

# THE AMBIGUITIES OF *BACURAU*

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The residents of Bacurau. Photo courtesy of Victor Jucá.

Both *Bacurau* (2019) and *Aquarius* (2016), the previous film by *Bacurau* codirector Kleber Mendonça Filho, have titles that refer to entrenched locales that endeavor to resist annihilation. Sônia Braga is Clara, the protagonist of *Aquarius*, who wants to keep living in her apartment building, resisting the forces of real-estate speculation. The inhabitants of Bacurau, similarly, want to remain in their

town and fight to survive a foreign invasion that aims to decimate the residents like animals on a hunt. In both cases, space (the *Aquarius* building, the Bacurau village) becomes territory as well as a physical means by which to address power relations. Characters struggle to preserve their ways of life in the face of the forced transformations of a predatory capitalism. Both films pose similar questions about the house and the land, the city and the provinces.

There are important differences between them, though. The resident in *Aquarius* struggles by herself against the invaders, but in *Bacurau*, the clash involves the whole town. *Aquarius* is centered on the dilemma and social

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Lunga (Silvero Pereira), under siege in *Bacurau*. Photo courtesy of Cinemascópio.

contradictions of its protagonist (and is also a star vehicle for Sônia Braga), while *Bacurau* concerns several characters who complement each other and contribute different skills in their efforts towards a common goal: the very idea of community, and its salvation.

Another frame of reference entirely is also at play in *Bacurau*. The struggle of native populations for the right to remain on their land, and their long history of fighting against foreign aggressors who want to wipe them out, are widespread motifs in the history of cinema, especially in such classic Westerns as John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948), and has important precedents in Brazilian cinema as well.

In Brazilian culture and history, the War of Canudos of 1897 serves as a symbol of resistance, as first depicted in Euclides da Cunha's 1902 book, *Os sertões (Rebellion in the Backlands / Backlands: The Canudos Campaign)*. Canudos had established itself in the late 1800s as an autonomous hamlet, deep in the hinterland and centered on the figure of the religious leader Antônio Conselheiro. Brazil's federal government, believing that Conselheiro could be a political threat, led several military campaigns against the small village, which resulted in the bloody massacre of the local population, including women and children. The campaign succeeded only upon the fifth expedition, with a much

larger army that wielded modern artillery against the peasants' cutlasses and antiquated firearms.

Inspired by the conflict, Sérgio Rezende shot *Guerra de Canudos (The Battle of Canudos)* in 1997. Alas, the political potential of the backcountry people's bravery ended up as a typical product for the entertainment industry, a would-be blockbuster that blended Hollywood's 1950s eloquent epic historical dramas with television dramaturgy. The subversive strength of fearless peasants was transformed into yet another exoticization of the folklore of the *sertão*.

Then there is the political cinema of Glauber Rocha, as seen in his *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol (Black God, White Devil, 1964)*. A ranch hand revolts against the injustice of class relations in the countryside, stabs his oppressive boss, and links up with other forces of rebellion in the surrounding hinterland. He joins with a messianic leader and his group who engage in *cangaço*—a kind of social banditry established in northeastern Brazil in the late nineteenth century. In this film, a landmark of Cinema Novo, Rocha deviated from the rules of the Western as a film genre to establish instead the foundations of a Third World cinema. As expressed in Rocha's 1965 manifesto, "The Aesthetics of Hunger," a film should not be considered political just for its plot: it is necessary that its aesthetics breathe through a revolutionary form, breaking with hegemonic narrative

patterns and incorporating the marks of underdevelopment into its own structure.

*Bacurau* avoids both Rezende's commodified exotic spectacle and Rocha's radical political allegory, though it feeds on some of their elements as a kind of intermediary. At the same time, *Bacurau* is reminiscent of the work of some non-Brazilian filmmakers of the 1970s. It is possible to see it, for instance, as descended from *Assault on Precinct 13* (John Carpenter, 1976). In that film, a group of policemen take refuge inside a police station, defending themselves against a furious gang that tries to invade the precinct at all costs. That police station is falling apart, but even so, the characters strive to fulfill their mission and also have fun, because there is nothing else left. *Assault on Precinct 13* is a film about the possibility of pleasure, even on the edge of the abyss.

In light of the Carpenter film and other exuberant movies of his 1970s generation, the ambiguities of *Bacurau* start to emerge. The film seeks to establish a balance between film genres: a popular siege film (a one-street Western situation) on the one hand, and a political film (an allegory about the oppressed, of those who insist on staying, the condition of the hinterlands) on the other.

*Bacurau* repudiates the attack by foreign explorers even as it establishes its reputation on the international cinema market to legitimize its political message. To whom is *Bacurau* really addressed? To left-wing Brazilian political voters, as a manifesto about the "oppressed who resist"; to the average Brazilian multiplex moviegoers looking for action movies; or to foreign art-house audiences who want

to witness the new boldness of an international director filming in a peculiar corner of an exotic land? *Bacurau* slips through these layers of expectation, floating—both genre movie and political cinema: it is the new icon of a Brazilian left-wing expression that simultaneously celebrates the resistance of minorities and the coproduction of the biggest Brazilian media corporation (Globo Filmes), the source of sales agents' profit in worldwide markets. And don't forget the cover of *Cahiers du Cinema*.

*Bacurau* is itself part of Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle." Not only is the film well aware of that, but its directors use the fact to their own advantage. Nor does *Bacurau* ignore the current configuration of the cinematographic market, which seems designed to engage a young audience who take pleasure in watching the brains of foolish enemies being blown up in 5.1 Dolby surround sound.

Perhaps *Bacurau* follows the complexity of *Black God, White Devil* in order to offer a more intricate approach to the current Brazilian historical moment. The pragmatism of *Bacurau*, evidenced in its huge commercial success—something that no Glauber Rocha film ever achieved—encompasses both reflection and spectacle, merging into a single text both the radical force of a sociopolitical cinema and the crassly commercial enthusiasm of the Cannes international film market. Perhaps *Bacurau* infiltrates the system to criticize it from within and to carry a message to a wider audience. Perhaps, though, it is just a way to get to the red carpet without actually changing anything. There is no definitive answer. Perhaps it is both.