

## Film Review

- *Piripkura (Piripkura: The last two survivors)*, directed by Mariana Oliva, Renata Terra, and Bruno Jorge, Zeza Filmes, Brazil, 2017.<sup>1</sup>

Brazil is the country with the world's most isolated Indigenous peoples, totalling 115 groups that are recognized by the government. However, there is often a major gap between legal recognition and practical protection, as the danger of extractive activities is always lurking behind the curtain. At present, only 26 of the tribes that have decided to isolate themselves from contact are duly protected by the Brazilian government – and they have to prove that they are still alive to be able to continue to receive state protection.

In *Piripkura*, the filmmakers, Mariana Oliva, Renata Terra, and Bruno Jorge, follow Jair Condor, a government agent from the Ethno-Environmental Protection Front,<sup>2</sup> in his search for Pakyî and his nephew Tamandua, two of the three remaining survivors of the Piripkura tribe.<sup>3</sup> They reside in the state of Mato Grosso, one of Brazil's most violent and deforested regions. While Condor has been following the Piripkuras since 1989, the purpose of this expedition is to confirm to the government that Pakyî and Tamandua are still alive and occupying their territory, as this is the only way to extend the ordinance that has kept the area protected since 2008.

During the Brazilian dictatorship (1964-1985), when Indigenous peoples were portrayed as hindrances to national development, entire tribes were extinguished. The idea that development should occur at any cost, attached to a destructive authoritarian mindset, led to massive government projects for the occupation of Brazil's hinterland.<sup>4</sup> The Piripkura region was most affected during the final years of the dictatorship, when a state project attempted to occupy that region through immigration of southern farmers and loggers. In the process, the Piripkuras were ambushed and killed. Pakyî and Tamandua stayed hidden and watched the carnage, after which they adopted isolation as a form of survival. Pakyî's sister, Rita, the only other remaining Piripkura, escaped the massacre by fleeing her territory. She told her story to government agents, which eventually started the arduous process of territorial protection.

State violence against Indigenous groups, predicated on a false dichotomy between development and preservation, is not new to Brazilian film and televi-

sion. Since *The Search for the Kidnappers* (1990), a film that documented the first encounter with the Uru Eu Wau Wau tribe, other films and series were released, like *Corumbiara* (2009), *Parallel 10* (2011), *Ex-Pajé* (2018), *First Contacts* (2000), and *The Man of the Hole* (2018). However, *Piripkura* has the distinguishing characteristic of not having an overly descriptive or proselytizing tone, as most films on this subject tend to be. Instead, the directors mostly rely on images to tell their story, largely giving up the use of an omniscient narrator and other didactic resources.

The documentary oscillates between images of nature's beauty and quietness and the devastation and fast-paced rhythm of the destructive extractive activities in the region. The film's rhythm is initially dictated by Condor's expedition and the stoic interaction with the forest. This imposes a steady, slow, and contemplative pace, with, for example, careful trekking through muddled rivers and close examination of abandoned huts. However, sometimes this pace is interrupted by images of lumber mills and trucks filled with tree trunks highlighting the devastation, danger, and violence that creeps in the protected land. It is in one of these moments of rupture that, from a quiet, poetic, and still shot of rain pouring in washed clothes, we see the arrival of the two Piripkuras at the expedition's camp.

After two failed expeditions, Pakyî and Tamandua decided to appear only due to necessity, since their torch, which had been burning since 1988, had extinguished. The camera seems to gasp in amazement at their presence, with an initial confusion of focus and zoom. From then onwards, the contemplative pace gives way to a more ethnographic bias. As they cuddle and sleep together, we observe the unbreakable intimate bond between Pakyî and Tamandua, created in years of isolation. At the same time, they are not frightened by the camera or crew, sometimes joyfully interacting, though with some restrain, with a FUNAI worker. These sequences problematize the common idealized notion that isolated tribes do not know about the exterior world, an essential demystification that serves to highlight a major point of the film: the need to respect their desire for self-isolation and protect them from a distance.

Without paternalism, the film shows the two Piripkuras not as artifacts from an idealized past, but as men who have been fighting for their survival for decades, with only a machete, a blind ax, and a torch. As Condor says in the film, "they need only this and the forest to survive, nothing else." His only fear is that their protection is becoming more fragile since the forest is being ruthlessly devastated. However, the film's reliance on Condor's statements (and those of Rita), has some limitations on the level of knowledge production. Although hinting at political and historical issues, the film requires some prior knowledge about the origin and development of these problems.

Under Bolsonaro's presidency, Condor's fear has unfortunately come to fruition. Devastation is at an all-time high: illegal miners, farmers, loggers, all are encouraged to burn and invade protected territories.<sup>5</sup> FUNAI is underfunded and directed by religious groups that are adamant on contacting isolated

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tribes, with many cases of evangelization attempts. Indeed, the authoritarian idea of development versus protection is back with full strength under Bolsonaro.

In *Piripkura*, the filmmakers aim to comprehend Pakyî and Tamandua's life of isolation from their point of view, while interfering as little as it is possible. This is no small task in any work that wants to tell the story of Indigenous peoples whose voices have been historically oppressed, but they succeed. All in all, due to its distinctive narrative choices among documentaries on this topic, *Piripkura* is a touching picture and an essential film for those who want to understand the imminent danger that Indigenous communities and their environments face in Brazil.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This 89-minute documentary can be seen at Amazon Prime, Google Play, Canal Now and IFDA website.
- <sup>2</sup> The Ethno-Environmental Protection Front is a specialized agency of the Brazilian government's National Foundation of the Indigenous (FUNAI) that is responsible for protecting and monitoring the territories inhabited by isolated or recently contacted Indians.
- <sup>3</sup> Name given to this tribe by a neighbouring Indigenous community, meaning 'butterflies' for their ability to vanish in the woods.
- <sup>4</sup> The construction of mega-highways, for example, increased not only the deforestation surrounding the area but created road branches that permitted deeper penetration in the rainforest, putting pressure on Indigenous communities who had to entrench themselves at the risk of being killed.
- <sup>5</sup> An illustration of the policy orientation of the current Brazilian government was the 'Day of the Fire', in August 2019, when the day seemed to turn into night in Southeast Brazil due to the cloud of smoke that arose from the burnings in the Amazon and travelled over 2.500 km to the region.