

## Bacurau

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*Bacurau*. Dir. Juliano Dornelles, Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2019

SET “a few years from now” in the *sertão* or *caatinga*, an arid region in Brazil’s northeast of xeric shrubland and thorn forests, *Bacurau* is a lush, hyperreal sci-fi Western about a community under siege. In the eponymous village of the title, named after the nightjar, a community has drawn together to mourn the loss of its matriarch and wise woman Carmelita. Some, like granddaughter Teresa, have travelled a long way to be there. Her journey through the surrounding outback demonstrates the extent to which her home has been isolated, the dirt roads lead past rusted police cars and collapsed school buildings. In Bacurau itself however the inhabitants are thriving, a well-attended school and bustling market defy the attempts of the state to strangle the settlement by cutting off its water supply. The arrival of a vote-hunting local politician, Tony Jr, demonstrates the immutable contempt of the inhabitants for their would-be leaders. Forewarned of the encroaching caravan of political lackeys and bodyguards, the inhabitants go to ground, hiding anything worth stealing and transforming their vibrant town-centre into a ghost town. Worse is to come however when a group of heavily armed Americans arrive and begin picking off the villagers. To face this existential threat, they are forced to turn to Lunga, a heavily made-up, androgyne bandit and his gang of outcasts to help defend their home.

In setting up the conflict between this homogenous, white, heterosexual kill-team of Americans and the racially, sexually and gender diverse inhabitants of Bacurau the film evokes the battle-lines drawn up in Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil, which has seen the wealth and privilege of the coastal cities explicitly pitted against minorities and the interior of the country. The assassinations, which are performed with the state’s collusion (the Americans’ local fixers turn out to be Assistant Federal Judges) immediately recall the 2018 murder of gay, black politician Marielle Franco as well as the worst excesses of the military dictatorship. The “day after tomorrow” setting of the film suggests less a worsening of the social contract in Brazil and more of an uninterrupted continuation of the power relations that have existed since colonial times. Bacurau’s museum contains weapons and photographs from the time of the *cangaceiros*, autonomous bandits from the early 20th century who, for a time, defied the government and affected a violent and carnivalesque form of wealth distribution in the *sertão*. A photograph of the severed heads of *cangaceiro* folk heroes Lampião and Maria Bonita presages the revenge that their spiritual heir, Lunga, will take on the Americans

in the museum itself. Afterwards, as the blood is mopped out the front door, the curator instructs the cleaning team to leave the bloodied handprints on the walls and they become part of the permanent display, the museum is an active site able to assimilate and process new history, recalling Michael Taussig's ideal of a museum that "combine[s] a history of things with a history of people forced by slavery to find their way through these things," in total contrast to the "dead and even hostile places, created for a bored bourgeoisie."

The appearance of a flying saucer, the casual dream-like way the villagers come together in sexual congress and the wild alien landscape of the *caatinga* might, in another film, suggest the exoticizing lens of a "magical realism," an absurdist "New World" fantasy-land where anything is possible and where, to quote Robert Kolker, the viewer is "assur[ed] that meaning need not upset assumptions or endanger tranquillity." This illusion is thrust aside by the film's desire to communicate the practicalities of how Bacurau survives, how it gets its water and the dismissal of the UFO by the gardener Damiano as a drone in disguise. In fact, the inhabitants are hyper alert to the reality of their situation. The Americans by contrast, are disturbed by the bloodstained clothes of villagers they have already killed hung prominently on a washing line, they shake their heads at this vulgar allusion to the violence that has gone before and brand them "savages."

The Americans have in fact misunderstood the situation, perceiving the withering away of the state from the village as a situation passively accepted by the villagers rather than one they actively connive in. Like the Malagasy "almost rebellion" described by David Graeber in *Lost People*, the community has simply become self-sufficient and ignores all but the most invasive attempts from the state to make contact. The Americans are so complacent about the ease with which they will extirpate their "prey" that they have devised a point-system just to keep the killing interesting. On the other hand, the villagers, though distraught, are quickly able to assimilate events into their understanding of the world. The mass taking of psychotropic seeds (presumably morning glory) before the final showdown, allows them to circumvent the externally imposed "logic" of the state and the Americans and defy the presupposed outcome of the encounter. When the cringing Tony Jr. is captured, he tries to appeal to reason, telling them that now they have "got themselves into deep trouble." "We have taken a powerful psychotropic drug," replies the schoolteacher, "and you are going to die."

The violence in the film, sanguinary but never sadistic, links the narrative both to the mass state reprisals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Brazil (including the punitive expeditions against escaped slave settlements, or *mocambos*, and the utter destruction of egalitarian, separatist communities like Canudos) and to the contemporary cohesion of state and organised criminal violence, described by Sayak Valencia in *Gore Capitalism* as "necroempowerment."

The film offers a cathartic imaginary counterpoint to this violence in the form of the bawdy, horizontalist and autonomous community in Bacurau. Other than this it offers no direct political message, where one might expect an evocative textual postscript describing the current situation in Brazil the merely notes that, “this production created 800 jobs.”

By deliberately unrooting the story temporally (whenever the film is watched, it will always be set “a few years from now”) the film speaks to a continuing set of conditions in Brazil rather than simply projecting a critique of today’s politics into tomorrow’s world. This detemporality allows the film to offer a vision of radical resistance that is not tied to a specific set of conditions. *Bacurau* is not about Bolsonaro’s Brazil, or it is but only as much as it is about Lampião’s Brazil, the Brazil of the runaway slaves, or the Brazil of the coming water crisis. Setting a piece of science fiction in a specific future is the surest way to defang its message and turn it into a wry milestone for nostalgic audiences. *Bacurau*, by contrast, is forever possible, forever just around the corner.

### Works Cited

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