

Filming Secrets¹

Filmando Segredos

Aurélio Michiles

Any vision of our life and our environment can, through documentary, reveal unsuspected secrets. In a nutshell: reality, bare reality in its intimate essence.

Michelangelo Antonioni (1937)

I shall not be the agent of silence, but I hope of the voice of freedom.

The Amazon Journal Roger Casement
(La Chorrera, Sunday, November 6, 1910)

I was born in Manaus and at home one could have a glimpse of the Amazonas Theater, probably the reason why I have always been drawn to reflect upon the Amazon's rubber boom. Who built it? How could that monumental architecture have been erected in the middle of the rainforest?

It can be argued that one of the most recurring themes in film, literature, and journalism is the Amazon. However, the Brazilian cinematography still had not had a film that brought to light questions on the “rubber boom” within the world's geopolitical trade.

Rubber is a resin extracted from only one plant (*Hevea brasiliensis*) found in the Amazon rainforest, which generated an extraordinary cycle of wealth to the region, placing it as a world economy protagonist between the end of the 19th and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

The industry back then developed a growing dependence on rubber — the commodity that made the world run faster. This wealth cycle of four decades was enough to establish numerous histories and stories that continue to impact the Amazon. These histories and stories are intertwined in the region's modern imaginary. Even if simply as an escape route, something intangible by the new generations.

The Amazonian mythic vision that startled the first colonizers and explorers was an invitation to reach the end of the rainbow and share the pot of gold. As an act that would take place among peers, in broad day light, why would anyone care about a natural predatory action in light of so much abundance and generosity?

During my childhood, in order to see this looting that had been done for over 4 centuries, one should only walk through the commercial streets, where offices and warehouses were located, on Teodoreto do Souto, Barés, Marechal Deodoro, Marquês de Santa Cruz, and Ladeira dos Remédios streets, or on Eduardo Ribeiro Avenue... Everywhere piles of *sernambi* (rubber) could be seen alongside piles of exotic animal leather: snakes, otters, alligators, jaguars, ocelots and other animals waiting to be embarked towards the North American or European consumer market.

The city stench with odors from these products, and have become not only part of my own olfactory memory, but also that of some generations of Amazonians.

Those who were born in the 1950s (such as myself) were the last ones to witness the physical presence of this cycle of wealth which was in its economic decadence. The lethargy to which the region had been subjected to was visible. There were certain dispirited characters wandering off in the streets, singled out by others as the heirs of a lost fortune.

Back then, rubber was referred to as if it was itself a life buoy that we had lost in a shipwreck. The city that once prospered suddenly saw its inhabitants leaving almost everything behind; at least their homes, abandoned palaces, became qualifiers: “old-houses”. It was not a ghost town per se, life kept on going in endless lassitude and in this atmosphere of “once having had”; statues, bridges, streets, avenues, public squares were like a film set that had been left behind after shootings.

In those abandoned palaces, enormous bold trees grew in the middle of dining rooms, breaking the marble floors, Venetian tiles, molded frescoes on the walls, recreating a pictorial image, with mosses of many green shades that could have been made by a modernist artist; or tree branches and vines creeping up on iron railings recreating an “art nouveau of nature”. It looked as if the jungle had reclaimed the space of which it had been expelled. To us, it was merely a refuge to start transgressing against the forbidden, challenging fear, amidst anthills, beetles, snakes, lizards, vegetation (*enviras, tajás*, nettles) and dried excrements, recent or petrified. Those “old houses” were our territory of discoveries and adventures.

Many of which were marked by tragic episodes that defied our playful visits. On one occasion, the homeowner had committed suicide upon realizing he had lost all his fortune after the Amazon rubber prices dropped in London stock market. In another one, a mysterious

fire transformed an entire family's wealth into ashes. Inside the houses, each family carried an inherited story from this cycle, be it through their grandparents and great-grandparents who had experienced it, be it through grandparents and great-grandparents who had escaped from the Northeastern droughts and sought new opportunities for wealth in the latex collection. Between these two ends of the spectrum was the indigenous heritage, of whom narratives were far from pleasant, and brought horror and prejudice to light...

The indigenous would insert themselves into these narratives as an outsider, who prevented the northeastern man from walking into the rainforest for the milk of the rubber tree. The indigenous man was an impediment, though he was also the one teaching survival skills. One could hear stories such as “my grandfather killed a lot of *indians* out there, he even had a necklace made of their ears”. They dehumanized the indigenous existence and their civilization. The indigenous peoples were “invisible”; therefore, any violence could have been practiced against them, even to the point of extinction. Luckily, the stories heard and told by the women who worked in our houses as domestic servants, many of whom came directly from an indigenous community, gave us access to other versions of the events in the rainforest. These women were the “*cabocla*”² Scheherazades”. They were part of my own story.

Nordestino, Arigó³

My maternal grandfather Joaquim Cândido de Oliveira came from Sobral, Ceará, in 1903. He was very young, not older than 18. He was avid for the opportunities promised by the rubber and had heard of migrant northeastern men who had become extremely wealthy. So, made up his mind. But once embarked on the ship that brought not only him, but other dozens of workers, they were not allowed to disembark at the mythic Belém, let alone in the city of Manaus. They were all left along the Solimões River (Amazonas) amidst the rubber tree landowner estates. When my grandfather, Joaquim Cândido, realized he would be subjected to the orders of some man in Parintins, and that he would be sent to the rubber plantations where jaguars, leopards and mosquitoes abound. He, who had already gathered some information on the atrocities perpetrated against laborers, reports of enslavement and conflicts with indigenous communities, stories of hunger and malaria, he knew right there and then he had been had. So together with other workers, he decided to run away and get lost in the wilderness along the shores of the Solimões River (Amazon). My grandfather was extremely lucky, having been able to survive after facing the rainforest, crossing rivers, reaching

the town of Maués, where he asked for the help of a local parish priest. My grandfather was a skilled stone mason and a carpenter. Thus, he soon became “Master Joaquim”, a maker of homes, windows, doors, tables, chairs... also a great storyteller. He had heard and told stories about the hardships in the Amazonian rubber plantations. And these stories were somehow kept in my memories.

My Documentaries

As a documentarist, I have always tried to reveal the rubber boom history from the point of view of the workers coming from the Brazilian northeast who had been involved in the extractive economy. During the first wave between 1872 and 1900, approximately 260 thousand northeastern people were taken from the drought of their region towards a drenched Amazon. During World War II, northeastern men were once again the workforce to extract latex, this time amounting around 55 thousand, the so-called “Rubber Soldiers”, according to the patriotic propaganda led by Getúlio Vargas’ administration. The Brazilian anthropologist and politician Darcy Ribeiro used to say that this was “the forgotten World War II battle”.

In 1992, I directed the documentary “A Árvore da Fortuna” [The Tree of Fortune] for TV Cultura channel. In this film, the objective was to talk about the rubber extraction in the Amazon. In 1997, “O Cineasta da Selva” [The Filmmaker of the Jungle] sought to narrate the life of Silvino Santos (1886-1970), a cinema pioneer in the Amazon who worked for big rubber entrepreneurs, more specifically the Peruvian Julio Cesar Arana, owner of the Peruvian Amazon Company, at the time accused of mistreating rubber workers — the indigenous people from the Putumayo region. Silvino Santos was the photographer and filmmaker hired to produce images that could disavow Roger Casement’s (1864-1916) powerful testimony.

The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement

I finally became aware of the *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* in 1997, having received it from the author and historian, Angus Mitchell, at the time living in Brazil. However, it was only in 2013 that we decided to transform the British diplomat’s journey in the Amazon rainforest into a film. This journal brought about many of the answers that I had been looking for over the years. Even better: the character had had a life story challengingly hallucinating.

In fact, Roger Casement was an Irish man serving the British government who, after denouncing the massacres against workers in Congo and the Amazon and returning to Europe, becomes an activist for the Irish emancipation from British rule, reason why he ended up sentenced to death. He was unfairly considered a traitor by the British Empire, but for the Putumayo's peoples and Irishmen, Casement is a hero. As said by Miller, a Bora indigenous man, in his statement recorded for the film:

“In History we always hear about Roger Casement, his presence in our territory. Had Mr. Roger not been vocal, letting the world know what was going on here, our ancestors would have been completely extinguished. Many of our clans disappeared, not having a single representative left. So, we are thankful for everything he did for us.”

Roger Casement is a “ghost knocking on the door” of the humanitarian consciousness... It had been over a century since Casement wrote his *Amazon Journal* and, even then, the facts narrated therein continue to mirror the present. Not exactly in the same way, of course, but indigenous rights, rights to self-determination, are in evidence and the indigenous peoples we met have stated they have not been able to plan the future of their territory and have expressed their dissatisfaction with the bellicose advances of new “bosses” who openly threaten their existence.

The Journey to the Putumayo

When due to budgetary issues in the production, we had to decide with who, where and how we would shoot the documentary; the journey to La Chorrera, in the Colombian Putumayo-river could not have been left aside. We needed to see and hear stories from *Uitotos*, *Boras*, *Ocainas*, and *Muinanes* on the tragic events experienced by their ancestors more than 100 years ago. What would be the memory that was kept alive?

After a long journey all the way from São Paulo, Lima to Bogotá, we drove during 8 hours to the city of San José del Guaviare, where we took a small plane, which curiously had been used in World War II, to get to La Chorrera.

La Chorrera

At night we were invited for a collective gathering with the whole indigenous community in La Chorrera. They wanted to know the real reason behind our journey. After some hours with interventions from many local leaderships and further clarifications, we were finally authorized to begin filming.

What had impacted me the most about my short stay in the Putumayo amongst the indigenous peoples from La Chorrera was that they constantly showed me that hope, in their viewpoint, was always a menu to be served, and never put aside.

One of the interviewed indigenous women, the Uitoto leader Luz Marina, stated: “In the past women only took care of the home, but we are We are currently involved in the process of leadership, questioning our own resources. That’s why the Secretariat for Women was created within AZICATCH⁴ . . . Looking ahead, we already have the Arana House, a school that helps us prepare the youngsters. We want to open a university to train professionals, so people would not have to go to the city. In the city one gets lost in interculturality. We often absorb bad examples from the West and we bring them out here. We want to maintain our culture, to have La Chorrera as a great but traditional people, to strengthen our four peoples’ cultural identity, and to keep our mother tongue”.

In an interview recorded with *pajé* Blas, from the Bora ethnic group, when asked what the threats experienced by his people were, he answered:

For us today that threat is not far away, it is present in the indigenous comrades that study with the white men. Once finished their studies, they come back to explore their own *hermanos* that don’t have the same knowledge. In the past the missionaries wanted our language and religiosity to disappear. Education was imposed by them. In the last few years, we have seen dealers, groups outside the law, drug trafficking. In 1978 there were hunters for the fur trade. Recently we are threatened by the Free Trade Agreement, neoliberalism and other multinational interests. These are the threats. The State does not want to recognize our rights as indigenous peoples. The State calls them ‘indigenous rights’ but we, as ‘indigenous peoples’, think that these rights do not exist just for our own people. South America belonged only to the indigenous peoples when the Spaniards and the Europeans from other countries came and made themselves the owners. Originally the territories of South, North and Central Americas belonged to the indigenous peoples.

As producers of the documentary, we have the historical commitment to give voice to those who have been denied one, and by making “Secrets from Putumayo” I wanted to make a film that would reveal the most horrible side of our heritage, the indelible mark of the colonizer on the indigenous souls and bodies, under the racist brutality that is still a reality these days.

According to estimates from the Institute for Development Studies and Peace (Indepaz), at least 254 leaders and Human Rights activists were killed in 2020 in Colombia, among them some leaderships from the Putumayo region.

Photography

One of the thrills of shooting in La Chorrera was to image the pioneer Silvino Santos registering, in photographs and films, scenes from our hosts’ ancestors. Silvino carried his heavy equipment, with less technical resources, a Pathé camera, wood and iron, fixed focus and a handle. He had filmed in that place under much more adverse conditions than our staff had to face. Silvino with his Pathé camera (1910), and us with a digital Sony A7sll (2019).

Since the beginning of the project, photography was central. We wanted to make a film on the most heinous episodes experienced in the Amazon, one that is called by the Putumayo indigenous peoples the “indigenous holocaust”, contrasted with the exuberant landscape of the region. Alongside the photography director André Lorenz Michiles, we decided to use black and white images. The images would be divided between fictional and documental. Documental scenes would be run in regular speed so that they convey a sense of reality. The fictional ones were shot in 48 and 36 grams (depending on the action) creating a suspension of time in a way the viewer could be connected to the past. We used a highly contrasted black and white to guarantee dramaticity to the image. The black and white images were also used to soften the cuts with archival images. As for the use of drones, we wanted to show the character’s loneliness (in a small scale) navigating the rainforest, the waters, the skies, and also to show how far from the political and economic center dictating the rubber boom the indigenous peoples were.

And Much More

A lot more could be said about the process of bringing the film to life over 5 years of many stories. The involvement of each and everyone who participated in this journey was key to make it happen. The production almost became a religion with the involvement of the technical and support staff.

Each one engaged in the production, such as the screenwriter Danilo Gullane, the editor and co-screenwriter André Finotti, with whom I had not had the opportunity to work. With Alvisé Migotto who worked on the soundtrack from Toronto in many exchanges to reach the final piece. Miriam Biderman and Ricardo Reis (sound editing and mixing), Isabel Lorenz Michiles (costume), Dori Carvalho (actor) were part of the same dynamics. A great deal of this process took place amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, when we no longer could meet each other face to face.

In La Chorrera, it was moving to watch Leo Bertolin operating the sound in the middle of the Putumayo forest, many times alone capturing the night sounds. Fabio Bardella operating the drone under the weather and fear that the equipment would be lost in the jungle or the river. Sidney Medina in the production articulating our movements throughout the river.

I would like to highlight, of course, the partnership with the producer Patrick Leblanc, who supervised the entire production for 5 years and who helped me get to the best film possible. Moreover, he worked as a rigorous and efficient iconographic images researcher.

Narration

Doing Roger Casement's voice over, we could count with the participation of the Irish actor Stephen Rea, renowned worldwide with *The Crying Game* (1992). Roger Casement's texts narrated by Rea were added to the metaphors, creating a new level of narrative that was not omissive, in which the narrator is made present, exposing introspectively and explicitly the dramaticity of the Amazon discoveries. The evolution of his outraged messages and nuances of the voice involve us and make us into accomplices of his anger, so that the narration is powerful. Rea with his narration brought about the essence of the indignant testimony.

Testimonies

The testimonies recorded and used in this film elucidate, move us, and are even didactical regarding historical references, specifically in the accounts by Angus Mitchell and the novelist Milton Hatoum (one who was also part of the generation of Amazonians I described in the beginning of this text). The testimonies by the La Chorrera indigenous peoples, descendants of the massacre victims, were so strong that it was very difficult to choose which ones should be in the final cut. I thank all of those who were willing to collaborate and reveal their most intimate emotions about the “secrets of the Putumayo”: Manuel Zafiana Ekirey, Luz Marina Zaita, Blás Candre, Miller Teteye, Edwin Teteye and Bartolomé Atama.

Finally

All of this work would not have happened without the partnership with the historian Angus Mitchell, professors Laura P. Z. Izarra and Mariana Bolfarine, as well as Yeda Oliveira, accomplices in the process of turning 469 pages of *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement* into a film.

The film *Secrets from Putumayo* is an opportunity for a wider audience to get to know this relevant historical figure and this episode of the Brazilian, Colombian and Peruvian Amazon.

Translated by Thiago Marcel Moyano

Notes

- 1 We thank the author’s permission to republish “Filming Secrets”, a chapter in *Secrets from Putumayo* by Aurélio Michiles. Eds. M. Bolfarine and L. Izarra. São Paulo: Outside Co., 2021. pp. 23-35. It was a project supported by the W.B.Yeats Chair of Irish Studies to bring the story of Roger Casement in Brazil to a global audience.
- 2 Caboclo means mestizo of white with indigenous, with copper coloured skin and straight black hair.
- 3 “Nordestino” is a person who comes from the Northeastern region of Brazil; “Arigó” is a person who works in the fields.
- 4 (Asociación de Cabildos de Autoridades Tradicionales de La Chorrera/ Association of Town Halls of Traditional Authorities of La Chorrera).