

Moi, un Indien

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First contacts

When, at the age of sixteen, I landed for the first time in a Xikrin village, in the south of the State of Pará, I discovered that the world was much more varied and fascinating than I had suspected until that moment. From the minute I saw the dark silhouettes painted with genipap beside the landing strip and then caught the smell of perfumed resin and *urucum*, I gained a new perception of humanity. Photography became a need to share this new world that I was discovering.

At the age of twenty I was already living in the Xikrin village. At this time, the guerrilla warfare of Araguaia had begun in the region. In the village, my involvement with the Indians became total. I simply wanted to be Indian, but the Indians wanted a friend who could give them the keys to understanding what went on around them, to help them defend themselves from the diseases that maltreated the village. The greater my involvement, the less time was left for photography. I learnt then that art and activism rarely go together. The groups with whom I spent most time and worked with were the ones that I photographed least.

Indigenous advocacy

From living freely in the village as I had been, I decided to join Funai, in the illusion of being able to help more, but I soon saw how the Brazilian government's authoritarian paternalism, the famous tutelage of the Indian, was extremely dangerous for the Indians, in its capacity to disarm them politically. It was not going to be the State that would change the situation of Indians, but they themselves who must take their destiny in their own hands. From the State Indian Service migrated to the alternative form of working with indigenous groups, or to subversion, as it was known in these times of dictatorship.

We founded, with several other colleagues from the faculty, the Centre for Indigenous Advocacy that was innovator in its challenging the abusive power of the State tutelage over the Indian. We fought for basic rights, such as the possibility of the Indians to obtain independent lawyers in disputes with the State, rights that years later were to be incorporated into the Constitution of 88. We took part in the general movement of Brazilian civil society in search of alternatives.

I also worked for ten years in establishing an image bank for the publications in CEDI's series¹ "Indigenous Peoples in Brazil". I was fascinated by the work of collecting these history fragments of peoples that were suffering such violent and swift transformation processes and by the possibility of passing on to the new generations these records of their history. At that time, the filmmaker Andréa Tonacci had sought our organization, with the proposal "Inter Peoples" an

¹ Ecumenical Information Center / Centro Ecumênico de documentação e Informação

intertribal communication project using video. At that time video was still a novelty. The idea did not take off. When the VHS camcorder appeared, I decided to take it up again, and thus the Video in the Villages project began within the Center for Indigenous Advocacy.

It was born in the midst of a relationship developed over years, a lifelong relationship centered around a cooperation between Indians and non-Indians to try and address vital problems such as land demarcation or freeing the reserves from intruders, finding means of subsistence and integration in the national economy, or forms of negotiating with the government to obtain access to health and education. The proposal was to offer them instruments that could permit access to their images, to the design and recreation of their own image. The procedure to be adopted, in which all the images produced were to be immediately exhibited in public, would permit the video camera to become an object that they would appropriate. The presence of the camera created or instigated the fact that it was recording. And this explains why, people were confident with the camera, but they also interacted with it, very often addressing it explicitly and directly. The camera was not a transparent object; it was one of the actors on stage.

My learning process

1987. I started making video films at the age of 36, and conceived this project within the perspective of intervention and activism that has orientated my life. I would never have imagined at that time that we would train indigenous filmmakers. My learning of film language had been with this background of offering a chance to record things of importance and to provide access to the images of other groups for the leaders I admired for their vision of the future, their discourse of resistance. The most traditional leaderships were, from the outset, the most enthusiastic about this technological novelty and I truly placed my camera at the disposal of their speeches.

Straight away in the first experience, held among the Nambiquara, we received a tremendous amount of receptivity from the Indians: the routine shooting/showing, generated an immediate feedback. The Indians rapidly took control of the direction of the process and the only thing that I had to do was to allow myself to be lead by them, who began to 'produce themselves' as they liked to see and to be seen on the screen. The result was the video "The girl's celebration". It was thus that work as such with the Indians, that began in an experimental manner and was carried out with technical resources that were totally amateur, gradually acquired the guarantee of its continuity through its self-documentation, achieved with more and more professional resources and for a growing public.

The short film entitled "Video in the villages" (the third in the series), for example, was edited in haste in late 1989, on the eve of my first trip to the United States in search of funding for the project. But once ready, it ended up outgrowing its immediate purpose and became a genuine portfolio for the project, gaining large publicity in circles interested in alternative communication projects.

The North American Foundations (Guggenheim, MacArthur, Rockefeller, Ford) were the first to support the project. As of 1995 the International Cooperation of Norway began to be interested in funding the work, which gave us greater

stability, enabling us to begin to design a long-term strategy. Virginia Valadão, anthropologist and coordinator of the Center for Indigenous Advocacy, was the main articulator of the project's survival. Furthermore, she left us this beautiful film "The banquet of the spirits" that required four years of work.

I learnt by doing: intuitively. In ten years of partnership with the editor Tutu Nunes, I also learnt a lot. He gave a modern wrapping to my footage, editing the majority of the videos of my authorship and contributing in large part to their success.

From trainee to filmmaker: broadening distribution

With the support of the US foundations, I decided to produce a more consistent description of the project and, in 1990, I started working with the Waiãpi Indians. In the partnership that I established with the anthropologist Dominique Gallois, who knew the Waiãpi language well, arose the possibility of bringing to the videos the wealth of discussions and commentaries provoked by the screenings. Dominique established a philosophical dialogue with her main informant Waiwai, a genuine Waiãpi intellectual, and this dialogue was transposed into the film. This resulted in the video entitled "The spirit of TV" (the fourth of the series), that brought to the screen the Indians' enthusiasm with the new discovery and the full range of reflections that the videos brought to the surface.

Edited in a much more modern style, abolishing voice over and letting the Indians express themselves spontaneously in their own language, the video shows how the projections induce discussions that involve, amongst other themes, a redefinition of their own identity in relation to others. At the same time, we see the growth of a pan-indigenous awareness on the basis of the similarity of the historical processes that each group has been through since contact, the problems that all share at present. It also enlightens the whole political issue of the manipulation of the image: who is going to see us and how should they see us, etc.

This video opened more opportunities for distribution, emerging from the "ghetto" of indigenous and ethnographic festivals, from the departments of anthropology and communication. Through word of mouth, dissemination in the universities, the multiplying effect of the more traditional festivals, special showings and retrospectives, the spectrum of dissemination of the videos was gradually broadened. Work with the Indians spread to new groups and, at the same time, gained new forms. Each group identified, through the videos, those with which they felt most affinity, through linguistic and cultural proximity.

We then began to produce a number of encounters between them, which resulted in the videos "Meeting ancestors" and "We gather as a family", that, like "The spirit of TV", are put together exclusively through the Indians' testimonies. "Meeting ancestors" was a big success, thanks to its narrative structure, but above all, through the snapshots that it manages to bring to the screen, giving the public an insight of a relationship between Indians. This generated a renewed interest from international festivals and public television networks from several countries in showing the trilogy, as this group of films became known.

Public feedback

On making the videos available for a public that I didn't know when I made them, I clearly perceived how the collection of images contained in these documentaries provoked a range of ethic and moral reactions, concepts and ideas that went beyond the "objective content", the explicit message of the films.

While the public seemed to expect the Indians to behave like victims, thus being able to express compassion and solidarity for them, we discovered that, on the contrary, the Indians think through their representation strategy, appearing strong, even aggressive, in relation to the colonizers or invaders. The majority of TV documentaries or reports produced in Brazil about Indians tend, on the one hand, to mystify the "good savage" and, on the other, to adopt this fatalistic tone: they are losing their lands, their culture, their language, etc...

I always thought it vital to show precisely the opposite: first, the Indians do not spend their lives moaning and groaning, quite the opposite; merriment, fun and games are elements of their living together - a characteristic that has been labeled "the ingenuity, innocence of the savage". Secondly, they are not passive victims in this process, but have a full awareness of the changes they are undergoing. There is a discussion and internal dynamics underway among the generations, incorporating some external things, rejecting others, preserving the memory of traditions and abandoning others.

When we attempt to undo the myth of the "good savage" and the rhetoric of the victim, showing things from a different perspective, we inevitably touch upon very sensitive issues such as alcoholism, sexuality, violence... around which the negative stereotypes in relation to the Indians are crystallized. The Indians themselves in the video "The spirit of TV" discuss the question of appearing drunk, for example. One Canadian distributor refused the video saying that I had disrespected the Indians in including the scene and that the Canadian public would condemn the film as politically incorrect. I disagree entirely. In the first video made by the Waiãpi themselves for a non-Indian public, they appear completely drunk from start to finish. Simply because the video is about festivals; and as the author himself explains, for the Waiãpi, to be drunk in a celebration is a socially and culturally valued attitude. What seemed interesting to me was exactly that: to show how there is a conscious discussion going on in relation to self-representation.

Someone was shocked by the violence and "needless killing" of the gold prospectors contained in the short section of drama interpreted by the Enauê Nauê in the video "Video cannibalism". I find it strange that we have incorporated, as the most natural thing in the world, watching hundreds of films where Indians are killed right left and centre and find shocking the killing of two gold prospectors invading an indigenous reserve. The public does not seem to be aware of the intensity and violence of the conflicts in the Amazon of today. Shock at times can be a good way of "waking up" to reality.

For the great majority of people, the Indians are a fiction in which they project ideals of wisdom and balance, harmony with nature, collective living, etc. and these people would like this dream to remain untouched, the Indians preserved in a kind of human zoo or, at least, that the changes in these societies be retarded as much as possible. Unfortunately this ideology runs through our

entire society and can have serious and real implications in a number of circumstances. All the official indigenous policies in Brazil reinforce this kind of conception and hence the government is always trying to distinguish the “authentic”, “pure”, Indians from the “civilized” Indians. And, through this distinction, to exclude the so-called “acculturated” Indians from legislation that protects the Indian to encompass them in basic citizenship. But who are the authentic ones? Those still naked; if having an ID card is no longer being Indian, if living in the city is no longer being Indian!

The indigenous communities are submitted to brutal transformation processes and it is not only a pressure for changes coming from outside, but with each succeeding generation, there is an internal movement renewed for changes. I believe that the real dilemma is in knowing in which direction this change can happen. Are the Indians going to turn into beggars or are they going to integrate economically in some way? Are they going to be integrated one by one, as the capitalist model desires, or are they going to integrate as a group, maintaining their internal organization? Are they to exploit their natural resources according to the predatory model that is everywhere around them, or are they to try out environmentally sustainable solutions? These are the challenges posed.

In the specific case of the video, some villages already had access to the big television networks when the video project arrived. But the majority did not. Today almost all do. The problem is not to incorporate new objects, new customs but how to assimilate them. If a new technology such as video can be incorporated and be used to raise self-esteem, what is the problem? This makes young indigenous people proud of themselves: they also know how to use the white-man’s tool to film their things, inverting the process of invasion by the television.

Indian Program²

The international recognition achieved by some of the videos took us to many festivals, and in them we discovered that the development of the indigenous media was a movement that was emerging in various parts of the planet, from an experience such as ours and others in Latin America to those of indigenous filmmakers from the first world, trained in film schools.

With the new legislation of public regional TVs, we were invited by the Federal University of Mato Grosso to make a programme “about” Indians. Until then, such a possibility had not occurred to us, but we immediately proposed to make a programme “with” the Indians. Thus, between 1995 and 1996, we produced the *Indian Program*.

Every time we screen this programme in the villages, the audience’s eyes shine with satisfaction. As the indigenous teacher Leonardo Tukano, from the Rio Negro, told me: “Of all the films about Indians that we show our pupils, it was the *Indian Program* that generated the most interest. My pupils don’t even want to hear about tradition, for them this is the incarnation of what is old-fashioned and *out*.”

² The original term in Portuguese, *Programa de Índio* also has the connotation of ‘wasting time’ (sic).

Neither do the pupils' parents want their children to *walk backwards*". But Indian TV presenters, reporters, cameramen, struck a sudden interest among them: so it was possible to be "modern", "civilized", and to be "Indian" at the same time!

Looking around us at the world, we perceive how feasible and necessary having a program made by Indians on Brazilian TV is. The Sami in Norway, the Inuit and the Indians in Canada, the Aborigines of Australia, and the Maori of New Zealand, all have their television channels. The development of an indigenous media is a world process, an historical movement. To give visibility to the ethnic minorities through the mass media has a strategic importance for these peoples, for them to be recognized and respected.

A new perspective

The evaluation that the Indians themselves made of the experience of the *Indian Program* and the general movement that I had been accompanying in other countries, such as Bolivia and Mexico, which already invested in training workshops, posed a new challenge to us. In 1997 we brought together in the Xingu over thirty Indians from various parts of Brazil, with whom we already worked and that knew each other through the network of video libraries that we installed in their villages. The meeting permitted a direct interchange between them, but we still needed a teaching method.

We invited the filmmaker Mari Corrêa, who already had a long experience in the cinema training process, to be in charge of the workshops coordination. The workshops lead to immediate and surprising results. Mari gave a radical and definitive turn to the project with a new language proposal and the timing of her editing in tune with the Indian timing . In 2000, the creation of the NGO "Video in the Villages" expresses the new work perspective: becoming a cinema school for Indians and amplifying its network of alliance and partnership with others NGO and Indian organizations.

For me, the move from filmmaker to teacher was extremely stimulating. Today we have the privilege of sharing the intimacy of the scenes that they film and show us and we can observe how each group responds in a particular way to the exercises proposed. In the process of translating the testimonies that they collect in their languages a new understanding of their respective cultures is revealed to us. I never learnt so much about cinema and about the people with whom we work. It is gratifying to see that seeds that we sowed have germinated and begun to produce their own fruit. It is gratifying to see that the project has finally found its vocation.

A cultural policy for the Indians

Video in the Villages has, to date, been funded exclusively by foreign agencies. It is symptomatic and consistent with the reality in which we carry out a project such as this, that we have never received any support from the Brazilian government.

It is necessary that the State and the private sector believe in the creative potential of indigenous peoples, invest in the dissemination of these cultures and stimulate intercultural dialogue. To this end, we must invest in the training of new talents, in the production of new programmes. The Indians, armed with these new

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languages and technology produce pieces of work that are absolutely original in the fields of art, literature and cinema. It is vitally important to make full use of and experience the wealth of indigenous culture in this country and stop seeing it as a thing of the past.

Since the time in which we made the *Indian Program*, we have had this perspective in mind, but for this to happen it is necessary for the indigenous movement to articulate this issue and demand that the government establish a policy and provide resources for this.

Looking retrospectively at the thirty odd years that have passed, we observe with satisfaction a certain evolution in the relation of the State with the Indians. FUNAI's centralizing model, an inheritance from the military dictatorship, has nurtured a certain indigenous apartheid, in which the entire country has washed its hands. "Indian? That is a problem for FUNAI!" In the 80's and 90's, when indigenous associations began to emerge, they encountered an enormous resistance from the public powers. The registry offices said: "An indigenous association can only be registered with an authorization from Funai".

The indigenous movement did its networking, above all locally and regionally. New professional categories were trained, specially those of indigenous teachers and health agents, and now an entire generation begins to have access to university. Brazil as a whole became democratic. In 1988, the Brazilian Constitution consecrated some important victories, although a large part of the country has not digested them. Little by little, we have left the centralizing model of the only organ with the monopoly over indigenous affairs, for a more plural model, where various new possibilities for interlocution are offered to the Indians, depending on the specific theme that they want to deal with: education, health, and environment.

The Ministry of Education took over the question of indigenous education and the Health Ministry did the same, causing the indigenous organizations to become interlocutors of public policies. The Ministry for the Environment created a special line of credit for indigenous populations to be able to propose and fund their programmes for environmental protection.

What is needed is for the Ministry of Culture to assume its part and establish with the Indians a dialogue to define cultural policy. This Ministry still behaves today like the registry offices of ten years ago: "an Indigenous cultural project, can only happen with Funai's authorization". The great patrimony of the Indians is cultural, live culture, not just for them but also for millions of Brazilians who have no idea what goes on in this country.

The meaning of this exhibition and the opening of a new cycle

The Idea of this showing is to present to the public these new authors that are giving an original and refreshing contribution, a real expression of Brazil's cultural diversity. We concluded the cycle of Video in the Villages and opened a new one, Video from the Villages. The Idea of an interchange of information among the villages continues in the project, but now the Indians have the chance to produce and watch their own works.

Our attitude is *activist* because we continue to place the project at the service of the indigenous movement. Our work is to convince the leaders

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of this movement that art is a powerful tool for transformation, it reflects their identity and translates an aesthetic emotion that can be shared by people of other cultures. In this sense, it is more efficient than the pamphlet video, the report video or the video of meetings. Cinema may be a powerful instrument for raising awareness, if it is not used in a utilitarian way and with a bureaucratic language.

We need much more intercultural dialogue, for the Indian to stop being a cuckoo in the nest, a stranger in his/her own land. The absence of the indigenous theme in the Brazilian educational system and the reproduction of the eternal clichés and prejudices in the media, perpetuate this distance, this ignorance.

The Indians can and want to take part in modernity, to be included in this country, enjoy full citizenship, if their identity and difference are respected. It is vital to support contemporary indigenous production and disseminate it in the educational system in an effective way. Being a tiny minority, access to the means of communication is strategic for them. The indigenous theme needs to be in our schools, in the media, but represented with their own eye, which makes all the difference.