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Art and Land: Eucalyptus Plantations in Brazilian Documentaries

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Abstract: In Brazil, since the early 2000s, different documentaries have raised awareness about the problematic issues that tree plantations, especially eucalyptus, provoke, as they are propagated across the country. By means of interviews and a mix of investigative and expository styles, these films address and denounce the controversial role and power of the timber industry. However, in the last few years, other works have approached the relationships between planted forests and local ecosystems, offering an alternative perspective. This essay analyzes two recent films on the issue, the short film *Gerais*, and the 78 min long *Do pó da terra*, released in 2015 and 2016, respectively, while looking at another short documentary, *Desertos verdes: plantações de eucaliptos, agrotóxicos e água*, released in 2017, a straightforward documentary that advocates against eucalyptus plantations, interviews specialists and activists, and shows data that work as a report about the situation. In *Gerais* and *Do pó da terra*, forest plantations are not central narratives, rather, the focus is on specific communities and their customs. Through testimonial, observational, and poetic modes, they discuss the challenges faced by local inhabitants as their unique lifestyles and sociocultural expressions are threatened. Thus, this essay explains how, instead of images of destruction and the specificities of eucalyptus environmental effects, these documentaries choose to show the connection of local people and their art with the land, their daily life, and the changes they face. By crucially emphasizing the different timelines in play, that of western modernity, and that of alternative understandings of life–nature, they differ from other approaches towards filming environmental conflict that stress the immediacy of the situation. These two films offer a more intimate perspective of human beings, in interplay with their ecosystem, which allows for reflection on how they cohabitate and look forward.



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1. Introduction

In 2002, the documentary *Cruzando o deserto verde*, by Ricardo Sá, raised awareness of the environmental and social issues that forest plantations, especially eucalyptus, were spreading across Brazilian geography. The film explains the effects and impacts that accompany the occupation of agricultural landscapes by tree monoculture, and proposes alternatives. Although a humble and relatively unknown piece, this 52 min long work is the first one in Brazil to address the controversial role and power of the timber industry. Thus, it opened a new chapter in a long and very productive tradition on Brazilian documentaries.¹

In the last few years, other films have approached the relationships between forest plantations and the ecosystems which Brazilian peoples inhabit.

This essay analyzes two documentaries on this issue: the short film *Gerais*, by Frazão and Carvalho (2015), and the 78 min *Do pó da terra*, by Maurício Nahas (2016). Additionally, and as a contrast to these two films, I will also refer to another recent work addressing the conflict, the documentary *Desertos verdes: plantações de eucaliptos, agrotóxicos e água*, by Ivonete Gonçalves de Souza and Lopes (2017).² Although the three of them share a critical narrative of the effects that monoculture provokes in the environment, I will argue here that *Gerais* and *Do pó da terra* offer an alternative approach to the topic that centers the narrative

of the local protagonists instead of the problems they face. Thus, *Gerais* is an observational documentary that focuses on a specific community, their customs, their special relationship with the landscape, and their cultural expressions in order to understand the changes that eucalyptus plantations expose them to. In *Do pó da terra*, although eucalypti are ubiquitous in the film, viewers may find that the issue of forest plantations is not central to its narrative. Instead, adopting an observational mode that includes testimonies, while engaging in the acoustic and the visual, the film discusses the environmental conflict by focusing on the challenges faced by pottery artisans in the Jequitinhonha valley as their unique lifestyle is threatened by capitalist extractivism. In this manner, both films radically differ from *Desertos verdes*, an activist documentary that, through participatory and expository modes, advocates against the timber industry business model. It describes the negative effects of monoculture through interviews with specialists and local activists, along with presenting information on harmful chemicals used by the timber companies.

In this essay, I will discuss how *Gerais* and *Do pó da terra* address the negative impact that eucalyptus plantations have on Brazilian people's lives by focusing on local communities and their specific lifestyles. These documentaries choose to show art and culture instead of images of destruction, they narrate these communities' daily life, and the changes they face, rather than the specificities of the environmental effects of eucalyptus monoculture. By doing this, they show the connection of local people and, specifically, their art, with the land. I will explain that these documentaries differ from other standard approaches towards filming environmental conflicts by offering a more intimate perspective of these human beings in interplay with their ecosystem, therefore emphasizing the cultural component of this connection within nature, because cultural diversity is also a victim of monoculture tree plantations. In order to do this, I will analyze the different filming strategies they deploy, the role of the local human actors in the films, as well as the agency and presence of trees, whether native or introduced. Additionally, I will look at the not so obvious connections between different scenes, and between images and words. Particularly, I will highlight the reliance on memory and the archive, both tangible and intangible, to build the narratives of the films. Finally, I will emphasize how the films contrast the different timelines in play, that of western modernity, and that of alternative understandings of nature.

2. Environmental and Socio-Political Context

Let us start with the tree in question. Eucalyptus is a genus of trees that accounts for more than 700 different species with origins mainly in Australia, but also in parts of Melanesia and Maritime Southeast Asia. Since the eighteenth century, it has been taken to different regions across the globe (Stanturf et al. 2013). Within those places, it has quickly spread as an introduced species, helped by the efforts of the timber industry, which values eucalyptus wood because of its rapid growth rate, especially—but not exclusively—to obtain pulpwood as raw material for the production of white paper (Stanturf et al. 2013). Some places where eucalyptus plantations have caused important conflict are South America, India, California, and the Iberian Peninsula (Rejmanek and Richardson 2011).

In Brazil, the timber industry has taken over vast landscapes, especially in the area of biodiverse forest known as Mata Atlântica, in the south and southeast regions of the country, where these documentaries were recorded (Associação Paranaense de Empresas de Base Florestal 2020). As of 2017, according to a report by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics—IGBE by its Portuguese acronym—Brazil has almost 10 million ha of forest plantations that are mostly used to grow two types of trees, pines and eucalyptus, 20.6% and 75.2% of the plantations, respectively (Nitahara 2018). As I mentioned before, eucalyptus trees are grown as a resource for the paper industry, in fact, after the USA, Brazil is the second producer of pulp for paper, comprising 11% of global production (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2021). However, eucalypti are also planted with other purposes, i.e., to be used in charcoal production, a very controversial process due to its working conditions and its strong environmental impact, as it is shown in *Cruzando o deserto verde* (Sá 2002).³ This first documentary on eucalyptus plantations was recorded

in areas on both sides of the border between Espírito Santo and Bahia. It is the same case for *Desertos verdes*, whose images focus mostly on the southern portion of Bahia, while it also features a few locations in Espírito Santo. Distinctly, the other two documentaries, *Gerais* and *Do pó da terra*, were made in the region of Minas Gerais, that has the largest area of tree plantations in Brazil, almost two million ha, most of them eucalyptus ([Associação Paranaense de Empresas de Base Florestal 2018](#)).⁴

Monoculture of trees, especially eucalyptus, face strong opposition around the world for various reasons ([Doughty 2000](#)). There, where eucalypti are planted, no other trees are allowed to grow, so they do not affect productivity ([Periódico Resumen 2014](#)). At the same time, due to high water absorption rates in eucalypti, soils dry fast, lowering the presence of water in the ecosystem ([Rejmanek and Richardson 2011](#)). Additionally, herbicides and other chemicals are widely used, polluting the land and water ([Gonçalves de Souza and Lopes 2017](#)). Altogether, repeated over and over after several rotations of planting and harvesting trees, eucalypti monoculture provokes a tremendous impact on biodiversity ([Calviño-Cancela 2013](#); [Proença et al. 2010](#); [Rodríguez-Suárez et al. 2011](#)). These trees are also accused of facilitating the presence and spreading of wildfires ([Rejmanek and Richardson 2011](#)). This is why they have been labeled *desertos verdes* (*green deserts*), because they dry the land, ending with water and life, as well as because of the monochromatic endless green of the plantations.

Moreover, local communities see their land taken or impacted by these environmental issues, making it impossible for them to live off it as they were used to doing; therefore, they are displaced, mostly migrating to urban areas. Usually, those who stay end up working for the same companies that changed their land, often facing precarious working conditions and low salaries ([Periódico Resumen 2014](#)). Human lives in ecosystems in conflict are also seen just as resources—as labor resources. Nature exploitation has always been human exploitation as well. This model to obtain wood has been embedded in a discourse of green capitalism, with controversial connections to capturing and managing CO₂ emissions, producing renewable energy—biomass—and creating a market of environmental certifications ([Stanturf et al. 2013](#)). It is also crucial to mention that tree monoculture promote an extractivist project that sees plants and trees as a mere commodity. A commodity that humans can take from one ecosystem to another, aiming for the best growing conditions, modifying them genetically if needed, increasing growing rates, and thus squeezing their lives to satisfy benefit margins ([Stanturf et al. 2013](#)). This vision of trees continues a not-so-long tradition that opposes humans against nature, that defines our ecosystems as spaces to extract from, not as spaces to cohabitate with and to belong to.

On a political level, despite environmentalist narratives all across the globe, little progress has been made in addressing the problematic spread of tree monoculture. An exception has been Portugal, where a ban on planting eucalyptus beyond where it already existed went into effect in 2018 ([Diário de Notícias 2017](#)). Although, it took 66 people to die in a wildfire the summer before for the Portuguese government to react to the issue. Even in that scenario, demand for eucalyptus timber has not decreased since ([Silveira 2020](#)). In the case of Brazil, the current far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro has explicitly promoted deforestation of the Amazon and extractivism, including tree monoculture, while actively opposing environmentalist discourse and its supporters. As a consequence, the surface of tree plantations has continued increasing during his mandate ([Campos 2021](#)). This attitude towards eucalyptus and pulp extraction, despite the rhetorical differences, is not that substantially different from that of the prior left-wing governments of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff. Lula himself promoted the timber industry's narrative that single species tree plantations actual forests ([Portal Amazônia 2009](#)). He did so from the beginning of his presidency, even while praising environmentalist discourse and figures such as the late Chico Mendes ([Silva 2004](#)). In other words, while his government promoted a more environmentalist attitude towards Brazilian ecosystems, "the pulp investment case demonstrates that the Lula government is also a servant of the globalizing industrial plantation corporations" ([Kröger 2010](#), p. 148). After Lula, Rousseff continued the same

policies on this issue and, like him, received wide criticism from environmentalist organizations ([Corporate Watch 2011](#); [Globo Natureza 2012](#)). This reliance on the extraction of raw natural resources and their export towards other countries for economic gain is explained differently by neoliberal governments, such as Bolsonaro's, or by progressive ones, including those mentioned above or others in South America, such as Correa's in Ecuador or Morales' in Bolivia. However, they are two sides of the same coin: one that explicitly promotes the despoiling of entire ecosystems in the Global South, known as extractivism, and another one that considers landscapes as a tool for economic and social improvement, known as neoextractivism ([Acosta 2011](#)).

When this model is opposed by organized communities, they encounter strong repression and so-called democratic governments that primarily respond after the lobbies of the timber industries. However, as a report written for the European Commission says, "Whilst there is no independent organisation for monitoring the forestry industry in Brazil, civil-society has been described as 'active', with numerous NGOs playing a role in monitoring the sector" ([UN Environment World Conservation Monitoring Center 2018](#)). Some of these NGO have included documentaries among their strategies to raise awareness of the problematics of tree monocultures, aiming to educate audiences in this reality. This is the case of both *Cruzando o deserto verde* and *Desertos verdes*, documentaries produced by local organizations that promote sustainability for these territories. As Silas da [Fonseca \(2014, p. 37\)](#) explains:

[O Movimento Alerta contra o Deserto Verde] se posicionou contra a expansão das áreas de eucalipto no Espírito Santo, Bahia e Rio de Janeiro, e se tornou importante no cenário nacional e internacional ao produzir documentários como *Cruzando o Deserto Verde*, [...] denunciando os impactos sociais, ambientais e econômicos do monocultivo de eucalipto nas comunidades rurais do Espírito Santo. ([Warning Against Green Desert Movement] positioned itself against the expansion of eucalyptus areas in Espírito Santo, Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, and became important in both national and international scene by producing documentaries such as *Cruzando o Deserto Verde*, [...] denouncing social, environmental, and economic impact of eucalyptus monoculture in rural communities of Espírito Santo).

Thus, since film documentaries have been a crucial media for critical thinking in societies shaped by audiovisual communication, even though, as [Furtado \(2019, p. 3\)](#) mentions, "documentary is far from a mainstream cultural form", they have also been produced in Brazil to address the conflicts caused by forest plantations; however, they are not all produced by political and social organizations, neither do they all follow the same approach.

3. A Departure from Environmental Activist Documentary

Desertos verdes, as an expository-style documentary, portrays the particular problems that locals, particularly indigenous Pataxó and quilombo⁵ descendant peoples, face because of the destructive proliferation of tree monoculture in their ancestral land. However, it provides a blurry picture of who these individuals and their communities really are and how they live. Instead, it highlights the detrimental effects on the ecology, concentrating on narratives of pollution, lack of biodiversity, and dispossession of land. While the film explains that some local actors are fighting back for their land, this is a brief comment, and it ends with a reminder of the potential worsening situation due to transgenic bioengineering and the long-term effects of chemicals in water and soil. By choosing this approach to ecology that excludes the human dimension, it fails to explain what activities people engage with when dealing with the oppressive situations they confront, what cultural artifacts they produce, and what practices connect them with the land they are being expelled from. This lack of examination of their particularities reduces the importance of their existence; it diminishes the relevance of their conflict by inserting it in a global list of environmental conflicts that simply characterizes the historical period we live in.

Gerais and *Do pó da terra* shift the focus from the tangible and explicit effects that forest plantations have on the land and its communities to the—still direct and material—unique connections of these peoples with their ecosystems, particularly showing that specific cultural productions and lifestyles are in danger because of the extractive model of development. As I will expand in the following pages, the memories of these communities, their dreams, as well as their engaging relationships with their soil and other forms of life around them, are the central narrative of these two films. Consequently, they switch the attention from the danger to the endangered. They prefer to observe their routines and how those eventually change, they look at how these people adapt to those changes and potentially overcome them, instead of examining the aggressive and explicit conflicts created by capitalist extractivism.

Additionally, documentaries that apply an observational style are works that tend to engage “with film form as much as or more than with social actors” (Nichols 2010, p. 162). Although this is not completely the case in the two films analyzed here, because of their strong use of interviews, both of them rely deeply on the esthetical use of image and sound as a communicative device rather than in explicit explanations and visual proof of the damaging effects of tree monoculture. By doing this, they are able to bring attention to the complex connections within the land that are being disrupted by monoculture. The two documentaries experiment with different filming strategies, staying away from a specific audiovisual approach, which allows them to portray environmental conflict as an entangled reality that intertwines human and non-human lives and their culture in narratives of past, present, and future. These strategies include, especially in *Do pó da terra*, the use of staged scenes in order to, for example, showcase artistic items produced in these places or to emphasize a particular connection with the land. Additionally, poetry and musical performances are embedded in the film as part of the soundtrack. Additionally, in a manner that allows the centering of memory and enables one to reflect on time in ecological narratives, footage from past films is used in *Gerais*, and, in both films, the only voices we can hear are those of people’s accounts about the past. Thus, this dissonance between what the audience observes and the environmental conflict they are addressing is characteristic to both films, that often expect viewers to connect the dots between tree monoculture and watching the documentaries’ protagonists simply moving about their lives. In fact, these films purposefully conceal eucalypti from the main narrative and, when they show them—although as a warning sign of their nearness—it is always unexpected and brief.

As a consequence of all this, both films, shaped by long and relaxed interviews, along with plenty of observational scenes where the viewer simply watches people in their daily routines, create a tone that moves away from the sense of emergency that we find in *Desertos verdes*. Instead, *Gerais* and *Do pó da terra* refuse to rush, they choose to slow down the time, handcrafting a work that looks backwards and forwards over the communities’ experiences.

4. Memory, Archive, and Images of Trees

People appearing in *Gerais* in the small community of Vereda Funda, in the municipality of Rio Pardo de Minas, and the inhabitants of the Jequitinhonha Valley in *Do pó da terra* are mostly elderly ones. As they speak, they refer to a different experience than the one the audience is witnessing, one that only they have lived. Thus, memory is a central element in these documentaries’ narratives. The protagonists speak of a time before the eucalyptus, when there was *nothing* there, where the land had no owners, and everyone was able to grow their own vegetables and to raise cattle. At the beginning of *Gerais*, several shots and images from five films by Humberto Mauro are used in order to provide this vision of the past.⁶ Overlapped by the voice of one of the villagers that relates the very first steps taken by early inhabitants in the area, these images evoke a life when young active people were responsible for different agricultural activities. In these scenes, kids play happily around, and they climb *jabuticabas*—known as Brazilian grape trees—to harvest and eat abundant fruit. Meanwhile, a present time background voice explains how working the

land was easier in the past, that they were even able to grow medicinal plants, and that water was plentifully available. As the male voice says, “havia fartura de água.” Suddenly, these black-and-white images are interrupted by a locked-down shot of a barbed wire fence with a blurry forest in the background. Through rack focus, the image centers in the trees, they are eucalypti, all perfectly aligned. However, the camera work is not finished, as the focus deepens even more, in the middle of this plantation, a different tree is also visible. This new tree resembles the ones we just saw in Mauro’s film, a tree from the native forest, a tree kids should be able to climb, a tree whose fruit people harvest. However, in this case, this tree is not part of idyllic memories but just a trace of that past, a tree that seems to stand there to remember the viewers of that past, a past that is still alive, barely so, while resisting the *desertos verdes*. This use of Brazilian film archive in *Gerais* in dialogue with the images of forestry conflict, while listening to the memories of a villager, mixes different timelines and ends up substituting the plantation trees for the same native trees that are first shown as elements of the past. In this sequence, present, past, and future entangle in a sophisticated manner. Therefore, by bringing this old footage to the documentary, *Gerais* gives an outcome to the process of “archivatization” that Gustavo Furtado precisely describes as “always a wager about the future—a wager that what is saved will someday be reused.” Expanding on this idea, Furtado explains that “the filmic incorporation of archival footage fulfills this bet by returning images to the ‘present’ (which is a different ‘present’ than the ‘present’ of the recorded image) and ushering them toward new uses and meanings”. This is certainly what *Gerais* is doing, it brings to the present the same trees that, in Mauro’s films, represented a future full of abundance for those first settlers of the rural areas of Minas Gerais, and it turns them now from a memory of that experience into an alternative to tree monoculture. In addition, this is one of the few images of tree plantations in the whole film. The other one happens right after that, in another locked-down shot, in which we see the village surrounded by eucalypti. Those two early images of eucalyptus plantations are the only ones in the documentary where viewers can unmistakably see the controversial tree. After that, it will be mentioned, but it will only be a memory for the viewers, a memory contaminated by the stubborn presence of that other tree among the eucalypti. These images stand in contrast to the memories of the protagonists of the film, memories of a time of autonomous subsistence, now interrupted by the arrival of the eucalyptus (Furtado 2019, p. 7).

The relationship between what we see in the present of the film and what we are shown or mostly told about the past is a constant strategy of these movies in order to explain the specific association that these communities have with their environment, why that relationship is changing, and how they react to that. That image of the tree in *Gerais* is always around, we see it later in a scene that shows Moisés, a 7-ish-year-old kid climbing a tree as those kids in the early scenes were doing. Additionally, the early tree is resembled when elderly Zumerinda and João eat some fruit directly from a *jabuticaba* tree as the camera follows them in a walk through the woods. Thus, the native tree, in all its forms and times, becomes permanent in the film, it is an image that viewers constantly refer to, the tree becomes the archive itself, exactly as Eduardo Cadava (Indij 2009, p. 309) explains in his short essay about the use of trees and memory in photography: “Como figura de la vida y la genealogía, de la naturaleza y la relación, el árbol también es una suerte de imagen que funciona como archivo, una imagen del archivo, una imagen del estado del archivo. (As a figure of life and genealogy, of nature and relation, the tree is also sort of an image that functions as archive, an image of the archive, an image of the state of the archive)”. In this manner, the tree turns into the representation of the protagonists’ memories. Later, as Zumerinda speaks of a time when there were farms and people in the village that were able to provide for themselves, what we actually see are bushes and other plants—“agora é só mato, (now is only shrubs)”, she explains, without mentioning other trees. However, the comparison with the first tree does not need to be explained. We are told there was a past of prosperity, but we do not see it, we simply listen to her memories of it.

Similarly, in *Do pó da terra*, viewers need to make an active effort to understand the particularities of the past which protagonists refer to during most of the film. There is an analogous scene to the one in *Gerais* which I just examined. A middle-aged man, Ulisses Mendes, describes a time when the Jequitinhonha Valley was identified as a place haunted by poverty but full of life. He explains how people learned of their environment and to move around it, they learned to grow their crops, to improve their agriculture, and to fish. Again, this oral history, another form of archive, although intangible, creates a referential image of past prosperity that opposes the sequence, as what we are seeing is nothing of that. We listen to his voice in the background while he is just walking through the woods with the camera chasing him. The landscape he crosses seems abandoned, not very fertile, and, maybe because of the influence of eucalypti, the soil is dry, in opposition to the words of active living he speaks of. It does not seem to follow a path, on the contrary, he seems to wander. Ulisses carries a machete and, right when he explains that, as a result of his experience, he has turned into “um artista de crítica social, (a social critic artist)”, he casually chops down a few branches, as if the filmmakers wanted to tell us that the machete is his tool as an artist. However, we see later that he broadcasts a radio program, and he also makes clay figures, specializing in dark colors he produces out of a specific rock he finds in the area. These scenes tell us of a memory we cannot completely understand or imagine, traces of the past and oral accounts that Ulisses transforms into tangible cultural expressions, into an alternative for current subsistence.

Contrary to the story in *Gerais*—that, at the very end, explains to the spectators that the villagers were able to get their land back after twenty-three years of lease by the timber company—in *Do pó da terra*, the narrative is somehow pessimistic. Messages of a local economy sustained by clay figure production are opposed by images of new generations having to leave the place to live in the city. Women in *Do pó da terra* speak of a time when it was more simple to live off making pottery. Their messages are somehow contradictory, different emotions fill the space as they talk of the difficulties which they went through in order to make their lifestyle possible, while at the same time, we see several beautiful clay dolls and other figures displayed purposefully behind or beside the women while they are being interviewed. For instance, the camera sometimes chooses to zoom into Noemisa’s old hands, full of wrinkles, themselves expressing decades of experience and knowledge of manufacturing clay figures, while she is also explaining what kind of soil, what kind of dirt, is necessary. She is doing this while first sifting and then adding water to that dirt, at the same time she is describing what the perfect humidity and texture are in order to make the best figures. These are images that speak of wisdom and *female* power, as characteristics earned with age. An idea supported by the words of other women in the film, that acknowledge the work and experience of Noemisa and Izabel, the two older ones, in order to successfully achieve their goals of living out of making clay figures. However, we see them having to take other jobs, or directly having to see their daughters migrating from there. That is to say that *Do pó da terra* does not clearly tell viewers whether this is a story of success, defeat, or even resistance. The experience between the memories of their protagonists and a possible present are mixed up. There is therefore an interplay that both documentaries portray between a past defined by a close relationship with the land, and a present of dependency under aggressive capitalism and the timber industry monoculture. This dialogue, this exchange, is exactly what is missing in expository, investigative documentaries such as *Desertos verdes*. They do not deal with the contradictions of adapting to live under the pressure of having their own ecosystem completely changed over the time of a generation.

5. Attention to Quotidian Details and the Connection to Land

This story of memory, of present in conversation with the past, it is framed in *Do pó da terra* by two particular scenes. At the end of the film, eight inhabitants of one of the villages of Jequitinhonha valley, men and women of all ages, are aligned in front of the façade of a house. They are firmly staring at the camera as we witness close-up shots of their faces,

while they keep their sight straight forward. In this staged scene, something stands out. Their faces are covered by clay, by dry clay. Nobody explains why, we only listen to Maria Lira's voice, one of the potters interviewed during the film. She is singing a song that praises for more rain, but she cannot finish it, overtaken by her emotions. The significance of the scene itself is crucial in building into the narrative of a community whose existence lies on an intimate connection with the soil. Thus, this image directly dialogues with the very first scene of *Do pó da terra*. At the beginning, before we listen to any words in the film, we witness a group of young man, half naked, with their bodies covered with mud, and some pieces of wet rags tied around their faces and genitals. Carrying some balls and stones made of the same mud, they approach a group of women. Both groups fight in a somehow friendly manner, in what it seems to be the performance of some sort of tradition. Their aspect, followed by the interview of Noemia, a native woman of Maxacali, ascend, provide the understanding that we are witnessing some interpretation of an indigenous ritual, if not the ritual itself. Additionally, Noemia explains that the tradition to make figures with clay comes from the indigenous people, and that it has been perfected by newer inhabitants of the area. Consequently, these two scenes enclose the narrative of the film on an understanding of people being in strong connection with the land, not only the potters that are protagonists of the documentary but also the ancestral peoples of the region.⁷ The land provides them with resources to perform traditional activities and to fabricate their pottery that, as different protagonists state, is their tool to be creative, to express themselves, and to communicate their vision of the world.

The debate on the relationship between people and land is central in both films and, in addition, the threat of the eucalypti presence highlights this complex interaction even more. Candace Slater (2002, p. 190) explains that these types of “images and stories are nothing less than a debate about people's place within nature and nature's place within our own and other's hearts and heads”. In this manner, both films emphasize how their protagonists engage in activities or visions explicitly related to their ecosystem. For instance, in *Do pó da terra*, at the end of the scene when he is walking in the woods, Ulisses sits down with his dogs and tells the filmmakers that he feels a special connection with nature, he feels the need to stop and breathe, to listen and to be listened to by others—non-human beings—it is there that he can relax. Noticeably, we listen to his words despite not observing that behavior. However, other parts of the films prefer to do the opposite, they show us people working with the land, while we listen to them reflecting on other issues. Thus, in the same film, a woman called Deuzani Gomes is explaining her daily working routine, the number of hours she puts into the clay, what time she works on her garden, and what other activities she does in the community. We see images of her watering plants, harvesting fruit, and plowing the land. These are shots that focus on how she carries out those activities, engaging in her caring relationship with the land. This attention of the camera is emphasized because she is the only one who, along with a man, talks about eucalyptus during the entire film, focusing on the access to the land, the lack of biodiversity, and the scarcity of water as the main issues caused by forest plantations.

The ordinary activities related with gardening are also the object of the camera in *Gerais*. Here, the entire family or Arcilo—inhabitants of Vereda Funda portrayed in the film—engages in taking care of plants and animals. Again, the camera focuses especially on watering, highlighting the importance of water in making life possible, therefore pointing out at the adverse presence of the eucalypti. Arcilo explains how they try to have their son Moisés to engage in these activities, and the kid himself says he participates in watering, feeding chickens, or harvesting carrots. For them, in order to avoid and fix the fact that “muita gente perdeu o equilíbrio de plantar (many of us lost the balance of planting)”—as their neighbor Nerim phrases it—generational transmission of this knowledge of the land is crucial for survival.

By analogy, in *Do pó da terra* we are shown a scene where a man, Amaury, is outside looking for good samples of soil to be turned into clay, which are followed, immediately after, by images of him teaching kids how to work on the clay. While seeing this, he explains

that this handcrafting activity is related with native traditions, therefore connecting people with that ancestry, implicitly saying there is memory in the clay itself. At the same time, because of its nature of working directly with soil, pottery allows them to interact with the environment. His poetic wording of the process through which soil transforms into clay, by interrelating land, water, air, and fire, overlaps with close-up shots of his students' hands and faces while they are working with clay. Thus, viewers are introduced to a film where every single clay figure is a product of the specific environment which they are elaborated in. Amaury, as Arcilo does in *Gerais*, stresses the importance of generational heritage of this knowledge, and he observes that, unfortunately, young people are not doing pottery because it does not allow them to survive. Precisely, his words end in the key moment that the film uses to connect soil with tree monoculture. While referring to the lack of generational legacy in making handicraft, he exclaims: "Há uma ameaça! Com certeza há uma ameaça. (There is a threat! There is certainly a threat)". Additionally, the next shot we see is one of loud music, and a screen full of eucalypti, as the camera moves very fast in a panning shot that turns into a train and then into an urban scenario. The viewers are shocked, from now on—despite being barely addressed as an issue in the film—the timber industry and tree plantations shape everything. This unexpected change of pace in between scenes, that happens again later in the film, is similar to that of *Gerais*, that goes from old black-and-white footage to a shot of a plantation of eucalypti, and in a way, this is also analogous to those aerial shots of never-ending *deserto verde*, so common in other documentaries. They function as a visual reminder of the different temporalities embedded in environmental conflict, one that seeks rapid growth in trees and profit, and another narrative that, in danger, reflects on the past, and engages in learning all the processes of the ecosystem in order to live with it, in accordance with its material limits. Additionally, these scenes are the only reminder in *Gerais* and *Do pó da terra* of that sense of emergency that characterize the activist-style documentaries such as *Desertos verdes*.

Thus, as we learn in *Do pó da terra*, their handicraft art is entangled in their environment, and it is affected by the threat of tree monoculture. This is a situated relationship, where they obtain the materials directly from the land and, also, because it serves them to transmit their identity and to express themselves. For instance, looking at the dolls that are shown in the documentary, we learn about people's customs and about their perspective of social life. Additionally, these figures allow them to react to the changes they experience, as Maria Lira explains how she represents her process of learning on identity and racial issues. However, clay is not the only explicit form of art that people use to express themselves in the film. Several songs are performed by different female protagonists as we watch the scenes of the documentary. Some are religious songs, and some others are popular songs, such as "Chora boiadeiro" or "Coqueiro novo". Additionally, we listen to a poem written by one of the protagonist women, where she directly addresses the conflict caused by eucalypti presence:

Assim é a vida do vale,
só vendo para acreditar.
Sofre, luta e trabalha,
com filhos para se criar,
falta casa, falta pão e terra para plantar.
E uma esperança me resta
de ver nosso vale pobre com saúde, com fartura,
e no lugar de eucalipto tivesse agricultura,
e no lugar de tanto capim tivesse fruta madura.
(Life in the valley is this,
Just seeing to believe.
Suffer, struggle, and work,
With children to raise,

Lacking house, bread, and land to plant.
 And one hope remains
 Of seeing our valley healthy, with abundance,
 And instead of eucalyptus it had agriculture,
 And instead of grass, it had ripe fruit).

This captivating poem, a chant of resistance and life in Jequitinhonha valley, shows how, even in places that have been mischaracterized as forgotten, people need culture and art in order to deal with their suffering and the threat of capitalist extractivism, because “it is in art that the fantasies we have about nature take shape—and dissolve”. These artistic representations are precisely what is lacking in documentaries such as *Desertos verdes* or *Cruzando o deserto verde*, a perspective of the importance of the communities they want to help, not because of the size of the threat they are facing, not because of the unfairness of their situation, but because of their importance as living beings that have established a complex and unique connection with their space in the middle of such a conflict (Morton 2007).

6. Landscapes of Environmental Conflict as Spaces for Creativity and Resistance

The importance of the cultural lifestyle of these communities reaches beyond its regional borders. These documentaries are narrating a twenty-first century reality, that it is still shaped by colonialism. Timber companies, many of which are supplying the global north with wood, or directly with wood-made products, such as paper, locate their business in peripheral areas within Brazil. Peripheral in geographical terms, but also peripheral because their lifestyles are not mainstream. These areas are examples of what Anna Tsing (2005, p. 28) calls the *frontier*, “an edge of space and time: a zone of not yet—not yet mapped, not yet regulated. It is a zone of unmapping: even in its planning, a frontier is imagined as unplanned”. For instance, there is nothing planned in a woman who makes enough money manufacturing a few dolls out of clay, while her partner takes care of house chorus and children, as we see in *O pó de terra*. Neither is it profitable to invest in a community such as the one of *Gerais*, that is hopeful and working towards a future of autonomy and sustainability. It is in places of conflict that cultural expressions are more vivid, as Tsing (2005, p. 3) explains in her account of deforestation in Indonesia: “emergent cultural forms—including forest destruction and environmental advocacy—are persistent but unpredictable effects of global encounters across difference”.

In this manner, these documentaries show us a narrative of resistance and adaptation, resistance to suffering the consequences of living in a sick land, that it is at the same time a struggle to demonstrate that alternative cultures are possible and necessary. Accordingly, in *Gerais*, while Arcilo provides some details of his former life in the city, we see images of the community gathering together for a celebration, playing, singing, and dancing music. This small village is decided to make sustainable life possible, based on the power of the community and the knowledge of their ecosystem. Their goal is to avoid becoming what Jason Moore (2016, p. 114) defined as *cheap nature*—the “appropriation of frontier land and labor”—that is, being an entity that capitalist society has identified as disengaged, and therefore worthy of exploitation. This is stressed in the scenes of *Do pó da terra*, where we see a community of people that has been able to organize themselves, led by women. They did so in an adverse situation, as Eva, one of the women, points out: “Este é um lugar esquecido. (This is a forgotten place)”. However, we know they are only forgotten in appearance, because as the frontier, they are still exploitable. Therefore, their effort to resist that exploitation, their story, has the value to show how this peripheral space can demonstrate the contradictions of the economy of the timber industry when it is faced with a local experience like that. Precisely, villagers in both documentaries emphasize that eucalyptus plantations provide a benefit only for those who already have money, not for them, the locals, highlighting the opposition between the globalized extractive economy and the alternative, which they represent.

Furthermore, as I have said before, the images of eucalypti are scarce in these films, representations of landscapes in general are not common. This is an issue of important relevance, because, as Thomas Rogers (2010, p. 7) explains, “landscapes can have social impacts and can change. Because they are visible and persistent, they are readily perpetuated over the course of time, but of course they can also evolve in response to other social dynamics”. However, these filmmakers choose to reduce landscapes representations directly to a minimum. They avoid showing us the iconic landscape of infinite eucalyptus plantation as, in contrast, the documentary *Desertos verdes* constantly does. Paraphrasing Rogers, they avoid perpetuating the plantations’ presence. However, also reading Rogers’ interpretation of the possibilities of landscapes, they avoid images of prospering native forest, or hopeful images of locals gaining their land back. Instead, they use the camera to center the attention on the small scale of that landscape. Thus, the films, by focusing on the affects, the emotions, the details of people watering plants and hands molding clay, provides the spectators with a different pace, one that resembles the slow change of entangled and heterogeneous ecosystems. It opposes then the aggressive and urgent—therefore ephemeral—condition of human-made nature, even when it comes to addressing environmental issues.

Gerais and *Do pó da terra* not only choose to set the trees aside when talking about them, there is a complete absence of the eucalyptus growers in the documentaries. This is probably the most explicit feature in contrast with other documentaries. However, as we have seen, it is what they shed light upon, not what they hide, that makes these documentaries relevant. The use of memory, the remembrance of a tangible past, in order to imagine a possible alternative future, while focusing on the traditions and specific cultural representations that the protagonists of the documentaries produce, shaped by the material conditions of their ecosystem. These documentaries, while centering the lives challenged and disrupted by tree monoculture, produce a narrative of resistance and coexistence under the threat of endless plantations. They challenge western rhetoric of pristine nature and break its division from human culture, because they center the complex interrelations that cultural productions have with the ecosystem, and because it is the particularity of the land, the environmental conditions, and the interdependency on other human and non-human lives that shape and allow those cultural productions to be what they are.

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Notes

- ¹ Gustavo Furtado (2019, pp. 2–3) explains that “from the 1990s onward, and especially in the new millennium, Brazilian documentary grew dramatically in both volume and quality of production, with an unprecedented number of innovative feature-length films.”
- ² Another recent documentary that addresses tree monoculture similarly to *Desertos verdes: plantações de eucaliptos, agrotóxicos e água* is *Deserto Verde* by Juliana Kroeger (2016), although, because it focuses on another region, the state of Santa Catarina, and another tree, *pinus ellioti*, I decided to not include it in this analysis.
- ³ As well as in the documentary *Os carvoeiros*, directed in 1999 by Nigel Noble, that won various awards for its account of miserable working conditions in charcoal production in Brazil (Noble 1999).
- ⁴ In the cases of *Gerais* and *Do pó da terra*, they are located in areas that represent transitional ecosystems in between Mata Atlântica and Cerrado, a tropical savanna ecoregion of Brazil.
- ⁵ Quilombo, a word of Bantu origin, is the name given in Brazil to spaces formed from situations of territorial, social and cultural resistance. Enslaved black people fleeing in search of freedom organized themselves into autonomous communities and established the first quilombos during the colonial period.

- ⁶ As stated in the film credits, those five Mauro's works are: *Chua-chua*, 1945, *Engenhos e Usinas*, 1955, *Manhã na Roça*, 1955, *Cantos de Trabalho*, 1955, e *Meus oito anos*, 1956.
- ⁷ Additionally, the very last shot of the film shows a donkey carrying clay dolls disappearing in the horizon, as this happens, the camera looks down ending the film in a retrospective look at the soil.

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