

Inês T. Alves about WATERS OF PASTAZA

“Not showing any adults insinuates some kind of utopia”

A group of Achuar children roam the rainforest along the boards of the Pastaza river, on the Ecuador–Peru border. Nature is their habitat, playground and workshop. They harvest vegetables and fruit, go out fishing in a small boat, they hunt forest animals, play at a waterfall, and watch videos on their smartphones. These kids run their daily lives almost autonomously and with a strong sense of collaboration. Portuguese filmmaker Inês T. Alves, stranded in this isolated community, observed them with a camera, catching glimpses of their daily lives that unfold on the rhythm of the jungle and the floating of the river.

You didn't look for these kids; you simply found them. Or they found you...

Inês T. Alves: It was an encounter. My desire was in the first place to discover the Amazon, and learn from the people. I got involved in a small scale project, collaborating with a local school teacher in an Achuar community. Within the project we could freely develop artistic and pedagogic

projects, so I took a small camera with me - maybe I could experiment with some film exercises, like I did in documentary workshops with children in Portugal. I didn't know if I would be able to charge my batteries there on the few solar panels that they had. In this amazing place I hung out with the kids; they were curious about me, and I was curious about them. They often made fun of my lack of basic knowledge about forest life, so they started teaching me. Seeing them so resourceful and independent, I got fascinated.

Did they know about cinema?

Alves: They all watch films on their smartphones. In a bigger village, one hour away, they sometimes project films on a big screen, and I also organised screening nights for the entire community.

Being somehow an intruder in their world, yet you felt accepted?

Alves: The community was very welcoming and the children all the time took care of me. The presence of my



camera at some point became natural for them. For me, documentaries are about the encounter. Even when watching through my eyes, we made it a collaborative work, thinking together about what would make sense to film. Things came together naturally while I filmed my encounter with their world and with myself.

How did you include that element in the film?

Alves: The things catching my attention are partly defined by who I am. I decided to focus on one particular aspect of the community: the auton-

omous lives of the children and their relationship with the forest. I intuitively filmed parts of my experience, deciding what to show and what not. For instance, not showing any adults in my film was a deliberate decision, insinuating some kind of utopia. You might easily imagine that these kids are living completely alone, in the sense that they do everything by themselves. My images are real but by the choices I made, I created this fictional dimension. Consider this a motto for my work: just because things are real, you shouldn't stop imagining!



Even if I knew the adults were around somehow, there is not a single scene in which you can sense their presence.

Alves: I had loads of footage and in the editing I began to understand that if the focus was to be on the world of the children and their strength and resourcefulness, it would come across much stronger if I radically took out all the adults, even if they were only somewhere far away in the background. That made the editing process much easier. It was super painful to throw away some of my favourite images, but it made the film more powerful and raises interesting questions about the documentary genre as such. Like, if documentaries should depict reality, then what is the reality? How would an audience that is preoccupied by documentary as a representation of reality fit WATERS OF PASTAZA into that vision?

“Children’s qualities should be preserved until death, as qualities distinctively human – those of imagination, instead of knowledge; play, instead of work; totality, instead of separation.” The moment I saw your opening statement, I knew I was going to watch a beautiful film.

Alves: I adore the work of Portuguese philosopher Agostinho da Silva. I to-



tally connect with this sentence; this is exactly the core of the message that I wanted to convey. WATERS OF PASTAZA is no ethnographic cinema about Achuar children, it is about being a child.

Actually we never get to know how isolated their lives are; the exact information is lacking.

Alves: The village lies deep in the Amazon rainforest, there are no roads, there is just the river that flows from the nearest city Puyo in Ecuador. At the time, you couldn't reach the city by boat - the waters are too dangerous so you need to take a small plane - but the river connects all the small Achuar communities along the shore, allowing friends and family to visit each other regularly.

All the games that these kids seem to play are actually about gathering food.

Alves: By playing, these kids learn everything they need to know. These communities mainly live on what the forest provides: a lot of fruits, plantain, plenty of yuca, but no cereals. They hunt for meat, birds and fish, and share the catch, as there is no way to conserve it. They cultivate vegetables, keep some chickens, sometimes they might buy rice, but that is a luxury. Even if they lack a variety in their menu, there is no food shortage.

How risky is it to completely rely on what your habitat provides?

Alves: The situation is fragile. The desire for progress is inevitable, for which money is needed. Now indus-

tries are entering the scene. European and Asian companies come to harvest the specific 'balsa tree' on a massive scale; it is used in the construction of windmills. There is a plan to extend the one road that leads into the forest, officially to establish a better connection with the outside world, but in fact it is all about serving the needs of the industry. The ecological consequences are devastating, but often local communities will accept them because of the financial profit.

Did you return with common horror stories about insects and snakes?

Alves: Snakes are a real threat, but on the spot you tend to forget about it, as you don't see them often. Yet you're never - never! - supposed to go into the jungle at night without a light. There were many bizarre insects, and huge cockroaches. When I first saw them, instinctively there was this strong feeling of repulsion. The kids found it hilarious - cockroaches are no threat whatsoever, so they didn't understand my reaction and all the time they were catching cockroaches to haunt me. They will only feel repulsed if an insect can hurt them. But the most annoying I found the insects that you can barely see, but that slowly "eat" your legs, biting you constantly.





In the film it is not clear which of the children are boys or girls. At some point you see girls climbing the highest trees. But how do girls and boys relate to each other? Is there a clear distinction in their roles?

Alves: Not when they are children; the distinction only comes when growing up, at the age of 13 or 14. It's a patriarchal society with plenty of machismo and men have a lot of power over women - some are polygamic. Often women are shy and they don't have a voice in the community. But I got the impression that things are starting to change. I saw young girls taking up roles that are usually taken up by men, and somehow that was accepted. But there is still a long way to go.

What if you would have arrived 10

years later? Do you think you would still be able to make the same film?

Alves: Changes will be inevitable. They never had a radio or TV and now suddenly smartphones offer them a possibility to connect with the internet and thus with the rest of the world. Curious as they are, this connection is as important for them as it is for us. This is the moment for us to think about how humanity should relate to technology. Digitalisation is a powerful tool, but it alienates people, and it will surely alienate them. These tools entered our world step by step, but are entering their lives very suddenly and radically. Disconnected from our essence as we are, we need the internet to connect again, while they still have this connection to a more earthly and diverse natural world. It is im-



portant to launch a dialogue between indigenous people and city people, to share reflections about the power, constraints, possibilities and dangers of digital technology.

Is there room for such a dialogue?

Alves: Surely! Once I sat in a canoe with one of the children when he asked me: *"What is this thing that we are? What does indigenous mean?"* I told him about those who have been living here for a long time, many generations before people from other continents came to impose their ways of living.

Do they know how this film is seen by many people?

Alves: I recently went back there to show them the film and tell them

about the experience of having their work shared in screenings around the world. In different festivals, I've recorded short clips with local kids, sending them their greetings. During the screening some were a bit shy to see themselves on the big screen, but they laughed a lot and had so much fun catching up with their five-year-younger selves. They are happy to know that the film is circulating.

—
Gert Hermans