

CONFRONTING DEVASTATION: THE GUARDIAN CINEMA OF THE GUAJAJARA PEOPLE

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The birds broke a bowl full of chants and gave it to him.
Thus did he meet the chants.
Then those birds flew away, leaving all wisdom with him.
—Tachico Guajajara, *The History of Chants*

A brutal sequence of images opens *Zawxiperkwer Ka'a – Guardiões da floresta (Guardians of the Forest, 2019)*, a documentary by Jocy Guajajara and Milson Guajajara.¹ After showing the sign marking the border of Indigenous lands, a zoom out exposes a long line of pieces of meat hanging on the fence that surrounds the territory. The camera is unstable. A long shot follows the red line of exposed, suspended meats, a kind of “installation” that, due to its dimensions, may not fit well in contemporary art exhibitions. As soon revealed, the oxen killed and butchered were a part of the illegal livestock found in the Indigenous Land of Caru, in Maranhão, and apprehended by a group called the Guardians of the Forest during their oversight patrol. Filmed on the border between the demarcated land and its surroundings, these sequences are addressed to a presumed audience of white people: the image of what is ceaselessly produced and reproduced by “them.”

In wide shots of the land, this time near the pasture, we see a large group of young Guajajara, Awá-Guajá, and Ka'apor—Tupi-Guarani peoples—assembled to resist the constant and increasing invasion of their lands. These are the Guardians of the Forest, an Indigenous autonomous organization that was established in 2011 to take on the risky task of inspecting and monitoring demarcated lands to protect them from predatory activities by loggers and land grabbers (*grileiros*) in the absence of state enforcement. The Indigenous lands in the region suffer from intense deforestation and the construction of small roads used to steal timber—a situation dramatically aggravated by a government that today, in an explicit and deliberate

way, attacks the constitutional rights of Indigenous peoples, encouraging land grabs. In November 2019, Guardian Paulo Paulino Guajajara was murdered in an ambush—a crime that has still not been investigated.²

Through this camera in the hands of Jocy and Milson Guajajara, the film travels inside the conflicts, documenting the actions of the Guardians of the Forest, especially the moments when they meet with groups engaged in illegal activity. Filmed in a direct cinema style, *Guardians of the Forest* places the viewer inside a risky scene on the threshold of a violent outbreak. Ruben Caixeta de Queiroz has described the film as an observational documentary, thus distinguishing it from other works by the well-known Vídeo nas Aldeias (Video in the Villages) directors, which generally use voice-over to “weave the threads” of Indigenous protagonists fighting against the colonization and expropriation of their lands. In a way, Caixeta de Queiroz has written, “the camera acts as a weapon, or a surveillance camera that is not continually connected,” varying between filming from a distance or up close, but always from the point of view of Indigenous people.³

The Guardians traverse the territory to dismantle illegal fences and bridges, to interrupt the work of loggers and cattle ranchers, seizing huge logs and cattle that have been irregularly dispersed in the protected areas. As wielded by Indigenous people, the camera demonstrates knowledge of the territory and a sense of assuming its own guardian task by joining the group's work, sometimes anticipating it or slightly out of step with it. The camera follows the action, matching its pace, sensitive to moments of apprehension and risk, of hesitation, of advance and retreat; it shares the speedboat (*voadeira*) for travels on the river, pays attention to the footsteps of oxen along the waterlogged trail, listens to the noise of a chain saw far away, hurries with the Guardians to catch illegal activity.

The film is situated in the passage between the pressure of the off-screen space of hidden illegal enterprises that insist on entering the Indigenous lands and their exposure on-screen, provoked by the camera, in alliance with the



The Guardians film the evidence of illegal logging inside Indigenous lands.

Guardians. The camera can make visible the powers that act through dodging and concealment and that have long depended on this invisibility to remain operating. By showing frontally what is habitually heard at a distance and making visible what usually hides in off-screen space, *Guardians* shows the way that private property historically originates in the illegality of land grabs. In its movement from off-screen to on-screen, the images thus place the viewer on the originary threshold of private property, one that is incessantly being updated. The extent of the ongoing destruction by corporations whose owners and managers operate at a distance is exposed in tense encounters with illegal workers, who are a threat yet are also victims of the same exploitation.

Faced with the menace of having his oxen apprehended, one of the young invaders returns with his father, who threatens, “That’s all we want: you release the boy, release his oxen . . . around, there are more than twenty men, down there are more.” Later, in an assembly between the Guardians, local leaders, and cattle ranchers, the exasperated speech of the Indigenous people in response to the farmer exposes his dissimulation. For a moment, as if to underline the impudence of the interlocutor, the camera stops on his face and that of a companion, sustaining the shot. In such passages, the camera does not merely follow

the speakers but moves slightly away to capture other sensitive aspects of the scene: the gestures, looks, and facial expressions, along with brief moments of silence.

In many ways, the camera is positioned midway between reporting and intervening—an instrument of evidence and testimony that is at the same time a form of partial protection for the Indigenous people it accompanies and witnesses. Often, the interlopers caught by the Guardians look at the camera, emphatically or discreetly, showing their awareness of its presence. Like binoculars, the camera also provides strategic visibility to the surroundings. By following their forays, it assumes the Guardians’ point of view. From a distance, it observes the territory and exposes, in wide shots, the environmental devastation, the planting of pasture over deforested landscape—in other words, the ongoing catastrophe. Like the meats suspended as a barrier at the limits of the Indigenous land, these images deliver to the spectator the exposed flesh of a devastated forest, the open wound of a deforestation that not only does not stop, but, on the contrary, accelerates. These are images that return to non-Indigenous spectators visible evidence of what is produced in their name, in a form of distant complicity.

The film thus represents an “internal look” that is not only the Guardians’ point of view, but also an act of agency



The Guardians patrol the devastated landscape.

(or interagency), as rendered by the position of the one who films as much as by the forces that pass through and destabilize that position.⁴ Composed of brief assemblies, routes, and flagrant violations and incursions into the territory, the editing montage maintains the duration of the shots, allowing the spectator to apprehend, in due course, the lines and developments of each aggression. In this sense, it requires its audience to inhabit dissent, to live its moments of suspense and impasse. Each act of engagement and agency begins before the scene does, crosses it, produces the instability of the scene, and extends beyond it. More broadly, then, each scene is a fragment of a history that constitutes it and that it precariously and fragmentarily represents.

The Guardians of the Forest concludes without an ending, suggesting how the situation itself is endless. There is no rest for the individuals who constitute themselves as Guardians of the Forest: after participating in so many confrontations with the invaders and crossing lands exhausted by predatory activities, there they still are, binoculars and camera at hand, identifying the cowboys: one, two, and then several. Armed, they return the look, followed by the sound of shots; in a rush, the frame is destabilized and a new conflict begins. If such an ending offers no closure, it does reveal the endlessness of the guardian

work that continues beyond the film's images. Produced within an ongoing struggle, the film is similarly open and unfinished, but nevertheless demands to be viewed as a complete work designed for its particular circumstances.

In its own way, perhaps cinema does not want to be either ahead of or at a distance from the struggle: at times, by being slightly out of step, it is able to capture the sensitive political complexity of the encounters. Being up to the cause that it assumes, the film must invent a form—one that was not given beforehand, but that emerges from the very task in which it participates. It is up to the cinema to “get out of itself” and enter into a task that is not primarily cinematic. Delivering cinema to an experience that surpasses it—by serving a cause and, in so doing, engendering a form that will be up to the task—is, after all, the work of invention that such a film ought to deliver.

Eyes Learn from Listening

In the face of this endless struggle, it is hard not to wonder where the young Guardians draw their strength. How do they keep alive their obstinate task of facing the forces distributed throughout their territory, powers visible only through the destruction they produce?

Perhaps part of the answer lies in another film that emerged from the same training ground of Video in the Villages. In *Guardians of the Forest*, the camera traces the Guardians' paths through the devastated forest. Not so in *Ma'e Mimi'u Haw – A história dos cantos (The History of Chants*, Jamilson Guajajara, Pollyana Guajajara, Jacilda Guajajara, and Lemilda Guajajara, 2019), which follows Tachico Guajajara—professor, researcher, and singer—on a walk (only at first glance alone) through the forest. Here, there is a kind of inversion of off-screen space. Where *Guardians* makes the devastation visible on-screen, *The History of Chants* is dedicated to the opposite: the preserved forest. When accompanying Tachico on his walk, in long, steady shots, the camera films the forest in a kind of enchanted realism, prolonging the visible and seeming to make the lens permeable—exposed to a wide, invisible world.

Where *Guardians of the Forest* exposes, on the scene, illegal subjects and actions that have been hidden off-screen, *The History of Chants* opens a trail of the visible into the forest—to the previously invisible surround of an off-screen space constituted by a multiplicity of nonhuman agencies. In *Guardians*, the scene attracts to its interior a growing concentration of forces on the verge of a violent outbreak. *The History of Chants* moves instead by centrifugal force: the scene of the character's walk opens up to a wide, sensitive field almost like the modulations of a chant, the paths of a dream, the breath of a shaman.

Concise and sophisticated in its formal economy, the film offers entry into a delicate and vibrant sonorous world: the twittering of birds, each with its own timbre, pulse, and uniqueness—some close, some distant; some stronger, others repeating discreetly. Multiple forms of life that become felt even if not visible in the image.⁵ Pulsating on the soundtrack, the multiplicity of songs becomes palpable (as if it were possible actually to see and touch each timbre). As the sound becomes more nuanced, discontinuous in its differences, so does the audience's sensitivity become all the more acute. In dialogue with the film's mythical narrative, its route suggests a hunter's journey through the forest as an encounter with the owners of the songs.

Tachico Guajajara walks along the trail with his hat, rifle, machete, and backpack. At a certain point, he stops and sings the song of the *tepetepen*, a bird that owns the chants of the forest. Farther on, in a hut, he rests the rifle on a log and narrates the encounter between a hunter and the owners of the chants—a history, therefore, of the hunter's own transformation into a shaman.

The History of Chants is a film of learning, a study in immanence that allows the viewer-listener to enter the



Tachico Guajajara drinks water from a leaf, in *The History of Chants*.

forest through the eyes of the hunter-singer-shaman. Little by little, through its long, uninterrupted visual and sonorous shots, the film changes its audience's gaze (and ears) from the inside out. It becomes capable of producing nuance and difference where previously only a homogeneous, uninhabited space could be discerned. A spider barely stands out from the bottom of dry leaves; in the freedom of not being seen, monkeys jump from one tree branch to another, a wasp house prolongs the trunk of the tree, an elongated leaf becomes the bowl where water is drunk. In the pedagogy of the film, the eyes learn from listening.

In its alliance with the birds that own the songs, *The History of Chants* indirectly provides a basis for the critique of private property by affirming the land not as a resource for economic exploitation but as a shelter for broad socio-cosmological relations (among humans, but also with non-humans). The illegal actions of loggers and farmers work to expand the borders of private property, invading the islands of megadiversity maintained by the Indigenous people.⁶ This walk with Tachico through the forest, permeated with chants, suggests a totally different relationship to the land.

If the chants have owners, they are less proprietors than guardians who take care of what they "own" and of the reciprocal relations between them. There is, of course, a long ethnological discussion on that very topic.⁷ Carlos Fausto shows how the owner/guardian category is historically stable in all Amazonian languages, designating "a position that involves control and/or protection, engendering and/or possession, that applies to relationships between people (human or nonhuman) and between people and things (tangible or intangible)."⁸ Among several Amerindian peoples, the term for "owner" has a variable meaning: *jara*, among the Awá-Guajá, means "creator" (one who makes life possible) and "the one who walks together" and "caregiver" and "double," while, among the

Yudjá, *iwa* is what brings [life] into existence, that which cares and protects, and, not least, that which also takes life. Fundamentally, this term refers to the very condition of social life, whether in its existential condition or in its most mundane events.⁹

Private property depends upon the conception of a nature without owners that can then be inhabited and made available for exploitation, claimed by individuals and private groups. Amerindian cosmologies start from the opposite principle: that everything there has its owner (trees, animals, rivers, chants, rituals) and that nature (taken from the start as a culture) is therefore constituted by an infinity of subjectivities, owners, and domains, which requires constant and careful diplomacy. In this case, being an owner involves less the possession of a property than the production of collectives (of things, animals, beings, people, and environments) that demand responsibility, care, protection, exchange, reciprocity, and also conflict.

José Antonio Kelly and Marcos de Almeida Matos have introduced the concept of a “politics of regard” in which “paying attention” assumes centrality: what is shown, what is looked at, what one is attentive to, “whom one is attentive to.”¹⁰ It is not incidental, then, that cinema—and the relations it engenders between on- and off-screen spaces, between the visible and the invisible—must become “indigenized” to participate in this complex politics. Tachico’s journey in *The History of Chants* offers a pedagogy of the sensitive and suggests, in its very immanence, an alliance with a myriad of “others,” each an owner, each a master of a knowledge, each a guardian of a “domain.”

The chants, like the dreams (as ethnological studies teach us), are a mode of transit in a land whose limits are permeable, where entering presents risks and requires caution, respect, and careful negotiation. Each shot of the film appears to be a frame of a cosmic parliament: porous, permeated by almost imperceptible passages between the visible and the invisible, indicating how, from one to the other, there is physical contiguity but “ontological” discontinuity, dealing with the proximity between disparate worlds.¹¹

Inheriting and elaborating upon a modern, Western scopopic tradition, cinema composes here a logistics of the visible and the invisible in which filmmaking is less a matter of advancing a domain—whether enlightened knowledge or privatization enterprise—than participating in sensitive diplomacy or even warfare. As Vinciane Despret has noted, referring to the interspecies relationship between plants and wasps, it is an arrangement by which

certain beings enable other beings, where it is never clear which is an agent and which is a patient; the agency is always plurivocal, the autonomous being always multiheteronomous and subject to external controls.¹²

At the moment, with a genocidal project under way in Brazil, these two films suggest paths of political invention that confront current restrictive and exclusionary conceptions of humanity.¹³ As Ailton Krenak has written, “When we depersonalize the river, the mountain, when we take their senses out of them, [and insist] that this is an exclusive attribute of humans, we leave these places to become residues of industrial and extractive activities.”¹⁴ In their alternative conception of humanity, the owners of the chants, the people who live, as they say, “in Iwak, between earth and heaven,” will continue teaching those who walk in the land. Placing these two films—*Guardians of the Forest* and *The History of Chants*—in juxtaposition highlights the alliance between warriors and shamans, filmmakers and singers, in their task of keeping, in historic time, in the geopolitics of the present, a sociocosmological space that can empower the forestland, the ways of life, and the different imaginaries that inhabit it.

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Notes

1. The two films discussed here—*Guardians of the Forest* and *The History of Chants*—were made in workshops for audiovisual training that were organized by Vídeo nas Aldeias (Video in the Villages). The filming workshop was coordinated by Wallace Nogueira, Kamikiã Kisêdje, and Luisa Lanna; the editing workshop was coordinated by Luisa Lanna and Joelton Ivson. Since 1986, Vídeo in the Villages has been dedicated to the audiovisual training of Indigenous

- filmmakers and collectives, creating an important collection of some eight thousand hours of images produced in collaboration with more than forty Amerindian communities in Brazil. This work has been widely distributed, screened, and studied in US contexts as well. For more information, see <http://videonasaldeias.org.br/loja/> and <http://vdb.org/artists/video-villages>.
2. In the 2000s, forty-eight Guajajara people were murdered, forty-seven of them in Maranhão and one in Pará, according to data from the Conselho Indigenista Missionário (Missionary Indigenist Council) of the Observatório da Violência contra os Povos Indígenas no Brasil (Observatory of Violence against Indigenous Peoples in Brazil); see <https://cimi.org.br/observatorio-da-violencia/caci/>. See also Renato Santana and Tiago Motto, “Povo Guajajara resiste às invasões territoriais e registra 48 assassinatos em menos de 20 anos,” Conselho Indigenista Missionário, March 2, 2020, <https://cimi.org.br/2020/03/povo-guajajara-resiste-as-invasoes-territoriais-e-registra-48-assassinatos-em-menos-de-20-anos/>.
 3. Ruben Caixeta de Queiróz, “Guardiões da Floresta: Câmeras em ação!” in *Catálogo do forumdoc.bh.2019: 23° Festival do Filme Documentário e Etnográfico* (Belo Horizonte: Filmes de Quintal, 2019), 203. As Renata Otto notes in reference to another relevant, Awá-Guajá documentary, *Virou Brasil* (Pakea, Hajkaramyky, Arakurania, Petua, Arawtyta’ia, Sabia, and Paranya, 2019), these are films in which both the framing and the subject that is framed are defined in terms of the Indigenous world. See Renata Otto, “Virou Brasil,” in *Catálogo do forumdoc.bh.2019: 23° Festival do Filme Documentário e Etnográfico* (Belo Horizonte: Filmes de Quintal, 2019), 208.
 4. Vinciane Despret, “From Secret Agents to Interagency,” *History and Theory* 52, no. 4 (December 2013): 38.
 5. Cristiane Lima, “O canto da boca da mata: Notas sobre *Ma’e Mimu Haw: A história dos cantos*,” in *Catálogo do forumdoc.bh.2019 – 23° Festival do Filme Documentário e Etnográfico* (Belo Horizonte: Filmes de Quintal, 2019), 167.
 6. Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, “Povos da megadiversidade: O que mudou na política indigenista no último meio século,” *Piauí*, no. 148 (January 2019), <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/povos-da-megadiversidade/>.
 7. I am grateful to Julia Bernstein with whom I engaged in this ethnological discussion when supervising her research project, “O cine-maniva do Rio Negro (2019),” a dissertation developed in the Graduate Program in Communications at the Federal University of Minas Gerais.
 8. Carlos Fausto, “Donos demais: Maestria e domínio na Amazônia,” *Mana: Estudos de Antropologia Social* 14, no. 2 (2008): 329–66.
 9. Uirá Garcia, “Sobre o poder da criação: Parentesco e outras relações Awá-Guajá,” *Mana: Estudos de Antropologia Social* 21, no. 1 (2015): 91–122; Tânia Stolze Lima, *Um peixe olhou para mim: O povo Yudjá e a perspectiva* (São Paulo: Unesp, ISA; Rio de Janeiro: NuTI, 2005), 95.
 10. José Antonio Kelly and Marcos de Almeida Matos, “Política da consideração: Ação e influência nas terras baixas da América do Sul,” *Mana: Estudos de Antropologia Social* 25, no. 2 (2019): 391–426. Following Kelly and Matos, Paulo Maia proposes the idea of a “cosmopolitics of the look.” Thanks to Paulo Maia for this reference.
 11. Bernard Belisário and I have dedicated our research to the characterization of off-screen space in Indigenous films. See André Brasil, “Tikmū’ün’s Caterpillar-Cinema: Off-Screen Space and Cosmopolitics in Amerindian Film,” in *Space and Subjectivity in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema*, ed. Antônio Márcio da Silva and Mariana Cunha (Nova Iorque and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 23–40; and André Brasil and Bernard Belisário, “Desmanchar o cinema: Variações do fora-de-campo em filmes indígenas,” *Sociologia e Antropologia* 6, no. 3 (2016): 601–34; for an English-language abstract of the previous source, see <https://doi.org/10.1590/2238-38752016v633>.
 12. Kelly and Matos, “Políticas da consideração,” 419.
 13. As I finalized this text in May 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Brazilian Supreme Court authorized the public disclosure of the official record of a ministerial meeting of President Jair Bolsonaro’s government. Among other atrocities, the minister of education, Abraham Weintraub, can be heard blustering that he hates the expression “Indigenous peoples,” and the minister of the environment, Ricardo Salles, defends “hastily passing the cattle” [to rush the passage of a large number of laws] to deregulate environmental protections while media attention is on the pandemic.
 14. Ailton Krenak, *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019), 49.