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Publisher: Routledge

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## Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjla20>

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Published online: 10 Oct 2013.

**To cite this article:** Gustavo Procopio Furtado , Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies (2013): The Borders of Sense: Revisiting Iracema, Uma transa amazônica (1974), Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2013.840276>

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# Gustavo Procopio Furtado

## THE BORDERS OF SENSE: REVISITING *IRACEMA, UMA TRANSA AMAZÔNICA* (1974)

*A landmark of Brazilian cinema, Iracema: Uma transa Amazônica (1974), by Jorge Bodansky and Orlando Senna, remains an underexplored film. This fiction-documentary hybrid is a visual reflection on territoriality, mobility, and borders – borders that are inherently paradoxical, limits constituted by contact, lines of division drawn by virtue of the possibility of their crossing. This article considers the significance of the film as a form of sociopolitical critique carried out by narrative and allegorical components. The film, however, also contains elements that resist interpretation, relating to the filming of unplanned and improvised encounters between film and lived, historical world. This article explores the implications of this dual gesture and proposes ways to appreciate the elements in the film that do not bear intended meaning but are highly significant.*

A landmark of Brazilian cinema, *Iracema, Uma transa Amazônica* (1974), by Jorge Bodansky and Orlando Senna, remains an underexplored film. This fiction-documentary hybrid is a visual reflection on territoriality, mobility, and borders – borders that are inherently paradoxical, limits drawn by virtue of the possibility of their crossing, at once the place of differentiation and contact between bodies or territories, as Michel de Certeau once noted ([De Certeau 1988: 127](#)). The permeability of borders is potently suggested in the film's title, starting with the recasting of the name 'Iracema,' which, taken from the indigenous protagonist of the nineteenth-century romantic novel by José de Alencar, is moved across time as well as across the border between media. The name, an anagram of 'America,' is also latent with resignification through the crossing over of its letters. More importantly, the title puns on the name of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, the epic, never-completed project of the military government that was intended to integrate the Amazonian region with the rest of the country. The prefix *trans*, which already suggests a moving over or across, becomes *transa*, Brazilian slang derived from the word for 'transaction,' which can refer to illicit or informal exchanges as well as to the sexual act. The semantic field invoked by the title, then, invites us from the start to think about mobility and acts of crossing over, exchange, commerce, and even skin-to-skin contact.

This article explores limits and crossings as they operate simultaneously in *Iracema's* location in the territory of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, in its own mixed cinematic practice, and ultimately in our critical analysis, which brings the film across a border of signification to be described and critiqued in writing. The film plays at the border of nonfiction and fiction but goes beyond the neorealist tendency characteristic of classics of 'cinema novo' – such as the fictions of Nelson Pereira dos Santos and

Glauber Rocha, which used amateur actors and real settings in part to enhance their films' sociopolitical thrust. More radical in its mixture of registers, *Iracema* combines elements of narrative fiction that have strong allegorical overtones with a style that is open to unmanaged, improvised, and even insignificant events that unfold in front of the camera. To a large extent this ambiguous practice enables, by way of similarity, a filmic critique of the effects of the highway on the Amazonian region. Insofar as the making of *Iracema* entails a sort of invasion of the region's everyday space and the appropriation of footage of non-actors in the service of narrative and argumentative goals, the film's production parallels the invasion of the region and the appropriation of resources for the sake of outside interests (Xavier 1999: 240). While explaining and acknowledging the implications and effects of this parallelism, this article also argues that the ensuing transactions between real bodies and abstract meanings exceed this initial function, placing not just film practice but also our own critique at a crossroads between two approaches that, although not mutually exclusive, resist conflation into one another. The first of these approaches consists of making sense of the film through a critical reading of its connotations and allegorical meanings – meanings that can be exegetically retrieved from the text. The second, more elusive and not yet appreciated by the critical literature, consists of acknowledging what may be called the raw physicality of the film. I am using this term to refer to the many improvised interactions between bodies and the camera – interactions that cannot be subsumed into narrative, allegorical, or argumentative lines – as well as to the film's frequent sensuous invocations that result from the camera's immersion into an unmanaged material world. While acknowledging *Iracema* as a meaningful and allegorical text, the following pages pay close attention to the film as a collection of physical and sensuous events that demand an embodied form of critical engagement.

### Narrative and allegorical meaning

Although *Iracema* is highly invested in unscripted improvisation and happenstance, Bodansky and Senna's film also works as a narrative fiction. This fiction emerges from fragments, elliptical episodes that advance a story centered on the relationship between Tião Brasil Grande, played by the boisterous actor Paulo César Pereio, and Iracema, played by Edna de Cássia in her first and only cinematic role. Having gathered enough fragments of this story, the viewer is able to retrospectively interpret the film as a narrative fiction, and thus lose sight of the myriad elements that escape and resist absorption by the narrative. I will delve into these elements in the next section. First, I will sketch out the film's storyline and develop its allegorical resonances.

The film tells a lapsarian tale about an indigenous girl who becomes a prostitute in the territory of the Trans-Amazonian Highway. In the opening shots, Iracema is seen in a small boat that is traveling to the bustling port town of Belém. At one point along this trip the passengers pause to refresh themselves in the river. Iracema, fully dressed, plays and splashes like an innocent teen. Right after the boat ride, she walks through a street market, which forebodes the way that, in the next scene, she herself becomes a type of merchandise. In contrast to the swimming scene, the now-topless Iracema puts on make-up and gets dressed to work as a prostitute. In the following episode she encounters Tião Brasil Grande, a truck driver named after one of Brazil's military regime's nationalist slogans that represented the official goal of the new roadway: to

integrate the remote Amazon region with the rest of the country. Tião takes Iracema along on the highway as he deals in illegally harvested lumber, and later, after an unromantic affair, abandons her by a roadside bar deep in the Amazonian territory. After this scene, each time we encounter Iracema she seems more diminished and worn-out until, in the final scene, she is disheveled, missing a tooth, and wearing a single boot.

The film's narrative invites an array of interpretive operations. The path of the boat in the opening scenes – from a small, wooded river that merges into a larger one that finally leads to a bustling port town – foreshadows the narrative's lapsarian structure. Moreover, to the extent that the film evokes José de Alencar's novel, it is worth recalling the text's function as a foundational fiction, as Doris Sommer argues (Sommer 1991). Alencar's novel belongs to a corpus of Latin American texts that, weighted with racial anxiety, finds in the multiracial romance an ideal founding fiction for the incipient nation. In Alencar's novel, a noble Portuguese warrior and an Indian princess fall in love and have a child, the first Brazilian. Alencar's difficulty in fully integrating the Indian into his imagined nation is manifested in the fact that Iracema dies shortly after giving birth, while the Portuguese father lives on. Although the film is not an adaptation, its narrative recasts some elements of Alencar's story. In Bodansky and Senna's film, however, the encounter between white and Indian is stripped of all romantic subterfuge and presented as bluntly perverse and exploitative. Thus, the film updates Alencar's founding national allegory by recasting it as a hyperrealist dystopia.

In another allegorical dimension, both the story and the character played by Edna de Cássia represent the effects of the type of capitalist development brought about by the military regime. The various means of circulation depicted (the river, the boat, the port town, the newly opened road) along with the various forms of transaction and commercialization (the street market, the dealings of Tião in lumber and cattle, Iracema's prostitution) render visible the destructive facets of capitalism in 1970s Brazil and arguably beyond. What is proposed by the government as 'development' and 'progress,' repeatedly alluded to by Tião's echoing of governmental slogans, is recast here as the unleashing of a destructive force that will consume, extract, transform, and destroy everything it can seize. Interpreted in this way, Iracema's decay represents a broader phenomenon that is visible in the Amazonian territory as a whole. As we travel the Trans-Amazonian Highway, we see swaths of forest reduced to stumps by logging. In one unforgettable travelling shot, the camera drives past an endless section of the forest being consumed by fire. In roadside joints and muddy shantytowns, the film also displays the bleak living conditions endured by migrants who were lured by the government to colonize the region. While the official rhetoric surrounding the construction of the road emphasizes national integration, the film reveals multiple forms of displacement, disruption, exploitation, and destruction brought about by the newly opened road. The misfortunes of people and territory are allegorically represented in the narrative and particularly inscribed on Iracema's body, which, following the encounter with the 'great Brazil,' is used, abused, and pushed aside.

### **The significance of the meaningless**

I started this essay by analyzing the film in a representational and allegorical key not only because this approach to *Iracema* is compelling but also because it constitutes a

familiar mode of cultural criticism. We (by which I mean critics of Latin American cultural texts) are most comfortable approaching literature and cinema as allegories of the socio-historical and placing them in frameworks that can include many texts at once, sometimes to the detriment of the specificities and idiosyncrasies of each work.<sup>1</sup> Against the grain of these tendencies, this article excavates a single film to unearth elements that elude broad allegorical readings.

Filmed primarily with a handheld camera and by a small, mobile crew, much of *Iracema* gives the impression of trying to encounter everyday life unguarded. Most of the film's participants are local people going about their daily lives – sometimes ignoring the presence of the camera crew's activities, sometimes visibly intrigued by them. Tião strikes up many conversations with strangers who are then forced to improvise with the actor in conversations that blend fictional theatrics with reportage-style interviews. As a result, this dimension of the film works less as an allegorical narrative than as a filmic registering of a series of unrehearsed encounters with everyday life.

*Iracema* abounds with images and visual elements that resist interpretation such as gestures, glances, and a plethora of phenomena that are less conceptual than tactile, less meaningful than sensuous. While discussing the film in an allegorical key, I mentioned the opening shots of the boat in the river and *Iracema*'s later meandering through the market. Retrospectively, these scenes nestle neatly into a narrative. Yet they also abound with non-signifying elements and with references to brute bodily experience. A plunge into everyday life, the extended opening sequence shows a wide range of ordinary tasks and actions such as cooking, eating, collecting and transporting baskets of fruit, listening to the radio, swimming. There is an intense sensorial materiality to these shots, resulting from the fact that, at this point, we lack a narrative structure that could tether these fragments of bodily experience to meaning. Further enhancing the materiality of these everyday gestures, the human sensorium is often invoked – as in the shot in which a woman hand-presses açai berries and pulp squeezes through her fingers. As we will see, invocations of tactility such as these punctuate the film's entrance into the Amazonian world – working as reminders that the film does not operate only at a symbolic representational level but at a bodily and sensate level as well.

After several scenes in the boat, the passengers land at the port town of Belém. Unless the viewer is familiar with the film in advance, it is only here that *Iracema* begins to stand out as a 'character.' We lose track of the other passengers but continue to (loosely) accompany her – a continuity that signals her transition from an anonymous body, unbound by the filmmakers' intended narrative meaning, toward her role as a protagonist in the film's narrative. The phrase 'stand out,' however, is not quite accurate. *Iracema* rather immerses herself in the crowd, starting at a portside market, and later in a sort of street fair or carnival at night. Sparse with providing contextual information, the film leaves us groping at fragments, feeling our way through a textural rather than textual display of ordinary, embodied life. Up to this point we are still, by and large, denied a position of interpretive exteriority, without a signifying structure of narrative or argument that would permit us to understand events rather than experience them. The bodies we see are unavailable for meaning. This situation can be illuminated by Edouard Glissant's discussion of transparency and opacity. By refusing to yield meaning to another's gaze, bodies remain singular and opaque. 'Opacities,' he

writes, ‘can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand this truly, one must focus on the texture of the weave, not on the nature of its components’ (Glissant 1997: 190). Similarly, inhabited by the protagonists of undisclosed lives, the film interweaves a tapestry of opaque singularities. The gestures of a multitude of bodies appearing in the film are simply not meant to bear meaning for us.

There are too many compelling sensual shots to describe here, but their overwhelming tactility can be gleaned from a few examples. A man soaps his body vigorously by the river. We see a woman grab a leafy green from a broth with her fingers and, in close-up, we see the vegetable dangle from her lips before she slurps it (figure 1). Iracema and others are seen handling the merchandise of street vendors – as if indulging in a sort of affective, sensorial purchase. The camera as a material object is felt as it moves unsteadily through the crowd, its presence accused by the direct glances of passersby or blocked by random objects. For a moment a red cloth completely blocks the view, heightening the sense of tactility by denying the penetration of vision (figures 2 – 4). These shots exemplify what some film theorists call ‘haptic’ (Marks 2000: 162) or ‘prehensile’ images (MacDougall 2006: 22); that is, images that refuse to yield to the penetration of vision and emerge as textures more available to tactile sensibility than to visual mastery or comprehension. The ever-changing image (a result of the mobility of the camera) is often uncentered, not focused on any single object or person. It is open to the excess of stimuli and of acting bodies, open to the physical contingencies of chance encounters (remitting, in fact, to contingency’s etymological roots, *cum + tangere*, or ‘with touch’).

It is important to emphasize that in the street scenes I am describing physical proximity is not the effect of a zoom. This is not a penetration of vision divorced from the condition of mutual proximity and vulnerability or from the possibility of contact. Rather than enabling visual mastery, the scene performs and evokes forms of embodied engagement. The camera’s plunge into the world mimics Iracema’s entrance into the crowd. This reciprocity is not limited to the relationship between the cameraperson and the pedestrians – we, too, are conjured into the crowd. At times we sense that the bodies of strangers brush against the body holding the camera. Through a slippage enabled by the prosthetic experience of the eye of the camera, our own sense of



FIGURE 1



**FIGURE 2**

corporeality is invited to coincide with the body holding the device. This slippage is especially provoked by the similarity between this filming body's motility – its bipedal wobble, its brush-wiggle-push negotiation of physical obstacles and the crowd – and our own familiar bodily experience. As a result, we are likely to feel as if the skin of strangers has brushed against our own.<sup>2</sup>

This corporeality of the image, resistant to abstraction, exemplifies what visual anthropologist David MacDougall calls the 'corporeal image,' images that enable a film to cross 'the threshold into a different sensory relationship between the film subjects and the film audience in which the human body is allowed to 'speak' more eloquently' (2006: 15). One of the consequences of this crossing is that *Iracema's* 'corporeal images' offer resistance to the voyeuristic tendency of metropolitan viewers. We are not just shown a world but, within the possibilities of the audiovisual media, are made to bump shoulders and collide with its inhabitants. Corporeal images kindle a relationship of somatic empathy between film audience and film subjects.



**FIGURE 3**



**FIGURE 4**

As the reader may have noted, I am elaborating a phenomenological description of the film – or, if I may borrow Clifford Gertz’s phrase, a ‘thick description,’ understood as a full-bodied engagement and acknowledgement of elements of the image before they are subsumed by the undertow of argument and narrative. Rather than an exegetical search for abstract meaning, I am emphasizing what Jacques Rancière, paraphrasing Flaubert, calls the ‘splendor of the insignificant’ (Rancière 2006: 8–9). The phrase refers to elements that are insubordinate to intended meanings and left loose in the text, uncollected by narrative or argumentative functions. Cinema may be the medium most capable of representing the insignificant, as André Bazin implies in the ‘Ontology of the Photographic Image.’ He writes: ‘All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence’ (Bazin 2005: 13). This ‘absence of man’ refers to the fact that the device’s recording function exceeds the operator’s intention and indiscriminately registers whatever comes into its view. This indiscriminateness enables the emergence of elements in excess of intended meaning – what Barthes once described as the *punctum*, the element in a photographic image that pierces the intentional composition, or the *studium*. A case in point, in *Iracema*, the camera’s mechanical reproduction allows for the unintended and uncontrolled to emerge in full force, as we witness in countless shots and images. This is particularly intense in the extended scenes that are presented without narrative context that could arrest elements of the images and harness them to a meaning-generating function. The ‘insignificance’ of a woman slurping a bit of soggy spinach, paradoxically enough, is significant precisely because of its non-availability as a legible sign, its refusal of transparency. The insignificant is the remainder that belies any masterful exegesis of the film.

### The borders of sense

The fundamental ambiguity between the tactility of the everyday, nudging the viewer toward an intellectually disarming sensorial experience of the film, and the structural logic of an authored, allegorical narrative is not easy to reconcile. The former, hinging on the openness of the film’s physical practice, conjures the viewer’s corporeality and



folds it into the texture of *Iracema*'s world. The structural aspects, in contrast, may hurl the viewer out of the viewed world toward a position of critical, surveying exteriority. A reading that emphasizes the allegorical narrative would tacitly presume the transparency of the text's meaning and locate itself at a masterful distance from its object of analysis. Nevertheless, while elements of the film allow, even invite, the recognition of macrostructures such as the recasting of the lapsarian myth or of Alencar's foundational fiction, countless other elements resist abstraction. A neat analysis of the narrative structure would have to deal with (or hide) a pile of debris, the outstanding balance of its interpretive transactions.

We may recall here David Bordwell's formulation in *Narration in the Fiction Film* regarding what he sees as the potential excess of the visual elements of narrative cinema – that is, contingent visual elements that remain in the image as residue, uninvited and unabsorbed by the narrative. These bits of the world, he writes, 'casual lines, colors, expressions, and textures are the "fellow travelers" of the story' (Bordwell 1985: 53). In films that attempt to master the material contingencies of *mise-en-scène*, these bits of debris are like stowaways. In *Iracema* the potency of the insignificant is such that it would not do it justice to define its presence under the rubric of 'fellow travelers.' In some segments, the reverse may be more apt: The narrative elements are the fellow travelers of a film that thrives by documenting the insignificant, the excess of the profilmic world. A well-rounded engagement with the film must deal with the tension generated between the legible and the opaquely sensorial, between the film's textual strategies and unmanaged traces operating with a non-conceptual logic.

The tension between the fictional-allegorical and the documentation of an unmanaged everyday world constitutes a duplicity that is everywhere present and dynamic in the film, cutting through, dividing, and reconstituting its space. The borderline between the staged scene and the uncontrolled event is sometimes incorporated within a single shot, as a sort of territorial limit. In two particularly potent examples, the gritty realism of local people eating and drinking inside a restaurant is awkwardly rimmed and unsettled by a line of curious bystanders looking in from the street. Both scenes portray staged, realistic conversations: the first between



FIGURE 5

businessmen negotiating the entrance of a multinational company into the region (figure 5), the other a casual conversation between Tião and three other men (figure 6). I say that these conversations are ‘realistic’ in the sense that their main players obey the conventions of representational realism, with its injunction that the presence of the camera and crew be ignored for the sake of creating the illusion of a self-enclosed diegesis. The participants in these fictional scenes help to erase the presence of the film crew and apparatus. The pedestrians, on the other hand, gaze at the scene of filming rather than at the scene being filmed and expose the presence of the otherwise hidden process of production.

The border between organized *mise-en-scène* and spontaneous life comes into view, causing indeterminations and exchanges: Under a gaze that exposes the production of the film, the hyperrealistic restaurant space is revealed as a sort of fiction, a cinematic construction. Yet the people who are looking in, acting quite in conflict with conventions of realism, certify to the film’s location at an unmanageable, un-authored world of inhabitants of everyday life that are capable of transforming the text at the moment of production in ways that exceed authorial forethought. Thus, their presence at once undermines and authenticates the film’s closeness to lived experience. In such scenes, we may think of the border that comes into view as that between fiction and nonfiction. The film’s approach to production creates a space of contact between the two, a threshold.

Thinking through this situation in terms of fiction and nonfiction brings to mind Michael Chanan’s differentiation between documentary and fiction film in territorial terms (2007). The difference for Chanan hinges on the film’s relationship to its exterior – understood as the lived world beyond the frame. While fiction amounts to the founding of a world apart (and is, as such, a space severed from and parallel to the lived world), the documentary indexes a part of the lived world (one that, despite the break of the frame, is contiguous with it). The borders of the fictional screen, then, demarcate its rupture from the real; they are the place where the diegesis cuts itself off from the lived world to invent its own. In the documentary, on the other hand, the edges of the screen do not constitute an impervious border or rupture because the lived



**FIGURE 6**

world continues beyond the frame. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, Chanan notes that we or anyone we know can potentially make a surprise appearance in the documentary and, as in the crowd gathered outside the restaurant, demonstrate through that appearance the contiguity between the space represented in film and lived, historic space. As is the case with all clear-cut differentiations between documentary and fiction, Chanan's has limited applicability. According to his definition, the films of Italian neorealism would be documentaries. Studio-made historical nonfiction films, particularly those involving dramatic reenactments, being temporally cut off from the time to which they refer and unable to deliver indexical images, would be fictions.

Still, Chanan's delineation of the two paradigms of film in terms of their relationships to the outside world is suggestive. Film may either attempt to sever its connection to the outside in the invention of a completely controlled, authored world (which characterizes the majority of narrative fiction) or it may attempt to explore a relationship of linkage and continuity with it (which characterizes the majority of documentaries). These two options coexist dialectically in a productive tension that is at once cinema's condition of possibility and statute of limitations. The severed world of the most fantastic fiction still deploys the indexical capacity of the camera and thus documents a materiality of being that is in excess of authorial, narrative intentions.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, documentary films cannot escape the fact that they do not offer a transparent, direct view of the 'real' but are textual constructs that, as do fiction films, rely on many artificial operations and techniques in order to create a final product. I do not state this to make a point about the inaccessible nature of the real or to conclude, as some have hastily done, that because there is no unmediated access to 'truth,' documentaries do not exist.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I am noting that because of this founding ambiguity of cinema, or what Rancière calls cinema's double power (2006), documentary film bears not only traces of the material world but the marks of its own textual construction. Conversely, the fictional image may stand, despite its best managerial efforts, as an inadvertently indexical document of the contingencies of the material world. In *Iracema* cinema's double power is exacerbated and brought to the forefront. Synergies between the two registers erupt, manifested in borders such as the one in the restaurant scene.

The manner in which we deal with this contact is one of the critical problems of *Iracema*, as can be gleaned from the critical literature. Although recognized as a groundbreaking film, it is more often the subject of a footnote or a brief laudatory reference than an in-depth analysis. Part of the problem is that its confusion of fiction and nonfiction places it outside or on the margins of the purview of analyses that focus on either category.<sup>5</sup> Filmmaker and critic Eduardo Escorel, in his periodization of Brazilian cinema, points out that *Iracema* inaugurates a new phase because it 'reconciles fiction and documentary.'<sup>6</sup> In another text, still keeping his mention of the film brief despite its alleged importance, Escorel rephrases his evaluation by stating that *Iracema* represents the renewal of Brazilian fiction film through its inclusion of documentary procedures – that is, its 'reconciliation' of fiction and documentary is an appropriation of the procedures of the latter into the logic of the former (Escorel 2005: 102). In a recent book, Fernão Pessoa Ramos formulates a slightly different thesis, which, nevertheless, unproblematically subsumes the documentary aspect of the film into the fictional. The fact that the film's fictional narrative makes use of the unpremeditated

events of daily life does not imply a mix ('mestiçagem') of fiction and documentary genres. The film is unquestionably a work of fiction (Ramos 2008: 45).

Variations of this notion are operative in much of Brazilian film criticism and justify the exclusion of the film from works that focus on the documentary. Jean Claude Bernadet's *Cineastas e Imagens do Povo* (*Filmmakers and the Images of the People*) and Silvio Da-Rin's *O Espelho Partido* (*The Broken Mirror*) are interesting examples. Both focus on documentary practice and, in different ways, set up problems with which *Iracema* could have been placed in productive dialogue, but the film is left out, presumably due to its classification as fiction. Bernadet's insightful close readings of Brazilian documentaries of the 1970s are a critique of the evolving relationship between filmmakers and 'the people' ('o povo') and also of the manner in which the voice-over – what he calls 'a voz do saber' (the voice of knowledge) – operates in these films to transform the people filmed into objects of knowledge for an external audience. In this respect, *Iracema*'s abandonment of a sociological, knowledgeable posture in favor of tactile, bodily engagement could provide a powerful alternative, potentially marking a new point of departure.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the final chapter of Da-Rin's book champions the work of Arthur Omar, Jorge Furtado, and Eduardo Coutinho for their complex awareness of the documentary as a textual form – thus his notion of the broken mirror, to suggest the move beyond the view of documentary film as a reflection of reality. *Iracema* is as complex as the films Da-Rin discusses, anticipates most of them, and would serve as a foil for many of his examples because of its simultaneous awareness of film as a constructed text and its investment in the indexical image (and is in sharp contrast with the deconstructive reflexivity of Omar's 'anti-documentários,' in which films are conceived as texts that refer primarily to themselves and not to the lived world). These omissions of *Iracema* reflect the prevalence of Escorel's and Ramos's notion that *Iracema* is a fiction film that incorporates elements of the documentary – or, as a recent article put it, that the film is a 'poorly behaved fiction' (Bruzzo 2006).

Yet the opposite statement could also be maintained. Commissioned and partly financed by a television network in West Germany as a documentary on the environmental devastation of the region, the film may derive its primary thrust from its documentary aspect.<sup>8</sup> In an interview, Bodansky himself describes his films as documentaries with incorporated elements of fiction (Bruzzo 2006: 296), suggesting that his view is opposite to the views of Escorel and Ramos, and from the implied positions of Bernadet and Da-Rin.

*Iracema*'s entangling of fiction and documentary registers has kept the film on the periphery of critical discussions to which it could have contributed. That said, I do not propose that it is desirable or even possible to securely classify the film as either fiction or documentary. Rather, a fruitful approach must account for the dynamic interaction between the two registers, as Ismail Xavier demonstrates in what is perhaps the best analysis of the film to date.<sup>9</sup> Observing the mimetic relationship between the exploitative invasion of the territory by outside interests and the invasion conducted by the making of the film, Xavier notes that social, economic, and cultural domination are incorporated as the organizing principle of *mise-en-scène* (Xavier 1990: 368). This takes place through the improvised interactions of the actor Paulo César Pereio with the inhabitants of the region. Like a 'cinema verité' interviewer, Pereio's impromptu conversations with people initiate a sort of game in which 'theater contaminates brute experience.' The relationships between actor and interlocutors are fundamentally

asymmetrical: as an actor, he masters the norms of the theatrical game and they do not. The contrast between Pereio's swagger and the palpable awkwardness of some of his interlocutors, unsure about the codes determining the interaction they are having with the actor, becomes a performative reenactment of the asymmetries of power that plagued plans for the 'development' of the region.<sup>10</sup> In Xavier's reading, then, the film's power rests on the simultaneous deployment of a documentary approach and the theatrics of fictional drama.

In order to further develop the significance of the film's mixed practice, I think it is useful to shift attention from the terms 'documentary' and 'fiction' as broadly understood toward the relationship between structures of meaning and contingent events as they interact in Bodansky and Senna's film.<sup>11</sup> Speaking as an anthropologist about the difficulties of understanding human experience, Geertz once noted the necessity of 'a continuous dialectical tracking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure' (Geertz 1983: 69). This dual tracking aptly describes the dialectics at work in *Iracema*.

Regarding the film's inclusion of the unmanaged and the spontaneous, comparison with the military regime's official description of the Trans-Amazonian Highway is revealing. We can access this official version not just through the parroting of Tião Brasil Grande during the film, but more directly through the 'cine-jornais,' the government's propagandistic newsreels produced during the period.<sup>12</sup> In a 1970 'cine-jornal' entitled 'A Transamazônica,' released shortly after President Médici's visit to the highway's construction site in the town of Altamira, the narrator reveals the government's obsession with the rational management of people and space: the highway 'is an enormous step in the rational occupation of an area characterized by a demographic emptiness comparable only to the polar regions.' The narrator goes on to cite President Médici's Altamira speech at length. The goal of the highway, the General claims, is to address the problems of 'people without land in the northeast and land without people in the Amazon.' Putting on display the importance of order in the government's fiction, the narrator also reveals the glibness with which the regime envisions the manipulation of bodies on an imaginary map, an imperial mise-en-scène that rearranges the redistribution of tens of thousands with one painless sweep. Throughout the decade, the government-produced newsreel series continued to develop this narrative of rational development with repeated formal and thematic characteristics: authoritative voice-over narration, the images of tractors breaking and smoothing the ground, and the sound of orchestras playing adaptations of Brazilian themes. To the extent that local people appear in this series, they serve as evidence for the government's narrative. Unlike the shacks shown in *Iracema*, here we see orderly, newly built, white-washed houses. Some are prosperous, such as the family of Samuel Transamazônico – 'the first child born during the construction of the road,' as we are told in 'A Transamazônica: O caminho do homem' (1971). The 'cine-jornais' are not just a mouthpiece for the military regime; they also mirror its approach to power, characterized by an intolerance of alternate versions of reality. Thus these films are purged of any reference to the shortcomings of the project. This authoritarian approach to power is also captured in one of the most memorable slogans of the time, 'Brazil, love it or leave it' ('Brasil, ame-o ou deixe-o'), which is stickered to Tião Brasil Grande's windshield as a reminder.

In part, *Iracema* counteracts the official narrative by putting on display some of the bleakest consequences of the project of national integration. But the film goes beyond presenting visible evidence contradicting the regime's self-congratulatory claims. With its heterogeneous combination of fictional and allegorical elements, documentary footage, and its vast collection of gestures from unmanaged everyday life, *Iracema* hurls a pile of debris at the government's fiction of order and progress. The film embodies an ethos fundamentally distinct from that of the government. While the regime seeks the integration of a 'Brasil Grande' that is free of conflict or dissent, the film thrives on heterogeneity and the inclusion of contingencies. The newsreel's voice-over narration and Médici's discourse reveal an authoritative view from above, an Icarian view that is disentangled from the vicissitudes of embodied experience. Illustrating this distance, Médici's proposition about the relocation of bodies across regions reveals a cartographic – removed, abstract, authoritative – perspective on national space and its inhabitants. In contrast, *Iracema* turns to 'the most local of local details' at the ground level of everyday experience. In other words, the film's raw physicality provides more than a counter argument to the official narrative; it is a counter example that enacts a radically different approach and relationship to the world.

By raw physicality I am referring both to the camera's plunge into everyday space and to the way the film compels our attention at a visceral rather than conceptual level. With respect to the latter aspect, the film anticipates recent theories in media studies that approach cinema as a full-bodied experience. According to these theories, the moving image is not only a system of representation but also an enabler of certain types of bodily experience.<sup>13</sup> Vivian Sobchack, whose existential phenomenology is at the forefront of this corporeal turn, explains that cinema's claim to the viewer's body ensues from its use of "lived modes" of perceptual and sensory experience ... as "sign-vehicles" of representation' (Sobchack 2004: 74). In other words, because film, like a prosthetic human body, perceives the world through motility, vision, and hearing, it is not surprising that it has the capacity to envelop the viewer's senses – so that the moving picture may be thought of as a vessel on which we embark, suggests Giuliana Bruno (Bruno 2002).

Although they are non-conceptual, visceral experiences generated by cinema are by no means insignificant. But their significance emerges from the specific ways in which each film teases, enlists, and compels our own bodily experience. I have begun to establish some of the ways in which *Iracema* works on the bodily level by discussing the market scene, in which the handheld camera's mingling with the crowd, along with the lack of narrative context, allows the emergence of a haptic visuality – a visuality accompanied by the sense of copresence and contact.

The film's last scene, which is both the culmination of *Iracema*'s fictional narrative and one of the strongest invitations to the viewer's corporeal engagement, can serve as a final example. In this scene, the disheveled Iracema is hanging out with a group of women by a roadside shack. Tião arrives, engages with the women for a few minutes, and prepares to leave. Improvised with a group of local prostitutes, the scene has the raw feel of the unmanaged that we have discussed in relation to other moments of the film. In addition to the improvising prostitutes, another man – Tião's travelling companion, a truck driver – appears in the scene. Interestingly enough, this man, the actual owner of a cargo truck, was flagged down by the film crew and convinced to delay his trip for a few minutes to lend his vehicle to the scene. But the driver was in a

hurry to move on and kept interrupting Tião's conversation.<sup>14</sup> Tião's interaction with him – shouting for him to wait – is indicative of the tenuous assemblage that constitutes each moment, an interaction of independent intentions that can be felt throughout the film.

At the end of this scene, the reunited, unromantic couple are laughing and exchanging insults, playing at a sort of reverse erotics: there is something intimate in their unreserved language and laughter, but they exchange insults instead of endearments as they prepare to part. After Tião enters his truck and shuts the door, the camera angle gives us the sensation that we ourselves are being hoisted onto the truck, looking slightly down at Iracema. But as the truck begins to move away, we stay put (although we are somewhat unstable), and the side of the truck passes so near to the camera that it feels like it might scrape against our side. Iracema runs along the vehicle, smiling and insulting Tião, until the truck picks up speed and leaves her and us behind. She strolls towards the voices of the other women, walking into offscreen space. We are left not so much as viewers in the comfort of our seats, but on the open road, unsheltered as the dust rises between the truck and us. The dust and the many scratches on the celluloid (which are present in the recently digitalized version of the film) help to enhance the material texture of an already haptic shot.

In keeping with the ambiguous work performed by the film, this moment concludes both the allegorical narrative and the sensory plunge into the everyday of the region. As allegory, the scene stages the way the ideology of a 'great Brazil' ultimately disregards and abandons fragile bodies, here represented by the indigenous protagonist. The tenuous assembly of the final scene also concludes the film's immersion into an unmanaged everyday space. By leaving us on the road with the improvising prostitutes, watching the actor and the borrowed truck disappear on the horizon, the film seems to place emphasis on the latter. Immediately following the conclusion of the allegory, the last shot can be experienced as a refusal of interpretive distance. It invokes our presence in this dusty Amazonian outpost, sensing Edna de Cássia's presence as she chats somewhere near the camera, physically close but unseen. Within the limits of the audiovisual media, the viewer's body is folded into the sounds not just of the scene filmed but also of the scene of filming. Unlike the removed, disembodied perspective of the official discourse, the viewer is acoustically enveloped. While the film's unsentimental narrative may be pitiless, as Ismail Xavier notes (Xavier 1990: 366), the non-conceptual corporeality of this and other scenes casts an empathetic spell, sets in motion the workings of an unthinking solidarity situated close to the skin. Although such bodily effects are not often accounted for in critical assessments of Brazilian cinema, they are fundamental to *Iracema's* transactions and 'transas' – the film's symbolic and sensual work performed at the limits of national space and at the borders of sense.

## Notes

- 1 To be sure, the tendency to analyze works in an allegorical key is neither unwarranted nor unfruitful. This broad approach to Brazilian films, however, characterizes most publications in the field. Due in part to market demands in the Anglophone world, most books discuss a great volume of works at the expense of depth and detail. To some extent, it is as if the field were condemned to repeatedly

perform an introductory type of discourse, usually under broad regional categories such as ‘Brazilian cinema’ or even the more ample category of ‘Latin American cinema.’ A recent example from *Cinema Journal*, titled ‘After New Latin American Cinema,’ discusses four decades of film production in the entire continent in terms of a transition from neobaroque aesthetics to what the author calls ‘melorealism.’ In my view, one of our current critical tasks is to offer new and finer-grained approaches to Brazilian cinema.

- 2 For an elaborate exploration of this effect, see *Viajo porque preciso, volto porque te amo* (2009), by Karim Ainouz and Marcelo Gomes. For nearly the entire duration of the film the camera sustains the point of view of the protagonist and narrator. At times we see his arms and hands, but the protagonist remains the subject rather than the object of vision. This has the effect of inviting the confusion of sensations between the protagonist’s body and the body of the viewer, a slippage by which representation and direct experience become mutually contaminated.
- 3 This discussion, hinging on the link between the material world and its representation, the index, has been complicated by the advent of digital media. I do not subscribe to the oft-stated view that new media, by enhancing the manipulative capacities of postproduction, completely sever the link between the image and the world. At any rate, because this discussion would take a substantial amount of space, and because the film I am discussing dates from 1974 and is therefore pre-new media, I will not be going to pursue this issue.
- 4 For more on the anti-documentary stance, see Trinh T. Minh-ha’s ‘The Totalizing Quest for Meaning’ in Renov’s collection *Theorizing the Documentary*.
- 5 Another factor affecting the film’s reception: *Iracema* was released in Brazil only in 1980, due to obstruction from the military regime. It is arguable that the film would have had greater impact and generated more critical discussion if it was released in 1974.
- 6 For more, see his essay ‘A direção do olhar’ in *O cinema do real*.
- 7 Bernadet locates the transformation of Brazilian documentary not in *Iracema* but in Eduardo Coutinho’s *Cabra Marcado para Morrer* (1984). As he notes in the introduction, if Coutinho’s film had been released before he had finished writing, he would have written an entirely different book.
- 8 As Randall Johnson argues in *Brazilian Cinema*, this foreign financing was used by the military regime to prevent the film’s distribution for five years. When it sought distribution channels as a Brazilian film it was seen as foreign or vice versa, in a bureaucratic catch-22 that worked as de facto censorship (374).
- 9 While this article was undergoing peer review, another excellent publication on Bodansky and Senna’s film has appeared. Although I was not able to engage with it in the body of this essay, I want to refer the reader to César Guimarães’ “The Scene and the Inscription of the Real,” where he draws a compelling parallel between the inscription of the real (understood in the Lacanian sense) in *Iracema* and in recent works by Eduardo Coutinho. Guimarães, César. 2013. *The Scene and the Inscription of the Real*. In *New Argentine and Brazilian Cinema: Reality Effects*, edited by Jens Andermann and Álvaro Fernández Bravo. New York: Palgrave Mcmillan.
- 10 On a narrative level, the fact that Tião is white and from Southern Brazil helps represent the power differential between him and his interlocutors. This differential is further illustrated in the contrast between the way Tião benefits from the mobility afforded by the road while *Iracema* seems trapped by that mobility, cast adrift in a precipitous series of misfortunes. In a sense, Tião uses the road while *Iracema* is used by it.



- 11 Although the recording of unplanned events is associated with the documentary tradition, the two are not synonymous. Thus it is significant to specify the terms of discussion.
- 12 These 'cine-jornais,' produced between the 1920s and 1980, are a fascinating but rarely studied facet of Brazilian audiovisual culture (Souza 2005: 44). Part of the National Archive, these films have been digitalized and are now available online. Between 1970 and 1978 many 'cine-jornais' were dedicated to the Trans-Amazonian Highway, including 'A tranzamazônica' (1970), 'Transamazônica: O caminho do homem' (1971), 'A integração da Amazônia' (1974), and a 'Tranzamazônica' (1978). For online viewing, see <http://www.zappiens.br/portal/BuscaRapida.do>.
- 13 This critical approach to the body has taken place from a variety of perspectives, including Linda Williams' work on 'body-genres,' Stephen Shaviro's Deleuzian approach to film pleasure in *The Cinematic Body* (1993), and Vivian Sobchack's outstanding appropriation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in *The Address of the Eye* (1992). Recent developments from these initial lines include the works of Laura Marks, Elena del Río, Jennifer Barker, and Martine Beugnet.
- 14 This information can be found in the interviews on the DVD's extra material.

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