

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF TWO LATIN AMERICAN DOCUMENTARIES TO AN EXPANDED PERCEPTION OF CLIMATE CHANGE FROM A DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Creating a new awareness of the environmental crisis has been on the agendas, either directly or indirectly, of many social actors and media products. These include films and videos focusing on environmental issues, given the current important role of audiovisual culture. Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on the Latin American documentaries *Hija de la Laguna* (Daughter of the Lake; 2015) and *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas* (The Mother of all Fights; 2021), with the aim of discussing their possible contributions to a broader perception of climate action. Based on a film analysis centred on the protagonists, the aesthetic and stylistic choices of each work, we look into how the narratives of the two documentaries intertwine information and subjective knowledge, the individual and the collective, the local and the global, personal memory and public archives, among other argumentative markers. These categorisations are compared to the decolonial perspective, which is taken up in the text in a broad way, that is in the dialogue with authors who embody the struggles of indigenous and/or marginalised people into decolonial theory. Among the results found, we highlight that the documentaries establish counter-narratives that allow us to identify the emergence of female protagonism in the struggles for land and water ownership, the critical stance towards extractivism (and neo-extractivism) and lingering ethnic-racial prejudice. Also worth noting in both films, the documentary language values the subject, without failing to link them with the social context.

KEYWORDS

documentary, counter-narrative, decolonial, climate crisis, Latin America

CONTRIBUIÇÕES DE DOIS DOCUMENTÁRIOS LATINO-AMERICANOS PARA UMA PERCEPÇÃO AMPLIADA DAS MUDANÇAS CLIMÁTICAS A PARTIR DE UMA LEITURA DECOLONIAL

RESUMO

A constituição de uma nova sensibilidade em relação à crise ambiental tem sido pauta, direta ou indiretamente, de diversos atores sociais e produtos midiáticos. Destes, destacam-se os filmes e vídeos que focam a temática ambiental, em função do papel relevante que a cultura audiovisual representa hoje. Com essas premissas, este artigo foca os documentários latino-americanos *Hija de la Laguna* (2015) e *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas* (2021), com o propósito de discutir suas possíveis contribuições para uma percepção ampliada das causas climáticas. A partir da análise fílmica centrada nas protagonistas e nas escolhas estéticas e estilísticas de cada obra, este texto investiga como as narrativas dos dois documentários entrelaçam informação e conhecimento subjetivo; indivíduo e coletivo; o local e o global; memória pessoal e arquivos

públicos; entre outros marcadores argumentativos. Essas categorizações são cotejadas ao posicionamento decolonial, assumido no texto de forma ampla, isto é, em diálogo com autores que incorporam as lutas das populações indígenas e/ou marginalizadas à teoria decolonial. Dentre os resultados encontrados, ressaltamos que os documentários estabelecem contranarrativas que permitem identificar a emersão do protagonismo feminino nas lutas pela posse da terra e da água, o posicionamento crítico em relação ao extrativismo (e neoextrativismo) e a permanência dos preconceitos étnico-raciais. Ressalta-se, ainda, nos dois filmes, a constituição de uma linguagem documentária que valoriza o sujeito, sem deixar de articulá-lo ao contexto social.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

documentário, contranarrativa, decolonial, crise climática, América Latina

1. INTRODUCTION

“Faced with the announcement of the ecological deluge, many are rushing towards a Noah’s ark, with little concern for those abandoned on the quay or those enslaved inside the ship itself” (Ferdinand, 2022, p. 22). The author criticises environmentalism that continues to ignore the fact that the destruction of the so-called natural world does not affect everyone in the same way, nor does it include in the debate the social pressure and exclusionary policies that are still in force today in the Caribbean — the author’s home territory —, and possibly across the whole of Latin America. They have in common the colonial past with several similar issues, which is why we agree with the author who assumes, as a starting point for devising a new way of tackling the environmental crisis, including the colonial fracture as “the crux of the ecological crisis” (Ferdinand, 2022, p. 201).

Following the argumentative construction of the Caribbean researcher, who sets out to conduct a diagnosis that points to decolonial ecology as an extension of previous criticism of the colonial fracture and which he classifies into four types¹, our goal herein is to discuss the possible contributions of the documentaries *Hija de la Laguna* (2015; by the Peruvian director Ernesto Cabellos) and *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas* (2021; by the Brazilian director Susanna Lira) to raising new awareness of nature, distinct from both the European *logos* and the environmental discourse, which Malcom Ferdinand criticises. This hypothesis is the result of research² that recognises both the power of film as capable of constituting a “symbolic repertoire full of cultural meanings” (Bragança, 2011, p. 169) and the intensity of the revival of documentary production “in recent years, once again in tune with its time” (Ramos, 2005, p. 14).

This is in line with the diagnosis of John A. Duvall (2017), who identifies an explosion in film and video production in the first decades of the 21st century that have focused on

¹ To summarise, actions by pre-Columbian and indigenous peoples who struggle to exist according to their cultures; political ecology resistance of enslaved people from the African continent; political ecology struggles led by women; claims of contemporary colonial situations in both Northern and Southern countries (Ferdinand, 2022, pp. 206–209).

² This text is part of a larger research project on environmental documentaries, supported by Faperj (Carlos Chagas Filho Foundation for Research Support in the State of Rio de Janeiro).

the various aspects of the environmental crisis³, and present broad and varied representations and rhetoric. Addressing such production requires, as we intend to demonstrate here, discussing and debating the struggles against violent processes of expropriation that the peoples and communities that were integrated into the colonial logic undertaken by Europeans continue to endure (Aráoz, 2020; Ferdinand, 2022; Quijano, 2019; Segato, 2021; Zibechi, 2022). It is therefore a question of emphasising the intertwining of resistance and expressive productions: herein we discuss two documentaries that focus on the concrete clashes between the predatory logic of capital and those who do not bow to it.

This is also evoked by the *quilombola* thinker Antônio Bispo dos Santos, who stated almost a decade ago that Afro-Pindoramic peoples (Amerindians and Afro-Brazilians) have always developed counter-colonisation strategies to defend their territories, symbols and ways of life that link them to their memories (Santos, 2015). He feels that words like development or colonisation cover up violent processes, such as deterritorialisation, expropriation and extractivism, which are the basic elements in the destruction of the planet and result in a cosmophobic and cruel world. “The process of naming is an attempt to erase one memory so that another can be composed”, says the author (Santos, 2023, p. 12), emphasising that he invests in a game that seeks to contradict colonial words as a tactic to weaken them.

Despite their different paths, both Ferdinand (2022) and Santos (2023) present arguments that reconfigure the way we look at and make sense of the narratives which bring to light the most different strategies for surviving in environments cleverly consolidated by modernity as areas of backwardness, where life is miserable, and the people have no scientific knowledge. In other words, the authors outline territories that are in urgent need of justice and that someone must put an end to barbarism. In this text, the two documentaries are aligned with a critical stance on the use of natural resources in Latin American countries. This focus, as highlighted earlier, is underpinned by the hypothesis that to understand and discuss broad concepts such as “climate change” and the like, there must be cracks through which the multiple and interconnected causes of this moment of environmental crisis circulate. This framework guides the analysis of the selected works.

The narrative axis of the Peruvian documentary is to closely follow the protagonist, Nélide Ayay Chilon, who belongs to the Quechua community of Cajamarca, a town in the north of Peru where Atahualpa⁴ was arrested and murdered, and is today still one of the country’s tourist centres. Nélide and her companions are fighting to preserve the local lagoons, which are under threat from the *Minas Conga* project. The project involves gold and copper mining by Yanacocha, a consortium made up of the US company Newpont (51% of the shares), the Peruvian company Buenaventura (43%) and Corporación Financiera Internacional (5%), which belongs to the World Bank (André, 2012). The project was put

³ The author also points to the investment in formal education (schools and universities) in accessing and discussing these films, and clarifies that activists and organisations have included audiovisuals in their forms of struggle.

⁴ He was the 13th and last emperor of the Inca empire, killed in 1532 on the orders of Francisco Pizarro, the Spanish conqueror and invader of the region (Domingues, n.d.).

on standby on 30 November 2011 (Sul 21, 2011), according to Newpont, at the behest of then president Ollanta Humala, after six days of intense protesting by local residents. However, as the film indicates the suspension did not last forever.

The Brazilian film *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas* centres its narrative on two main characters: Shirley Djukumã Krenak, an indigenous activist who lives in the Rio Doce region of Minas Gerais, and Maria Zelzuíta, one of the few survivors of the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre in the south-east of Pará. Here, on 17 April 1996, 21 rural workers were murdered. They were part of a group of just over 1,500 people marching to Belém, as part of the struggle against the expropriation of the Macaxeira farm, occupied at the time by 3,500 landless families. In all, 155 well-armed police officers took part in the massacre. Of these, only the two commanders of the operation were convicted, but are serving their sentences in freedom (Barbosa, 2020).

The story of the two documentaries is about defending water and land, as a circuit that must be included in the effort to ensure a broader perception of the causes of the climate crisis. This is part of the purpose of our research, mentioned above, which considers that the submissions and views defending the separation of environmental struggle from the unrestricted rejection of the colonial process and its consequences that still apply today must be rejected, as proposed by Ferdinand (2022). The challenge, however, is to outline distinctions that counter common sense platitudes, so often fabricated by piles of information that anaesthetise rather than mobilise us to “think in an original way” (Dilger & Pereira Filho, 2016, p. 22). In other words, statements that do not contribute to the debate on Latin America’s development models, which still keep the “continent” subordinated to the neoliberal global market (Acosta & Brand, 2018; Aráoz, 2020; Ferreira, 2011, 2012; Svampa, 2019). Thus, in methodological terms, the goal is to trace a path that seeks to demonstrate how the narratives of the two films interweave information and subjective knowledge; the personal and the collective; the local and the global; personal memory and public archives; among other argumentative markers, evoking the emergence of a decolonial ecology, even where it is not designated as such.

It should also be noted that the two films were chosen from the wide range of existing productions, first due to the categorisation previously promoted within the scope of research into environmental documentaries in Latin America, where the struggle for land, especially in the Brazilian context, remains a key issue⁵, and that of water can be identified in several countries in this region (Castro et al., 2015). Then acknowledging the importance of their narrative and aesthetic choices, which make them stand out in relation to the proposed analytical keys. For this reason, the film analysis presented in this paper takes into account what Aumont e Marie (2004) emphasise in terms of there being no single, universal analytical method; on the contrary, it depends on the theoretical assumptions underpinning the discourse on the films and the processes of approaching the work and how it is viewed. Thus, as mentioned before, the film material provides the context for engaging in an analytical process that dialogues, in an interdisciplinary way, with the topics and issues that the films bring up through their narratives and images.

⁵ There has been a long history of disputes over land ownership, including the demarcation of indigenous lands and settlements made possible by land reform. See, among others, Linhares e Silva (2021).

With this in mind, we have drawn on a basic conceptual framework that aims to demonstrate how these documentaries expand in a mediated scenario, amplifying the options of engagement with the environmental cause, to the extent that their narratives echo their struggles and, in a way, summon us to adhere, even if not entirely, to information and/or to empathise. The hypothesis also grants audiovisuals, particularly documentaries, a special place in shaping a new, much needed human sensitivity to nature, which is based on the problematisation of a way of life that is still guided by the colonial process. In other words, it means agreeing with Maldonado-Torres (2023) on the need to invest in a process that, for the author, and just as Franz Fanon (2005), implies considering the struggle for decolonisation as one in which the colonised emerge as a creative, activist and thinker, and where communities understand that decolonisation is an unfinished project. The present paper seeks above all to demonstrate that documentaries make these claims possible.

2. FEMALE PROTAGONISTS

The first image we see in *Hija de la Laguna* is of a small woman, standing with her back to the camera, on the edge of a lagoon. She bends down to pick up the water and then dives in, keeping half her body above the water. The long shot isolates the subject, while a female voice off-screen, easily identified as the woman, says:

water is the blood of the earth, and without its blood the earth has no life, no living being could live on it. And I wonder and say: when they destroy the lagoons, how will the owners of the lagoons be forced to live, not the people. But the elves' shop, because they're there looking after you, mother water, mother now, and they don't ask for anything. They don't ask us for anything, they don't say hey hey, I want you to look after me, they're just there. And if they destroy the lagoons, where will they live? I don't know.
(Nélida Ayay Chilón, in *Hija de la Laguna*)

The tone of voice is firm, without inflections, but loaded with painful questioning. The protagonist is Nélida Ayay Chilón, who will be accompanied by the camera for practically the entire documentary, almost always observed from afar as she moves around the large open areas that define the geography of the place where she lives and where she fights against the *Minas Conga* project. Initiated around twelve years ago, the project remains suspended by the current Peruvian government⁶. It has fuelled a significant number of conflicts that have generated a wealth of news stories and short documentaries, before and after Ernesto Cabellos' film. In other words, in thematic terms, and considering for how long these disputes have been taking place, it is very difficult for the Peruvian population in general not to identify the struggle that mobilises the protagonist. We therefore argue that its strength lies precisely in the fact that it is not bound by

⁶ The failure of the *Minas Conga* project and its consequences for Peruvian mining in *El Montonero*, <https://elmontonero.pe/economia/el-fracaso-del-proyecto-conga-y-sus-consecuencias-en-la-mineria-peruana>

the pamphleteering logic⁷ that guides many documentaries on social movements. By choosing Nélide as the central argumentative axis of the narrative, the work thus emulates the counter-coloniality⁸ proposed by Santos (2023): “where I was born and raised, we have an organic relationship with all life. All life is necessary, not important” (p. 26). Nélide is not important: she is necessary.

It is not a question of highlighting its leadership, but of understanding, together with Santos, the perceived urgency of reversing the ideas and imaginaries that have drawn the human being away from nature, contrasting the uniqueness of a subject who delicately exposes her intimate world, with her beliefs and values embedded in the space and time in which she lives. Not such an easy goal, even for environmentalists like Enrique Leff, who are open to the need to understand again what the “environment” is. Close to the materialist theoretical field and critical thinking, Leff (2012) identifies the end of the 1960s as a turning point for an epistemological shift in relation to the concepts and reflections that circumscribed environmental knowledge to a single territory. What triggered this shift, according to the author, was the realisation of the great environmental crisis that was already predictable at the time. A situation that reshaped environmental studies, recognising that trans and interdisciplinary approaches were inseparable if the aim was to build new pillars to ensure the sustainability of human life.

While this position is welcome in academia — and it has been — in parallel, other political, ethical and artistic paths have taken shape, originating from unlikely resistance against the defenders of predatory capitalism. The process not only ignored the strategies for disputing knowledge established by the post-Enlightenment scientific *logos*, but also amplified, in an increasingly powerful way, voices such as that of Ailton Krenak, who openly questions scientific knowledge about native (indigenous) peoples, almost entirely classified by this “scientific knowledge” as primitive. “What strategies did these peoples use to get through this nightmare and reach the 21st century still moaning, claiming and happily singing?” (Krenak, 2019, p. 28). The reach of these and other voices in a scenario of strong media presence such as contemporary society, as we know, is linked to a large number of media products starring these voices, as is already the case, for example, of films produced by various indigenous directors through projects such as *Video nas Aldeias* (Video in the Villages)⁹.

It is in this context that I emphasise the essential role of audiovisual production in sensitively reshaping what cannot be objectively measured, but is capable of revealing a fabric that is still porous, perhaps frayed and fragile, yet perceptible enough for us to evoke traces and persistence through its narrative and aesthetic choices. In the Peruvian film, the simplicity of the scene and distance of the camera emphasise the

⁷ “Pamphleteering” suggests documentaries that have quick, direct statements and that, because they are linked to certain social causes, favour discourse on these, without incorporating, among other things, moments of reflection, questioning and tension that the events involve.

⁸ The word expresses the author’s intention to “sow words” as a politics of resistance. For example: “...for *colonisation*, *counter-colonisation*... and so on” (Santos, 2023, p. 14).

⁹ Created in Brazil more than 20 years ago by anthropologist Vincent Carelli, the project has produced a significant crop of indigenous film-makers and inspired other similar projects. See: <http://www.videonasaldeias.org.br/2009/>.

small, reflective Nélide (Figure 1), in the middle of large empty spaces and naturalising her daily life as much as possible, permeated by apparently banal conversations highlighting the emotional ties consolidated by shared problems.



Figure 1. Nélide's small, delicate body contrasts with the vast territory (image from the film)
Credits. From *Hija de la Laguna*, 00:14:56, by E.Cabellos, 2015. Copyright 2015 by Guarango.

One of the moments that explores this circumstantial tone is in Nélide's conversation with Máxima¹⁰. While walking across the open fields, the camera captures a medium distance shot of the silhouettes moving slowly or calmly. The camera shooting from a distance contrasts with the familiarity of the prosaic conversation about animals looking for water, such as ducks. The women's faces are not clear. After a cut, both women are filmed inside of a house where, finally, the frame changes. A close up shows them talking, cutting potatoes and throwing them into pots of boiling water. In this intimate, private and friendly moment, we can finally make out the features of the characters in the scene. However, because these scenes are interspersed with a lorry driving along the road and then stops, the focus is on the contrasts once more.

In this excerpt, it is a question of the filmic materiality expressing the dramatic *plot* of antagonism that sustains an objective look at the work: with a slow, high-pitched soundtrack that announces danger, of negative expectation, a game of shot and counter-shot is created to show the conflict that mobilises the character. The tension has interrupted daily life, which is presented in a soft tone up to that point, and the viewer finally realises the impasse that the community is facing: by not handing over the land to the mining companies that are trying to evict the residents. Nélide supports resistance and outlines her leadership role, which involves the sacrifice of moving to the city of

¹⁰ Since 2016, Máxima Acuña has caught the attention of the press for her fight against *Minas Conga* and, in 2021, her story is told in the documentary *Máxima (Indie Rights Movies For Free)*.

Cajamarca to study law. This choice echoes one of the counter-colonial tactics adopted by Santos (2023): “I soon realised that, in order to confront colonialist society, at times ‘we must use the weapons of our enemies in our defence’” (p. 13).

On this journey that does not deviate from Nélide’s fragility or tenacity, the documentary expresses the ambiguities and sadness involved in fighting for survival when there is no other option. At the same time, it makes the presence of collective demonstrations in the film more fluid and less pamphleteering. The camera highlights posters, marches and slogans that the history of protests on the continent knows all too well. An amalgamation of the subjective power of a protagonist who enters into a dialogue with her “mother water”, the lagoon — which welcomes and strengthens her — and the images and sounds that would naturally be found in news reports about social movements is thus created. In these sequences, the protagonist wanders almost anonymously, in a scenic strategy where the collective in the foreground and close-ups appears through clear and well-defined faces, gestures and attitudes. In other words, by singling out the faces of a group of anonymous people, the film declares the local population’s involvement in challenging the government and fighting for water.

Besides two other very short narratives further down, this constellation with Nélide engages in a dialogue with Julieta Paredes Carvajal, who, not disqualifying the achievements of Western feminists, proposes community feminism, an umbrella concept that began in Bolivia in 2003 during the uprising of the country’s women in the fight against the privatisation of gas and water. “We don’t want to think of ourselves as women in relation to men, but as women and men in relation to a community” (Carvajal, 2020, p. 197), reinforcing that the reconceptualisation of *warmi-chacha* (woman-man) has the community as its starting point. This community is both rural and urban, cultural, political, educational, among others. What defines it, in fact, is that it is made up of the woman-man pair as complementary and essential halves, “non-hierarchical, reciprocal and independent, which does not necessarily mean compulsory heterosexuality, because we are not talking about a couple, but a pair of political representation, we are not talking about a family, but a community” (Carvajal, 2020, p. 200).

Belonging to a community is what activist and plastic artist Shirley Krenak, the first protagonist of *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas* clearly acknowledges. Her powerful presence on screen is felt as soon as she appears in the film, director Susanna Lira giving emphasis to some imagery codes that dialogue with the mythical elements of Krenak’s narrative. It is a question of opening up gaps in a classic iconography, determined by photography that plays with shapes while following the assertiveness of her narrative in a frame that increasingly closes in on the activist’s face: she not only modulates her voice, but also takes on the different roles in her narrative about man’s relationship with Mother Earth, interpreting the variations in her speech with her body, in tune with what she is emphasising. Her movements are short and dense, showing no fear of the camera losing her (Figure 2).



Figure 2. *The first time she appears on screen, Shirley Krenak dominates the scene in a dreamlike setting (image from the film)*

Credits. From A Mãe de Todas as Lutas, 00:02:11, by S. Lira, 2021. Copyright 2021 by Modo Operante.

After the title of the film, the meaning of Krenak is emphasised, on a black canvas with similar graphics: “head of the earth” — kren (head), nak (earth). In this short sequence, the documentary shares with the “other”, the non-indigenous person, access to the language that was denied to the ethnic groups of Brazil’s original peoples, in accordance with the political project of burying their identity, values, culture and their obvious right to live on the lands they occupied before the invasion of Europeans. The political stance that dialogues with the dimension that the dispute over land has occupied in the country’s history since the beginning of the colonial process is brought onto the screen. This then takes us to the violence in recent times of the Eldorado Massacre in Pará, which Maria Zelzuita survived.

Marking what might be the second part of the film, the narrative uses the same strategy of the black screen with a subtitle, highlighting the linguistic and historical significance of the place: “From the Spanish ‘El Dorado’, a word that has inspired countless legends about a land full of riches”. The perception that the white invaders’ greed remains is stressed when the massacre is introduced through Zelzuita’s body and voice: she appears in full body (Figure 3) in a clearly arid landscape, with parched crops, after a scene of her private daily life: in the kitchen of a very modest house she peels manioc with firm and precise, but also risky movements because of the sharp machete.



Figure 3. Maria Zelzuita, on the curve of the “s”, where the massacre ended in a bloodbath, in her words (image from the film)

Credits. From *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas*, 00:32:12, by S. Lira, 2021. Copyright 2021 by Modo Operante.

The close-up emphasises her natural gestures, common to many housewives who cook every day and make up the majority of the country’s lower-income population. Such natural and simple gestures contrast powerfully with the views of the members of the Landless Movement, to which Zelzuita belongs. This political movement, today probably the longest-running in the country, continues to be persistently presented by the hegemonic media as a group of criminals who invade land that does not belong to them. To counter this, the documentary uses footage from archive films that recover several moments in the struggle of the Agrarian Reform in Brazil, from the 1960s to the Carajás massacre. It thus builds a bridge with what is happening today, as growing agrobusiness, especially in the Amazon rainforest, is contributing to the worsening of the climate crisis through fires and extensive livestock farming (Pompeii, 2021).

Nélida, Shirley and Maria’s trajectories highlight the struggle for social change that also takes place from a female perspective, one that resounds in Lélia Gonzalez (2020) who on the historical reality of resistance in Latin America, which has deviated from ethnic and gender issues, says: “it is worth noting that even the left absorbed the thesis of ‘racial democracy’, to the extent that their analyses of our social reality never managed to glimpse anything beyond class contradictions” (p. 45). María Lugones (2020), in discussing Aníbal Quijano’s concept of coloniality of power, presents a similar view on gender, pointing out that in the framework drawn up by the latter “there is a description of gender that is not questioned, and that is too narrow and hyperbiologised – since it is based on the assumptions of sexual dimorphism, heterosexuality, the patriarchal distribution of power and other similar ideas” (pp. 60–61).

Both positions emphasize that in the current context there is the “political and strategic potentiation of the voices of the various intersectional feminist segments and the multiple identity configurations and the demand for their places from where they speak” (Hollanda, 2020, p. 12). Against this backdrop and without directly including these thoughts in their narratives, the two documentaries that are based on the stories of these protagonists are also part of the movements that project the recognition of women as partners. In other words, by promoting a shift away from male centrality in the fight for social, economic and cultural rights, they widen the gaps that shake truths crystallised by a historical knowledge that has hardly ever recognised the female gender as being capable of playing such roles.

3. STRUGGLES AGAINST EXTRACTIVISM

After introducing Nélide in the opening scene of the film, in which she reveals her relationship with “mother water”, in *Hija de la Laguna* we hear a loud explosion (Figure 4) that dramatically takes over the screen and occupies both sound and picture of the diegesis for a few seconds. The events that will be shown during the narrative are still not clear. So anyone who does not have any references outside of the film searches for bridges to connect one scene to another, to understand what these spaces are, to try to establish the links that Nélide’s rhetoric hinted at in the beginning. However, the explosion in the beginning of the Peruvian film will only gain full meaning later in the film when it can be understood as the main axis of the story for establishing its counter-narrative. Consequently, the insertion of the image in the initial sequence complements the prologue by highlighting an antagonist (the mining company) whose material participation in the narrative is symbolically achieved through the explosion or when mentioned in Nélide’s rhetoric.



Figure 4. The explosion occupies the full screen in the opening scene of *Hija de la Laguna* (image from the film)

Credits. From *Hija de la Laguna*, 00:02:58, by E.Cabellos, 2015. Copyright 2015 by Guarango.

Such symbolic configuration takes place in a different way in *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas*, which also has an explosion that is visually very similar (Figure 5) to the pictures in the Peruvian film. Although both occur in the beginning of the films, in the case of the Brazilian documentary the time marks place the pictures in a different time than that when the film was produced. In other words, the sequence contains information from news reel made in 1975. Another striking difference is in the audio. In the Peruvian film the soundtrack amplifies the explosion. In the Brazilian film, the explosion is muffled by the male voice who praises the ore mining in the state of Minas Gerais, in the southeast of the country, and the positive role of the Vale do Rio Doce company, which at the time belonged to the federal government and was responsible for the mining of ore. In other words, the use of archive material here and in other moments of the Brazilian documentary creates two layers in the narrative, linking on screen the past and the present of the two regions where its protagonists live. The explosion is a reference to the geology of Minas Gerais, where in recent years there were two of the largest environmental catastrophes in Brazilian history, caused by endless predatory extractivism which, at this point, is praised by the dictatorial government in power when the film was shot: “thanks to Minas, Brazil exports more than 125 million tonnes of ore a year”, says the male voice of the narrator.

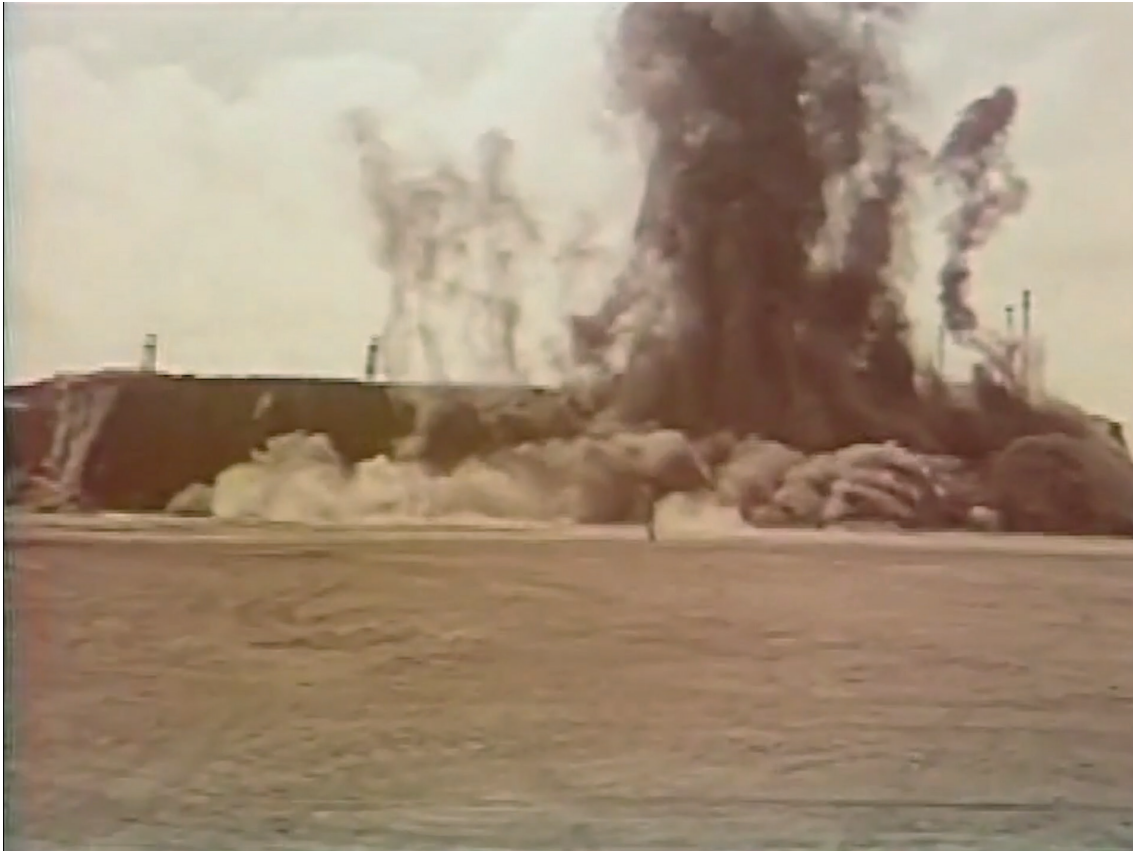


Figure 5. The explosion is part of a news story in *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas* produced in 1975, in the midst of Brazil's military dictatorship. It praises ore mining in Minas Gerais by the Vale do Rio Doce company, which generates wealth for the Brazilian state (film pictures)

Credits. From *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas*, 00:12:49, by S. Lira, 2021. Copyright 2021 by Modo Operante.

Filmed at different times and places, the explosions circumscribe yesterday's extractivism (Acosta, 2016; Aráoz, 2020) persisting in the neo-extractivism of the present, which, according to Maristella Svampa (2019), conceals the lingering logic of coloniality in Latin America. The author feels the biggest challenge of neo-extractivism is that the ideology of development often confuses politicians of different and antagonistic ideological hues. In recent times, this was due to economic conditions in 2000–2003 arising from a consensus around the commodities, that is the “high international commodity prices, which had an impact on trade balances and the fiscal surplus” (Svampa, 2019, p. 36).

Acosta and Brand (2018) have the same diagnosis. They point out that until 2014 the Latin American countries had not been hit by the recession, as they were still benefiting from the increase in income from commodity exports. In this scenario contradictions are underlined: countries like Ecuador and Bolivia have recognised in their laws Nature as a subject of rights¹¹, while maintaining their extractivist policies, thus belonging to a group that has refused to discuss the environmental impact of such investments. On the other hand, as these activities involve intense, continuous and extensive occupation of the territory in different ways (including land grabbing), in order to foster investments

¹¹ The thesis on the rights of nature was proposed by Christopher Stone, and was later taken up by environmentalists and used as the basis for some laws, such as Ecuador's 2008 Constitution (Pontes & Barros, 2016).

in monoculture, Svampa (2016, 2019) believes they have also amplified resistance, even by those who were allies of centre-left governments and whose ideas about agribusiness were ambiguous.

This analysis is supported by the struggle undertaken explicitly in *Hija de la Laguna*, particularly where the documentary looks at the protests to protect the lagoons and in Nélide's dialogues with Father Marco, when she opens up to him, fragile and tired of the endless struggle. These confrontations support Svampa's (2019) thesis of the "ecoterritorial shift" (p. 147), which originated, according to her, in the concepts of environmental justice in the 1980s in black communities in the United States and which have spread to other countries. Generally speaking, the underlying proposition is the right to life in a safe environment for all, especially the indigenous peoples. In Latin America, one of the concepts that supports this shift is *good living*, which is presented as a strategy with a global reach and seeks to position itself as a radical antagonist of the Western way of life, strongly criticising Eurocentrism and its concept of economic and social development.

Presented by its followers as an idea in the making, broad and with fluid conceptual boundaries, the *good living* political proposal has gained momentum on the Latin American continent, because it takes inspiration from and reveres the knowledge of its ancestral peoples who "even though they were ruled out, marginalised or openly confronted, their values, experiences and practices spanned across the Conquest, the Colony and the Republic. And they exist, with renewed strength", points out Alberto Acosta (2016, p. 73). In a similar vein, Svampa (2019) argues that there is now a common framework of meanings in Latin America combining the struggles of the indigenous people with new territorial/ecological and feminist activism, which, according to the author, points to the expansion of the frontiers of law, in marked opposition against the dominant model. This is reflected in the pictures and narrative of *Hija de la Laguna* and *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas*, whose *mise-en-scène* demarcates different rhythms in terms of creating bridges between what is happening on screen and the environmental crisis described by the media in broad topics, as was the case of the nuclear arms control protests in the 1980s and now the climate crisis, massively disseminated by the Oscar winning lecture film, *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006) by Al Gore.

Rightly criticised for simplifying matters, the latter has the undeniable merit of popularising the issue. However, making the individual responsible and highlighting the fight against global warming as a moral rather than political imperative, the documentary does not question "consumption, development patterns, the current economic paradigm" (Dias, 2007, p. 3), sustaining the narrative that continues to legitimise modern Western empires, such as the United States. "In short, raising the issue of colonialism disturbs the tranquillity and security of the modern citizen-subject and modern institutions", Maldonado-Torres (2023, p. 33) points out. In view of the likelihood of currently concealing colonialism and decolonisation, the author believes it is necessary to underscore that

colonialism can be understood as the historical making of colonial territories; modern colonialism can be understood as the specific ways in which Western empires have colonised most of the world since the ‘discovery’; and coloniality can be understood as a global logic of dehumanisation that is capable of existing even in the absence of formal colonies. (pp. 35–36)

Such is the approach that the narrative of *Hija de la Laguna* adopts by embarking on a narrative journey that connects the rural community of Cajamarca and Totorola, in the Andean region of Bolivia, to Amsterdam in the Netherlands. The link between these places, which have different screen times depending on Nélide’s role, is the relationship with gold, since both Latin American countries experience the consequences of its exploitation. In other words, the arid, contaminated land in Bolivia makes it practically impossible to produce potatoes, the region’s main food product. In Cajamarca, besides the land that has been lost, the fish are dying, water is scarce and the air has been poisoned by regular high winds in the highlands, which lift the waste that is thrown on the ground (Alier, 2018, pp. 147–148). Amsterdam, on the other hand, is introduced through the jewellery designer in her workplace and in her private space, playing affectionately with her baby son. The predominant medium shots highlight space and adopt an emotional view, especially of the contrasts between the women in Peru and Bolivia, and the one living in Amsterdam; while the daily lives of the former involve the struggles for survival, the latter lives in Europe in a clean place adorned with works of art, where there seems to be no conflict between work and motherhood, which is almost impossible for low-income Latin American women.

4. THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE “OTHER”

While the Peruvian documentary highlights the marks of coloniality that remain in the present time through several situations showing, for example, how the native people treat the natural world differently to governments which support big businesses, in *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas* such continuity is revealed through the materials recovered from the aforementioned archives, both photos and clippings from institutional films. This facilitates a narrative that reinforces the decolonial stance by guaranteeing the presence of indigenous epistemes, which in this sequence of the film consist of ten photographs. They represent different situations and at the same time express how white people observed and treated the native peoples in other times, which is still the case today, according to Shirley Krenak’s rhetoric in the film. Consequently, including not only portrait photos of the indigenous people looking directly into the camera lens, but also shots of everyday life, corroborates historically perpetuated imagery that emphasises the distance between cultures, in a process of downgrading the indigenous culture, if we consider how the idea of urban and scientific development has been linearly valued. No wonder that this sequence shows a couple bearing a bow and arrow, a woman carrying a child on her back, a small group of people rubbing wooden sticks together to make a fire (Figure 6). The last photo is actually the only one with a caption that identifies the people as

botocudos, a generic name which colonisers called different indigenous groups belonging to the macro-Jê trunk, also called aymorés.



Figure 6. After the prologue, with an almost ghostly appearance of Krenak, the film begins with a sequence of ten photos of indigenous people from the macro-jê trunk (image from the film)

Credits. From *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas*, 00:04:43, by S. Lira, 2021. Copyright 2021 by Modo Operante.

The photos slide slowly across the screen to the sound of the rattles of the indigenous peoples. The slow pace, the absence of any explanatory rhetoric and the distant time that the black and white pictures suggest, create a very poignant dramatic effect, especially due to the visible physical fragility of the indigenous children who appear in some of the photos and evoke the recent situation of the starving and sick Yanomami, in pictures that were widely circulated at the beginning of 2023. Past and present inexorably linked, modernity and coloniality intertwined by the visual material that was recorded in the coloniser's style, that is, as a museum archive, and which is even more powerful in the narrative flow as the script and editing show the voice and face of power that continues to use tricks to deny the rights of the original peoples.

The narrative ingeniously uses one of the most striking symbols of modernity — a train — which is still laden with minerals. The documentary thus transitions from indigenous representation to the exaltation of colonial discourse, amplified by the narrative that praises the French ensign Guido Manieri, introduced in the documentary through the original soundtrack¹² as someone “who accompanied King João VI on his trip to Brazil, and later became the protector of all against the Brazilian savages, especially the infamous *botocudos* of Rio Doce”. This and other excerpts of the film which was integrated into the documentary's narrative praise the achievements of the white man, emphasising

¹² Film from the collection of the Indian Museum (Funai), undated, but presumably produced between the 1960s and 1970s.

that “where the jaguar used to rampage, the zebu grazes quietly; where the despicable Indian savage once lived there is now an infirmary and a school; and the Indian, under the aegis of the law, is a citizen”. This contrasts vividly with Shirley Krenak’s oral memory that hints at conflicting values and requires the viewer to take a stand on the right of indigenous peoples to keep their land and their culture. In other words, the comparison in the film brings to light the way in which each people relates to nature and a moment in Brazilian history that does not hide how it viewed the “other”, the indigenous people.

The more obvious contrast between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures, which includes a series of cultural marks such as Shirley Krenak’s body paintings and Nélida’s clothes and certain props and ways of doing her hair, are not as visible in Maria. In this case, the social differences come up on screen, translated especially through the direct reference to the Landless People’s Movement, mentioned earlier: the “other” who is almost hegemonically treated by the media as a criminal, living on the fringes of a society in which property ownership rights are above the right to life. Considering the choices in the narrative, the biographical uniqueness of Nélida, Shirley and Maria visibly confirm their lucid awareness of their inner self, about the reality of the world and the environmental, cultural and historical conditions restricting their existence, including how the “other” recognises them. This is because, although not disconnecting from the complexity of the world, the two documentaries avoid social typologies, reversing the disjunction between the object and the subject of knowledge, undeniable foundation of Eurocentric modernity. Investing in subjectivities shaped by the persisting violence of the colonial process, the works reveal the emancipatory experiences of each protagonist and the people around them.

The fact is that addressing narratives that seek to unveil other links with a nature that is distant from the majority of the Latin American population — since around 81% of the population lives in cities — also means observing and monitoring the ramifications that these works unfold both in their filmic materiality and in the media crossings that they allow us to undertake. In our opinion, this is because in the discursive game of these projects, adherence to the causes is, as always, established through a dialectic relationship, in other words, without the mythical-prophetic experience of emotional interaction and the meaning of life in nature — we are part of it, and we are not animals apart from nature. There will always be room for ambiguities that cause oppression and the desire for extermination to endure, as some moments in these works reveal quite explicitly. These are for example the scenes of confrontation between social movements and the police in both documentaries, the Brazilian film, as we have seen, recalling the Carajá massacre.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The article sets out to discuss the possible contributions of the documentaries *Hija de la Laguna* (Cabellos, 2015) and *A Mãe de Todas as Lutas* (Lira, 2021) raising a new awareness of nature that is distinct from both the European *logos* and the environmental

discourses which Malcom Ferdinand (2022) refers to negatively, in his assessment that these tend to erase the social and political gaps created by the destruction of the planet. From this perspective and based on film analysis, the text compares the message of the decolonial movement and the narratives of documentary films, observed not only from the subjects they address, but also for the aesthetic and stylistic strategies they use. To that effect, this paper highlights the scenic and rhetorical construction of the protagonists, locating them in the context of community feminism, one of the theories that is integrated into the decolonial struggle; it points out extractivism and neo-extractivism as regarded by different authors (Acosta & Brand, 2018; Aráoz, 2020; Svampa, 2016, 2019), as fundamental to the preservation of relations that originated in the colonial period, and also stresses a process of differentiation maintained to differentiate the marginal “other”, be it an indigenous person or a landless rural worker, a situation that almost always normalises relations of oppression and lack of rights, justifying actions of explicit or invisible violence.

Considering that the current audiovisual culture contributes significantly to the production of world views and meanings, the analysis intended not only to foster enhanced appreciation of the works, but also to locate them in a context of struggles and resistance to predatory activities which affect the protagonists and their communities, but that can also be replicated through inferences. One such inference, which both documentaries also focused on, is the acknowledgement that the climate crisis must be addressed within a broad scope, incorporating the struggle for land ownership and the way humans relate to it — for example, not turning it into large pastures — and the struggle to maintain water sources, which for now may not be an issue, but if they disappear desertification will have devastating consequences.

Of course, as pointed out elsewhere, these works have to be seen as cultural products that are part of a larger group, in this case, the intensive production of documentaries (Ramos, 2008) and, among them, those that focus on environmental issues (Duvall, 2017). This is against the backdrop of growing environmentalist movements and the focus on a milestone that is the construction of “a militant anti-colonialist cinema in the form of documentaries” (Shohat & Stam, 2006, p. 373), which began in the mid-1960s. Since then, there have obviously been many changes and criticisms. Consequently, we highlight herein, in line with Julieta Paredes Carvajal (2020) and Lélia Gonzalez (2020), the criticism of a political stance taken on the left-wing spectrum that was based exclusively on social and economic issues, ignoring gender and ethnic oppressive differences and inequalities. This is why we have highlighted in our analyses the contributions of the two documentaries to this diagnosis.

We also think it is necessary to point out how the decolonial movement or theory — both concepts are appropriate — call for approaches and proposals that are crossed by criticism of persisting colonisation in various dimensions, despite the end of formal colonisation and the achievement of economic and political independence for Latin American countries, as Maldonado-Torres (2023) warns about. From this perspective, the legacies of colonialism continue to exist at different levels of social organisation,

which places decoloniality as “a living struggle in the midst of competing visions and ways of experiencing time, space and other basic coordinates of human subjectivity and sociability” (Maldonado-Torres, 2023, p. 29). This process that allows us to align ourselves with the *good living* policy proposal, which recognises, as mentioned in the text, its matrix linked (but not exclusive) to native peoples: their visions of the cosmos, the relationships they establish with the natural world, the way they preserve their traditions and knowledge. In other words, a position that is present in both films, even if it is not spelled out.

Finally, acknowledging that academia must analyse the expressive and cultural products of our time, recognising the extent to which they integrate everyday imaginaries in a mediated society, we have committed to this investigative-analytical process that reinforces, in short, the integration of some struggles in the environmental urgencies. This position also implies, in line with the films, the search for social justice. In other words, without social justice, no ecological crisis can be overcome. Social and historical justice is what Shirley Krenak is claiming. Through her solar presence on screen she demands the return of what belongs to her and her people, exposing the genocide against the indigenous people that never ended in Brazil. Seldom are those who have had to live with promises of land ownership and access that are fulfilled at a slow pace and with on-going battling, heard. Brazilian landless people are so often regarded as criminals because of what they are fairly claiming, as happened to Maria Zelzuita, who survived the massacre and has not given up. To conclude, the right to water, without which there is no life, is what Nélide, the lunar and resilient character, continues to fight for. That is perhaps why the most powerful moment of communion in the film is the scene where she pays tribute to the five campaigners murdered by the police force of Peru during the Protest for Water. Slowly Nélide casts their pictures into the lagoon, and then flowers which float with the current, just like the images.

Translation: Traversões, Serviços Linguísticos, Lda.

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