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"A FEW YEARS FROM NOW" IN WESTERN PERNAMBUCO: *BACURAU'S* VISION OF THE FUTURE

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Anyone who has ever seen a science-fiction film would associate the cacophonous opening of Gal Costa's rendition of "*Não* identificado" with aliens arriving on Earth, with the screeching, psychedelic sounds that typically foretell an impending global disaster. In the song, though, those odd sounds are followed by a distinctive organ and violins that transform them into a romantic ballad. Composed by Caetano Veloso and released in 1969, "Não identificado" announces the arrival of a Brazilian sound, a romantic yeah-yeah-yeah to be sent into space, a love letter to top all love letters. As proclaimed by the song, the singer's passion will shine like an unidentified flying object in the night sky of a provincial city.

It is this song that begins cinema's journey to the fictional countryside town at the center of Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles's *Bacurau* (2019). Set to Costa's soothing voice, the opening credits give way to a satellite shot, a slow-moving pan that reveals planet Earth in its blue exuberance until it zooms into a spot in South America, just off the northeastern Brazilian shore. A cross fade seems to affect the song—in a return to the earlier sound effects—and sets off an aerial shot that tailgates a truck and, like a slowly landing flying saucer, surveys the vast landscape at its disposal. This is western Pernambuco, in the Brazilian *sertão,* in Bacurau, "a few years from now."

The film's opening sets up a dialectics of discord that will govern many of the scenes that follow. The satellite imagery typical of lavish filmmaking clashes with both the soundtrack and its landing spot, Bacurau, the latter of which might be more commonly associated with the low-budget cinema of Glauber Rocha and his "aesthetics of hunger."[1] If Gal Costa's song serves to warn the viewer that this is no classical-music-themed Kubrick film, the locus of the narrative, revealed in the subsequent scene, confirms that it is also not a film set in a traditionally recognizable territory, neither North America nor Europe.

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Bacurau's landscape is vast and deserted, but unlike most of the *sertão* films in Brazilian cinema, the vegetation is rather lush, clouding memories of the dry branches and harsh sunlight that tinted Nelson Pereira dos Santos's groundbreaking *Vidas secas* (*Barren Lives,* 1963). In its very first scene, *Bacurau* indicates a cinematic intervention that is twofold: into global genre cinema, disrupting generic conventions and relocating the narrative to the margins; and also into Brazilian cinema—in particular, regarding its depictions of the *sertão.* The audiovisual reeducation engineered by *Bacurau* relies on the device of its narrative's near future tense, simultaneously present and past, familiar and eccentric, predictable and surprising.

The cinematic *sertão* has often been presented as a place where nothing happens beyond the banal routines of its inhabitants. The uneventful lives of its characters, tied to a seemingly endless landscape of hardened clay and dry vegetation, create a sense of the region's being stuck in a permanent past: everything looks and feels as though the *sertão* has been untouched by the "civilizing" advances of urban centers. Yet, what anthropologist Johannes Fabian termed a "denial of coevalness" has given way in some *sertão* films to a critique of the uneven distribution of resources across the Brazilian territory, a strategy particularly embraced by Cinema Novo filmmakers.[2]

Sertão films have also traditionally deprived their inhabitants—the *sertanejos*—of subjective agency, their actions limited in scope and aimless in effect, in the face of the overwhelmingly oppressive land; their most common wish, sometimes their only hope for survival, lies in reaching an urban center—or the ocean.[3] In this cinematic tradition, the *sertão* condemns its characters to live always on the verge of a crisis brought about by seasonal droughts. Survival becomes part of the everyday struggle, and death, a slow, inescapable process. In other words, the *sertão* has mostly appeared as an infertile, stifling land, with an aesthetic tuned to the struggles of characters in search of survival and escape.

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Bacurau's opening satellite shot.

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Where *sertão* films once expressed the contradictions of Brazilian society and its stark inequalities across the map, *Bacurau* instead highlights the contradictions between the popular imaginary surrounding the *sertão*—"one of the cactus, of the soil cracked by the drought, of the corroding sun," as Luiz Zanin Oricchio writes—and its own depiction of a *sertão* town.[4] Its futuristic exploration of the *sertão* produces scenes that reconfigure the territory as belonging to a technologically advanced, socially progressive, and cohesive community. Unlike in most *sertão* films, the residents of Bacurau rely heavily on their cell phones for communication, including mass announcements of the arrival of nonresidents, whether the rare passerby or the mayor on an occasional visit. The public school named after a certain João Carpinteiro (a tongue-in-cheek reference to filmmaker John Carpenter) is equipped with electronic tablets that can access satellite images.

In the near future in which *Bacurau* is set, the *sertanejos* no longer attempt to escape their community. Bacurau appears coeval with the film's contemporaneous viewers, allowing them to question their own expectations of what the *sertão* and its people should look like. A high-tech *sertão* may look strange to urban audiences in whose minds the region has remained stuck in the past, but they would be fooling themselves to think of that feature as science-fiction-inspired poetic license. It is precisely in the social mapping of its community that *Bacurau* expresses its most future-forward outlook.

Notwithstanding the disregard with which it is treated by elected officials, Bacurau presents itself as a utopian and thoroughly diverse society in which the efforts and labor of its residents contribute to the community's well-being. From prostitution and informal public safety to medicine and education, each character serves a particular function in Bacurau. Not only do its residents recognize the sociopolitical roots of their conditions—such as the expired medicine distributed by a populist and corrupt mayor—but they also refuse to accept them. Defying political authorities, they organize socially and politically, take matters into their own hands, and fight against foreign invaders.

While the film plays with a number of traditional Hollywood genres, science fiction is the most immediately recognizable in terms of its nondiegetic soundscape, opening shot, and a caption that locates its story in the future. Science-fiction motifs provide *Bacurau* with the tools to explore this unlikely location and future tense, revising decades of expectations and representations. In addition to the opening, there are two other scenes that help to illustrate how *Bacurau*'s dialectics of discord operates to revise both cinematic traditions linked to genre and traditional narrative depictions of the *sertão*.

An unidentified flying object follows Damiano (Carlos Francisco) back to Bacurau.

In the first, Damiano (Carlos Francisco) is on a motorbike returning to Bacurau when he notices a flying object following him (with movements that mimic the aerial shot that first introduced viewers to Bacurau's landscape). Due to the perspective of the shot and its accompanying sound effects, the object looks like a round alien spaceship straight out of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951) surveying him from a distance. Later, Damiano reports the incident to a fellow resident, revealing himself to be a film buff and demonstrating a knowledge of advanced technology: "Yesterday, I saw a drone. Like a flying saucer from some old movie, but it was a drone." Despite an earlier scene that had revealed the true nature of the drone to viewers, Damiano here bridges the gap between cinematic illusion (the UFO) and diegetic reality (the drone); he certainly appears to be savvier than viewers who might have already fallen for the ruse.

The other key scene takes place immediately after Bacurau's residents definitively realize they are under attack. First comes the town's disappearance from online maps, then the suspension of cell-phone service, and then the arrival of a couple of outsiders to the area. Finally, the sight of fellow residents' dead bodies makes clear the urgent need for the community to come together and organize. In response, residents gather in a circle to play *capoeira,* a highly coded performative martial art that traces its origins back to forms of black resistance in colonial Brazil.[5]

Stylistically, the *capoeira* scene enacts a reversal of the film's opening: as the characters play *capoeira* to the beat of claps, *zabumba,* and triangle, a nondiegetic song suddenly takes over, replacing these sounds with a synthesizer in near-synchronicity with the *capoeira* percussion. The song is actually John Carpenter's 2015 release, "Night." It sounds as though it could have come from any of his films, presenting another audiovisual clash as it drowns out the scene's diegetic sounds. In this discordant transposition of an expression of local culture into a cinematic rendition with a name-brand soundtrack, *Bacurau* uses the scene to illustrate the parochialism found in too many other films from the Pernambuco region: an effort to highlight local flavors while simultaneously ensuring they are universally recognizable.[6] Like Damiano's recognition of the drone as something out of an old movie, the shift in soundtrack operates as a metalanguage, rejecting any reading of the film as ethnographic or authentically "local," whatever that might mean.

The leap from Caetano Veloso to Carpenter, a leap from a national to a transnational expression, adds to the film's visual, aural, and contextual absorbency. This willingness to incorporate disparaged sources of inspiration is made clear to a knowledgeable audience through scenes in which characters play *capoeira* with *forró* instruments (the traditional berimbau conspicuously absent) and in the casting of Lia de Itamaracá, the most important composer and

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performer of *ciranda* (a music genre local to Pernambuco), as a matriarch whose funeral sets the narrative in motion. This seemingly erratic patchwork is at play when the ghost of Carmelita haunts global actor Udo Kier, when *capoeira* blends into Carpenter, and when Caetano meets outer space. In such intentional incongruencies does Bacurau carve a cinematic space, soaking up the world to create a decidedly motley text.

As the pieces fall into place, *Bacurau*'s device of setting itself in the future seems less and less necessary. With the glaring exception of one futuristic cell phone, the technology in the film is not far-fetched. The real battle here is not between aliens and earthlings, nor between the *sertão* and a center of power, but rather one between north and south, the West and the native. How is it possible that the *sertão,* traditionally portrayed as economically static and socially conservative, lives by values of race, gender, and community so progressive that they would put any contemporary society to shame? How near is this future in which local resistance secures a lived collectivity, triumphing against a high-tech massacre that appears to be the last resort of white supremacists? Inasmuch as the residents of *Bacurau* hold progressive values, they also carry a history of marginalization and resistance, as illustrated by the banditry history celebrated on the walls of *Bacurau*'s municipal museum.

The residents of Bacurau beat the odds by coming together and fighting like their ancestors once did in the face of invaders whose technology and preparedness give them the upper hand. Ultimately victorious, the community takes no pleasure in the bloodbath into which it is forced. Like the museum within the film, the *sertão* of the future cannot negate its history of pain and resistance. In the end, any such future society will be lucky if its fate falls into the hands of such people, for as Euclides da Cunha famously wrote in 1902, the *sertanejo* is "above all a strong person."[7]

Notes

1. Glauber Rocha, "An Esthetic of Hunger," in *Brazilian Cinema*, ed. Randal Johnson and Robert Stam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 68–71.
2. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). For an assessment of how Cinema Novo films made use of the *sertão* landscape in comparison to contemporary films, see, for example, Ivana Bentes, "The *Sertão* and the *Favela* in Contemporary Brazilian Film," in *The New Brazilian Cinema*, ed. Lúcia Nagib (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 121–38.
3. Lúcia Nagib has written on the metaphors of sea images in Brazilian cinema, including in some *sertão* films. See Lúcia Nagib, *Brazil on Screen: Cinema Novo, New Cinema, Utopia* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007).
4. Luiz Zanin Oricchio, "The *Sertão* in the Brazilian Imaginary at the End of the Millennium," in *The New Brazilian Cinema*, ed. Lúcia Nagib (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 131.
5. A form of choreographed fight, *capoeira* enabled enslaved individuals to navigate between their private training and the required public performance of obedience. As such, *capoeira,* played in public, disguises its real fighting effectiveness through a performance of dance and playfulness. As Maya Talmon-Chvaicer has observed, many *capoeira* practitioners "see capoeira as a way of life that provides them with all they need for coping successfully with their difficulties and problems. The basic trait underlying capoeira ideology . . . is *malícia,* a term meaning cunning, suspicion, alertness, readiness, flexibility, and adaptation." Incidentally, Bacurau residents appear to activate these traits by collectively taking a mysterious "psychotropic drug." Maya Talmon-Chvaicer, *The Hidden History of Capoeira: A Collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 166.
6. Bruno Guaraná, "Neighbouring Films: How Recife Became the Capital of Brazilian Independent Cinema," in *Sounds and Colours: Brazil,* ed. Marlon Bishop (London: Sounds and Colours, 2013), 124.
7. Euclides da Cunha, *Backlands: The Canudos Campaign,* trans. Elizabeth Lowe (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 96.

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