

# ‘The Territory’: Film Review | Sundance 2022

by Sheri Linden, Reprinted from *The Hollywood Reporter*

*Chronicling the struggle of Indigenous people in Brazil to protect their ancestral land, Alex Pritz’s debut documentary was made with the production involvement of the Uru-eu-wau-wau community.*

Focusing on what the filmmakers call “an island of rainforest surrounded by farms,” *The Territory* is a striking first feature for cinematographer Alex Pritz, as well as a notable collaborative work. Its producers include Darren Aronofsky, and its subjects, the Indigenous Uru-eu-wau-wau people of Brazil, helped make the film.

The documentary’s title refers to a 7,000-square-mile region in the Brazilian state of Rondônia, sovereign land of the Uru-eu-wau-wau and other Indigenous groups. With a profound connection to the land, animals and rivers, they’ve lived there for generations, but it wasn’t until 1981 that their first contact with the outside world occurred. They’ve been on the defensive ever since, as agribusiness, farming, logging and ranching interests encroach upon their home. Numbering fewer than 200 and led by a forward-thinking young man, the Uru-eu-wau-wau became partners in Pritz’s filmmaking process, shooting portions of the doc, an approach that became a necessity in the first months of the coronavirus pandemic.

Pritz chronicled the group and its struggles against incursions over a three-year period beginning in 2018, the year that Jair Bolsonaro was elected president and local farmers formed an organization with aims of developing land in the protected region. Early in the film we see Bitaté, an intelligent, charismatic teenager who would be named Uru-eu-wau-wau leader before he turned 20, watching a Bolsonaro campaign speech on his phone. “There won’t be one more inch of Indigenous reserve,” the politician proclaims. (That an Israeli flag is prominently displayed on the stage as he speechifies can’t help but bring to mind the Israeli settlements that have proliferated in violation of international law.) Bitaté turns to his grandfather and asks, “Do you ever worry about our people disappearing?”

Another key figure in the film is Neidinha Bandeira, an environmental activist and not just a mentor to Bitaté but a “second mother.” Well into middle age, she’s tireless in her commitment to the Uru-eu-wau-wau, certain that saving them is the way to save the Amazon. Bitaté, who sees the Amazon as the heart of the planet in terms of climate health, also looks up to Ari, who leads the Uru-eu-wau-wau surveillance team documenting land

grabs and clear-cutting to an increasingly indifferent government.

The film’s sympathies are clear, and it would be compelling with just these figures as its focus. But its strength lies in the way it offers intimate access to people on several clashing sides of the situation, making for a complex, layered and thoughtful examination. Pritz spends time with Sérgio, a 49-year-old farmer who has worked other people’s land his whole life. Determined to realize his dream of owning his own farm, he forms the Association of Rural Producers of Rio Bonito, with visions of a community of a thousand or more families. Attuned to the pain

of hardworking, underpaid people like himself, he commits to following the letter of the law so that his plans can proceed.

But settler Martins can’t wait for the rule-following association to cross its T’s and dot its I’s. He shares Sérgio’s belief that the Uru-eu-wau-wau “don’t create anything” and have too much land, but he’s moving ahead with his chainsaw and his land-clearing fires. “Every road in Brazil was created like this,” he says, feeling encouraged by the government and invoking

a biblical imperative to take land that he believes is his. *The Territory* poses important questions about progress — specifically, the pioneer spirit that has often gone hand-in-hand with genocide and the destruction of tribal lands in the Americas. “That felt like the end of the world,” a settler says after felling a tall tree. He means it as a boast.

For the Uru-eu-wau-wau, endangered and outnumbered within their territory, drone cameras and other recording technology prove crucial in their unflagging efforts to prove their case to the government and protect themselves from development. Footage from one of Neidinha’s drones reveals the lines of demarcation between the green forest and a man-made desert. Bitaté leads his people into the world of connectivity, aware that the devices also help to preserve their culture and language through documentation.

Macro shots of gorgeous creepy-crawlies provide a vivid sense of the diversity of the forest, enhanced throughout by an immersive sound design, rich with the songs of birds and insects. Deforestation and invasions in the Indigenous territory are on the rise, closing titles say. But with the Uru-eu-wau-wau setting up their own news media team to get their message to the world (and Pritz planning to continue working with them), *The Territory* closes with a sense of hope, hard-won and fragile though it may be.

