

## Lost & Found: Samuel Fuller's *Tigrero!* and Accidental Ethnography

by Andrew Howe

In 1954, Fox studio executive Darryl Zanuck commissioned Samuel Fuller to journey to the Amazon basin of Brazil and shoot footage of the Karajá tribe, around which the writer/director would then construct a screenplay based upon the life of Sasha Siemel. Born in Riga, Latvia, Siemel immigrated first to the United States and then Buenos Aires, finally settling in the Mato Grosso region of Brazil in 1914. He became a big game hunter, successfully killing over 300 jaguars, nearly all while armed with nothing more than a spear. He first gained attention following the publication of Julian Duguid's *Green Hell* (1931), a non-fiction account of an expedition into the Pantanal led by Siemel, and *Tiger Man* (1932), Duguid's follow-up biography. This exposure turned Siemel into a global celebrity during the 1930s and 1940s, with the hunter booked for international speaking engagements, advertising campaigns, and even acting gigs. After Siemel published his autobiography *Tigrero* in 1953, Zanuck immediately optioned the book and hired Fuller to give it the Hollywood treatment. Although John Wayne, Tyrone Power, and Ava Gardner were all soon attached to the project, insurance companies would not cover a shoot in such a dangerous location. The project was set aside, although Fuller did use some of the footage he shot for a dream sequence in a film he released a decade later. Nearly 40 years after his visit to Brazil, Fuller returned to the Karajá in 1993, accompanied by fellow director Jim Jarmusch as an interviewer. Out of this experience came a documentary, *Tigrero: A Film That Was Never Made* (1994), by Finnish director Mika Kaurismäki. The result is equal parts documentary and

ethnography, serving as a time capsule for the Karajá—many of whom recognized long-deceased relatives in the footage shown to them—revealing just how much their culture had changed in four decades. This chapter examines how a failed project yielded an accidental ethnographic study of the Karajá and their change over time.

Samuel Fuller was an oddball in Hollywood even amongst a canon full of unconventional filmmakers. Instead of yelling ‘Action!’ to initiate a scene, he was known to fire blanks from a pistol he kept on his hip. He routinely placed a “W” in the margin of a script to denote that the scene was “weird,” either by dint of its content or the manner in which he envisaged its filming (Dombrowski 2008: 22). Inter-personally, he was known for his colorful demeanor, often seen with a cigar in one hand and a drink in the other, employing colorful language to get his point across. Throughout his career, Fuller courted controversy, pushing the envelope when it came to his cinematic subject matter. He depicted death by friendly fire in *Merrill’s Marauders* (1962), abuse in a mental hospital and the divisiveness of racism in *Shock Corridor* (1963), and the underbelly of small-town Americana through prostitution and pedophilia in *The Naked Kiss* (1964). These latter two films were so provocative that Fuller would not direct a film in Hollywood for the next sixteen years. Perhaps due to his controversial films, very little has been written about *Tigrero!*; other than Kaurismäki’s documentary, Fuller’s own musings in interviews over the decades (published in 1969 and 2012) and posthumously published autobiography—*A Third Face*—represents the bulk of focus upon this episode of his career. It is fascinating to note how the director’s musings on the Karajá changed over time, transformed in his imagination from a savage race into a bellwether for the

impact of globalism on indigenous culture. Fuller's wild and often seemingly exaggerated tales of the Karajá became more and more romantic as he progressed through life.

For the indigenous group that would appear in his film, Fuller chose the Karajá, at that time only reachable first by plane, then horse, and finally boat. This tribe is located in central Brazil, mostly on islands in the middle of the Araguaia River, one of the largest in the Amazon basin. The modern era has not been kind to the Karajá, which saw its population drop from approximately 40,000 at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to just over 3000 today ("Karaja Indians"). The attrition is due to the twin impacts of modernization and globalization, with many leaving the Araguaia region for employment in cities, gold mines, oil fields, and other locations, integrating into the Brazilian melting pot and never returning (Buckley 1999). Despite being largely unvisited by tourists as late as the 1950s, the Karajá welcomed Fuller with open arms. Although he was there primarily to scout locations for a fictional film based upon the life of a European expat, the footage Fuller captured provides a fascinating insight into an indigenous culture largely untouched, at that point, by the modern world.

Fuller's writings about his past must be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism. The interviews he gave over the years and his posthumously published autobiography are packed with anecdotes that, in their totality, seem a bit unlikely to have been squeezed into a single lifetime. Fuller was a storyteller extraordinaire, and it is important to filter his tales about the aborted *Tigrero* project. Over the years, his accounts of the Karajá grew more and more romantic, perhaps impacted by the forty years he lived after that trip, with a loss of innocence about the social and cultural inequities that were supposed

to be addressed by World War II and its aftermath. Certainly, different aspects of his descriptions of the Karajá become harder to reconcile when placed in conjunction with one another. For instance, he discourses in both his autobiography and in the *Tigreiro* documentary about how peaceful the tribe was, a point that comes up over and over: ‘What I discovered in that remote corner of Mato Grosso was a society far more peaceful and caring than ours. Little by little, I began to feel like the savage and see the Karajá as the civilized ones’ (Fuller 2002: 326). Fuller continues by noting other aspects of the utopia, finding the Karajá to be ‘joyful, hospitable, generous human beings. They didn’t have laws, judges, or police, nor did they need any. There was no crime, jealousy, or greed’ (Fuller 2002: 327). No society is perfect, Fuller’s statements clearly unrealistic and based upon a *very* brief period of observation in a single village. Furthermore, his account veers into incongruity several pages later when he describes a scene where the Karajá decapitate a tribal enemy, hang the head above a fire, and feed the flames with special wood and herbs. Three days and three nights later this process results in a shrunken head, a trophy for the tribe to cherish (Fuller 2002: 330-331)! As Fuller noted in one of his many interviews, “I asked them through an interpreter as a special favour, when they shrink the head, to stop the ceremony at night because I can’t photograph at night” (Server 1994: 144). In his schizophrenic focus upon this tribe for both its noble and savage attributes, Fuller fell into a representational trap that developed out of the Enlightenment period, his fascination with the Karajá reducing them to a highly bifurcated abstraction.

Although his writings on the subject may be suspect due to his competing projects of romanticism and sensationalism, the footage he recorded can unimpeachably be

considered ethnography, and forms the basis for our understanding of the original film project. Perhaps due to the fact that he was unable to communicate with the tribe members, the footage he shot is quite detached, simply taking in tribal life and rituals. Fuller was largely an observer, with very little evidence of interference other than perhaps convincing the tribal elders to shrink their trophy head during daylight hours. The most well-known scene involves a ceremonial ascension to manhood where young boys subject their skin to scraping by a device made out of piranha teeth. The ritual bloodletting that results is presented matter-of-factly. Fuller also filmed a related ceremony that involved the piercing of the penis with a wooden needle, footage that for obvious reasons was never shown, and does not appear in the documentary (Fuller 2002: 328). He may have embraced a project of sensationalism in his writings about the Karajá, but his camera is one of passive observation; at least, as passive as turning a technological and western gaze upon naked indigenous bodies can be. This remove is all the more impressive due to the genuine connection he felt with the villagers, at one point mentioning that his favorite part of the trip involved sitting around the fire laughing with the tribe members even though he had no idea what they were laughing about (Fuller 2002: 330). Amidst the bluster and hyperbole that typifies his autobiography, it is quite clear that Fuller viewed his short time with the Karajá as something special: 'It was damned hard to leave a place where I'd experienced so much peace and happiness' (Fuller 2002: 329). He may have found it difficult to leave, but he would have an even harder time getting the tribe, and project, out of his system. Upon Fuller's return to the United States, he was informed by Zanuck that the project was dead.

Fuller's description of *Tigrero*, a film that was never made, soon takes a back seat in the documentary to the accidental ethnography that comes about from two visits to the exact same village forty years apart. The changes that Fuller notes are numerous, obvious, and far-reaching. As Fuller states during an interview: 'Their village was so much more developed than the primitive place I'd visited in the fifties. The brush and trees had been cleared away, and there were telephone poles everywhere. Instead of going naked with body paint, now the Karajá wore T-shirts (Fuller 2002: 552). The t-shirts are clearly from elsewhere, as many feature messages and slogans, some in Portuguese but even more in English. One person wears a New York Yankees baseball cap; another sports a digital watch. It is clear from the documentary that, although the younger Karajá still have facial tattoos, they are much less extensive than those worn by their elders. The Karajá have also acquired electricity since Fuller's initial visit, and now have television. Fuller is told that whereas the villagers did not use money in 1954, they do now. The tribe is also abandoning its language, and in one scene Fuller and Jarmusch watch as a teacher reads to her charges from a Portuguese reading book geared toward normalizing mechanized life for the Karajá: 'I'm seeing an airplane. It's coming down from the sky.'

As the documentary establishes, there were several primary reasons for the rapid obliteration of traditional Karajá culture. In the mid-1960s, the Brazilian military dictatorship put in a nearby airstrip to support the 20,000 soldiers they moved to the region to suppress a group consisting of less than 60 leftist guerillas. A hotel and casino were also constructed near the village to turn the region into a tourist destination, with the Karajá advertised as a draw. The sad irony is that the monies earned from such tourism

were often lost at the casino. A small measure of karma was exacted when, in an attempt to smoke out a beehive from the hotel, the Karajá hired for this operation accidentally burned the building to the ground! As Fuller notes, however, some things have not changed, as the river continues to be a resolute influence on the Karajá: ‘The only thing they couldn’t change is the river. They can’t change the women there beating the hell out of the clothes and washing, they can’t change the families around there singing and having fun. That’s what they haven’t changed.’ This is the creeping, and unbeatable, threat facing the Karajá: allowing enough of the outside world in to appeal to new generations with new expectations, so that their children will not leave, while simultaneously attempting to preserve some semblance of traditional culture, language, and ritual. In the midst of this focus upon widespread culture destruction, one of the village elders, a sculptor, reminds Fuller that there is a very personal dimension to such loss: “In this village, a lot of things have changed since your last visit. But for me the saddest thing is that I’ve lost my husband. I feel very lonely.” It is easy to forget that *Tigrero: A Film That Was Never Made* actually features *three* directors, as Fuller is such an overwhelming presence that we tend to focus on both him and Jarmusch, who fills the role of the one who sees with fresh eyes. Mika Kaurismäki’s erasure from the text is extreme, even by documentary filmmaker standards, although it is in moments such as the inclusion of the sculptor where his genius is evident. True, much of the footage this director chose to include in the documentary involves the broad strokes of cultural loss on a *tribal* level as seen through the eyes of a western observer, as well as footage filmed forty years apart. With the brief inclusion of this statement from the sculptor, however, the audience is reminded that the loss we decry as National Geographic-loving, armchair-

sitting voyeurs is nowhere near as acute as the specific loss felt by the Karajá themselves. This truth is nowhere more amply demonstrated than in one of the culminating episodes of the documentary, where Fuller screens his 1954 footage to the gathered village.

Fuller and Jarmusch project the film onto a sheet tied between two trees. At first, despite their rapt attention the Karajá are visibly confused, although quickly begin to note familiar locations and individuals. The villagers in the 1954 footage wear less clothes and more paint, but largely look the same. As Fuller later notes, unlike the village elders, for whom the experience was sobering, the youth of the village were amused by the experience: 'It was exactly how our kids would react to seeing their grandparents dancing, say, the fox trot' (Fuller 2002: 563). Jarmusch agrees: The screening was a success. The Karajá were really surprised to see their relatives and friends alive once again.' The sobering elements of the footage are evident, however. Fuller finds out that two of the boys featured in the footage—Kuberene & Iora—who would be no more than fifty in 1994, have long since died. By dint of his background, Fuller is able to revisit a place forty years later, a number probably not that far off from the average Karajá life expectancy. One of the viewers, the son of one of the boys featured in the footage, is very touched by the experience. It is later revealed that his father was killed by a crocodile. Finally, although the documentary does not connect the dots for the viewer, there is the subtle implication that the personal dimension of showing footage of ancestors is the only aspect of novelty. Although presented almost as if an avatar type experience, with strange men arriving to project images onto a sheet tied between two trees, the documentary had previously established that many Karajá worked in the hotel and casino during the twenty year period those two establishment were in operation, and that most of the hovels in the

village now have television. Even in the midst of a special episode such as this one, where villagers are treated to images of loved ones before the incorporation of such technology into their lives, Mika Kaurismäki reminds us that the damage has already been done, and that the images that the Karajá witness are not only a celebration of their kin, but also a *memento mori* for a traditional existence.

Fuller journeyed to the Mato Grosso region of Brazil to make *Tigrero*, which—featuring John Wayne, Ava Garner, and Tyrone Power, all at the height of their stardom—would have been one of the biggest films of his career. What he found there was not the film he was looking for but instead an indigenous tribe whose lifestyle would fascinate the director for the rest of his life. Fuller was lucky enough to get to return to the Karajá several generations later, in so doing—with the help of Jarmusch and Kaurismäki—able to document the loss of traditional culture in the face of modernization and globalism. True, from his initial visit in 1954 through his 1994 return, and in all of the interviews he gave in between, Fuller fell into the trap of romanticizing the Karajá. However, it must be conceded that he was little different in this than pretty much everyone else during this time period, such liberal portrayals of massive indigenous cultural loss the groundwork for later, more nuanced, anthropological visions. *Tigrero* may have been a failed, unfinished film, but it was also the lynchpin for a lifelong journey undertaken by one of Hollywood's most eccentric of storytellers. In the documentary's final frame, a lesser known, but no less potent, storyteller reinforces one last time the schizophrenic nature of Fuller and his fascination with the Karajá, which in many ways stands in for a general western fascination with the loss of indigenous culture. When Jarmusch notes that the studio wasted the pairing of Wayne with Gardner and Power, Fuller reminds him that he

should add the Karajá to the list. This statement is insightful, but the last image Mika Kaurismäki leaves us with indicates that, despite a career full of cinematic plaudits and even an accidental ethnography, in the end of the day Samuel Fuller was little better than a tourist. Before being whisked away on a speedboat to the ‘uncivilized world’, the venerable director tosses of a cryptic *bon mot* to the Karajá chief seeing him off: ‘See you at MGM!’

Note – A longer version of this paper constitutes a chapter in *Shadow Cinema: Historical & Production Contexts of Unmade Films* (Ed. Kieran Foster, James Fenwick, & David Eldridge), forthcoming in 2021 from Bloomsbury Press.

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