

# Slow seeing<sup>1</sup> and the environment: connections and meanings in beyond Fordlândia

*Olhar lento e meio ambiente: conexões e significados  
muito além de Fordlândia*

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“Slow Violence” is the key concept in the ecocritical thought of Rob Nixon and it has been a major inspiration for the documentary *Beyond Fordlândia*<sup>2</sup>. Slow Violence is defined as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (NIXON, 2011). Slow Violence persists through time and is invisible to the eyes of the common observer; it is closely tied to economic and neoliberal capitalist processes and predatory strategies of development dependent on the exhaustive use of natural resources. This violence produces and reproduces procedures of renewed primitive accumulation on peoples and lands, to the extent that it adheres to the model of progressive linear development and the “commoditization” of natural resources and the environment as a product of the market (NIXON, 2011; ATILES-OSORIA, 2013). The fact that people living this tragedy do not know how to relate their suffering and the demise of their environments by political conditions, impacts my thinking.

I have learnt from Rob Nixon that embodied in the concept of slow violence lies the possibility of transforming it into an operative category that guides one’s actions. This means that the concept has a dual function in comprehension and interpretation of reality. It is a model that guides enlightenment while serving as an intelligent platform of intervention, with language, images, strategies and other interactive resources. This ecocritical thought and cinema brought me to the Amazon that my Brazilian side yearned to know and discover. These ideas awoke memories and meanings from my childhood; made me want to recall information and perceptions transmitted in the family environment.

I was first attracted to the Amazon rainforest through the passion and despair of my grandfather<sup>3</sup>. He shared his environmental concerns and the importance of the Amazon Region to the ecosystem of the world, imbuing me with the same level of enthusiasm and wonder that he attained from the Amazonian writings of Euclides da Cunha. My grandfather opened the imaginative highways and byways of the Amazon, which I am now crossing physically and textually.

In reflecting on these concepts, I intend to clarify my position in the production and direction of *Beyond Fordlândia*. I decided to see Amazon Nature&Culture slowly, slowing down my sense of time and space: The poor, black, indigenous populations are stigmatized at various regional levels. It is these individuals and communities that are my most recurrent epistemic subjects, experienced interpreters of slow violence in the Amazon. Riverside dwellers, extractivist communities, landholders, cattlemen, *pantaneiros*, descendants of slaves (*quilombolas*) and Indians bear the load of work on the land, the waters, the forests, the cerrado, the fields, the mountains and the peripheral margins of the cities, towns and settlements while their environments decay and they are deprived of support.

The Amazon roads, in conjunction with other infrastructural developments, ignore the lives of native humans, forests, and the wider ecosystems. These physical networks built by power serve as an instrument of possession, conquest and demarcation of place and passage. In the Amazon, the *bandeirantes* trails marked out the location for roadways in movements of colonial reiteration, *territorialization* of the space of the Nation State and the productive forces sustaining it. The rubber years phase of the nationalization of the Brazilian State called for economic development of the region through the use of its natural resources and natural potential. Since the nineteenth century the Brazilian State has dominated the Amazon, beckoning international capital to fluvial and maritime navigation, for economic, scientific and diplomatic expeditions, for exploration that would come to define policies of white settlement and displacement of native populations in the region. In the Amazon, there is a constant construction of economic and populational dynamics that are imposed upon the rhythm of nature. As W.F. Laurance stated, in “Brazilian Amazonia, for example, 95% of all deforestation and burnings occur within 50 km of highways or roads” (438). The roads alter physical and biotic worlds through the mobilization of “traffic” through the forests, river biomes and ecosystems of the Amazon. The occupation of “empty” space is a continual demonstration of power over the region, practiced by the agents of governments and economic forces.



Photo 1 - Devastating image of deforestation in the Amazon in the production of a soybean field flanking the national forest of the Tapajos. Belterra, Santarém/PA, 2017.

Source: Marcos Colón & *Beyond Fordlândia* ©.

At the same time, the Amazon roads are also instruments to open up a different sense of perception that brings us to pathways otherwise ignored. Access to primitive societies adapted over 500 years of coexistence in the humid tropic make the Amazon a natural cultural archive. The humans and non-humans housed in the Amazon biome are completely interdependent. But, the path to knowing the Amazon is sensitive. I have incorporated the comprehension of this sensitivity as an interpretive principle. I felt I entered a world known only in appearance where I was always an apprentice<sup>4</sup>. Knowing and recognizing the Amazon required adaptation of my urban rhythm to the rhythm of the forest.

The Trans-Amazonian highway that I cross today is not the same that my grandfather imagined. Currently, the Amazonian highways and roads are much more extensive and present greater problems than those

my grandfather argued against. He educated me in relation to the real and imaginative highways; the image of *Os Sertões* (“Rebellion in the Backlands”) and the Amazonian writings of Euclides da Cunha that indicated the problematic relationship between Nature&Culture. The intervention of Henry Ford in the region underscored the complicated relationship between center and periphery with the gentle mediation of the state. The connection between the colonial past, rubber tapping and agribusiness demonstrates the material networks of capitalism sustaining slow violence today. This has immediate implications for my narrative perspective in *Beyond Fordlândia*.

The grandeur and diversity of the Brazilian Amazon allow us to configure it as a nation in itself - a nation full of consonances and dissonances, which, stitched within its fabric, offers us lessons on how humans and non-humans can understand each other and live harmoniously within a common geographic territory. The visuals I present in *Beyond Fordlândia* demonstrate the various rhythms and cadences of the infinite diversity and dynamics of the Amazon. I expose these rhythms by connecting together the past, the present and hypothetical futures.

Heeding the words of Benedito Nunes, my aim is to illustrate “A reality that (perhaps) one cannot touch but touches us: every photographic image opens up the expansive network of our imagination, drawing us in with its suggestive force and moving us” (24). In summary, the features, rhythms, and aspects of the Amazon provide us with a unique cartography constituted by a multitude of landscapes—social, economic, political, historical, cultural and environmental.

The Amazonian region has commonly been referred to as “the lungs of the world”. While this may not be strictly true, the Amazonian region does have an impact as a regulator of the Earth’s climate. Extensive deforestation of the Amazon jungle would generate a major reduction in the amount of moisture released into the atmosphere through evaporation. This reduction, moreover, would lead to a decrease in rainfall, thereby triggering a self-sustaining vicious, violent cycle in which the surviving forest cover would become increasingly arid. Consequently, this transformed ecology and its arid climate would lead to extinction of the remaining rainforest.

Over time, the impact would spread like a highly contagious disease. It would extend to southern Brazil, bringing drought to its extensive agricultural estates and commodity frontiers. Beyond Brazil, these changes would negatively impact the planet. Globally, this human-induced process would contribute to the Earth becoming progressively hotter. Such a dramatic and sustained increase in the planet’s temperature would have dire effects for nature and society, including intense concentrated rainfall, forest fires, ever stronger storms, flooding, erosion, and fatal landslides. Furthermore, the soil would become drier and less humid, culminating in prolonged desertification. Perhaps we know this already. Or, we have already witnessed the effects in person or broadcasted through data, news stories, and other types of media outlets.



Photo 2 - Environmentally impacted landscapes where the trees forgotten by history stand out. Belterra, Santarém/PA, 2017.

*Source: Marcos Colón & Beyond Fordlândia ©.*



In the summer of 2016, I arrived in Santarém, Pará - Brazil at around 10:00AM on a flight from Belém. The plane had a few empty seats, which allowed me to move to a better window seat. I was tense at my window and as soon as the plane took off I started snapping photos as fast as I could. I took a countless number of pictures of the majestic silhouette formed in the middle of the “Green Hell”, as Alberto Rangel had described the Amazon. I arrived in Belém the evening before, so I had been unable to contemplate the beauty of the forest upon descent, a beauty that now leaves me speechless. But the turmoil of voices reverberating inside me was trying to make sense of the vivid scenes that my imagination had captured from my readings and held for so long. There at the window, bewildered by beauty I could see the forest disappearing into an infinite sea of scattered clouds before the plane disappeared into the haze.

The vision of the forest and its record in my literary imagination marked out a place in my memory, already sensorially embodied within me, and opened a special file with records of collective knowledge to be narrated by the film. Reviewing this moment, I retain the image and carry it with me until today. Upon returning home, I continued to deliberate over the feeling that had hit me and captivated me in June of 2016. My reflections evoked a passage by Walter Benjamin in “One Way Street” that had left an impression on me:

“The power of a country road when one is walking along it is different from the power it has when one is flying over it by airplane... The airplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospect at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front.” (27-28).



Photo 3 - Emerging view of the soybean cultivation in the Amazon – the new economic cycle challenging traditional human occupation. Dercy Gordinho, resident of the Boa Esperança municipality, walks through the soy invasion in the backyard of her property. Boa Esperança, Santarém/PA, 2017.

Source: Marcos Colón & Beyond Fordlândia ©.

The experience portrayed by Benjamin encapsulates that which has captured the imagination of travelers, explorers, scientists and adventurers for centuries. When seen from the ground the views from above were readily dispelled by the realities imposed by the environment. This distorted perception is precisely what Euclides da Cunha wanted to call to our attention: “Em vez de admiração e entusiasmo, o que geralmente vem sobre alguém que contempla a Amazônia no ponto em que a vibrante confusão do Tajapuru chega no grande rio é um sentido de desilusão”.

“Rather than admiration and enthusiasm, what usually comes over someone beholding the Amazon at the point where the Tajapuru’s vibrant confusion merges with the great river is a sense of disillusionment”.

Euclides da Cunha continues:

“O grande volume de água é incomparável e, portanto, é capaz de induzir aquele espantamento de que Wallace fala. Mas desde que, no início da vida, cada um de nós desencadeou uma Amazônia ideal em nossas mentes [...] nós experimentamos uma reação psicológica comum quando nos encontramos cara a cara com a Amazônia real: nós a vemos como de alguma forma com respeito à imagem subjetiva que temos mantido há muito tempo” (CUNHA, 1976, p.35).

“The sheer volume of water is unmatched and therefore capable of inducing that wonderment of which Wallace speaks. But since, from early on in life, each of us had drawn an ideal Amazonia in our minds [...] we experience a common psychological reaction when we come face to face with the real Amazon: we see it as somehow lacking with respect to the subjective image we have long held of it”.



Photo 4 - The roads of agribusiness imposing new routes from the economic enclaves on the region, with impact on the forest, the territories and the traditional people. BR-163 is an arm of the Trans-Amazonian highway, the original source of all the other economic routes. Rurópolis/PA, 2017.

*Source: Marcos Colón & Beyond Fordlândia ©.*

At the Santarém airport, Railson, the driver, and one more companion, Miguel, were waiting to meet me. We immediately left for Miritituba taking BR-163 — a well-known branch of the Trans-Amazonian Highway. The road, which until this day remains incomplete and partially paved, was built in the seventies with the intention of integrating the North with the rest the country. For the next eight hours, the bumpy ride on BR-163 gave us front row seats to the spectacle of deforestation produced by corporate soybean farming, besides taking us to an encounter with a web of Amazonian human ecology: settlers, natives, riparian dwellers, fishermen, truck drivers, and local farmers. During the three months in which I traveled across the Amazon, I witnessed first-hand “slow violence”. It is a “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). The Amazon region has experienced and continues to experience, a slow and gradual process of deforestation in favor of soy production. The soybean crop, planted for the most part illegally, is one of the engines that drives the alarming rate of deforestation in Brazil (Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia - MATOPIBA<sup>5</sup>).

Nixon urges us to consider this process of slow violence not only imaginatively and theoretically, but also from a political perspective. Through a combative discourse, where the central issue is strategic and representational, Nixon challenges us to engage in the deconstruction of the strategic narratives that furnished the invisibility of slow violence. He argues that if the neoliberal era has intensified the assault on resources, it has also intensified resistance (as Michael Foucault emphasizes “Where there

is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95).), whether through isolated struggles specific to a given place or through activism across national boundaries in an effort to build trans-local alliances.

For Nixon, the pivotal demand is: “how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image world?” (NIXON, 2011).

There is a neoliberal narrative in Brazil with massive campaigns on the major television channels that legitimizes the aggression of agribusiness, or “agronegócio” as they say in Portuguese. The slogan “Agro é tech, Agro é pop, agro é tudo” [Agro is tech, Agro is pop, Agro is everything] is catchy and deceives the audience as to the real implications of the soybean industry, especially in the Amazon. Why are the ecological implications of this profitable agroindustry invisible in the public sphere? Is it, perhaps due to the acceleration of info and entertainment availability in today’s media?

If we shift our perspective to what I call *slow seeing*, we can observe the Amazon with fresh, critical eyes. Seeing nature slowly allows us to identify solutions embedded in the process of change. If we do look slowly at the environment, we can identify spaces and places with opportunities for critical intervention. Seeing slowly draws us away from the violent speeds of the roads and highways and engages us, instead, in the possibility of a new method of Amazonian perception and eco-political practice. In short, seeing slowly enables us to find other possibilities. These seem to indicate other modes of possible coexistence between humans and non-humans, between Nature&Culture, between culture and power. Rethinking the past history of the Amazon forces us to reflect on the roads that led us down the path of destruction and peril that the region experiences daily. It also provides tools to better engage with and change the stories currently being written. Slow seeing is a means of resistance against the slow violence in progress.



Photo 5 - Produce by Amazonian family agriculture on show for sale to the consumers of the local towns, villages and “beiradões” riverside settlements. The routes of sustainability do not use the soybean highways. Santarém/PA, 2017.

Source: Marcos Colón & Beyond Fordlândia ©.



Seeing slowly is my method of analysis and narration, which can be defined on two levels of change. The first is of an internal character that changed me as a subject of my work, of how I relate to my creative process. The other change refers to the knowledge produced on people, things and the environment that surrounds us. Seeing slowly is a way of inverting the intervention priorities of the external view on the Amazon; it is looking carefully at what its fragile ecosystems need. It is establishing profound connections, which are continual yet invisible, between slow violence and the environmental impact suffered by the Amazon. I'd like to close this text with a story that not only changed me, but also embodies what defines seeing slowly. Gito, a friend who fights against the invasion of the soy industry, brought me to the Maguari Community<sup>6</sup>, where he lives, located 40 minutes-drive from Belterra, to meet Avelino Campos, a resident who arrived in the region when he was 8 years old. Now, ninety years after his arrival he has shared with me how his surroundings have changed. He talked easily and had vivid memories of events. I tried my best to keep track of all the information he was unloading on me, which was a lot. He spent a long time talking about when he and his father started to supply food to Henry Ford's workers. Besides the numerous accounts of his experiences, what I brought home from that visit were his reports of the transformations that had taken place, which he sensed as being nothing more than slow violence observed in the open air. He proudly showed me his private Igarapé (a small stream of water that arises in and crosses the forest and finally flows into a river), which supported different species of fish. Then he told me:

"This Igarapé is not for business but for when we have the need; we come here to get something to eat" (*"Isso não é pra negócio, mas pra quando nós temos uma precisão a gente vem aqui buscar algo pra comer"*). He walked with me through part of his property, showing me different kinds of plants he conserved, telling me that some species or other was rare and hard to find nowadays. — "This one is called Andiroba, these over there are called Papunha, and this one is called Sapitinga, and this one is called Pau-Rosa" (*"Isto é Andiroba, aquilo é Papunha, isto é Sapitinga, e isto é Pau-rosa"*) and the list goes on. He told me, pointing to the Pau-Rosa, that it is the best perfume fixative ever found. Coco Channel uses it extensively. He told me that its market price is around \$25.00 a pound. Nowadays there is a lack of Pau-Rosa in the region due to the high price and demand. I paused for a minute, considering what he had just told me, as we continued strolling through his property. I was mesmerized by his passion, love, and care for preservation of the environment. But he also shared his despair.



Photo 6 - Beside the National Forest of the Tapajós (Flona), the highway and the soybean fields compose the new environmental, cultural and human cartography of the Amazonian scenario by shaping new economic territories. Terra Rica, Santarém/PA, 2017.

Source: Marcos Colón & Beyond Fordlândia ©.

"Since the soy industry arrived here", (*"Desde que a indústria da soja chegou aqui"*) he said, "everything has changed. The wildlife has disappeared, and we cannot hunt anymore". (*"tudo mudou. A vida selvagem desapareceu, e não podemos caçar mais"*). Moreover, he adds that "Some people have to buy on credit and they have debts because of this, they think that this is getting results, but for me this

is a loss. Because no one here uses anything produced by the soy industry. Of the soybean, nothing. There is a soybean farmer who has four tractors, each tractor is operated by two people - a helper and an employee -, and that's it; and the others just stand by staring. A huge piece of land out of sight. At the right moment they turn on the tractor again with two funnels to throw poison, so that the soybean ripens quickly, and the insects are eliminated. Today, we do not find any Juriti in the jungle — not one of those pigeons. They disappeared because they died poisoned..."<sup>7</sup>.

The account that Mr. Campos has described here has great implications for him and for those nearby, those who share the same space but not the same understanding of the destructive butchering of the forest. What Mr. Campos observes is the slow violence of environmental change - the gradual loss of biodiversity, the subtle transformation of food systems, and the tectonic rise of agro-industrialization. The voice of this epistemic subject is contained in *Beyond Fordlândia*, the film completes the individual perception and intersubjective understanding of the way in which the violent interventions of yesterday feed the violent interventions of today. When we cast our eye over the natural world, to look at "Nature", it is true that nature is dynamic and diverse. It changes continuously and randomly (more than I dare to say), so the only way we can attempt to understand nature is to observe and record (depending on the specific limitations in being able to observe) at a particular time; step back, observe and record again, then again, later, and again, later. Are the changes that occur between these observations the only facts we can comment on? The experience of Avelino Campos captures the act of seeing slowly, tracing the routes and highways of the environmental changes suffered by the region in which he dwells. We must ask ourselves for the sake of the Amazon and its future. Is sharing intimate stories about change all we can do? Or, can we use these stories to intervene and change the future?

*Beyond Fordlândia* executed the conceptual and political proposal against slow violence, producing a methodology for action, which, upon relearning how to see the Amazon slowly, promoted a new encounter between Nature&Culture. *Beyond Fordlândia* communicates a point of view (via ecocritical thought), narrates a story / human adventure in the Amazon (of the American Henry Ford vs Amazonian populations) and makes connections between the past of rubber and the prospection of soy yesterday, with the extensive and intensive agribusiness of soy today. The changes are emphasized in the film and in the dialogue with the public; the way the voices of the local people (Indians, farmers, union leaders, soy producers, the church, etc,) present my understanding as to what occurred and the way "my truth" captures the collective imagination. *Beyond Fordlândia* documents my slow seeing, which is expressed in the voice, the images and extreme situations slow violence produces in relation to Nature&Culture.

## NOTA

<sup>1</sup>I have developed the concept of *Slow Seeing* from my research experience in the Amazon. Said concept is epistemologically inspired by the *Slow Violence* approach proposed by Rob Nixon.

<sup>2</sup>Written, directed and produced by Marcos Colón, *Beyond Fordlândia* (2017, 75 min) presents an environmental account of Henry Ford's Amazon experience decades after its failure. The story addressed by the film begins in 1927, when the Ford Motor Company attempted to establish rubber plantations on the Tapajós River, a primary tributary of the Amazon. The film narrates the recent transition from failed rubber to successful soybean cultivation for export, and its implication for land usage.

<sup>3</sup>Although my grandfather never physically visited the Amazon, like many other Brazilians he knew the region literarily; his book collection gives him away. This does not stop him observing complex interactions between the environment and violent human intervention. His Southern coastal sensibility would experience the consequences of climate change in South-east Brazil, which, according to him, resulted from human violence enacted upon the Amazonian forest.

<sup>4</sup>Mário de Andrade was photographer, ethnographer, anthropologist and interpreter of the Amazon region to which he was a visitor. The author of *Macunaima* describes his study trip to the North and North-East of Brazil avoiding speaking of these places from the foreign point of view of a "southerner". He put himself in the position of apprentice, attempting to know the communities of the Amazon and its nature with the interest of recording in order to preserve. In *O Turista Aprendiz* [The Apprentice Tourist], the author thinks of the nation as an encounter of different eras, places, images and voices. I come to the Amazon with a similar attitude, to appreciate and to see it *slowly*.

<sup>5</sup>MATOPIBA is an economic region covering the complex of *cerrado* regions in the states of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia (North and North-East regions). Its territorial extension is 73,173,485 ha, across 337 municipalities.



<sup>6</sup>Maguari is one of the 25 communities belonging to the Tapajós National Forest, a Federal Conservation Unit, located on the banks of the Tapajós River. Flona Tapajós has an area of 549,066 hectares, with more than 160 kilometers of beaches. Throughout the area of Flona, there is a great diversity of landscapes: rivers, lakes, wetlands, terra firma, hills, plateaus, forest, fields, açazais, etc. It has about five thousand traditional inhabitants, among all the communities, in riverside populations with their own cultural traditions.

<sup>7</sup>“algumas pessoas que compram fiado e tem dividas com isso, que acham que isso está dando resultado, pra mim isso é prejuízo. Porque ninguém usa nada deles. Da soja, não. Tem um plantador de soja que traz quatro tratores, cada trator trabalha com duas pessoas, um ajudante e um funcionário, e só; e os outros ficam aí só olhando. Um lugar para perder. Quando está em certa medida eles metem o trator novamente com dois funis, jogam veneno, pra que a soja amadureça rápido e os insetos se afastem. Hoje você não está mais familiarizado com um mato, um pombinho daqueles. Desapareceram porque morreram envenenados (...).”

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