as a state, and a modern one for that matter. The best way to show it in the film is to reinforce the institutions which lend it its sturdiness and density. The happy marriage has already made evident that the family is one of those foundational national institutions. But, as Durkheim had asserted (1934, p. 232), it alone is not enough: “In asking the school to prepare children for a higher social life than that of the family, we are only asking something that is in quite accord with its nature” of social being. It is therefore in school that social values are learned which allow one to think of oneself beyond the immediate family group, therefore making possible universal relations mediated by the state and the nation. It is thus not surprising that the film underscores precisely these institutions, in all indigenous outposts it visited, from the earlier Bananal Island to this Pacahás Novos. In the latter, shown after a long shot in the Carajá village where dances and rituals are praised, this perspective became explicit. A panoramic shot initially shows a group of numerous women which, in contrast to the Carajá, are properly covered by white, long dresses.

The shot finalizes in some houses nearby, where a line of students is seen marching. Besides them, walks Marshall Rondon. He is escorted by uniformed female students carrying a large flag to a building that looks like a school. After a quick cut, images show women holding their children, all wearing colored clothes, but with haircuts and face paintings that bear witness to their Carajá origins. They have not yet completed the process of being incorporated to the nation. Various close-up shots of these Indian women are made, drawing attention to their ethnic traits. Another blunt cut leads to an intertitle presenting the outpost's school. A group of short uniformed students are aligned to the left, with Rondon walking in front of them. The camera turns right, showing another line of girls wearing white skirts and, as the boys, barefoot. In front of them stands the teacher, wearing a more elegant dress and shoes. Behind this group stands another one, of older characters wearing similar clothes. It can be guessed that they are the students' parents, especially since the following scene shows, behind the boys on the other side, a line of mothers embracing their babies. This denotes the union of the nation's three chief institutions: the family, the school, and the state – represented by both the school and the army. From this perspective, the film makes concrete the proposition that the outpost is the site of symbiosis between two worlds, a gateway permitting the Indians to shake off the particularities making up a plurality of indigenous 'nations'. As became explicit in the Pacahás Novos outpost, they became the members of a single and great nation – the 'Brazil' in the title of the film. They are incorporated into the nation's primordial institutions: the family, conceived in Christian and civil terms (therefore mandating the nuclear family and excluding nudity as a kind of social behavior); and the school, the breeding ground of social values allowing them to share the collective destinies of this greater entity which comes to define and encompass them, the nation. Simultaneously and correspondingly, they will be taken care of by her and kept safe by the public forces of the police and the army. If the process is successful, the avowed purpose is what is shown at the very end of the film: the indissoluble marriage of she who is no longer an Indian but a civilized woman, who receives the membership pass to civil society and, through it, to the world of paid labor and the modern state.

But something in the constitution of the country through images is still lacking. After spending more than half its time showing the process of conversion to civilization through pacification – and the associated images of numerous of the country's natural beauties such as the sequences of the Santa Rita Waterfalls and the Negro River – the film will explore a series of images of Brazil's frontiers.

The first one appears up the Negro River, in Cucuhy. There, the expeditionaries are seen going up the river slope until a garrison of armed soldiers appropriately aligned in front of their superior; by the latter's feet, a massive cannon is seen. What appears to be the garrison's commander house is shown, and then again the marching battalion. A much taller building is then shown right besides – or so it seems, filmically – the other. From what seems to be the local school, women and children look outside, directly to the camera, appearing surprised by the unusual situation. Another community is shown on the bank of the Cucuhy, before entering the territory (today state) of Acre, along Brazil's non-coastal frontier. But a difference here is that the territory of Acre is presented with the support of numeric data – something which had only happened in the movie in the Ford farm, as will be seen below. An intertitle states that this is the home to 105,000 people. From within the boat, the river bank is seen getting closer; there, a crowd awaits the frontier inspector. These scenes are peculiar. They show women on lace dresses and umbrellas, men wearing coats and ties, mostly white – and all with straw hats. These images construct a frontier population quite different from that of the

indigenous outposts. Here, besides civility, one sees good manners from good families. Even the children wear long pants, coats, and straw hat. An intertitle explains that “schools and boy scouts receive the Frontier Inspector”. Once again, boys are seen in line to one side, and girls to the other. The latter are a bit older, wear dark skirts, three-quarter length socks, and white fine blouses, waving fans and little flags. Next to them, the boys appear with scouts uniforms and hat, in line facing the marching band. Next to the band stand the men from the public forces – so announces another intertitle –, all dressed in white gala uniforms, their commander on a magnificent horse. Yet another intertitle tells that the former governor of Acre has built “beautiful headquarters”. Its main façade is shown by a panoramic shot which slowly moves right, before being suddenly interrupted – images of the forest would have undermined the sense of security and urbanity that was to be conveyed. All elements present in the outposts reappear: the school, the family, and the state. The latter’s public forces fulfill the functions of maintaining order and external defense; a frontier army demands large and impressive buildings, as its role in securing national sovereignty in such a site is heightened. The film goes on to show the large school facility, a par with the headquarters. At this point, the city also enters the narrative. Scenes of the river port accentuate the size of steamers loading and unloading all sorts of merchandise. A *Banco do Brasil* (Bank of Brazil) is seen and highlighted by an intertitle, and “diverse aspects of the city of Rio Branco” include busy streets and sidewalks, a large, arboreous house from where some people leave, median strips covered with recently-planted trees – sign of an urbanizing effort, even if incipient, as the streets are still unpaved. Nonetheless, the images show the care and active presence of the public power. The following scene is homely: three ladies wearing elegant white dresses sit on a plaza bench; the youngest, dressed sailor style, smiles and frolics with the cameraman. As expected, an intertitle announces the Governor’s Palace, looking more imposing from the lateral than the frontal shot, which inevitably reveals its relatively reduced size. The city market is also shown: a large masonry building with tall and wide doors, showing comfort and security of supply. The passage by Rio Branco shows therefore a frontier that is more than protected: it is inhabited, well inhabited, by elegant ladies and established institutions, as should be within a state that protects its citizens and its territory. What was of course never mentioned is that Rio Branco is not really a frontier city. But that is not relevant; in the film it is presented as if it was one, and ultimately that is what counts.

The promenade through the geographical limits of what is to be conceived of as Brazil goes on. First, another frontier town – this time, a real one – bordering Bolivia is shown. There, one sees more neat houses and streets, more people walking through streets which are more rustic, but as well constructed as the others. The expedition then arrives at Porto Velho, which is also presented as a frontier city – which it is not – and as an important commercial entrepôt with Bolivia. A panoramic view of the Madeira River introduces us to the city, which spreads throughout its banks, where numerous large warehouses are seen. As in Rio Branco, everything here is built to be shown magnificently. A first intertitle tells that that is the starting point of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad; some images take us through the wide and arboreous streets of Porto Velho, the camera following Rondon’s strides. This is in itself quite impressive; one can imagine how difficult it is to build a railroad – highest symbol of the idea of progress in early cinema<sup>13</sup> – in the middle of the rainforest. The epic of disasters are not shown; to

---

<sup>13</sup> Many films from the 1920’s make use of this same visual vocabulary when claiming that a place is modern, in the industrial sense. Common images are trains and engines; when industry itself is at stake,

the lenses is reserved only its final, achieved moment, duly sanitized, when the locomotive cuts through the now-tamed forest towards the other frontier town, Guajará-Mirim. The latter is shown the same way, in spite of its more modest dimensions and precarious urbanization. This does not seem important, as its residents, always wearing coats and straw hats, are a visual testimony to the civility of the people and safety of the place.

The last film site visited by Rondon is the Mato Grosso border. It is presented as inhospitable, but not unguarded, land: 147 years ago, during the times of diamonds and other precious stones, the Príncipe da Beira fort was erected. The images show an abandoned fortress; its external defense structure appears however to be intact. The intertitle remarks, as will be seen later, that the fort's internal facilities are in ruins. In order to show what the eyes cannot see, another intertitle explains that that was a Vauban-style fort, with four balustrades, fourteen embrasures each – showing not only its premier military engineering as its irreproachable firepower. The fact that it is in ruins seems to be no big deal, as an intertitle explains that the place had been hoed three months earlier, and can be used at anytime for defense. Images of an officer preparing a cannon seek to substantiate that: he fills it with ammunition that is proudly launched towards the forest. The same operation is repeated with other cannons aiming at other directions. The important thing here is what the images construct, not the immediate effectiveness of the fort itself – after all, it seems to sit in the middle of the woods. The whole sequence aims at showing that, if needed, to defend those borders would be easy and swift, as all that is needed is already there. And when that is not the case, nature will play this role on behalf of men. The film does not hesitate to show, after the scene of the fort, inhospitable planes and rivers packed with alligators. The latter, even though smaller than their cousin crocodiles, are ferocious enough to scare away those attempting at trespassing.

This might be seen as concluding the second of the film's explanatory keys: in order to filmically build the idea of the nation as state, solid institutions cementing both should be shown throughout the entire national territory, including its most remote borders. Indeed, the film does that exhaustively. In the indigenous outposts, the presence of national institutions had already been perceived through the family, school, and state – the latter, always manifest in terms of its capacities for territorial defense, namely, the army or police. The outposts and frontier “towns” show that the territory is inhabited by healthy people, with good work conditions and quality of life, where those same institutions are present as even grander buildings, especially given the distance they are from the federal capital and more developed urban centers. Thus, if first the country's hinterlands were shown pacified, and consequently socialized, now Brazil's continental dimensions are shown delimited by frontiers, its sovereignty accordingly protected – as should be expected from a real nation-state.

Finally, a last proposition should be noted. A nation does not exist without wealth, and the film shows many instances of this great country's natural wealth. Its first mention of the economy takes place roughly one-third through the film, when, after showing the natural beauty of the Santa Rita Waterfalls, the film goes on to explain that those waters hide yet another wealth, to be disclosed by skillful hands sorting out diamonds from gravel and pebbles in the *bateia*. Mineral extraction from alluvium demonstrates beyond doubt the economic potential of a region which, even though beautiful, seems too distant to attract other kinds of economic investment. The best though starts exactly in the middle of the movie, with a drawn-out scene about five

---

close-up on moving pistons. Good illustrations of this are Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, and Grierson's *Drifters* – all dating from the 1920's.

minutes long. The expedition shows the grandeur of the Amazon rainforest as it goes up the Tocantins River towards Cametá, which is presented by an intertitle as the second town in the state of Pará, in the *seringais* region. The *seringueiras* (rubber trees) are shown, gigantic trees spreading across the river banks and penetrating the interior elbowing oil-rich *buritisais* (Moriche palms), which just sit there waiting to be tapped by human labor. Some wooden palafitte huts indicate where the locals dwell – something which could convey the misconception that that was a region of low economic, even if extractive, potential. The images that follow quickly belie this interpretation. After a long sequence of shots showing the river banks, a view of the Cametá port draws attention for its apparently reduced dimensions – an impression soon rectified by an intertitle explaining that there is “large commerce of cocoa, rubber, and nuts, accessible to steamers of great hull draft”. The smallness of the river port thus contrasts with the greatness of its function, even though this cannot be ascertained by the images themselves. But something else will.

A new intertitle informs that the Ford enterprise is approaching, 74 miles from the city of Santarém. The images are indeed impressive, and will be reinforced by several intertitles presenting data on the undertaking. A motorboat crosses the river, showing not only its width, but what seems to be a small town. “Land for planting rubber trees, a concession of 20 square leagues”, an intertitle explains, translating in numbers what the eyes could already take notice of, and will continue to do so in the following shots. A large panoramic shot of huge deforested areas is explained when it reads that it represents “over 1,200 hectares prepared, and 500 already planted”. The following images bring the cleared land with a few young trees. Another panoramic shot from the middle of the river makes evident the enormous facilities covering the project area. First a succession of large rooftops is seen, ending in a large white building closer to the river bank as well as to the port, which is slowly approached by the boat from where the scene is shot. Soon a crane is seen besides a small truck, waiting for freight to unload. Another intertitle unveils that the investment there was of over one million dollars. In order to bring home this figure, the cameras show the facilities resulting from such an investment. Large bulldozers, several containers and numerous trucks appear, and then the lenses halt at a large and long white building which looks like a huge dorm, or dining hall, for its supposedly many workers. Truck number 13, which carries Rondon, stops to pick up a cameraman, and then the images move to other, fancier facilities, probably housing for skilled technicians, managers and engineers. There are nine wide buildings, all encircled by verandas shielded with large, top-bottom mosquito nets. This demonstrates the care and sophistication with which such lodgings responded to the sometimes hostile weather of the forest and its flying inhabitants. In front of one of these is a man, well-dressed in white and wearing a straw hat, standing on the wooden pathway linking the various buildings so their residents do not have to set their feet on the mud caused by constant rainfall – making this apparent sophistication a de facto necessity. Images of a large electrical plant – its sheds are still under construction, but the eight boilers and engines are running – are preceded by a statement that 2,000 volts provide light and power for the entire project. All these facilities are connected by wooden pathways, showing that not only the housings, but the whole complex, is protected from the mire.

The obviously herculean dimensions of such an enterprise are reinforced over and over again by such images and figures. It should be kept in mind that this is the 1930's, which makes everything even more impressive. Besides the large sum invested, extraordinary for the epoch, there is the project's territorial dimension, coupled with the difficulty of bringing such heavy equipment all the way over. The film effectively

argues that Brazil's hinterlands, at first apparently inhospitable to development, are able to attract significant investments lending to the local extractive industry an aura of modern industry, in its highest sense according to the standards of the time. With this, Reis kills two birds with one stone. First, he shows that Brazil's hinterlands and its frontiers are not nobody's land, vulnerable to the occupation by wildcats of all sorts. Second, by showing that Brazilian forests are filled with such high-level, cutting-edge enterprises, he conveys the impression of an urbanized country, much more industrialized than it actually was in those times. What matters though is the impression that these five minutes leave on the spectators – that progress was penetrating deeply into that region and others –, which is sufficiently strong to last unsuspectingly up to the end of the movie. At the very end, a quick image of another enterprise is shown, albeit just its main – and much more modest – building: the Guaporé-Rubber. The spectator might imagine this as having, if not the same, at least as large scale dimensions as the previous one – the result of a supposedly large foreign investment, as is indicated by the name in English.

These enterprises, associated with the images of the railroads trailblazing through the rainforest, are enough to crystallize the idea of a modern industrial state that the film aimed at building in the first place. All visual symbols of progress and of a solid economy are present. If Brazilians still coexist with primitive Indians, these are presented as exotic peoples, substantiated by the dances and straw gear worn by the Xingu inhabitants. Simultaneously, their pacification is foregrounded, a path towards civilization under the control and assistance of a state which reinforces family ideals while educating and protecting them – a true, great nation. Finally, external sovereignty is also secured by protected frontiers.

For all this, the movie's final scene has all but significant meaning. It turns out to be a huge rock, as Cucuhy's Amazon rock, from which the entire lowlands can be seen, as if, from high above, the entire Brazil could be captured. It appears immense, as a great panopticon capable of seeing, surveilling, and controlling everything. With this final parting shot, Major Thomaz Reis provides his spectators with a great movie, about a great, safe and consolidated Brazil, assembled and constructed, definitively, 'for the English to see'.<sup>14</sup>

## Referências

ARANTES, Paulo. Providências de um crítico literário na periferia do capitalismo. In:

ARANTES, Oflia; ARANTES, Paulo. *Sentido da formação*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1997. p. 7-63.

BERGER, John. Why look at animals. In: BERGER, John. *About looking*. London:

Writers and Readers, 1980. p. 1-19.

---

<sup>14</sup> Translator's note: *Para inglês ver* is a common expression in Brazilian Portuguese, roughly equivalent to 'pulling wool over someone's eyes'. Historically, it refers to a series of anti-traffic and anti-slavery laws passed in Brazil during the nineteenth century, meant to respond to British pressure but which were never actually enforced.

- CANDIDO, Antonio. *Formação da literatura brasileira (momentos decisivos)*. 4th edition. São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora, [s.d.].
- CANDIDO, Antonio. O significado de Raízes do Brasil. In: HOLANDA, Sérgio Buarque de. *Raízes do Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997. p. 9-21.
- OS CARAJÁS. Directed by Thomaz Reis. 1932.
- DURKHEIM, Émile. *L'éducation morale*. Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934.
- ELIAS, Norbert. *O processo civilizador: volume 1: uma história dos costumes*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1994.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. *L'ordre du discours*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.
- LÉVI-STRAUSS, Claude. *Tristes trópicos*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2004.
- MENEZES, Paulo. Representificação: as relações (im)possíveis entre cinema documental e conhecimento. *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, São Paulo: Anpocs; Edusc, v. 18, n. 51, p. 87-97, fev. 2003.
- MENEZES, Paulo. O cinema documental como *representificação*: verdades e mentiras nas relações (im)possíveis entre representação, documentário, filme etnográfico, filme sociológico e conhecimento. In: NOVAES, Sylvia et al. (Org.). *Escrituras da imagem*. São Paulo: Fapesp; Edusp, 2004. p. 21-48.
- MENEZES, Paulo. O nascimento do cinema documental e o processo não civilizador. In: MARTINS, José de Souza; NOVAES, Sylvia Caiuby; ECKERT, Cornelia, *O imaginário e o poético nas ciências sociais*. Bauru: Edusc, 2005. p. 27-78.
- MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice. O cinema e a nova psicologia. In: XAVIER, Ismail (Org.). *A experiência do cinema*. Rio de Janeiro: Graal, 1983. p. 103-117.
- NICHOLS, Bill. *Representing reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.



AO REDOR do Brasil: aspectos do interior e das fronteiras. Directed by Thomaz Reis.

Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1992. 1 VHS (71 min), b&w. Original film, 1932.

RONURO, selvas do Xingu. Direção de Thomaz Reis. 1924. 35 mm, p&b.

STAROBINSKI, Jean. *As máscaras da civilização: ensaios*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2001.

TACCA, Fernando de. *A imagética da Comissão Rondon*. Porto Alegre: Papyrus, 2001.

TEIXEIRA, Ana Lúcia. Modernismo brasileiro e as marcas portuguesas de uma modernidade periférica. 2007. Texto apresentado no XIII Congresso Brasileiro de Sociologia, Recife, maio de 2007. In:

<[http://www.sbsociologia.com.br/congresso\\_v02/hot\\_papers.asp#25-1](http://www.sbsociologia.com.br/congresso_v02/hot_papers.asp#25-1)>. Last access, October 15, 2007.

Recebido em 05/11/2007

Aprovado em 30/03/2008

Translated by Letícia Maria Costa da Nóbrega Cesarino

Translated from **Horizontes Antropológicos**, Porto Alegre, v.14, n.29, p. 231-256, Jan./June 2008.