

BACURAU AS SCIENCE-FICTION REVENGE FANTASY

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August 26, 2019. Another crowded premiere screening of *Bacurau* (Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, 2019) ends at the Odeon cinema in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The audience enthusiastically applauds the directors Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, present for a Q&A session. A film student picks up the microphone. He doesn't articulate a question but rather expresses agreement with what he apparently understood as the message of the film: "I think we live in a dystopia, and . . . we are all weak, but together we are strong . . . and in a dystopia, everything tends to get worse, so we have to . . . really . . . kill them."

The student, referring to the villains of the film—who are annihilated by a communally coordinated action of the citizens of the threatened village—was making a parallel with the current political context in Brazil to suggest a possible hint about actual ways of resistance against the present reactionary rise. Dornelles quickly replied, "If you are going to kill them, kill them here, on the screen," and pointed to the huge screen behind him. I suspect that his response sought to dispel any literal reading of the feature's narrative, which was intended not as propaganda for armed struggle but to provoke a reflection, through genre, on contemporary political challenges. This scene in the movie theater is illustrative of the uneasy place in which *Bacurau* puts its spectators.

One scene, which marks a turning point in the film, provoked the strongest response from the audience at this same screening. Kate (Alli Willow) and Willy (Chris Doubek), two of the heavily armed foreign snipers on "human safari," prepare to ambush Damiano (Carlos Francisco), one of the citizens of Bacurau who, naked and apparently helpless, is watering plants in his greenhouse. As soon as he goes back into his house, they prepare to attack—only to be taken by surprise by the counterattack of the seemingly unsuspecting villager,

who explodes Willy's head with his shotgun. The theater audience immediately applauded.

This is the first of countless scenes that use, in an ostensibly Tarantino-esque style, special-effects makeup in a very impressive and unexpected way. Next, it is Kate's turn to be shot—by Damiano's wife, Deisy (Ingrid Trigreiro), who was also hiding naked inside the house. A new round of euphoric applause. In a point-of-view shot from the perspective of the villagers, the viewer sees Kate bleeding through her torn hands, her cries for help staged in a purposefully pathetic, almost humorous way. Some viewers laughed. In the following countershot, the audience view instead coincides with the villains' as Damiano (and Deisy) stare straight into the eyes of their foe and the audience as well, and ask: "Do you want to live or die?"

These reactions are obviously specific to the screening I attended and do not account for all possible responses, but the point of registering them here at length is that I found myself, in that instant, in a viewing experience similar to that instigated by the slaughtering of the Nazi leaders inside the movie theater in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). As a spectator, I felt "avenged" by the surprisingly successful triumph of the oppressed over their genocidal oppressors, but at the same time, I felt self-aware and embarrassed at being visually delighted by those images of extreme violence. Indeed, *Bacurau's* shot-reverse-shot structure in this scene strikingly resembled the final sequence of *Basterds* in how it purposefully merges the gaze of the viewer first with the point of view of American lieutenant Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt) and later with that of the Nazi colonel Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz). Something similar to a "teaching machine" (as Andrew Chrystall termed the Tarantino film) seemed to be at work here, aimed at confronting the spectators, through a process of self-recognition, with their own complicity with violence.¹

Released after the rise of far-right president Jair Bolsonaro, *Bacurau* has been mostly celebrated as a leftist resistance tale against Bolsonaroism. But the film's hyperbolic counterviolence and its emphasis on collective catharsis



“Do you want to live or die?”: Damiano (Carlos Francisco) and Deisy (Ingrid Trigueiro) address their attacker. Photo courtesy of Cinemascópio.

has led some critics to consider it instead a “celebration of barbarism.” Cinema Novo filmmaker Eduardo Escorel insists that *Bacurau* offers an “upside-down Bolsonarism” and claims that the film praises an “alliance between unassisted people and bandits” and could “stimulate various types of violent actions.” Escorel even compares the film’s plot points with Bolsonaro’s support for militias.² Such a train of thought, though understandable, seems wrong-headed in its implication that what one sees on-screen coincides with what one actually chooses to do in real life—a seriously misguided argument, as Ben Walters once suggested.³

Here again, a comparison to *Inglourious Basterds* is useful. Tarantino was also accused of equating Jews with Nazis by staging a hypothetical revenge instead of representing them as the usual passive victims in film depictions of the Holocaust. But Charles Taylor has pointed to actual (and not scarce) examples of Jewish revenge, arguing that these figures cannot become “equal” to their executioners; he insists on a discrepancy between the violence of a racist, genocidal ideology, and the violence with which people respond in the moment when that ideology is being enacted upon them, which are completely different.⁴

How am I suggesting we should handle *Bacurau*’s audience-pleasing bloodbath, after all? Seeing it through the lens of the sci-fi genre may help. Adilifu Nama categorizes *Basterds* as a “science-fiction fantasy . . . [that] presents something more akin to an alternative world that exists in a parallel universe.”⁵ Highlighting science

fiction’s reliance on colonialist history and ideology, John Rieder references *Inglourious Basterds*, along with Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009) and James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), as “spectacularly violent, racialised revenge fantasies directed against white-male representatives of organised racial injustice.”⁶ For Rieder, these three films of 2009 function as “cogent synecdoches of the world-historical catastrophe of modern racism,” which he identifies as Nazi anti-Semitism, South African apartheid, and colonialist resource extraction, respectively.⁷

Bacurau could easily be included in this category, since it allegorically revisits Brazil’s colonial history and its open wounds in Brazilian society today. The attack on Damiano and Deisy reenacts the violent encounter between white colonizers and non-white native peoples in Brazilian lands; the couple’s nakedness and use of psychotropics corroborate such a reading, while their triumph over an intended genocide acquires the status of historical reparation. When Michael (Udo Kier), the hypermasculine white-supremacist leader of the snipers, is finally buried alive by Lunga (Silvero Pereira), a queer person of color, isn’t it also *Bacurau*’s attempt to bury this foundational colonial violence, as currently revived through Bolsonarism?

In a postapocalyptic landscape subtly displaced in space and time, *Bacurau* mixes up temporalities like its highly technological drone disguised as a retro-styled flying saucer. In *District 9*, the arrival of an alien ship in Johannesburg takes place in the past instead of the near future, emphasizing the analogy between ghettoized



Michael (Udo Kier), the white-supremacist leader of the snipers. Photo courtesy of Cinemascópio.

extraterrestrials and Black South Africans segregated during apartheid; similarly, *Bacurau* implies that what it shows is not a fantasy of what might happen, but history as it has already happened.⁸

If politics, in Michel Foucault's sense, is indeed nothing more than war continued by other means through an inherently false pacification, then it is crucial to rediscover the forgotten past of real struggles that remain surreptitiously inserted in all levels of society.⁹ From this perspective, *Bacurau* can be understood as an attempt to translate into powerful images—perhaps in the hopes that new ways of resistance may flourish from the impact of its spectatorial experience—the foundational violence that has always already been everywhere in Brazilian society.

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Notes

1. Andrew Chrystall, "Inglorious Basterds: Satirizing the Spectator and Revealing the 'Nazi' Within," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 13, no. 2 (2015), 153–68.
2. Eduardo Escorel, "Bacurau: Celebração da barbárie," *Piauí*, August 28, 2019, <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/bacurau-celebracao-da-barbarie/>.
3. See Ben Walters, "Debating *Inglorious Basterds*," *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 19–22.
4. See Charles Taylor, "Violence as the Best Revenge: Fantasies of Dead Nazis," *Dissent* 57, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 103–6.
5. See Adilifu Nama, *Race on the QT: Blackness and the Films of Quentin Tarantino* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 94.
6. John Rieder, "Race and Revenge Fantasies in *Avatar*, *District 9* and *Inglorious Basterds*," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4, no. 1 (2011): 41.
7. Rieder, "Race and Revenge Fantasies," 43.
8. Paraphrasing Rieder, "Race and Revenge Fantasies," 51.
9. See Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (New York: Macmillan, 2003).