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Title	Fragments of encounters: the filmic chronicles of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Dina Dreyfus in indigenous villages in Brazil
Authors	Brum, Rodrigo;Coutinho, Ana G.
Publication date	2025-10-23
Original Citation	Brum, R. and Coutinho, A. G. (2025) 'Fragments of encounters: the filmic chronicles of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Dina Dreyfus in indigenous villages in Brazil', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 29–30, pp. 70–91. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.2930.04
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.2930.04
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Download date	2026-10-31 18:34:49
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18174



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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 29–30, 2025, pp. 70–91
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.2930.04

alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

Fragments of Encounters: The Filmic Chronicles of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Dina Dreyfus in Indigenous Villages in Brazil

Rodrigo Brum and Ana G. Coutinho

Abstract: *In 1934, the young Claude Lévi-Strauss and his then wife, Dina Dreyfus, departed from Marseille bound for Brazil. It was in Brazil that they had their first experiences as ethnologists. At the invitation of Mário de Andrade, a central figure in Brazilian literary modernism and then head of the municipality's cultural division, Dreyfus was tasked with offering a course in ethnography aimed at providing "a general method immediately applicable in the field". In her course, Dreyfus classified film as the ideal medium for obtaining "perfect notes" in ethnographic research. The aim of this article is to analyse the filmic records captured by the couple during their missions, in light of the multimodal nature of the research, which includes articles, photographs, lectures, notes, and letters. It is possible that the images produced on these missions not only represent a seminal point in ethnographic film but also the beginning of an experience that reinvented anthropology and placed Amerindian thought at the scientific forefront of its time. Our analysis of the film material produced in the indigenous villages integrates reflections on the legacy of Lévi-Strauss and Dina Dreyfus to the Lowland South American Amerindians.*

The formative years of Claude Lévi-Strauss as an ethnologist in Brazil are well documented. His research experiences in the country are meticulously chronicled in his bestselling work, *Tristes Tropiques*, and in the objects, photographs, writings, and notes amassed during his Brazilian expeditions, which have since become integral to significant ethnographic collections and scholarly reviews. Nonetheless, this article seeks to illuminate the lesser-known films, recently restored by the Brazilian Cinematheque, that Lévi-Strauss and his then-wife, Dina Dreyfus, produced during their inaugural expedition to the state of Mato Grosso.[1] These films, among other subjects, represent a rare visual documentation of the lives of the Kadiwéu and Boe-Bororo peoples at the time of their production.[2]

This article begins by revisiting Lévi-Strauss's arrival in Brazil, drawing primarily on *Tristes Tropiques*. It then turns to Dreyfus, foregrounding her often-overlooked contributions to their joint expeditions. Given the limited biographical material on her ethnographic role in English-language scholarship, we offer a more detailed account of her formation and work in Brazil. Finally, we examine the films they produced, focusing on three elements: the ethnographers' presence in the footage, the depiction of a funerary ritual, and the exchange systems that shaped both the films' production and circulation. We argue that the films recorded by Lévi-Strauss and Dreyfus not only document specific ethnographic encounters with Indigenous groups in Brazil, but also challenge and expand the boundaries of ethnographic practice itself, including the forms of ethnography now practiced by Indigenous filmmakers. Their visual work—marked by fragmentation, ambivalence, and embodied presence—suggests a relational mode of ethnography

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that exceeds the limits of textual representation and offers insights into how image-making, observation, unscripted encounters, and exchange are entangled in the production of anthropological knowledge.

Tristes Tropiques

While Lévi-Strauss had not yet fully embraced ethnology upon his arrival in Brazil, his interest in the discipline had already taken root. This transformation, decisively shaped by his first journey to the Americas, was in part facilitated by his contact with Georges Dumas, a French physician and psychologist who played a pivotal role in the establishment of the University of São Paulo. For a time, Lévi-Strauss had attended a room at the Sainte-Anne Asylum in Paris, where Dumas delivered impromptu lectures that, according to the student, failed to garner much interest. After one or two hours of exposition, the patients of the asylum would be presented and discussed as case studies. Eventually, those who earned Dumas's trust were granted the privilege of having a patient entrusted to them for a private interview. In describing this second part of the lectures, Lévi-Strauss recalls an episode that left a lasting impression on him:

> No contact with savage Indian tribes has ever daunted me more than the morning I spent with an old lady swathed in woollies, who compared herself to a rotten herring encased in a block of ice: she appeared intact, she said, but was threatened with disintegration, if her protective envelope should happen to melt. (*Tristes Tropiques* 20)

This image, which evokes the imminence of finitude but also the veiled body of radical difference, is not, after all, far removed from a certain relationship with the Indigenous body in the ethnographic practice that Lévi-Strauss would later develop. Regarding the strangeness of that body, the scene is presented to the reader in its apparent mystery and brevity: a reminiscence told as an anecdote, without extended analysis to unfold its meanings, yet visually precise in its description. The account of this intimidated gaze upon the appearance of the elderly woman seems to cultivate a structure of impasse, in which no third term is invoked to synthesise or resolve the tension between "the ordinary plasticity of appearances" and the "indescribable evidence" of that body (Brenez 38; our trans.). These expressions are used by Brenez to describe what she formulates as a fundamental dialectic in the cinematic work of ethnologists, arising from the interplay between the appearance of the "body without a model" (Brenez 38; our trans.), understood as the form of a shared familiarity, and alterity as a dynamic question. In this context, the confrontation with alterity, despite the refusal to immediately decipher it, remains nonetheless conceivable.

In addition to attending Dumas's lectures at the Sainte-Anne Asylum, Lévi-Strauss also frequented Natural Sciences conferences held in an old pavilion at the Jardin des Plantes, the botanical garden, where the Society of Friends of the Museum operated. Founded in 1907 by anatomist and zoologist Edmond Perrier and conceived as an institution to support the National Museum of Natural History, the society organised weekly scientific lectures. These were delivered by "adventure narrators", as Lévi-Strauss described them, who showcased images and documented materials collected during their expeditions using a projection device (Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* 18; amended trans.).

Lévi-Strauss, weary of the philosophical environment in France that he perceived as merely an "application of a method", may have found alternative avenues of thought in the patients' analysis of Dumas's lectures and the conferences held in the amphitheatre of the Society of Friends of the Museum. These experiences, alongside his interests in geology, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, led him away from the career of a tenured philosophy professor. The exhausting repetition of his courses in secondary schools finally came to an end on a Sunday morning in the autumn of 1934, at 9 a.m., when he received a phone call from Célestin Bouglé, then director of the École Normale Supérieure and his former advisor.[3] Bouglé enquired whether he would still be interested in specialising in ethnography, informing him of an open position in Sociology at the University of São Paulo, where the outskirts of the city were populated with Indigenous peoples he could study during weekends.



Figure 1: Collection of Museu Nacional/UFRJ–Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (MN.DR, classe 146.0, relatório 1931-1940).

Lévi-Strauss's arrival to Brazil began with a brief stop in Rio de Janeiro, prior to the ship's final destination at the Port of Santos, and included an archaeological excursion organised by the National Museum. It is perhaps from this period that the famous photograph emerges, in which Lévi-Strauss appears on the far left, in the museum courtyard, alongside Ruth Landes and Charles Wagley, both students at Columbia University and disciples of Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, conducting research in Brazil. At the centre of the image, dressed in black, is Heloísa Alberto

Torres, the sole woman on the Council for the Supervision of Artistic and Scientific Expeditions in Brazil and the newly appointed director of the National Museum. To her right stands Luís de Castro Faria, who would later accompany Lévi-Strauss on his final expedition to Serra do Norte, assigned by the Brazilian government to supervise his ethnographic research. Beside him is geographer Raimundo Lopes da Cunha, who was employed by the Museum at the time. On the far right is the ethnologist, folklorist, and historian Edison Carneiro. In contrast to the two other foreigners, Landes and Wagley, Lévi-Strauss stands out as a researcher working without peers or mentors, lacking formal academic training in the field, and striving to establish his authority as an ethnographer through independent missions.

Yet, the photograph—and, to some degree, his entire account of this journey in the now-classic *Tristes Tropiques*—fails to fully capture the reality of his situation as a researcher in Brazil. Starting with the 1935 journey that would take him to the Americas for the first time, the writer was not alone. Alongside his colleagues, Lévi-Strauss embarked at the port of Marseille with his then-wife, the philosopher Dina Dreyfus. During their stay in São Paulo, she co-organised and accompanied him on both of his Brazilian expeditions, her presence implicitly threaded through the "we" used to recount, in many of the lines of *Tristes Tropiques*, his experiences with the Bororo, Kadiwéu, and Nambikwara peoples. Remarkably, in the span of more than five hundred pages, Lévi-Strauss never once names her.[4] His silence regarding his then-wife—despite her formative role in his ethnographic trajectory—is striking, prompting scholars to search for traces of her between the lines. Corrêa even speculates whether the character Cecília, from a play Lévi-Strauss describes in Chapter XXXVII, might implicitly reference Dreyfus.[5]

Dina Dreyfus

Dina Dreyfus was born in Milan in 1911. The youngest of three sisters, she moved to Paris with her parents and siblings at the age of thirteen. There, she pursued a degree in philosophy at the Sorbonne alongside her elder sister, Milka Lodetti (Azeredo de Moraes 73). Both attended Marcel Mauss's course at the Institute of Ethnology, earning a completion certificate. Around the same period, she worked as an intern at the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography. Lévi-Strauss, by contrast, as noted by Mauuarin and Debaene ("Cadrage"), had neither formal training in ethnography nor direct engagement with its museum and academic institutions. After marrying him, Dreyfus relocated to Mont-de-Marsan, where he taught philosophy and she prepared for her *agrégation*. In 1933, having earned the title of *agrégée* in philosophy, Dreyfus became a professor at the lycée in Amiens, a position she held until departing for Brazil.

Although Dina Dreyfus had also been promised employment, either at the University of São Paulo or at the Franco-Brazilian Lycée, this opportunity never materialised. In an interview conducted by anthropologist Luciana Portela, philosopher Alain Badiou suggests that the fact she was a woman "certainly influenced" her lack of appointment ("Dina Dreyfus" 342), corroborating what Luisa Valentini had already indicated in her work. The difficulty in securing a full-time university position did not prevent her from continuing her research, particularly in physical anthropology, focusing on a racial marker known as the Mongolian spot.

As recent scholarship on Dreyfus's contributions to ethnography highlights, upon her arrival in São Paulo, she possessed an ethnographic expertise uncommon among her peers. A frequently cited account is that of Luís de Castro Faria, who accompanied Dreyfus and Lévi-Strauss on their second round of fieldwork. The Brazilian anthropologist noted that Dreyfus was "the one doing ethnography, as she was prepared for it" (qtd. in Spielmann 66). This observation led Ellen Spielmann to wonder whether Lévi-Strauss might have been a disciple of Dreyfus (66).

It is likely that she played a pivotal role in organising the so-called Lévi-Strauss Mission, which took place between November 1935 and March 1936 in Mato Grosso, focusing on research among the Kadiwéu and Bororo peoples. The mission received enthusiastic backing from Mário de Andrade, then the director of São Paulo's Department of Culture, with whom Dreyfus developed a close friendship.[6] It was Andrade who personally intervened with the city's mayor to secure the necessary funding for the expedition. Among other deliverables mentioned in the proposal letter, the films the couple would produce during the expedition served as a key argument in Andrade's request for funds to support the research.

After the completion of the first mission, Dreyfus was invited by Mário de Andrade to teach an ethnography course, where she would instruct students in the procedures necessary for training field researchers with the aim of forming ethnographic collections in Brazil. In the course outline, Dreyfus planned to introduce the basic concepts of Physical and Cultural Anthropology and ultimately integrated these ideas into training for fieldwork and data collection. This included classes on "mechanical recordings" such as photography and cinema. Likely without realising it, Dreyfus ended up teaching what some have claimed to be the first ethnography course in the history of the social sciences and humanities in Brazil (Spielmann 74).

At a luncheon held in her honour following the conclusion of her course, Mário de Andrade announced the creation of the Society of Ethnography and Folklore—the first in Brazil—with Dreyfus as a founding member and inaugural lecturer. Soon after, she engaged in organising another expedition, between May and November of 1938, to study the Nambikwara people in Mato Grosso. Planned to last a year, Dreyfus left the field after three months due to an eye infection, returning first to São Paulo, then to France. Reflecting on the tensions of the anthropological gaze, Barbara Browning briefly references this episode, speculating in a short yet insightful footnote, on the possible "contaminations" of Lévi-Strauss's gaze upon her eyes (14).

Following her return to France, and throughout her career as a philosopher, it is striking that Dreyfus continually placed emphasis on the moving image and its interconnections with thought and pedagogy. The same, however, cannot be said of her ethnographic work or the films recorded while in Brazil. Dreyfus never revisited these experiences in her writings, and they eventually became subjects of resistance within her own memory (Corrêa 20). Lévi-Strauss, for his part, dismissed these films as devoid of interest, seldom mentioned them, and never in his own writings. During an interview with Antoine de Gaudemar, in one of the rare instances where he did refer to his filmic work, Lévi-Strauss classified them as "poor fragments, without any interest" (Lévi-Strauss, "Nostalgia").

Fragmented Films

Of the six films—or fragments of films, as Lévi-Strauss referred to them—one was lost due to inadequate conservation conditions. Among the surviving titles, only one does not document the lives of Brazilian Indigenous peoples, a brief three-minute film named *Cattle Work in the Corral of a Farm in Southern Mato Grosso* (1936). A seventh film, which was certainly not shot during the Lévi-Strauss mission and also does not focus on any Brazilian Indigenous group, but rather on a religious festival in Mogi das Cruzes, was produced during the ethnography course taught by Dina Dreyfus and is the only one in which authorship is attributed solely to her.[7]

The three members of the expedition that most likely were operating the film equipment—Claude and Dina Lévi-Strauss, along with agricultural engineer René Silz—were seemingly untrained in filmmaking. The footage from all the films, with the exception, perhaps, of the one shot by Dina during her ethnography course, is quite irregular in its angles and movements, and lacks consistent formal strategies aspiring to transcend mere supplementary documentation within a multimodal research framework. This, in fact, reinforces the fragmented quality that Lévi-Strauss emphasises in his account of the films.

In their films, the use of introductory panoramic views of the landscape is a recurring feature, perhaps reminiscent of the travelogue format (Rony 83), as is a certain disregard for constructing a voyeuristic gaze: the presence of the camera is rarely obscured from those being filmed—whether because they look directly into it or actively perform for it. They contain no authoritative voiceover narration, prevalent in visual ethnographic work of the time—such as Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's *Trance and Dance in Bali*, also shot in 1936. Unlike Robert Flaherty's films, the images are fragmentary and brief, punctuated by title cards that never coalesce into a cohesive textual commentary, and, certainly, are devoid of a narrative structure that extends beyond the ethnographic documentation, hampering, for instance, subjects from becoming characters in their own right.

Perhaps due to the limited resources available, this material remains unembellished, avoiding spectacle-driven narration or an extended, immersive approach to capturing ethnographic practices. Its simplicity—seen in the modest editing, fragmented structure, brief shots, and lack of sound—nonetheless reveals subtle complexities, especially regarding the filmmakers' presence. Not only in their occasional physical appearance on screen, but also through their camera work, which wavers between observation and possible staging. Improvised camera angles often capture the filmmakers unintentionally, though at times their inclusion seems deliberate. If they are not always visible within the frame, they also do not seek to erase themselves; their presence surfaces intermittently, neither asserted nor concealed.

Presence/Absence

Cattle Work in the Corral of a Farm in Southern Mato Grosso begins with a panning shot that reveals the corral area and a small wooden platform. In this initial shot, Dreyfus can already be seen in the distance on the platform, and a male figure likely to be Lévi-Strauss or Silz, who

climbs up and down the same structure. Following a close-up of the cattle passing through the corral, the next shot depicts those standing on the platform, particularly a man counting the animals, with Dreyfus beside him, observing the action. The presence of Dreyfus and Lévi-Strauss is far less visible in the two surviving films on the Boe-Bororo. In *The Life of a Bororo Village* (1936), the researchers appear only briefly at the edges of scenes focused on daily life and spatial organisation. In *Funeral Ceremonies Among the Bororo II* (1936), they are entirely absent—likely a result of the ritual's sacred nature, which may have required discretion and adhered to internal restrictions. As will be further explored, this absence may reflect a deliberate ethical stance in deference to the sacred nature of the ritual.

In contrast to the Boe-Bororo films, the Kadiwéu films—shot in Nalike Village—feature the filmmakers on-screen multiple times. This visibility likely reflects the Kadiwéu's prolonged contact with non-Indigenous groups, a point extensively explored in Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*. The only ritual being documented in the two films shot with the Kadiwéu is a puberty ceremony, arranged in an overtly celebratory manner, which makes the ethnologists' movement within the village space less restricted. The filmmakers are shown observing from a distance—such as in a shot by Silz—and within the ceremony itself, as in a scene where the shot widens from its focus on a dancing man to reveal Dreyfus seated nearby, her back turned to the camera.

In another shot, the same image simultaneously registers the acknowledged presence of one ethnographer on-screen while remaining unnoticed by the other. It is precisely this "parallax effect"—to borrow and displace a term from Faye Ginsburg—that reveals a discernible distinction in how Dreyfus and Lévi-Strauss navigate the ethnographic space. Dreyfus's authority and familiarity with ethnography may be reflected in this shot, where Lévi-Strauss appears in the foreground, looking directly at the camera, accompanied by an Indigenous woman sitting behind him to his right. However, upon closer observation, an action is unfolding in the background: Dina Dreyfus, seemingly unaware of the filming, is handling an object and communicating through gestures with an Indigenous woman seated in front of her, who appears to be assisting with another object (a lens?), while the ethnologist demonstrates something with her hands.




Figures 3 and 4: Dreyfus in the background, conversing with an Indigenous woman in *The Nalike Village* (1935–36). Screenshots.




Figures 5 and 6: Exchange between Dreyfus and an Indigenous woman in in *The Nalike Village*. Reframed screenshots.

This scene, like others, attests to the spontaneous nature of image capture, rendering the presence or absence of the ethnographers largely incidental.[8] It is difficult to believe that Dreyfus was deliberately performing for the camera. Likewise, Lévi-Strauss's return gaze may have been an instinctive reaction to Silz's handling of the camera (assuming it was indeed him filming). Rather than intentionally staging a scene, they appear to be recorded in the midst of their engagement with the environment. And yet, their presence on screen might help clarify their positionalities within the ethnographic research conducted by the couple during this mission. Furthermore, this unguarded presence of the ethnographers contributes to a certain despectacularisation of the traveller, stripping the aura of adventure and reducing them to the ordinariness of ethnographic work. This approach rejects both a certain politics of non-location based in the effacement of the filmmaker (Trinh) and the construction of the ethnographer as a character, whether through a scientific discourse that explicitly comments on the images or through the explicit or implicit figure of the ethnographer as an adventurer.

The Boe-Bororo Funerary Ritual

Funeral Ceremonies among the Bororo II requires a more nuanced analysis. First, because the preceding film, which documented the initial stages of the funeral ritual, was lost due to poor preservation. Second, the film's subject involves a complex ritual system, deeply embedded in cosmologies and traditions that must be considered. In the following paragraphs, we will integrate the visual material with theoretical frameworks and scholarship on the Boe-Bororo funeral ceremony, including contributions from Lévi-Strauss himself, to highlight key aspects that inform our understanding of what is visible—and what remains unseen—in the footage captured by the Lévi-Strauss couple.

The filmed images of the Boe-Bororo funerary ritual reveal the entrance of various participants into the ritual space and the orchestration of multiple events. While the researchers remain absent from the frame, their presence is implied through the movement of the camera as it navigates specific areas of the village's public square.[9] The caution to avoid a potential disruption posed by external figures to the ritual cycle thus becomes evident in the choice of camera

placement. A similar approach to a Boe-Bororo ritual, characterised by a distanced camera, can be observed in *Rituals and Festivals of the Bororo* (*Rituais e festas Bororo*, 1916), filmed by Luiz Thomaz Reis—one of the earliest cinematic records of Indigenous peoples in Brazil.

In his 1936 article on the social organisation of the Boe-Bororo—a work that played a pivotal role in shaping Claude Lévi-Strauss's academic trajectory and had a significant impact on Brazilian ethnology—death is presented as both a natural and cultural process. The article argues that, for the Boe-Bororo, as for many other societies, it is insufficient to conceive of death solely as a natural occurrence (Lévi-Strauss, *Plus vastes horizons*, 269–304). This early work anticipates Lévi-Strauss's later theoretical framework, particularly his exploration of the tension between nature and culture, a theme that permeates much of his scholarship.

In Boe-Bororo society, death is understood in the context of a network of relationships—both human and nonhuman—that activate a series of ritual actions involving most of the village.[10] Multiple roles emerge: the "social representative of the deceased" (*aroe maiwu*) (Caiuby Novaes, "Funerais" 303–04), the deceased's mother and father, the mourners, the singers, the women, the audience from the opposite moiety, and the cultural hero Bakororo (*aroe*), among others. Some mourners weep, scarify themselves, or tear out their hair, while the parents care for the deceased. The "social representative of the deceased" must exact vengeance for the death, while others embark on collective hunts. The predatory nature of the recently deceased, along with its dangers, is neutralised through these rituals. Death, triggered by an intensification of the *bope* force within the body, sets in motion a process where vengeance offers the possibility of life's renewal:

> All deaths among the Bororo are consummated by *bope*, a class of spirits directly or indirectly responsible for any and all transformation, whether creative or destructive. However, as described by Crocker (1985), death is not conceived as the inevitable result of the entropic process the body undergoes throughout life, even though this process is also under *bope*'s responsibility. Death is, above all, an act of revenge by these spirits. (Kelmer, *Parentes* 180; our trans.)

The act of revenge in Boe culture is intricately linked to the concept of debt (*mori*), which the living owe to those mourning the deceased. The "social representative of the deceased" must come from the opposite moiety and, by assuming the role of "representative of the dead", takes on the responsibility of delivering the skin of a large feline [puma, jaguar, or ocelot], its claws, and teeth to the deceased's relatives (Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* 219–20). The *aroe maiwu* is tasked with hunting the large feline and offering its skin ("*mori*") to the mourning relatives. In return, the deceased's kin present the *aroe maiwu* with a bow and arrows, necklaces, the deceased's clan names, and a wind instrument ("*powari mori*") (Caiuby Novaes, *Mulheres* 210–11). This system of ritual exchange reflects a cycle involving the causes of death, vengeance through the killing of a large feline, and the offering of its predatory parts—fangs, claws, and skin—to the bereaved.

In the section of *Tristes Tropiques* dedicated to the Boe-Bororo funeral ritual, Lévi-Strauss highlights certain chronological mismatches between the research group's arrival and the ritual events they had hoped to observe. The complete ritual should be understood as a cycle, composed of various sequences and simultaneous events, which "can extend for over two months (the time ranging from an individual's death to the final burial of the bones) and includes a large number of

rites in which practically all the members of the village participate" (Caiuby Novaes, *Mulheres* 195; our trans.).[11]

The death in question occurred in another village, preventing the group from witnessing the initial burial of the body in a shallow grave, the "provisional tomb", covered with "branches in the centre of the village until the flesh has rotted" (Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* 288). During this period, the grave where the body lies is constantly watered to accelerate the decomposition process, as Sylvia Caiuby Novaes explains ("Funerais" 290–92). Lévi-Strauss and Dreyfus also did not witness the washing of the bones in the river, where they were hung, adorned with feathers, and placed in a basket before being submerged in a basket at the bottom of the river (Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes* Tropiques, 228). Regarding the funeral ritual described in the chapter "The Living and the Dead" alongside the film recorded by Dreyfus and Lévi-Strauss, several questions emerge.

As Lévi-Strauss notes in *Tristes Tropiques*, the initial part of the ritual was missed, since the death occurred far from the village. The group arrived during an unproductive hunting day; no jaguar was found, so the skin of a previously hunted one was reused as the *mori*, the debt owed to the deceased's relatives. Still, the researchers witnessed key actions, including scarifications performed on mourners "at the place where the provisional tomb should have been dug" (Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* 228). What stands out is the unresolved ambiguity—never clarified by the author—about whether the bones were actually brought to Kejari, or if the rituals occurred there without the remains. It is possible the filmed scenes belong to a later stage of the cycle, independent of the burial itself. The "absent tomb" referred to by the author may not have been the same shallow grave that remained unseen.[12]

What we witness, therefore, in *Funeral Ceremonies among the Bororo II* are partial sequences from a broader funerary cycle. By examining the intertitles, we can trace a progression of actions, figures, and objects, though the title cards remain sparse and do not cover all the ritual activities captured. These cards serve a basic organising role, guiding the viewer through the ritual flow. Their structure aligns with the type of data ethnographic expeditions aimed to collect, echoing more detailed written records produced for the Trocadéro Museum. Though differing in format and depth, these visual and textual records ultimately form part of the same documentary framework common to other expeditions of the period (Debaene, "Cadrage"; Joseph and Mauuarin).

The camera follows, for instance, the process of the *Marid'do* fabrication until its completion, capturing the detailed technique of the craftsmanship. The camera approaches cautiously, capturing the artefact's production up close while keeping its distance during the ritual action, when the heavy *Marid'do* is lifted and accompanied by the "social representative of the deceased". Throughout the ritual actions, the camera remains in motion: it follows the artefact's making, provides an overall view of the ritual, and also positions itself alongside the opposite half of the deceased and their grieving relatives. In the final moments of the footage, it assumes the perspective of the audience—the perspective of the living.




Figures 7 and 8: The preparation of the *Marid'do* in *Funeral Ceremonies among the Bororo II* (1936). Medium shot and close-up of the craftmanship. Screenshots.

The spectators' area, from which the ritual actions are observed, is located on one side of the village, in a social division (moiety) opposite to that of the deceased. Both men and women occupy this space, adding yet another perspective—that of the living—to the interplay of distinct yet simultaneous viewpoints during the ritual performances. In the final scenes of the films shot in the Rio Vermelho village, the camera captures gazes directed both at itself and at the ritual scene. In general, the position of the audience is fundamental in ritual contexts, as it provides a standpoint that guarantees the validity of the events by offering a distanced gaze on the properly performed ritual actions.




Figure 9 (left): The audience in the moiety opposite to that of the deceased.
Figure 10 (right): The *Marid'do* is lifted and accompanied by the social representatives of the deceased.
***Funeral Ceremonies among the Bororo II*. Screenshots.**

The Urgency of Exchange

Lévi-Strauss and, above all, Dreyfus were acutely aware of the central role of "exchange" as a foundational principle in cultural dynamics. Dreyfus, having studied with Marcel Mauss, was directly shaped by the intellectual legacy of *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925), in which her former professor elucidated the reciprocity structures that undergird social systems, namely, and to use Mauss's own words as employed by Lévi-Strauss to critique him, "that exchange is the common denominator of a large number of apparently heterogeneous

social activities" (Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction* 45–46). Mauss's analysis of gift economies outlines the obligations of giving, receiving, and returning, emphasising—particularly in his discussion of Maori law and religion—the intangible force within objects that drives their circulation and embodies the donor, making exchange itself a primary and fundamental phenomenon for understanding cultural relations.

In his 1936 article "Contribution à l'étude de l'organisation sociale des indiens Bororo", Lévi-Strauss noted the difficulty of assessing how contact with non-Indigenous groups had affected Bororo economic life. Yet their exchange system already exceeded a simple gift-versus-market distinction. Ritual ornaments—especially feathers—held high value, varying by species, colour, and shape. Items traded by the ethnographers were absorbed into this system. The Rio Vermelho chief, identified by Lévi-Strauss as the sole figure authorised to trade ritual objects, used these exchanges to acquire goods like clothing and tools, which were then redistributed among clan leaders to negotiate internal alliances.

In the case of the filmed images, it remains unclear whether the Bororo requested any form of compensation for recording their activities and rituals. Regarding the funeral ritual, the camera's positioning—maintaining a certain distance, as previously discussed—seems to circumvent this issue. Focused on their ritual obligations, the Indigenous participants may not have deemed it relevant to negotiate the recording of the event, especially since the camera's presence does not appear to disrupt the ritual space. The case of the Kadiwéu, however, presents a different scenario. From the outset, image capture was complicated by the group's financial demands, as they were already accustomed to outsiders documenting their culture. Since at least the visits of Italian painter Guido Boggiani in the 1890s, their artistic practices—figurative male sculptures and women's abstract designs on pottery, leather, and bodies—had drawn sustained anthropological attention. As becomes evident in *Tristes Tropiques*, the Kadiwéu had, over the centuries, understood the system of exchange that the capture of these images could generate, and they sought to gain some advantage from this interaction:

> Young anthropologists are taught that natives are afraid of having their image caught in a photograph, and that it is proper to overcome this fear and compensate them for the risk they think they are taking by making them a present in money or in kind. The Caduveo [Kadiwéu] had perfected the system: not only did they insist on being paid before allowing themselves to be photographed; they forced me to photograph them so that I should have to pay.[13] (176)

One of the strategies Lévi-Strauss devised to navigate these financial demands was to ask the Indigenous women to recreate their facial paintings on presketched faces he had drawn on paper, which proved effective, as they created the designs without requesting anything in return. The image of these women replicating their facial paintings onto paper is featured in *The Nalike Village* film. Throughout the mission, collecting objects, recording images, and accessing communities depended on reciprocal negotiations—through trade, collaboration, or persuasion. The researchers' presence itself required access to be negotiated and mutual interests to be acknowledged. In the case of the Kadiwéu, film and photo records were not neutral documents but outcomes of exchanges in which subjects actively participated—often performing and consistently engaging with the camera and its operators.

Eventually, however, in their attempt to capture authentic forms of cultural expression and avoid potential resistance from the portrayed subjects, the ethnologists may have concealed the presence of the camera to secure the documentation of practices they believed were on the verge of disappearing. In one of her lectures, where Dreyfus characterised sound film as the medium capable of producing "perfect notations", she suggests that its capture could occur regardless of the consent of those involved (Dreyfus qtd. in Valentini 153; our trans.). This belief in film's ability to capture notes with precision, informed by her training in ethnography, intersected with broader archival and museological logics of the time. These logics were driven not merely by technical fascination, but by an urge to preserve what was perceived as disappearing.

The urge to document cultures seen as endangered as a means to protect against loss was one of the driving forces behind the establishment of public archives and museums in the early twentieth century. In particular, this impulse shaped natural history museums—with their taxidermied dioramas of vanishing species—and the visual records produced during ethnographic expeditions or by filmmakers tied to anthropological representation (Haraway; Rony). It also underpinned Franz Boas's appeal to Will Hays, president of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), amid Hollywood's interest in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). In a letter cited by Rony, Boas's warns Hays of the "complete breakdown" of native cultures "from a pictorial point of view", urging collaboration between film and anthropology (77–78).

This same urgency often outweighed—or equalled—ethical concerns regarding the relationships between documentarians and the communities they filmed. Although the films produced by Lévi-Strauss and Dreyfus avoid a complete taxidermic approach by capturing living cultures rather than staging a dead past, Dreyfus's recommended methodology—eschewing the need for consent—reflects traces of this dilemma. One of the most intriguing aspects of this discussion is that, within the taxidermic regime, ethnologists and filmmakers often exhibited a certain blindness to the fact that the very cultures from which they extracted their "representations on the verge of extinction" were not necessarily extinct. As Rony argues, "the representation of the 'vanishing native,' […] which denied the coexistence of indigenous peoples and turned a blind eye to how they were able to resist and survive European encroachment and dispossession, was an extremely potent and popular image" (91).

Further evidence of such tensions is visible in the films' composition, especially their deliberate focus on close-up shots of manual techniques, a choice Dreyfus defended in lectures by praising "photographic detail" as "more revealing" and "more instructive" than wider shots for preserving cultural practices (*Curso*). And while the films may not constitute a taxidermy of the practices observed during the expedition, precisely because it lingers on the renascent fragments of cultural expression instead of assembling a taxidermied whole, the portrayal of the Kadiwéu in *Tristes Tropiques* strongly echoes Rony's later definition of the term. When the Lévi-Strauss expedition arrived in Nalike, they encountered what the author describes as evidence of their cultural "degradation", a condition that rendered these "ragged peasants […] a sorry sight" (Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* 156). Paradoxically, Lévi-Strauss argues that this perceived "degradation" made the surviving cultural elements more striking—especially the intricate facial paintings by village women, which became central to his analysis and are prominently featured in *The Nalike Village*.

Crossing the Tropic

However, there is yet another exchange, one not confined to the urgency of preservation in the face of these cultures' potential disappearance but rather shaped by their very survival over time. This concerns the reception of the films and the ongoing engagement of the Boe and Kadiwéu with the images captured by the couple during their expedition. Since the films were rediscovered—and especially after becoming available online—it is likely that members of these communities have revisited them on multiple occasions. More recently, in October 2024, in the context of a collaborative project involving anthropologists, ethnographic museums, and the Boe-Bororo, Brazilian researchers brought Boe representatives to Paris, where they viewed the recently restored films for the first time, tracing a return journey opposite to that of Dreyfus and Lévi-Strauss. Their visit, proposed and documented by Maria Luísa Lucas and João Kelmer, also included a conference at the Collège de France, where Lévi-Strauss once held the Chair of Social Anthropology, and the crafting of a *pariko* (ceremonial headdress) to be added to the Musée du Quai Branly's collection, where the screening of the films took place. Among those in attendance were Lévi-Strauss's widow, Dreyfus's nephew, and the president of the museum. As Lucas and Kelmer write:

> Before the screening of the films […] the Indigenous representatives—Ismael Atugoreu (57 years old, a respected ritual specialist from the Córrego Grande village), Bosco Marido Kurireu (43, one of the leaders of the central village of the Tadarimana Indigenous Territory), Antônio Jukuriakireu (44, a teacher), Neiva Aroereaudo (40, a leader of the Pobojare village in the Tadarimana Indigenous Territory), and Majur Traytowu (33, the first transgender leader of the Boe people)—improvised a headdress presentation ceremony on stage. They approached Emmanuel Kasarhérou, the museum's president, and tied the *pariko* around his head. Standing before him, Ismael Atugoreu gave a brief speech addressed to the president. At that moment, a striking role reversal took place: the Boe, suddenly, became the hosts, placing Kasarhérou in the position of a visitor. (36; our trans.)

The screening of the films was interspersed with comments from the Indigenous participants "amid laughter, explanations, and exclamations of astonishment and surprise" (36; our trans.). When asked at the end of the session what they had discussed during the screening, Jukuriakireu responded simply, referring to their ancestors who appeared in the footage: "They were happy." As they examined the objects collected during the mission housed in the museum, the Indigenous visitors seemed convinced that some had been crafted hastily, in an improvised manner, solely for trade with the ethnologists and to be displayed as part of a collection—further confirming the urgency of exchange discussed here. At the same time, they expressed satisfaction with the *pariko* they had created to deposit in the museum, despite also having made it "in a hurry" and "for display", with the hope that one day their "grandchildren and great-grandchildren" might see it.

On the day before their return to Brazil, Ismael Atugoreu suggested a visit to the Paris Zoological Park in the Bois de Vincennes. There, they encountered several animals, some familiar to them, including two jaguars confined in a cage, separated from visitors by a glass barrier, that Atugoreu recorded on his smartphone. However, what struck him most was a meerkat in a small enclosure, persistently gazing at the sky. According to Atugoreu, the animal could not possibly know that the planes flying overhead were not birds. The following day, at the airport, when asked

by the anthropologists what had left the greatest impression on them during the trip, Atugoreu mentioned the meerkat.

In a compelling article entitled "Iconophobia", filmmaker and anthropologist Lucien Castaing-Taylor critiques the "anxiety" with which academic authors approach images, particularly filmic ones, criticising a scholarly tradition that questions the extent to which moving images can be fully integrated into anthropological research. This scepticism toward film within anthropological discourse is also observed by Rony, who notes, for instance, the lack of academic interest in the vast raw footage material captured by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson—now relegated to storage boxes in museums and libraries, and largely forgotten (70–71). Lévi-Strauss's scepticism regarding the relevance of his films to both his own work and the broader anthropological field does not necessarily stem from iconophobia. While Dreyfus remained actively engaged not only in the philosophical analysis of cinema (*Écrits*) but also in its practical application as a pedagogical tool—most notably through the television series *L'enseignement de la philosophie* (*The Teaching of Philosophy*, 1965), which she produced and Jean Fléchet directed—Lévi-Strauss, in many passages of his work, but especially in *Tristes Tropiques*, appears invested in the creation of literary images of what he encounters. Not by chance, the genre of the book has been considered by many to be unclassifiable, as it neither reinforces nor conforms to the conventional parameters of academic writing in its reflection of ethnographic experiences (Bataille; Debaene, "Case"; MacDougall).

One of the aspects that may render the book difficult to classify within academic writing is the fact that *Tristes Tropiques* is deeply invested in the creation of literary images and in the discursive construction of a visuality that eventually operates without any additional textual elaboration. A striking example is the passage cited at the beginning of this article, where Lévi-Strauss describes his encounter with the old woman in the context of a session permitted by Professor Dumas. The author is also capable of crafting, in the same book, extended visual descriptions, in order to "find a language in which to perpetuate those *appearances*, at once so unstable and so resistant to description"—such as in Chapter VII of *Tristes Tropiques*, where an elaborate lyrical passage, at times baroque, at times impressionistic, depicts a sunset (*Tristes Tropiques* 62; emphasis added). Why, then, would he choose such brevity for the image he claims daunted him more than any contact with the "savage" Indian tribes he would later establish? Why do the literary construction of some images, in his book, look like a brief photographic description, while others are more like long, durational moving images?

Suffice it to say that rather than approaching this question through a textual hermeneutic, it may be more productive to examine it through the book's broader investment in image production. From this perspective, theories of montage—whether in Kuleshov, Eisenstein, or Vertov—can offer insight into the effects generated by the juxtaposition of shots of varying lengths in the articulation of film language that are not distant from what Lévi-Strauss achieves in writing. In cinema, as we know, brevity does not necessarily diminish a shot's impact. The fleeting visibility of an element can, paradoxically, heighten the audience's sensory and intellectual resonance with the overall structure of the film. As well as the images that are not shown, but implicit by framing and montage.

To borrow, as a final resource, film language to conclude our article—offering one last exchange of gazes that encapsulates Lévi-Strauss's ethnographic awakening, Dreyfus's transformative pedagogical contributions to the practice of ethnography in Brazil, and the contemporary image making conducted by Indigenous filmmakers (as evoked in the closing visual of the article *O Reencontro*, rich in layered meanings)—we propose a simple, silent three-shot montage. This is not intended as a scientific analysis but rather as a visual juxtaposition that we find evocative of the ethnographic exchanges set in motion by the couple's arrival in Brazil. The final sequence of our film/article would thus unfold as follows: Lévi-Strauss's intimidated gaze upon encountering the old woman at the Saint Anne asylum; a reframed shot from *The Nalike Village*, bringing to the foreground the exchange of knowledge and equipment between Dreyfus and a Kadiwéu woman; and finally, Atugoreu's short clip of the meerkat at the Paris Zoological Park, its "tireless vigilance" fixed upon the sky, watching the machines that have taken over the space of birds.

Notes

[1] The restoration process of the collection composed of five titles by Dina and Claude Lévi-Strauss, made in Brazil between 1935 and 1936, was carried out in 2022. The processing was coordinated by the Image and Sound Laboratory of the Cinemateca Brasileira, and with funding from the São Paulo City Hall Grant Program (the legal holder of the works), certain services were contracted from Cinecolor Brasil to make the initiative possible. Preservation masters were produced for the archive, as well as exhibition copies in DCP format.

[2] Currently, the ethnonym Boe, rather than Bororo, is self-claimed by the people. The Boe inhabit six demarcated Indigenous lands in the state of Mato Grosso, now reduced to small islands amid the expansion of Brazilian agribusiness.

[3] This passage from *Tristes Tropiques* is frequently cited in scholarship on Lévi-Strauss, though it merely highlights a circumstantial moment in his ethnographic beginnings. Its recurrence reflects a familiar trope in Western travel narratives—dating back to Homer's *Odyssey*—in which the hero is thrust into an adventure by forces of chance and must respond to the challenges and alterities encountered along the way without having consciously prepared for them.

[4] Dina's contributions to ethnography, long neglected, are now being reconsidered, particularly by female scholars (Corrêa; Spielmann; Valentini; Portela, *Brasil*; Azeredo de Moraes).

[5] If so, it would ironically echo the dynamic he observed among the Nambikwara, where proper names were virtually forbidden in interactions with outsiders—a secret he managed to uncover by encouraging small disputes between Indigenous children so they reveal each other's names in retaliation. Jacques Derrida's critique of this episode is well-known, highlighting the anthropological violence Lévi-Strauss overlooked, both in his portrayal of the Nambikwara's avoidance of proper names and their alleged lack of writing (101–40).

[6] Mário de Andrade (1893–1945) was a central figure in Brazil's modernist movement and served as director of São Paulo's Department of Culture from 1935 to 1938, where he promoted ethnographic research and supported the Lévi-Strauss Mission.

[7] Although the authorship of the other films remains a topic of debate (Portela 171–74), we choose not to pursue this discussion further, given the many scenes in which the couple is captured on film. These suggest a collaborative authorship, at least in terms of handling the equipment.

[8] Their unassuming approach to film may limit their ethnographic films—if viewed in isolation from the broader multimodal outputs of the mission—from fully achieving the status of filmic ethnography (Ruby), despite the filmmakers' familiarity with emerging anthropological methods.

[9] Dreyfus was likely not the one filming the village's public square, a space traditionally reserved for men. However, João Kelmer, currently researching the Boe-Bororo, noted in personal communication that women are not strictly barred from the square (email to the authors, 12 June 2025). The main restriction applies to witnessing the dead being fed—while women send food offerings, they are not allowed to observe the act itself.

[10] The Boe organise themselves in a circular village, divided into two exogamous halves. In the central courtyard, there is a ceremonial house, whose access is restricted to women. In his dissertation, based on field research conducted in 1960, Crocker analysed two Bororo notions "through a dialectic of being and becoming, embodied by two distinct classes of beings: the *bope*—predatory spirits associated with death, fertility, and time—and the *aroe*—beautifully adorned doubles of humans, animals, and other named entities, who embody form, continuity, and space" (Kelmer, *Ritual Aesthetics*).

[11] It will not be possible to fully reconstruct all the ritual events that take place within the cycle, which lasts an average of two months. The ritual begins with the act of a woman cutting her hair as a sign of mourning. The mourners enter seclusion, and subsequently, the singer-chiefs oversee and control all ritual actions (Kelmer, *Ritual Aesthetics*). Once the mourning period begins, various rituals are performed involving the former body of the deceased, as well as certain acts of vengeance, which we briefly describe in our article.

[12] In personal communication with the ethnologist João Kelmer, we speculated about the geographical distance between the death and the execution of the funeral ritual in the Kejari village, as witnessed by Dreyfus and Lévi-Strauss. It is not possible to determine if there was an actual body in the grave shown in the images. Among the speculative hypotheses about what might have occurred between the death, which took place in another village, and the start of the ritual, there is the possibility that "the body had disappeared, or only the bones were transported for the final ceremony" (Kelmer, email to the authors, 3 Sept. 2024).

[13] Lévi-Strauss found a way to circumvent this system of exchange, which, according to the ethnologist, would have "exhausted my resources" (*Tristes Tropiques* 185–187). To avoid the expectation of rewards, he began drawing the facial paintings himself but soon discovered that it was easier to ask the indigenous women, especially the elderly ones, to do the drawings for him.

They willingly carried out the task without asking for any compensation in return and he ended up collecting around four hundred samples of these patterns (*Tristes Tropiques* 185–87).

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Suggested Citation

Brum, Rodrigo, and Ana G. Coutinho. "Fragments of Encounters: The Filmic Chronicles of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Dina Dreyfus in Indigenous Villages in Brazil." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 29–30, 2025, pp. 70–91. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.2930.04.

Rodrigo Brum is a film producer, programmer, and Associate Professor in the Film Program at the American University in Cairo. He is pursuing a PhD. at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, focusing on film education in Africa and Latin America since the emergence of the Third Cinema movement. Brum co-founded A Kiss in the Desert, a Cairo-based film collective supporting emerging filmmakers. His research and practice engage with decolonial approaches to film programming, restoration, and pedagogy. He has contributed to film festivals, academic journals, and curriculum development, emphasizing Global South perspectives in cinema.

Ana G. Coutinho holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the National Museum – Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She is a consultant for the Apyãwa-Tapirapé Museum project, which will be located in the Indigenous village of Tapi' Itãwa, Mato Grosso, Brazil. Currently, she is a Fellow conducting postdoctoral research within the Mecila – Maria Sibylla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America program, based at CEBRAP (Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning) in São Paulo, Brazil.