Resistance, necropolitics, and revenge fantasies: *Bacurau* (2019) by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles[1]

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Abstract. *Bacurau by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles was the most controversial Brazilian film of 2019. It premiered at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Special Jury Prize and went on to win a series of national and international awards. It was praised and criticized as a film of resistance against the Bolsonaro government, and its sexist, racist and homophobic discourse, but also as Manichean. This article seeks to analyse some of the central aspects of the film, mainly by focusing on its narrative: the dehumanization of the people from the Brazilian Northeast of African or mixed-race descent and its relation to the resistance of the cangaço, the polarization of the film's reception, the issue of resistance within the context of maroon societies), the questions of race and gender, the problem of the certainty of death, given biopower and necropolitics, as well as revenge fantasies based on the visual pleasures of violence. The main objective of this article is to understand whether the film contributes to the debate on racism in Brazil, or whether it is just an escape valve for political frustrations, offering viewers a fleeting cathartic moment. We conclude that the film avoids confronting the real reason for Brazilian necropolitics, i.e. the legacy of colonialism and slavery: racism.*

Keywords: Bacurau, Brazilian cinema, contemporary cinema, necropolitics, resistance, racism

[1] This is a revised version of an article published with the same title in Portuguese, in 2021, in the Brazilian journal *Rebeca*.

Introduction

When we first saw *Bacurau* by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, which premiered in 2019, we were rather disappointed. The discussion in the media about its political dimensions – resistance – and aesthetics – a clever mix of genres in the authorial film – had created great expectations. However, the story of the village in northeastern Brazil being attacked by *gringos* (foreigners from the USA) seeking to eliminate its population seemed a little shallow. In June 2020, amid the coronavirus pandemic, we saw the film again, this time in the context of the violent death of US citizen George Floyd, who, racialized as Black, was inhumanely murdered by a police officer on May 25, and our reading gained new contours (McGreal, 2021).

George Floyd's merciless asphyxiation, filmed by a brave young woman on a cell phone for 8 minutes and 48 seconds, made this recurring police practice undeniable, and led to anti-racist protests in over 2,000 cities, first in North America and then in Europe, followed by confrontations with the police (Owen, 2020). Since May 2020, statues of slave owners and other representatives of imperialism and colonialism have been removed in several countries (Grimshaw, 2020). Long-awaited reforms began to curb state violence through the police in the United States (Chris, 2021). In Brazil, the discussion on white supremacy and privilege, despite the countless murders of mostly young men of African descent, and their large-scale incarceration, has not sparked the same degree of revolt in the streets (Candido, 2007;

Schwartz, 1996).[2]

While the death of George Floyd catalyzed an increase in the number of on-line discussions (known as *lives*) in Brazil, there was little concrete support for the Black Lives Matter movement, especially when compared to the USA and elsewhere (Burch, 2020; Mercer, 2020).

This new context led to the desire to read the film through a different, philosophical and sociological lens to understand how *Bacurau* looks at racism. Despite resistance against the ultra-right government of President Jair Bolsonaro, elected in 2018, the question of racism was not at all addressed in the media's reception of *Bacurau*, nor the public debate around it. We suspected this was because it is as veiled in the film as it is in the Brazilian socio-political context. Structural and institutional racism, as well as the "social form" of racism (Sodré, 2023) that manifests itself in daily life but also in State violence against the Afro-descendant population, are historically denied, especially during the Bolsonaro government and its racist, sexist and homophobic discourse[3]. The main objective of this article is to inquire whether and if so how the film positions itself towards racism, which we understand to be the real reason behind the necropolitics of the Brazilian State.

[2] In 2018, 75.7% of homicide victims in Brazil were Black, an increase of 11.5%. Data from https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-08-27/numero-de-homicidios-de-pessoas-negras-cresce-115-em-onze-anos- o-dos-demais-cai-13.html [last accessed 3/10/ 2022] It can be speculated that this is due to the tradition of silenced racism and its lack of recognition in public discussions, both based on the false myth of racial democracy (whitening of the population) that managed to erase and conceal State violence, practised against the Afro-descendant population since the abolition of slavery by the *Lei Áurea* (Golden Law) of 1888 to this day. It is worth noting that, in Brazil, legislation tried to restrict Afro-descendant participation in society for decades and while the reversal of these laws was achieved through significant struggle, they have not yet managed to eliminate deeply rooted structural racism. On the *Lei Áurea*, see Candido and Schwartz's work.

[3] For a critical analysis of Bolsonaro's discourse, see https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/01/veja-falas- preconceituosas-de-bolsonaro-e-o-que-diz-a-lei-sobre-injuria-e-racismo.shtml [last accessed 15/4/2022].

Carolin Overhoff Ferreira (2017) discussed Kleber Mendonça Filho's second and last film before *Bacurau*, *Aquarius*, comparing it to the famous *Terra em Transe* (1967) by Glauber Rocha, and asked whether the two films could be seen as diagnoses of Brazil, and if so how this was done and what it implied. Likewise, the idea of political diagnosis permeates our questions about the political-aesthetic dimensions of *Bacurau* and its discussion, or not, of racism. We call on the anthropological definition of film by Martin Seel (2013), who considers that it shares with any other art form the possibility of facing both ourselves and the world around us. According to the author, film presents variations and variants of our lives and of our hopes: "[...] it plays with the possibilities and impossibilities of human experience and expectation" (Seel, 2013, p. 234). Watching a film means seeing an alternative version of our inner life and outer reality that can move us and, eventually, make us move, in the sense of making us feel, think and perhaps act according to its positioning before the socio-political *status quo* (Ferreira, 2017).

Given the political polarization in public and media discussions of *Bacurau*, we ask whose inner life and outer reality the film reflects, what and who it wants to mobilize, and how it positions itself towards racism and State violence in Brazil. To do so, several disciplinary fields and respective key concepts will be employed for this analysis. From political philosophy and sociology we borrow the concepts of "biopolitics" – the use of power to govern people's bodies (Foucault, 1999; 2000), "necropolitics" – the practice of treating Black bodies as disposable and expendable

(Mbembe, 2016), "white supremacy," "racism" and "*quilombism"* – the philosophy of maroon societies (Nascimento, 2016), and "colonial power" (Quijano, 2006). We also draw from the idea that decolonization and resistance is always a violent phenomenon (Fanon, 2006). From psychology we borrow "revenge fantasy" – a misleading impression that one is taking action (Horowitz, 2007; Goldner et al., 2019), and from aesthetics, cinema and media studies, "catharsis" – the purgation of emotion (Aristoteles, n.d.). The analysis of *Bacurau*'s drama on violence is structured across a series of subsections that look at the dehumanization of the Black and mixed-race (or dual heritage) population and its relation to the banditry of the *cangaço*, the polarization of the film's reception, the issue of resistance within the context of maroon societies, questions of race and gender, the problem of the certainty of death, given biopower and necropolitics, as well as the revenge fantasies based on the film's visual pleasures of violence.

Bacurau – Dehumanization and *cangaço*

History helps to understand the implementation of Brazil's structural racism and the difficult transition from object to subject of law that took place when dehumanized and enslaved African became people of African descent. It also explains how deeply rooted the dehumanization of racialization is to this day:

> For almost four hundred years, Black people were useful objects of purchase and sale, subject to a mortgage. According to Teixeira de Freitas' classification, during the consolidation of Civil Laws (1858),

> enslaved people were considered part of the personal estate, alongside livestock (Prudente, 1988).

The Criminal Code (Article 179) then defined the enslavement of free persons to be criminal, but the Philipian Laws were maintained to guarantee the economic interests of enslaved people's owners. In an 1837 decree, enslaved persons were forbidden from attending schools:

> [t]he reform of primary education carried out in 1837 in the province of Rio de Janeiro, for example, forbade school attendance for those who had contagious diseases, African enslaved and Blacks, even though they were free and non-slaves (Almeida et al., 2016).

In 1850, the "Land Law" prevented land purchases by Black people. Decree 847, referring to "Vadios e Capoeiras" (vagrants and bandits), prohibited Afro-Brazilian cultural and religious expressions under threat of imprisonment. On the other hand, in 1911, land and education were guaranteed to European immigrants (Law 9,081), and in 1934 the idea of eugenics was included in the Constitution as a means of whitening the nation, which presented itself as a racial democracy, promoting the idea that there was no racism in Brazil. At the same time, the right to vote was granted to the Afro-descendant population, though this excluded the illiterate. However, as early as 1937, the organization that aimed to coordinate the fight for more rights and equality, the Black Front, was prohibited. The legislation that attempted to circumvent this historical and structural discrimination is recent: Law 7,716, known as Lei Caó, of 1989, declares racism a crime; Article 140 of the Penal Code regulates racial discrimination; and Law 12,288, of 2010, instituted the Racial

Equality Statute.

A plot summary of *Bacurau* makes these racial dynamics apparent. Racialization was, as Aníbal Quijano (2006) argues, the motor of the "colonial power:"

> Over time, the colonizers colour-coded the phenotypic traits of the colonized and took them for the emblematic features of the racial category. This codification was probably initially established in the British-American context. Blacks were not only the most important exploited there since the main part of the economy depended on their work. They were, above all, the most important colonized race, since the indigenous were not part of that colonial society. As a result, those who dominated them called themselves whites. (Quijano, 2006, p. 117)

We argue that this understanding is not, however, centre to the film's preoccupations. Rather, it focuses on the ambivalent resistance of the social banditry of *cangaço*. Even though the film makes a strong case for resistance, it is not a Black resistance because it overlooks and suppresses, as it is common in Brazil, the key problem of the country's discriminatory politics.

Set in the not-so-distant future, *Bacurau* presents a young, dual heritage woman, Teresa, returning to her village, also named *Bacurau*, in Pernambuco, a state in Northeastern Brazil. She goes home to attend the funeral of her grandmother, Carmelita, a Black matriarch. Her father, a Black teacher called Plínio, is organizing it. After the communal rite in which the entire village participates, strange things start to happen that put people on alert: two White bikers, a couple, arrive from the state of Rio Grande do Sul, where the population is largely white. They draw attention to the fact that the internet signal has disappeared. Other strange things also start

happening, for example, horses suddenly flock from one of the small farms at night. When two young men, also of dual heritage, take them back to the farm, they discover that all of the inhabitants have been brutally murdered. The White biker couple from the Brazilian south intercept and kill these men, preventing the news from reaching *Bacurau*.

Later in the film, it is revealed that the White mayor of the municipality has authorized an international scheme to remove the village of *Bacurau* from the map and use it as a playground for a group of North American tourists. They want to play out their perverse white supremacy through a game, which has migrated from the virtual sphere to reality: hunting and killing the Black and mixed-race Natives. Pacote, a young mixed-race man, who has an affair with Teresa, takes on the *cangaço* tradition as an outlaw and killer. After finding his friends dead and discovering the killings on the farm, Pacote asks for help from another ambiguous dual heritage man, Lunga, who is wanted by the police. This other contemporary *cangaceiro* has a more well-defined political project, having stood up to local politicians when they cut off the water supply. He had to leave the village and now lives with two mixed-race friends in the ruins of the local dam. A man of "fluid gender,"[4] as the directors and the actor put it, Lunga organizes the defence of *Bacurau* and kills the foreign attackers in a

[4] The directors initially wanted Lunga to be a trans woman, but actor Silvero Pereira (Jucá, 2019) declined this possibility and gave him another characterization. The actor explains: "What matters the most is something that is in the entire movie. It is that the community does not care if a trans woman lives with two men or if the female physician lives with another woman, who in turn has a relationship with a male hustler. The community does not care at all, so why would viewers be bothered by Lunga's sexuality?" (Pereira apud Jucá, 2019) We are not so sure that the film is as unbiased about sexual relations as the actor suggests. A study of the sexual politics of the film would be valuable.

graphic scene of carnage.

During the film's closing scenes, we see the dual heritage and Black population of the village united and victorious. They depose the White mayor, who is tied up naked on a donkey, forced to wear a mask, and taken out into the wilderness. In turn, the leader of the White North American supremacist group is buried alive in a sort of bunker. Before that, the severed heads of the other White invaders are exhibited in front of the church, in a reference and resignification of the classic photo of the severed and mummified heads of the most famous northeastern dual heritage *cangaço* bandit, Lampião, his dual heritage mistress Maria Bonita and some of his mixed-race and Black henchmen (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Exhibition of the *gringos'* heads at the end of *Bacurau* (Source: Vitrine Produções).

Cangaço was a phenomenon of violent banditry in 19th-century Brazilian society, a protest against social injustices in the northeast region. The phenomenon took place after the region lost its importance during the colonial period. While the sugar mills were still populated with thousands of enslaved Africans, the federal

capital was moved from Recife to the southeast to Rio de Janeiro. However, the process did not involve any defined or articulated political agenda. The Empire (1822-1888) (Alencastro, 1997; Barman, 1988) did not bring about any improvement to the social situation of the northeastern local population, who were left dissatisfied with the continued power of White landowners who appropriated the best lands, exploiting the Afro-descendant population to cultivate the land and breed livestock. Still, the film does not mention race in conjuction with the *cangaço*.

Nonetheless, *cangaço,* as "social banditry", had two faces. On the one hand, it resisted the "cangue" of landowners – that is, the yoke imposed on the poor, caboclo (native dual heritage) and Afro-descendant population, and can thus be considered a form of non-organized defence against the social injustices that perpetuated the slave master mentality. On the other hand, it was also part of oppression itself, because it was just another form of violence, whether through looting, murder or rape, committed by independent dual heritage and Black bandits called "*cangaceiros,*" or henchmen, on behalf of the White oligarchs. Therefore, the *cangaço* did not have any political agency:

> *Cangaço* is born out of revolt before social inequality, but it does not constitute a transformative agency. It is introduced into the community, occasionally through stealing from the rich and giving to the poor; however, it [*cangaço*] establishes a network of complicity, generally based on both terror and the exchange of favours. It functioned somewhat similarly to the current drug lords or the mafia capos. It protects, gives favours, and benefits the community. Nevertheless, those who do not submit to their rules and desires are at risk. The *cangaço* banditry reached – similarly to today's organized crime and trafficking –

> where the State is not present. It ostensibly occupied that gap in the State, until it ended, with the decline of Coronelism, to which it rendered good services (Oricchio, 2005, p. 52)

At the time, "natural conditions (...), exacerbated by peasant bossiness and its surplus value instruments, war and private revenge, gave life to a culture that inculcated violence, and banditry that thrived throughout our territory" (Mello, 2019, p. 56). In other words, the *cangaço* was imbedded in violence and thus, even though allegedly part of a vindication for social justice, ultimately met violence with violence.

Figure 2: Severed heads from Lampião's gang.
Source: https://wikimedia.common.org [last accessed 12/5/2022]

Decapitation was seen as an honour that was practised by both the *'cangaceiros'* and their opponents, the brigades and the police at the service of the landowners and the government. Whoever killed the opponent was "considered a hero of the bloody feat," (Mello, 2019, p. 20) and were permitted to cut off their head.

The heads of Lampião and his henchmen were exposed after their murder by the police in 1938, a statement of a "world of incredible despotisms" (Mello, 2019, p. 42). A photograph of this scene (Figure 2) aimed to expose that the White landowners had defeated and regained control over the Black and mixed-race 'outlaws'.

The violence in the film dialogues with the historical *cangaço*. But while in reality it was the State that killed the *cangaceiros*, *Bacurau* reverses the gesture of beheading: now, it is the marginalized and victimized dual heritage and Black villagers that behead the representatives of power, namely the White foreign tourists who bribed a White Brazilian politician to hunt these people down. The film thus suggests that the power structure needs to be inverted, because of the State violence against its population. Justice needs to be taken into the people's hands, who, like the historical *cangaceiros*, do not have a political agenda but act as a reaction to the violence they suffer. Likewise, although there is an inversion, this brutal and symbolic act is still – like in reality – part of the ambiguity of violence. As we will argue, the film does not challenge but rather affirms violence as a necessary if rather blunt solution.

Polarized reception of *Bacurau*

Franz Fanon (2006) already knew that in situations of oppression, it is necessary to take up arms. The film's narrative confirms and agrees with this principle as a necessary outcome of resistance. Therefore, it was not surprising that the film's

violence, as resistance to State violence, was the central theme addressed by film critics in their reviews. As in *Aquarius*, the previous and much-acclaimed film by Kleber Mendonça Filho, *Bacurau* was read politically and interpreted either as a visionary film (Bentes, 2019) or as left-wing propaganda (Magonoli, 2019). This time, the background of the discussion was not the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 (see Ferreira, 2017), but the Bolsonaro government and the president's actions and discourse against the Native, Black and LGBT+ population. The critics were again either for or against this position, either praising the film as a necessary diagnosis and response to the verbal violence and militia spirit of Bolsonarism, or criticizing its Manichaeism on the other. While some saw this as part of a didactic strategy to discuss the revolt of the united proletariat (Araujo, 2019b; Nunes, 2019), valid nationally and internationally, others interpreted it as a simplifying vision of US imperialism (Magnoli, 2019). The film's aesthetics were read in the same way: the mixture of genres – B movie, "northeastern" (Brazilian western), science fiction and horror film – won as many favourable comments (Bentes, 2019; Nunes, 2019; Pitanga, 2019) as derogatory remarks about the supposed imitation of Hollywood tropes, especially Quentin Tarantino's aestheticization of violence, the fascination with subculture and subliterature (Magnoli, 2019). There was also criticism of the somewhat TV-like language and the lack of attention to the regional culture of the hinterland (Forlin, 2019).

Since Rousseff's impeachment in 2016, Brazil has radicalized its political

positions from the right and ultra-right to the left – a return to the idea of the "two demons". Edson Teles (2018, p. 29) explains that

> […] the military used the discourse of "two demons," whose thesis argued about the existence of radicalized sectors: the militants of the armed struggle and the agents of the dictatorship. Attempts were made to match the resistance struggle with the barbarism of torture and assassinations commanded by the top officials of the Armed Forces. Following this logic, a fiction emerged from the consensus, developed by conservative sectors of the opposition, which recognized the recent history of the country, but primarily to overcome its excesses.

The persistence of this discourse in the democratic period suggested that there were two sides to the country's narrative: one that wanted to remember the victims in a revanchist way, and another that wanted to forget. We encounter the same dualism in the reviews of the film, especially in the affirmation that there is a confrontation between the "fierce, cartoonish, lunatic ultra-right [...] as the mirrored image of our anachronistic, primitive and mystifying left" (Magnoli, 2019).

What are we to think of this politicized polarization in the reading of *Bacurau*? Is the film "a testament to our intellectual misery, or, more precisely, to the extinction of any trace of intelligent life in the Brazilian left" (Magnoli, 2019)? Or is it "a clear and direct film," "the synthesis of brutal Brazil" (Bentes, 2019), of an "allegorical clarity" (Araujo, 2019a), and "about resistance and of resistance" (Araujo, 2019b)?

To answer these questions, we will now analyze *Bacurau*'s defence against invading foreign tourists, which supposedly reverses the motto of the classic western

"cowboys and Indians" in a melodramatic twist that victimizes the village. We question whether it is truly a narrative of resistance, or whether it simply uses this idea to blur more important social issues, such as racism. We will also inquire whether, in the context of our consumer society of late capitalism, the film uses elements of this and other cinematographic genres to reach the general public and make a political observation about the persistence of colonial power and violent State oppression against the poor and marginalized, for whom the only answer ends up being violence. Accordingly, we will now ask whether, by inventing a "Manichaean" narrative about self-defence against the Machiavellian State power and by using an aesthetic of excess, the film discusses something that "is not palatable" (Oricchio, 2019). In Brazil, one critic suggested that "resistance causes horror," but that *Bacurau* "dares to discuss something very uncomfortable for our culture: the use of the just violence of the oppressed against the unjust violence of the oppressor" (Oricchio, 2019).

Quilombo remix

A brave bird from the hinterland[5] gives the film its title, serving as an analogy for the poor yet resilient people of African and Native, mostly dual-descent, who live in the village. *Bacurau* has been carefully constructed by the two filmmakers.

[5] The metaphorical dimension of the name 'Bacurau' seeks to characterize the village as being small but brave. The bird measures less than 30 centimetres, but its large wings make it agile enough to hunt for insects at night. It is considered a bird of bad omens.

Since it situates the narrative and its conflict in the not-distant future, it has certain characteristics that exaggerate or even replace those that one might find in the outer reality of the northeast – the absence of the State in terms of medical and educational infrastructure. At the same time, the inner reality – the needs and desires of the inhabitants for a decent life, health services and education – are more reflective of reality. Nonetheless, it should be noted that small towns tend to be rather conservative concerning gender roles and religion, are largely catholic, and do not acknowledge African descent, as one can see from the latest census (IBGE, 2022).

Thus, *Bacurau* (Figure 3) is almost the opposite of what would be encountered as an outer reality. Both the villagers and the gringos possess state-of-the-art technology (cars with LED images, cell phones and tablets, and a UFO-shaped camera), but some deprivations and socio-political problems are more hyperbolic, such as the total denial of water by the government.

Figure 3: Entrance to the *Bacurau* village (Source: Vitrine Produções).

At the same time, the village is characterized by tolerance in terms of gender identity and sexual freedom, and uses less visible or alternative technologies: the intrinsic relation with its dead and ancestors and the knowledge of plants represent two examples that are fundamental to the narrative and are part of Afro-descent epistemologies.

The wake of Carmelita (Figure 4), the Black matriarch of the village, is used to showcase the simple men and women, old and young, of diverse ethnicities, who live in *Bacurau*. They gather in communion in a farewell procession, led by the late Carmelita's son, a school teacher. The poor community's coming together to celebrate this rite introduces the central theme of the film: looming death and the struggle for life.

Figure 4: Funeral procession for Carmelita (Source: Vitrine Produções).

It is not by chance that the film begins with a natural death, a fate that political circumstances – the sale of the village to the *gringos* as a shooting playground

– radically alter. The population is being sold and will be shot like cattle, facing the same certain death as historically experienced by the enslaved people brought from Africa to Brazil as well as Native Brazilians who suffered ill-treatment at the hands of colonizers (Lingna Nafafé, 2022).

The day after the funeral, the film starts to introduce the village through its daily activities: it has a street market, the city museum is opened up, and children are seen studying at school. In other words, even though it is a very remote and poor place, there is self-sustained commerce, culture and education. Both the museum (which tells the history of the *cangaço*) and the school belong to the population, are communal, and will play an important role in the narrative as prominent places of resistance. The State is absent, and the village resembles the social organization of maroon societies (*quilombos*, Rodrigues, 2010; Anderson, 1996). In the first minutes of the film, we can already see that the government authorities have left the municipal school in ruins (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Municipal school in ruins (Source: Vitrine Produções).

The village has managed to circumvent its material scarcity to some extent, although its reliance on donations is reinforced during the mayor's visit when food, medicine and books are offered. One dimension of the modernity of this poor and abandoned place is the school, where state-of-the-art technology is used for passionate and inventive teaching until the internet signal is cut off and the village disappears from the geographical map. Its eradication is supposed to follow. In other words, the film intentionally shows that the locality is modern and humanistic in a positive light: secular, progressive in terms of gender and race, and concerned with education and culture. Precisely everything that the Bolsonarist government was attacking and what would not be found in a northeastern village. The inhabitants are well-connected to the world and have all the latest gadgets, like cell phones and tablets. The internet coverage seems good until the *gringos* use their technological supremacy to end the advances, both technological and human. In short, *Bacurau* is home to average but liberally minded Brazilians who are trying to survive in a community with minor conflicts.

The mayor, Tony Júnior – Júnior indicating that he is the son of a lineage of oligarchs –, is the classic example of a *coronel*, a corrupt and self-interested politician of the ruling class that, at the time of the film, had established a monopoly over the water supply[6].

[6] To call Tony Júnior a caricature would be an understatement. Since the televised impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, it has become clear that no caricature is capable of representing in a sufficiently grotesque way those oligarchic politicians who

There is an important detail that exemplifies the village's awareness of its own exploitation at the hands of the mayor. When his arrival is announced through a walkie-talkie by a trans woman who lives on the outskirts of the village, everyone disappears and hides. He deposits old and seemingly unusable books from a truck and leaves food, most of which is expired, as well as outdated prescription drugs. The mayor's contempt for the population's education and health could not be more evident. At the end of his visit, he picks up one of the prostitutes – without paying, of course – and leaves (Figure 6). She will come back later, visibly mistreated, but nobody reacts.

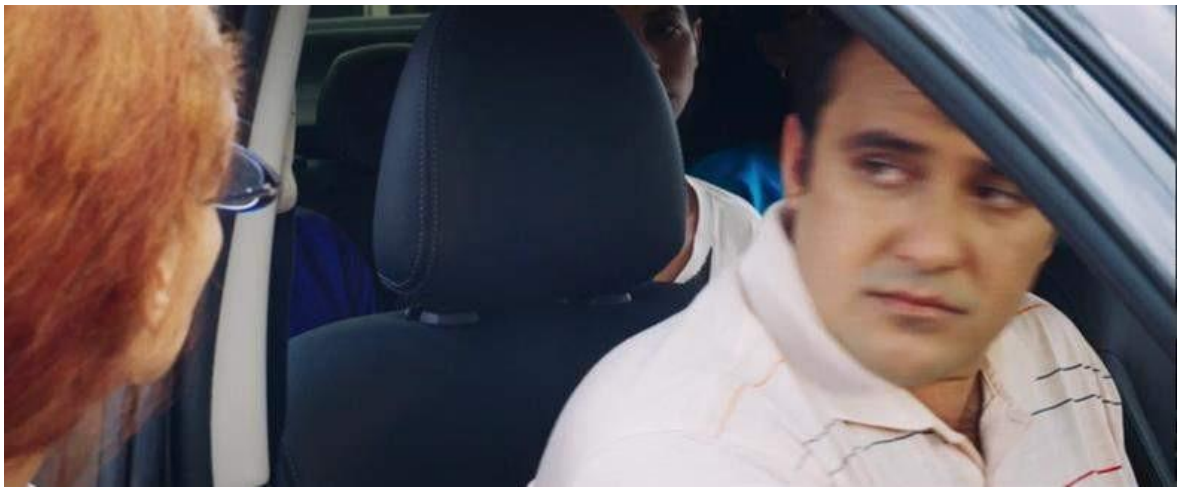

Figure 6: Tony Júnior takes prostitute Sandra away against her will (Source: Vitrine Produções).

If *Bacurau* is inhabited by average Brazilians – who turn into cowards when the mayor arrives and the prostitute returns –, Tony Júnior is its average politician: he leaves only the crumbs, while keeping the rest to himself. This attitude of power is

presented their crude reasons, based on the power of family and property, for impeaching the president and disregarding the country's republican and democratic ideals.

hyperbolically exaggerated in the film when Tony Júnior sells the population of the village, just as the former masters of the plantations sold enslaved people. Only this time, these individuals are not to be sold for work, but to be slaughtered like animals.

By dealing with an unlikely but hyperbolic concept, the narrative victimizes the population by using a melodramatic structure, but also points to its cowardice. Right in the first minutes, we learn that the village is being deprived of water and that Lunga is the only one willing to resist. Since a gunfight that took place some years earlier, Lunga has been living in the village dam tower. While the village despises the mayor, it accepts books and food, thus confirming its dependence by not rebelling like Lunga. The only way to demonstrate their dissatisfaction is to ignore Tony Júnior while he talks about the upcoming elections. Only the medical doctor, Domingas, shows some character by confronting him when he kidnaps the prostitute (Figure 6). The resistance of the village is later led by men of fluid gender identities. Generally, the film creates a highly hypothetical, if not fantastical, situation that echoes the colonial times of slavery: the selling of an entire village to fairly ordinary people from the US – babysitters and policemen – for their perverse enjoyment of white supremacy.

Race and gender issues

The opening of the film suggests that the village is self-sufficient in terms of education, has its own culture, and has no specific religion, as the parish church serves

only as a deposit for school desks and other junk. People live their Afro-descent culture not only during the funeral, which is led by a folklore singer and the deceased woman's son – an artist and an educator rather than a religious authority –, but also when practising capoeira (Assunção, 2007) – a martial art of African origin – when they begin to organize themselves for self-defence against the invaders. What is more, knowledge and technologies of Afro-Brazilian and Native heritage help the village to emerge victorious: they know nature and use a hallucinogenic seed to protect themselves psychologically, they practice capoeira to strengthen themselves physically, and they generally venerate their dead and ancestors (Nyamiti, 1980; Matory, 2008, Hawthorne, 2010).

In *The New York Times'* very generous critique of the film (Dargis, 2020), the community is considered a *quilombo* (maroon society), based on an interview with Mendonça Filho in which he calls *Bacurau* a "*quilombo* remix". However, despite appreciating Afro-Brazilian and Native epistemologies and practices, this so-called remix attitude participates in the deflation of what *quilombismo* represents historically and as a form of resistance today (Nascimento, 2019).[7] Brazilian scholar, artist and politician Abdias Nascimento suggests that *quilombismo* is a historical-humanist science whose role it is to Afro-Brazilian memory, culture and knowledge:

> *Quilombo* [maroon community] does not mean fugitive slave. *Quilombo* means a fraternal and free encounter, solidarity, coexistence, and

[7] *Quilombos* were settlements formed by fugitive enslaved Africans in Brazil who were run away from their enslavement from the Portuguese. The most famous being Palmares in the 17th century in the then captaincy of Pernambuco, the very state where Bacurau is located.

> existential communion. I understand that a *quilombola* [maroon] society represents a stage in human and socio-political progress in terms of economic egalitarianism. (Nascimento, 2019, pp. 289-290)

What is at stake for Nascimento is a resistance to the whitening and erasure of Afro-Brazilian (and one could add Native) culture. But this is not present in the film. *Bacurau* certainly begins by appreciating Black protagonism, with the teacher Plínio and his mother Carmelita representing Black people and Afro-Brazilian culture, but then changes direction with the leadership of the resistance by Lunga, who has lighter skin and is more strongly associated with *cangaço*. The film leverages the idea of *quilombismo* and its ideal of fraternity, yet this is overshadowed by the violent resistance of the *cangaceiros*. Thus, the Brazilian hinterland, traditionally seen as a place of religious fanaticism and ambiguous violence in literature, cinema and fine arts, is revamped as modern and progressive, but, at the same time, mestizo and violent, not Black and fraternal. Nonetheless, the hinterland people are portrayed, albeit robust and resistant, as contrasting the characteristics attributed to them by Euclides da Cunha (2020, pp. 67-68), who called them "backward" and "religious."

Consequently, the 'remix' of *quilombola* and *cangaço* elements presents the community not as affected by racial issues, but above all by class and gender. Tony Júnior does not justify his perverse deal for money in racist terms, nor is the resistance Black, but rather, formed of ultra-violent, male-presenting non-binary people. The protagonists of the younger generation are no longer Black, but are mixed-race. The problem of racism is indeed dissociated from Brazil and attributed

only to the US characters. It is addressed only once, in a scene in which the White American supremacists humiliate the White bikers from the Brazilian south, a region predominantly colonized by Europeans, for not being White or White enough in their physical configuration: "how could you be like us? You are not Whites". In other words, the couple might have thought of themselves of being elites in Brazil, but are not perceived as such by the foreigners. The biker couple wants to be on the same footing as the *gringos*, despite showing insecurity and a certain inferiority complex, which contrasts the arrogance with which they deal with the dual heritage people of *Bacurau*. Thus, the real racists in the film are the White North Americans, following the classical negation of racism in Brazil. In addressing the inferiority complex of white Brazilians, it is not the people of *Bacurau* who suffer racism, but the Euro-descendants[8]. This is once more indicative that popular culture – cinema – maintains the Brazilian tradition of not facing the problem of racism head-on. Racism is once again framed again as a class problem, which "underestimates the role of racial and ethnic phenomena in the analysis of multiracial and multiethnic societies [tending] to overshadow what is specific about racial oppression" (Hasenbalg, 1982, p. 78).

Underestimating racism is the film's first political flaw. The second consists of how it replaces not only race with class but female leadership with effeminate male

[8] There is yet another ambiguity concerning the bikers. After the *gringos* kill the two at the meeting, obeying an order received through the headphones they wear, the fact that the man is an assistant judge is revealed, that is, he works in the judiciary. It is not clear whether this is a criticism of the judiciary possibly being allied with the villains, enabling their work, or if it indicates an ongoing investigation. It could be both a posthumous justification for their actions, as if Brazilians could not be so bad after all, or an indication that they are part of a more Machiavellian scheme than it appears, with the involvement not only of an insignificant mayor but of higher rank lawyers. The information is not straightforward since it does not make sense, other than making the characters more ambiguous and less bad.

leadership. And this is masked under the idea of sexual and gender liberalism. The film suggests the progressiveness of the village through the aforementioned openness towards all sexual orientations and practices, as well as gender constructions, in addition to the absence of any religious dogma. On the first day, before they open the street market and the museum, and the spectator gets to know the church and the school, a truck arrives with three prostitutes, two women and a man.

The practice of sex is very visible: the prostitutes parade through the village offering their bodies; sex is regularly practised with open windows and doors in broad daylight. A trans woman who lives with the two men serves as the village informant, letting them know when someone is arriving. The rebels who will organize the defence of the village, and do much of the killing with machetes, are non-binary men. Yet, despite being armed rebels who display their masculinity in gestures and behaviours, they paint their nails and wear hair pieces and jewellery, reminiscent of the elaborate aesthetics of the *"cangaceiros"*.

In contrast to the reality of the conservative Northeast, all of the above aims to illustrate that *Bacurau* does not discriminate against anyone, and that everyone lives their identity as they please. However, female sexuality is treated with less appreciation. A first example where this becomes palpable is a small incident at Carmelita's wake, in which Doctor Domingas (Figure 7) shows up drunk and insults the deceased woman. Her competing for attention is not elucidated further, and we will learn later that they were friends when they were young. Domingas will apologize but

will not be able to fill the matriarch's vacant shoes. Why? While there is no explicit reason, the directors created an ambiguous personality of Domingas by giving the role to former sex symbol, Sonia Braga.

Figure 7: Domingas making a scene at Carmelita's wake (Source: Vitrine Produções).

Despite having the conscience and courage to face Tony Júnior, Dominga's strength is undermined by her alcoholism, while her sexuality is viewed with suspicion. While she is a lesbian, her partner is seen having sex with a male prostitute. In the end, there is a kiss between the women, but it is only shown from a distance. Female homosexuality is thus addressed by Mendonça Filho and Dornelles with unease. And instead of developing a narrative with female leadership, women are sidelined by men. As an example, Carmelita's granddaughter Teresa also gives way in the narrative to Pacote, the *"cangaceiro"*. Thus, another political struggle is mixed with *quilombism* and *cangaço*: that of people of fluid gender, albeit it only male-presenting. The feminist or lesbian struggle, in turn, does not seem to have a place in this masculinized – or even macho – remix.

Certain death, biopower and necropolitics

The resistance of the village arises because their humble yet progressive way of life is threatened by the death drive of the supremacist *gringos*, facilitated by the mayor. In other words, the dehumanization from which *Bacurau* manages to free itself in its everyday routine is inevitably lurking. Without this being associated with the racialization of its inhabitants, the directors nonetheless refer to the history of enslavement and the certainty of death associated with it to dramatize and radicalize the situation of the average mixed-race Brazilians from the hinterland.

Lingna Nafafé (2019) reflects on how, in the history of slavery, the idea of the certainty of death, given the violence of the Middle Passage (the forced voyage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas) and on the plantations, was used as a political tool during the 17th century abolitionist movement. The idea of the radical certainty of death due to the slave trade was developed by the African intellectual and Kimbundu prince, Lourenço da Silva Mendonça, whose kingdom of Pungo-an-Ndongo had been destroyed in what is today Angola by Portuguese conquerors in 1671. Mendonça was first exiled in Brazil and later taken to Portugal where he received a Western education (Lingna Nafafé, 2022). He then became an international prosecutor for the Black Brotherhoods in Brazil, Portugal and Africa and went to the Vatican where he opened a legal case to advocate for the abolition of slavery in the Atlantic. Mendonça led an activist movement that included the New

Christians and the American Natives, and won the case in the first instance when it was presented to Pope Innocent XI, on March 6, 1684 (ibid, p.306). The reference letter to the Vatican from the Portuguese diplomatic representative of the Pope, the nuncio, carried the motto of the certainty of death, and was also part of Lourenço's argument when he highlighted the violence and misery of the human existence of the enslaved. He emphasized that colonialist countries were breaking all laws: human, natural, divine and civil, insisting on how the certainty of death for the enslaved stripped Africans and American Natives of their human condition (ibid, p. 369). It is precisely this condition that the directors use as their point of departure regarding the village of *Bacurau*, whose White mayor once again activates his colonial power to decide on life and death, handing it over to the *gringos*.

By highlighting the certainty of death and the resistance it triggers, the film reverses one of two traits that Frederico Pernambuco de Mello describes as being typical of the late feudal system in the hinterland during the *cangaço*: "that of the indifference of man towards death and the insensitivity in dealing with blood" (2019, p. 58). The indifference towards death is explained with religious fatalism and is replaced in the film with a new humanistic sensitivity and resistance to the certainty of death. But the question of the insensitivity in dealing with blood, which is seen as a result of the livestock breeding activity and expressed through the film's depiction of graphic violence, is much more complex and will be discussed in due course. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of the powerful threat of death and its

racial dimensions, as a backdrop to the film, gained new contours. This is particularly evident given Bolsonaro's complete indifference to death, which prompted accusations of genocide.

In *Bacurau*, the construction of the idea that the decision over life and death lies in the hands of politicians is introduced in the first few minutes of the film, as we see a pile of coffins that have fallen from a truck (Figure 8). We later discover that these coffins are intended for the population which was sold to be shot by the *gringos*.

Figure 8: En route to Bacurau (Source: Vitrine Produções).

After Carmelita's peaceful death, several members of the community die violently: first two young men, who discover the murdered bodies of a family, and then a child. Despite the constant attacks, there is always time to honour the dead, which highlights not only the humanity of the village, but above all the importance it attributes to its members and the rite of passage. At the end of the film, all the empty coffins brought in by the city hall truck are placed on display near the church,

showing that they will not be needed by the population (Figure 9). By exposing the intention to assassinate the local population, the film stresses the fact that the cycle of violence and the certainty of death is only to be broken through resistance.

Figure 9: Exposure of the unused coffins (Source: Vitrine Produções).

In other words, the film shows that power is unstable and that it can be overcome. This is its seductive discourse: resistance against State power can be successful. The presence of the coffins that were left unused serves as a reminder and monument to the attempt on people's lives. Their desire to live has defeated the desire to kill. It is important to note that in this supposedly secular place, the church ultimately stands out as a prominent site. This subtly mobilizes a series of tropes, both politically and morally: the salvation of the just, the victory of life over death in the sense of the promised resurrection, and the absolution of the sin of killing for a just cause. Ultimately, the directors return to the very same Christian narrative that they sought to abandon in their initial characterization of *Bacurau* as a village without confession. This seems to be quite unconscious; perhaps a result of the filmakers'

upbringing rather than a desire to include the church in the idea of resistance.

The death declared to the dual heritage people of *Bacurau* is the result of the mortal game of the White supremacist *gringos*. Yet slavery is not directly addressed. As in the final scene in front of the church, there are only subtle references that are nevertheless sufficient to mobilize the Brazilian collective unconscious regarding its violent history. These references include a scene in which the main villain from the US wanders around in the plantation master's house where they are staying, and another in the village museum that gathers various relics from the history of the northeast region, such as photographs and artefacts. Both spaces are explored as ghostly territories of an untold but present history. These are significant scenes that invoke the history of slavery and *cangaço* but without too much commitment. This is a strategy that Kleber Mendonça Filho has used in his previous films *Aquarius* (2016) and *The Neighbouring Sound* (2012), employing ghostlike Black characters that haunt the protagonists and the spectator. In *Bacurau*, this strategy feels like evasion.

The plantation where the North Americans organize their invasion is once again the slave master's house, from which violence against the alleged non-White other originates, based on the white supremacy that is re-defined as a North American responsibility. There is a moment when their leader (Figure 11) touches a cotton gin machine manufactured in the US, as though the responsibility for slavery and racism could be easily identified as coming from the Anglo-Saxon world (Figure 10).

Figure 10: North American machine on the farm that serves as a base for the *gringos* (Source: Vitrine Produções).

Seen through foreign eyes, especially that of North Americans, the film has an interesting dimension, especially when we remember the murder of George Floyd. However, this may also indicate that, from the outset, the film was targeted at a global as opposed to national market, or at least for those who do not see racism as a national problem. This would explain but does not justify that Brazilian racism is conveniently replaced with *gringo* racism.

By the film's logic, it is not due to racism that Tony Júnior sold the village, but due to greed and the legitimacy to exercise state violence. Michel Foucault famously called this type of violence biopower, seeking to describe, in 1976, the modern state's right over the lives of its subjects, given the "right to death [which] will tend to move or, at least, to rely on the demands of a power that manages life and to organize itself according to its claims" (Foucault, 2010, p. 148). Foucault overlooked the connection between biopower and colonialism in the way that Mendonça

highlighted it (Lingna Nafafé, 2022). More recently, the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (2016) expanded this Foucauldian concept, which he considers insufficient, to coin the concept of "necropolitics".

Figure 11: The leader of the *gringos* en route to the village to kill the population (Source: Vitrine Produções).

However, the concept of necropolitics is largely about how the sovereign state acts in contemporary times, particularly how it "instrumentalize[s] human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 125). It thus aims to underscore that the modern state works against the model conceived in Western philosophy, which supposedly envisioned individuals becoming subjects. Mbembe's understanding of Western philosophy is perhaps too sympathetic. It does not take into account its participation in the construction of imperial power and colonialism and the subalternization of the so-called others, their epistemologies and histories (Sodré, 2019). The author even accuses the Africans of having participated not only in slavery, but also in colonialism (Mbembe, 2016); a

point of view that historical evidence contradicts (Lingna Nafafé, 2019).

Mbembe considers that, today, necropolitics does not only affect the Afro-descendant population but is more widespread. As a consequence, he argues, the population becomes deprived of its "political status by being reduced to its biological body" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 125). It is worth remembering that European authors only began to think about the issue of racism after the Jewish Holocaust. To this we might add Foucault, who claimed that state racism caused "the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or of the degenerate, or the abnormal) [which] is what will make life in general healthier; healthier and purer" (Foucault, 1999, p. 305). Accordingly, Mbembe (2016) recalls Hannah Arendt, who was the first to discuss this after the extermination of Jewish people in Germany. Concerning concentration camps, Arendt reflected on the "destructive experience of otherness and her claim that the politics of race is related to the politics of death" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 128). Mbembe only focuses on the problem of racism concerning anti-semitism, silencing 500 years of colonialism and racism against Blacks and Natives as its driving force.

The question of biopolitics or necropolitics was already discussed in the first abolitionist struggle against slavery in the 17th century, which described the certainty of death by state power, and the European royal houses as rooted in illegal racism. In the Latin American context, these observations are not new. They were formulated in the 1990s in a far more critical way to that of the Western world by decolonial authors such as Quijano (2006), among others. These authors have insisted that we do not live

in a post-colonial era, but that colonial power is constantly perpetuated. Contrary to what the film and Mbembe would have us believe, coloniality's fundamental tool has always been racism. Mbembe (2016) shares this thought only when he says that "race" has a prominent place in the rationality inherent in biopower, identifying it not as a motor but as a shadow:

> [a]fter all, more than class thought (the ideology that defines history as an economic class struggle), race has been the ever-present shadow over Western policy thinking and practice, especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of foreign peoples – or to dominate them (Mbembe, 2016, p. 131).

It is worth noting that, despite publishing his ideas as early as 1980, Nascimento is not acknowledged by the aforementioned decolonial authors for his work on *quilombismo.* For him, it was imperative to remember that the State was always violent against Africans and Afro-descendants in Brazil. In other words, racialization was the basis of colonialism:

> For enslaved Africans, as well as for their 'freed' descendants, both the Portuguese colonial State and Brazil – colony, empire and republic – have a single and identical meaning: a terror state organized against them. A state, so to speak, naturally perverse, a state naturally illegitimate, since it has been the political and social crystallization of the exclusive interests of an elite, whose aspiration is to achieve the Aryan-European status in terms of racial aesthetics, culture and civilization (Nascimento, 2019, p. 286).

The exercise of contemporary colonial power, or necropolitics, has, in a way, waged an endless war on the descendants of the African enslaved and Native peoples. This war by the Brazilian State prolongs the idea of the certainty of death introduced

by slavery. It is this same war that *Bacurau* faces. However, by assigning violence to the Americans from the North, the film dismisses the role of racism and its earlier form, slavery. Without showing where the evil comes from, and by making a corrupt politician responsible, the film does not participate in the decolonization of the social imaginary of slavery. On the contrary, it participates in the erasure of this history, as well as in the whitening, commercialization and folklorization of Afro-Brazilian culture, which has been criticized by Lelia Gonzalez (1982) and Nascimento (2018).

Revenge fantasies and the visual pleasures of violence

When the *gringos* start attacking *Bacurau*, the population is prepared to fight. Some deaths occur before resistance is effective. The population justifies their violent response to the perversity of the *gringos* when a child is killed, an act that even the *gringos* disapprove of. The people of *Bacurau* prepare themselves by taking a psychotropic agent – part of ancestral technology but also a narrative strategy to exempt them from taking responsibility for the violence. Before the carnage in which the population both defends itself and takes revenge, there are three interesting but partially ambiguous scenes. These scenes demonstrate the village's superiority in ethics and knowledge, but either do so superficially or by naturalizing violence.

In the first scene, we see an elderly couple, made up of a Black man and an obese mixed-race woman who grow plants (among them the psychotropic seeds). The two walk around naked, reminiscent of the Native population, and due to their age

seem vulnerable. Apart from their ancestral knowledge of plants, they also have an instinct for danger. When two *gringos* – a White man and a White woman – get close and attempt to attack them, they perceive their presence and respond with firearms. They kill the man – his dead body is graphically displayed with a huge hole in his head and no brain – and injure the woman, who is taken to the village heavily bleeding but does not resist. The scene indicates the Black man's and dual heritage woman's superior technology – the perception of noise and danger – but exaggerates the result of their response with the images of the badly severed bodies.

The second scene, in turn, is more convincing. Domingas has set up a table to receive the *gringos* in an act of peaceful resistance. The first to appear is the most perverse of all: the German-born leader of the foreigners. Domingas offers food and drink, but these are violently snubbed by the man with a gesture of distrust.

Figure 12: Domingas trying to pacify the *gringos* by offering food (Source: Vitrine Produções).

The scene re-enacts the first encounter between colonial invaders and locals, based on the friendliness and hospitality of the Afro-Brazilian and indigenous matrix

(Lingna Nafafé, 2022): something impossible to accept in the war being waged by the foreign supremacists. The reaction of the *gringo* leader is, however, predictable: claiming a code of ethics based on not killing women and children, a code apparently not shared by his peers, he does not kill Domingas.

In the third and final scene, we watch the *gringo* leader as he realizes that they have been defeated. He puts a revolver in his mouth, but, before he can shoot, the late Black matriarch Carmelita appears. Surprised – though unaware that she is deceased and thus a spirit – he gives up and is arrested by a villager. The ancestor returned to ensure that justice was served, ensuring the *gringo* would be held responsible for his actions and buried in a symbolic act.The *gringo* leader is the only one who survives. His punishment is to suffer public humiliation in front of the church, which serves as a moral if contradictory backdrop to the scene.

Before that, the villagers prepare themselves for the final invasion by digging a hole, which leads to an underground space, similar to a bunker, where they conceal themselves. Lunga, meanwhile, is hidden in the museum with his men, while the vast majority of the population remain in the school. Everyone is armed with the museum's firearms and machetes, relics of the *cangaço*. During the battle, the film cuts to an enraged Lunga, who is bathed in blood as he violently hacks at and slashes one of the *gringos*. This is the moment when resistance turns into revenge, in contrast to the elderly couple's defensive violence and Domingas' peaceful attempt to receive the invaders.

Figure 13: Lunga attacking a dead *gringo* with a machete (Source: Vitrine Produções).

There is consensus among psychologists (Goldner, 2019; Horovitz 2007) that revenge fantasies are important for the psychic economy and that they can be central to a healing process through the positive emotional effects they provide: the victim feels good about acquiring a sense of power and control before the aggressor. In addition, imagining the aggressor suffering, without this factual happening, provides a feeling of pleasure. Thus, revenge fantasies participate in the construction of a subjectivity that goes beyond that of the fragile and impotent victim. However, therapy usually points to the difference between fantasy and reality and, eventually, shows the futility of fantasies, encouraging the vindictive person to look for other ways to rebuild their self-esteem, coherence and self-control; to cope with feelings of humiliation and injustice, and to overcome traumatic events.

What, then, is the purpose of the violent revenge in *Bacurau*? During the heyday of the *cangaço* genre, between 1953 and 1965, it was common for film narratives to deal with the question of violence. Most engaged with the *cangaçeiro*

desire to abandon their violent ways, demonstrating a critical approach to violence rather than glorifying it. What is more, almost every *cangaço* film presented the idea that government representatives – the police, security officers and soldiers – were the real villains (Bernadet and Ramalho Jr., 2005). *Cinema Novo*, "whose aesthetics of violence was based on politicization," contrasts sharply with the films of the *Retomada* (Brazil's film revival in the 1990s), when "the spectacularization of violence (…) acquires an expression of everyday naturalness, situating the viewer as a voyeur of other people's suffering" (Freire, 2005, p. 71). In *Bacurau*, we find a mixture of *Cinema Novo* and *Retomada*: the film aims at politicization – resistance – while also using spectacle, driven by the desire to reach audiences that appreciate genre films with vengeful violence and its cathartic pleasure.

Can we speak of politicization? And if so, how does this relate to violence? *Bacurau* certainly deals with State violence and resistance to it, because Brazil has always been and still is an extremely violent country, particularly given its history of colonization and enslavement, inflicted on both the indigenous population and that of the more than four million who were kidnapped and brought by force from Africa. And it points to the *cangaço's* violence as a political response to State violence.

Figure 12: Tony Junior receives a mask and will be taken to the wilderness (Source: Vitrine Produções).

But what does this say about the political resilience of Brazilian society, invited to see itself in the film's Black and mixed-race community? Is the spectator reflected in the community's bravery against White *gringos,* and cowardice in facing the White Brazilian mayor?

To answer these questions, we look to the film's ending, and its revenge economy. The US-German *gringo* is arrested and taken to the centre of the village, where the inhabitants have displayed the heads of the other *gringos,* much like the scene of Lampião, Maria Bonita and their henchmen's heads (Figure 2). The coffins, laid out earlier, will either remain empty or be used for the invaders and the village dead. In other words, these images show that Tony Júnior's necropolitics did not succeed, and that the mayor has lost all his power. Echoing the notion that 'the king is naked,' he is sent away, visibly reduced to his humble human condition, divested of his power to kill. The film chooses to expose him, and humiliate him, but not to kill

him. In comparison to the spectacular violence of earlier scenes, this act is mild and somewhat folkloric.

The *gringo* leader does not escape either, but he will die: he is buried alive inside the bunker that was used as a hideout by the population. His cry, "this was just the beginning", is thus muffled. His burial is as symbolic as the severed heads and the mayor's nakedness, making it clear that violent revenge is reserved for lower-level foreigners. The big bosses, both national and international, get the political respect they are owed. The Brazilian Mayor is spared, while the North American is placed where the enslaved would have been during the Middle Passage, referring to their suffering. The population's anger is not directed at the *gringo* leader. The film concocts yet another justification: the *gringo* leader did not kill anyone in the village except those who worked for the Mayor and some of his own group, who were also part of the mission to take Bacurau.

Both Tony Júnior and the *gringo* leader are seen as cynical, but are not directly considered responsible for the deaths in *Bacurau*. Accordingly, those that are truly responsible are partially exempted. After the explosion of violence against low-status *gringos*, there is a moralistic ending: the leaders are humiliated, the *gringo* will die, but not by force and not as part of a public spectacle, and the Brazilian politician is unlikely to die. Part of the humiliation of the *gringo* is the lack of a wake and a funeral; his death will not be celebrated as a rite of passage. He and the other *gringos* are punished, denied dignity in death (their heads being chopped-off) and,

consequently, are denied respect for their lives.

Conclusion

Bacurau certainly offers a narrative of resistance to State violence, which is hyperbolically presented as real and lethal. However, there are several ambiguities in the film's opposition to the necropolitics it portrays, which coincide with the ambiguities of the concept itself and its lack of historical coherence i.e. the history of Brazilian colonization and slavery and the certainty of death on which the nation was built. The film's inconsistencies and problems consist of not linking death directly to the politician, exempting the leaders from their responsibility for the deaths of the population, and justifying revenge as a way to gain closure, a concept based on Christian morality and non-violent (graphic) punishment.

In the film's hyperbolic construction, which victimizes the population and justifies their violent and vindictive response to State violence, the White *gringos* are necessary because they serve a specific purpose: exempting Brazil from racism, which is naturalized according to the old myths of racial democracy and policies of whitening through miscegenation. Thus, the film perpetuates the Brazilian mentality that only the United States defends racial supremacy and segregation, as well as making it responsible for external imperialism. *Bacurau* thus downplays Brazilian necropolitics, denying that racism might explain it, as well as that racism is still fuelled by internal colonial power. The White mayor, as absurd as it may seem, is not

at all associated with racism. He is a mere trafficker, a corrupt person who 'only' sells the Black and dual heritage population, without linking this to colonial and slave history. His punishment merely consists of being exposed. He does not need to die because by the film's logic he is not as bad as the *gringos*, who are the true racists, supremacists and imperialists.

Part of this logic is the replacement of Black leadership, which existed historically in the region (Palmares), with that of rebels of lighter skin and fluid gender. There is certainly an appreciation of African, Afro-Brazilian and Native elements and a view that Bacurau's technologies – their knowledge of nature, alternative forms of education, Afro-descendent martial arts, living in harmony, respect for ancestors and rites of passage for the dead, as well as mediation, peaceful solutions and hospitality – is superior to that of the state-of-the-art technology of the White supremacists (although modern devices are also used in the hinterland). But instead of fully acknowledging *quilombism* and thus the Black historical struggle, the film uses the *cangaço,* that had no racial or other defined political agenda, and which is freed from its historical ambiguity through the melodramatic victimization of the village. This leads to the use of graphic violence and the infantile catharsis of revenge fantasies. The replacement of female leadership with that of men of fluid gender references their political agenda but disrespects the feminist and lesbian struggle. This might be unsurprising, given the popularity of transvestites in Brazilian and imported television reality shows, which demonstrates that the film sees effeminate men as

aesthetically more acceptable than emasculated lesbian women. Accordingly, the directors also stage a contemporary pop makeover of the exotic, perfumed and beautifully dressed historical *cangaceiros*.

Consequently, *Bacurau* makes many concessions to contemporary consumer society and film tastes. The narrative is filmed in a rather conventional way, albeit with cinephile references to *cangaço* films and American B movies, the graphic violence of cult films, and exoticized non-binary male and less attractive lesbian female characters. *Bacurau* thus factually presents an unpalatable subject – political resistance to State violence – in a palatable fashion, since its melodramatic structure and its very few historical references to colonialism and slavery make it easily digestible. Accordingly, instead of saying that the film presents the unpalatable issue of political resistance to State violence, it would be more correct to say that it uses the palatable aesthetic of pleasurable violence and revenge fantasy to make the spectators believe that they are participating in an act of resistance, obscuring what is truly unpalatable – Brazil's colonial history and its legacy of racism.

Ignacio Araujo (2019), from *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper, compares *Bacurau* with other contemporary Brazilian films, observing its lack of political sophistication:

> We have, without a doubt, several more subtle films than "Bacurau." "O que se Move," by Caetano Gotardo, "Branco Sai, Preto Fica," by Adirley Queiroz, "Sinfonia da Necrópole," by Juliana Rojas, "Gabriel e a Montanha," by Fellipe Barbosa. All these films were largely ignored by the public and did not deserve any comments from sociologists, scholars, etc. (Araujo, 2019)

Nevertheless, Araujo considers that the film's merit consists in having sparked so much debate around its agenda, which he sees as taking a stance against racism, the supremacy of the Southeast over the Northeast, and the death drive. For Araujo, it is a film for the general public, and thus accessible in contrast to the great classics of Brazilian cinema, for example by Glauber Rocha. In contrast to Araujo's appreciation in his film review, the present analysis has shown that *Bacurau* perpetuates a simplifying and even falsifying perspective on these issues.

If watching a film means seeing an alternative version of our inner lives and outer realities (Seel 2012), *Bacurau* is still far away from recognizing the mechanisms of Brazil's necropolitics, its historical roots in colonialism, slavery and racism, and its ambiguous relationship to the violence, as resistance, that this generated. Rather, it fulfils the revenge fantasies of those who feel victimized and powerless. In asking who the film is for, this article has shown that *Bacurau* is for those who believe that it is possible to bury the White supremacists who come from outside, and send Brazil's corrupt and folkloric politicians out into the desert. As for what it seeks to mobilize: a revenge fantasy that is not part of a historical healing process because it avoids, once again, facing the fact that necropolitics is based on internal racism as a result of Brazil's colonial history. This is certainly rooted in the interruption of the resistance to and discussion of racism in Brazil during the dictatorship, both politically, in the public sphere, and within academia and the arts. It is worth remembering that, in turn,

the United States, which has a long (often peaceful) history of fighting for the civil rights of its population racialized as Black, has been awakening to the reality of racism and State violence after the death of George Floyd, and this has largely led to peaceful resistance and only in a few isolated cases to violence. As said, the Black Lives Matter movement has not had the same effect in Brazil, in the sense that the Black population still fights very much alone for its rights.

As a film on resistance, *Bacurau* is only light entertainment that feeds revenge fantasies without pursuing other ways to build self-esteem, coherence and self-control as political technologies. Also, it does not access Brazil's unconscious form of racism by conveniently blaming the North Americans. In order to move beyond fantasies of violent resistance, it is necessary to develop a more solid foundation of the reasons for the biopower in the film's narrative that could provide a true diagnosis of the regime of Brazilian necropolitics, which is based on the perpetuation of colonial power and the racist and slave master mentality. Only then would the film have had the capacity to lead to a diagnosis of the nation's best hidden secret and offered a decolonization of the spectators' minds.

To the contrary, *Bacurau* participates in a) the myth of racial democracy, which again makes us believe that the poor mixed-race and Black population is targeted equally, and thus supports b) the idea that there is a social but not a racial divide in the country. Both myths help perpetuate institutional and structural racism, but, above all, the 'social form' of racism (Sodré, 2013), which is unconscious and

deeply embedded in the minds of all Brazilians, be they White, Black or dual heritage. The social form of racism naturalizes racialization and traps people according to sophisticated rules of oppression and being oppressed, which depend on their skin colour and facial features, also known as colourism, a highly debated subject that should be considered in future studies of the film. *Bacurau* makes the strong, hyperbolic and entirely wrong case that racism is not an issue within the national boarders, but a *gringo* import. As part of the generalized naturalization and denial of racism, this has not been detected by its critics and the audience. This article, conversely, makes the case that this naturalization and denial of racism needs to be acknowledged, as much in the cinema as elsewhere.

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