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## A REVIEW OF THE WESTERN GENRE BASED ON THE JOURNALISTIC CRITICISM OF “BACURAU”<sup>1</sup>

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1. This work was presented at the XVIII Meeting of Multidisciplinary Studies in Culture, at the Universidade Federal da Bahia, in August 2022.

**Abstract:** This communication proposes to approach the feature film *Bacurau* (2019), by Kléber Mendonça and Juliano Dornelles, from the perspective of the notion of “ideological western”, taken up by film critic Luiz Carlos Merten and attributed to the cinematography of Glauber Rocha. Therefore, it is necessary to make an incursion not only in the journalistic text, analyzed under the light of Semiotics, but also in the history of cinema itself. In this sense, a whole set of legi-signs and sin-signs, interchangeable with each other and in constant process, make us discover filmic semioses that update the legacy of Brazilian culture. All this takes place without forgetting the legacy of cinematographic culture itself in Brazil and in the world, in a broad discussion based on the “western” cinematographic genre – the target of the most varied apprehensions regarding the film.

**Keywords:** *Bacurau*, criticism, ideological western, semiosis, Brazilian culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Among the texts that journalist and critic Luiz Carlos Merten published about the film *Bacurau* in 2019, in the newspaper “*O Estado de São Paulo*”, the use of the term “ideological western” in the title of an opinionated text draws attention semiotically. This procedure constituted a provocation in the sense of understanding both the relationship between Brazilian production and the North American Western genre, as well as with the work of filmmaker Glauber Rocha, to whom the use of this term by the journalist is attributed, in addition to qualifying the treated film. From directors Kleber Mendonça and Juliano Dorneles, the film *Bacurau* was one of the most successful productions of recent Brazilian cinema, having received the Jury Prize at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival.

The film, observed as an audiovisual text, consists of several legi-signs and sin-signs,

some related to the experiences lived by all human beings represented in the film, such as the struggle for survival in the face of violent actions, and others corresponding to to cinematographic culture, both internationally and in Brazil. The “ideological western” sign, presented in the journalistic text as a key to interpreting the feature film, leads above all to an apprehension in the perspective of the genres established in the history of cinema, whether at the international level or in the Brazilian context.

According to the theory of speculative grammar, in line with Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics (PEIRCE, 2000; SANTAELLA, 2000), legisigns correspond to the way signs produce semioses according to habits, established conventions or logical generalizations. In turn, the sin-signs concern the signs manifested or observed as occurrences. When appearing in certain contexts, legisigns manifest themselves as updates of general ideas in specific situations, and can therefore be considered as sinsigns.

Observations on the types of signs depend on how the sign manifests itself and, also, on what perspective is created in understanding its possible actions of meaning, that is, on the interpretative intention. This way, the “ideological western” sign can be seen as the combination of two legisigns in a journalistic text, talking about the movie *Bacurau*, thus producing, from general ideas, specific meanings.

The impact that the film has produced in academia can be seen in the various articles that have been presented at conferences. In the article “Signs under the Effect of a Powerful Psychotropic: *Bacurau* as a Seismograph” (NAKAGAWA et al, 2021), presented at the IV Meeting of Research Groups in Semiotics, the authors semiotically analyze the film as a production capable of continuously articulating signs. The study, starting from the

conception of the seismograph, understands that there is a way to produce meanings that rescue semioses already in progress, related to current semioses, in order to establish a perspective of action of the signs in the future.

Having as reference the Semiotics of Culture, in the light of Iuri Lotman, the article (NAKAGAWA et al, 2021) demonstrates that, in the film, the signs have the capacity to rescue meanings from the past, worthy of an “informative memory”, to the to which the “creative memory” is linked, established in the interrelation of language and the system of signs synchronically. The text highlights the intertextual work, which connects the film to cangaço and the work “Os Sertões”, by Euclides da Cunha (2003), originally published in 1902, especially with the emblematic presence in the plot of the “Museu Histórico de Bacurau” and the sequence in which the heads of the dead outsiders are displayed before the population. Here are signs present in Brazilian culture, whose semioses the film has the ability to reassemble and update. This imagistic semiosis work brings to light landmarks of Brazilian culture, which deserve special attention.

### **AROUND BACURAU: CRITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

Luiz Carlos Merten wrote his first review of the film on the occasion of its screening at the Cannes Film Festival, on May 16, 2019. The text was accompanied by a report by journalist Rodrigo Fonseca (2019). Entitled “Survival and protest”, Fonseca’s text is tasked with first presenting the production of the film in the context of the Cannes festival. He mentions the section aimed at journalists. He identifies the film as “a feature that defies all tension conventions of thrillers ever made in Latin America” and “for a sweeping line of suspense, which left the Press astonished”.

Fonseca (2019) also addresses the film *Bacurau* as an update of the “nordestern” genre, “the cangaço cinema”, which had as the starting point the feature film *O Cangaceiro*, in 1953, and continuity in the work of Glauber Rocha, as the representation of the struggle against forms of oppression. It also emphasizes the participation in the soundtrack of the musician, composer and filmmaker Sérgio Ricardo, who participated with his compositions in emblematic Cinema Novo films. The sin-signs presented in the report by Fonseca (2019) prove once again how the film *Bacurau* works as a “seismograph”, according to the hypothesis of the cited article (NAKAGAWA et al, 2021).

In Merten’s critique (2019), which follows Fonseca’s report, there is an emphasis on the “ideological western” sin-sign, consisting of two legesigns, “western” and “ideological”. They appear in the title: “Film reopens with brilliance to the ideological western aspect”. The mention of Glauber Rocha’s cinematography will be the guiding thread of the text, from the title to its closing. This sin-sign, which manifests itself as an occurrence both in Brazilian cinematography and in the analyzed text, concerns a general idea prominent during the period of Cinema Novo. The writing makes us discover sin-signs that oscillate between the current Brazilian sociopolitical context, the plot of the film and issues related to the cinematographic medium.

The difficulties faced by filmmakers, given the current political situation in Brazil, arise related to the sin-sign that describes the obstacles to nominating the film *Aquarius*, by director Kleber Mendonça, to represent Brazil in the competition for the Oscar awards in 2017. The “author’s protest”, carried out by the director and his team at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016, against the impeachment of President Dilma, is quoted indirectly producing a semiosis in the order of thirdness,

as a legi-sign, evoking Mendonça's political position. Despite the obstacles, the journalist writes: "Kleber is back, and with another great film", referring to *Bacurau*. In this excerpt, we observe the journalist's concern in relating cinematographic production to the political context, weaving approximations with the semioses of the word "ideological".

A practically inevitable legisign/sinsign in journalistic texts about films is the plot. It is described: "Bacurau is an ideological futuristic western. He'll be gone in a few years. The whole of Brazil fits in the little town of the title, in the middle of the country side". The term "Western" refers to the North American western cinematographic genre. In turn, "futuristic" relates narrative to science fiction, and "ideological" emphasizes the condition of any cinematographic production, which, in the case of the Brazilian tradition, goes back more notoriously to Cinema Novo, emphasizing the political stance of filmmakers. Brazilians under the "ideological western" sign. In short, when dealing with the plot, the journalist repeats the idea of an "ideological western".

The names of Glauber Rocha and Geraldo Vandré are two mentioned sinsigns, permeated with a strong symbolic charge related to the period of the Military Dictatorship. Singer-songwriter Vandré was linked to the Centro Popular de Cultura (CPC) of the National Union of Students (UNE), a center for the dissemination of Cinema Novo ideas in the 1960s, in Rio de Janeiro. He is the author of the anthem of resistance of the student movement *Not to Say I Didn't Talk About Flowers*. In choosing the words to describe the film and the characters, the journalist does justice to the complexity of his narrative and, at the same time, evokes pulsating issues of history and current affairs.

Merten highlights the confrontation between the characters of Sônia Braga, the doctor Domingas, and the German actor Udo

Kier, the "Nazi" "leader of the North American militia". At the end of his writing, the critic emphasizes the link between the narrative and the ideas of the exponent Cinema Novo filmmaker:

Everything is solved with a shot and a knife. Kleber and Dornelles brilliantly reopen Glauber Rocha's ideological western strand, to which they add elements of science fiction, with drones that resemble flying saucers, and a soundtrack with the vibe of Geraldo Vandré. Brazil in a few years is a mirror of the present and the past. If this serves as a stimulus to raise expectations, in 1969– 50 years ago -, *The Dragon of Evil vs. Holy Warrior*, with his international title, Antonio das Mortes, he won the mise-en-scène prize at Cannes (MERTEN, 2019).

The evocation of the film: "*O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro*" would have as the initial motivation the history of Brazilian participation in the Festival de Cannes, but also by the semiotic link between *Bacurau* and the work of Glauber Rocha, emphasized by the term "ideological western". It must be clarified that the journalist uses the expression "mise-en-scène" instead of "direction", the corresponding word in Portuguese.

In your book "Cinema: Between Reality and Artifice", Merten (2015) dedicates a chapter to Cinema Novo, in which he addresses the work of Glauber Rocha. When dealing with the production of: "*O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro*", cited in his analyzed critique, the author brings some points that contribute to elucidate the term "ideological western":

There were elements of a spaghetti western [in the film,] which resumed, for export, the title of his character, Antônio das Mortes, [who was already part of the story of Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol], Glauber seemed to hitch a ride on westerns Europeans that directors like Sérgio Leone made in the second half of the 1960s (MERTEN, 2015, p.183).

## **BACURAU, CINEMATOGRAPHIC PRESENT AND PAST**

As Sydney Ferreira Leite (2005) observes, Cinema Novo films tried to reflect on national identity. There was an attempt to understand Brazilianness and, at the same time, bring the national reality to the screens. There was, however, limited success with the public, which was only offset by the influence that the movement was able to establish in the intellectual segment.

According to the author Ismail Xavier (2001), there is in the cinematography of Glauber Rocha (1939-1981) a reflection on the “conscience of the oppressed” in a clear way, having as a landmark the film *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*. Xavier claims that these concerns derive from his dialogue with the journalistic/literary work “Os Sertões” (1902), by Euclides da Cunha. Within the scope of factual reality, the writer, in an initial reportage work, witnessed the cruel death of peasants in the Guerra de Canudos (1897), in the same way as the threat occurred to the population in the film Bacurau. In the actual episode, the army massacred the poor, followers of the messianic leader Antônio Conselheiro, “in the name of Reason and the Republic”.

Glauber Rocha, in 1963, returned to that experience to work on the relationship between hunger, religion and violence, and to legitimize the response of the oppressed, highlighting the presence, in Brazil, of a tradition of rebellion that would deny the official version of the peaceful nature of the people. In *Deus e o Diabo*, the mobilization impulse for revolt prevailed and the entirety of the film was one of hope, as we were in the period before the 1964 military coup, in the moment of struggle for basic reforms, with the agrarian question at the center, the same one that still remains at the center of Brazilian social tensions (XAVIER, 2001, p.19-20).

Glauber Rocha was imbued with the nationalist ideals of Cinema Novo and believed that Brazilianness would be achieved in cinema through its own cinematographic language. At this moment, however, he would have highlighted the inevitable internationalist character of cinema, represented by the “western” itself and its cannibalization by Italian cinema, for example.

The term “western” is a legi-sign, which has a symbolic character within the scope of cinematographic culture, whose meaning filmmakers and cinephiles are primarily able to apprehend, both in relation to the international context, as well as the Brazilian one.

Sin-signs have the ability to also function as legi-signs, evoking broad ideas. However, this broader reading depends on the readers’ repertoire, which semiotically corresponds to their collateral experience. Some signs treated in the critique in question can be understood within the scope of the socially shared reality, others can be more restricted to the context of cinephilia.

The term “ideological western” was probably chosen by the journalist for its ability to evoke many ideas, such as the connection of Brazilian cinema to the international context of cinematography and the political perspective launched by national cinema to this semiosis that occurs worldwide. The link to the work of Glauber Rocha, directly citing the film *The Dragon of Evil Versus the Holy Warrior*, however, it leads to this reflection developed within the scope of Cinema Novo and which also brings with it the awareness of a historical process lived at least since the Canudos War, and which the film *Bacurau* is capable of updating, as observed in the article by Nakagawa et al (2021).

Still within the framework of an approach to the Northeast and considering the dialogue established with the work “*Os Sertões*”, by Euclides da Cunha (2003), it is worth remembering the production of “*O Canto do Mar*” (1953), by Brazilian filmmaker Alberto Cavalcanti (1897-1982), about a decade before the film “*Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*” (1964).

With “*O Canto*” (MARTINS, 2008), the filmmaker aims to denounce the state of misery of society in the Northeast, a documentary contribution being introduced in the midst of fiction. In its opening, an anonymous and descriptive voice-over accompanies the shots of the initial sequence, whose first image is the map of the region, the camera focusing, above all, on Pernambuco. The shot concludes in *fondus enchaînés* with a close-up of the arid and cracked ground, the importance of which is underlined by a forward tracking shot. Then, another *fondus enchaînés* ends with a general shot of the natural landscape, showing the immensity of the region, marked not only by its breadth, but also by the fact that it is desert. Again, this image merges with a close-up of dry, cracked ground, a vertical pan demonstrating the presence of a single house in the distance.

A portrait of the country side is sketched this way: one perceives the dryness of the vegetation, the animals, for example, vultures standing still or in flight in a sunny sky. Throughout this sequence, there is also the presence of man, confronted with death, as seen in the image of a tomb with a cross fixed to the ground. This man is confronted with the almost total disappearance of water. This is what causes the rural exodus of this population, becoming one of the recurring events in the history of the country side. In addition to these elements, still in the opening sequence of “*O Canto*”, two groups of migrants are shown in their departure,

each one distinguished by the way they travel: the first on foot and the second in “*pau-de-arara*”, both present in the work by Euclides da Cunha (2003) as well as the exploration of the landscape.

Regarding the possible interpretations of the term “western” in the context of Cinema Novo, Ismail Xavier indicates that this movement problematized “its insertion in the sphere of mass culture, presenting itself in the market, but seeking to be its negation”, articulating “its policy with a deliberate inscription in the traditional erudite culture”, “especially the tradition of Modernism of the 1920s” (XAVIER, 2001, p.23). This way, the author evokes the idea of cultural anthropophagy and the way of relating to internationally hegemonic cultures, now represented mainly by the film industry.

Cinema Novo was linked to Neorealism and the politics of the Nouvelle Vague authors. Especially from the point of view of the Nouvelle Vague, there would be recognition of the creative and critical aspect even in the work of internationally popular filmmakers who were subject to the industrial system, as is the case of Alfred Hitchcock. This consonance with the reflective movement on cinema, according to Xavier, was implemented in the practice of Brazilian cinema in the 1960s as a “leverage of cultural nationalism and political cinema”, leading to a position against the dominant cinema and “the imperial interests of Hollywood”. In the 1960s, the concept of “nation” played a key role “mainly in countries on the periphery of the international order” (XAVIER, 2001, p.24).

The author Fernão Ramos (1987) emphasizes the negation character of the influence of classic cinema in the initial definitions of Cinema Novo, but these undergo modifications at the time of the production of “*Dragão da Maldade Contra o Santo*

*Guerreiro*” (1969), upon which the concept of the “ideological western” is pertinent.

At the beginning of the cinema-novista period, the dictates of North American cinema, which “had its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s”, “are radically abandoned” (RAMOS, 1987, p.321). Even the Nouvelle Vague was considered too bourgeois and its admiration for the North American cinema of the “B movie” type was disregarded by the Brazilians of Cinema Novo (RAMOS, 1987, p.338).

Cangaço cinema, referring to a form of banditry that existed in the first half of the 20th century in the Northeast region, is when a more direct relationship between Brazilian cinematographic production and the western genre occurs. Its origin was most evident in the successful film *O Cangaceiro* (1953), mentioned in the first journalistic text cited, but which in turn has other antecedents: *Filho Sem Mãe* (1925), *Sangue de Irmão* (1926) and *Lampião, Fera do Nordeste* (1930). However, it was in the early 1960s “that the production of bandit films emerged with vigour”, continuing until the early 1970s. Its “mark is visible in several authors of the period”, even Glauber Rocha (RAMOS, 1987, p.341).

Due to the fact that they maintain a close relationship with the classic form, the cangaço films - called *northerns or northeastrn* - were far from the cinema-novelist proposals, in any case they were part of an extensive filmography. In films with great public success such as “*A Morte Comanda o Cangaço*” (1961), the “verdant caatinga and the large open sets are very reminiscent of John Ford’s westerns”. “The family productive unit attacked by the cangaceiros is typically North American, in the way it is portrayed in westerns” (RAMOS, 1987, p.342).

Ramos observes, however, that, throughout the 1960s, Cinema Novo moved towards an aesthetic with better market reception,

being increasingly open to public tastes [...] and to the exhibition factor” (RAMOS, 1987, p.354). Even if the “cursed language” is not being abandoned, the issue of better communicability with the public will be in focus:

It is important to remember that during the 1960s, Cinema Novo suffered intense ideological demands for its stylistic choice, both in terms of not having contact with the people due to the language (and, therefore, not being ‘political’) but also, from 1965, regarding the fact that this same language was responsible for its marginalization in the market. (RAMOS, 1987, p.356).

The production of *The Dragon of Evil vs. Holy Warrior* (1969) it is part of the last phase of Cinema Novo described by Fernão Ramos (1987), in which there were traces of “allegorics and spectacle concerns”. In his statements at the time, Glauber Rocha reformulates his opinions, and puts communication with the public at the forefront, “related not only to the distribution sector, but also to production” (RAMOS, 1987, p.373). There is a search for inspiration in typically popular demonstrations.

*The Dragon of Evil Versus the Holy Warrior* appears in this sense as an attempt to reach the general public through the exploration of a narrative form based on popular traditions, tempered by great spectacle and color. The film was made between the second half of 1968 and the beginning of 1969, having been shown at the Cannes Film Festival, where Glauber won the prize for best director. It tells the continuation of the story of Antônio das Mortes, the cangaceiros killer, who is the central character of *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*. This one now finds himself facing the ‘last’ of the bandits, whom he once again hesitates to kill (RAMOS, 1987, p.373).

The author Laurent Desbois (2016) considers that the story of *Lampião* “is one of the topics of the Brazilian imagination”. He cites Cocteau to emphasize that “the public

loves the 'eternal return' of stories, as it prefers 'to recognize' than to 'know'...". This way Desbois (2016) interprets that Glauber's film "reaches the deepest roots of popular culture" (DESBOIS, 2016, 177).

This way, it can be observed how Glauber's cinema politicizes the use of western language, which in the period of cangaço films had great popular repercussions, recovering its political aspect in Cinema Novo, as a manifestation of an imaginary of the Brazilian context. There is an initial intention to show deep Brazil as the mythical country side, but simultaneously establishing a renewed dialectical relationship of denial and recognition of the cinematographic device and how its relationship with the audience has been established.

Although the western genre has been present since the beginning of American cinema, with the silent films of Edwin S. Porter, constituting one of the first narrative genres, Fernando Vugman (2012) emphasizes its influence in many other countries, with the version from the Italian *Wertern Spaghetti* the most successful imitation of all.

The "Old West" is the imaginary fusion of various eras and regions of the United States, as "a single mythical and timeless place" (VUGMAN, 2012, p.159). *Westerns* involve violence between the mythical figures of cowboys, horsemen, miners, Indian warriors, gunmen and railroad workers.

The issue of imaginary space is quite important in the genre. "Western projects a scenario of infinite natural resources and landscapes without visible limits". "The official policies of territorial expansion and conquest" are taken for granted. The "mythological clash between the civilized and the wild" unfolds (VUGMAN, 2012, p.162).

The concept of myth cited by the author is useful for understanding the "ideological western" sign in question. Myths are "stories

created from the history of a society that, repeated over time, acquired the power to symbolize the ideology of that society and to dramatize its moral conscience" (SLOTKIN in VUGMAN, 2012, p.160). This way, the western would already be loaded with an ideology, and the emphasis given to the ideological in Glauber's work emphasizes the political character that is given in any cinematography, however neutral it may pretend to be. Vugman analyzes that there was an effort of the genre to express the dominant ideology in the United States in different historical stages of the 20th century.

Coinciding with the approach of Merten (2019) in his critique, Bacurau received the designations "political western", "modern western", "western under acid", as proposed by the French critic. In this regard, the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, when announcing the release of the film in September 2019, discloses the way Les Inrocks magazine refers to the film: "a Western on acid. Impressive". And, moreover, the magazine *Paris Match* defines it as "a metaphorical Western with total effectiveness" (July-August 2019, N° 757, p. 4).

Indeed, by involving aspects of other cinematographic genres, namely, thriller, science fiction and horror, the film points to the contemporaneity of unanimous cinema in its mixture of different genres, hence the name "contemporary western". From this perspective, a whole character of self-reflexivity brings cinematographic expression to the forefront. As for the cinematographic genre itself, its contemporaneity, it is worth mentioning how the contribution of the Brazilian film has been recognized: "Contrary to the ideology of the conquest of the West, *Bacurau* reorients the vindictive and pleasurable energy of the western, taking as a target the America of devouring capitalism and of servile fascism." (BUI, 2019: p. 8).



## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The “ideological western” sign evokes a series of questions that could be related to the film *Bacurau*, and this way it constitutes a powerful sign due to its ability to produce semiosis around the film. There is a perspective of interpreting the film as a commentary on the international western cinematographic genre, the insertion of Brazilian cinematography in this context, and, at the same time, the relationship with the work of Glauber Rocha which, in turn, holds behind it, the ability to refer to several other signs corresponding to Brazilian culture and its historical experiences.

The film *Bacurau* questions the relationship of space in an imaginary location, problematizes questions of power, how a community establishes its ethical values in relation to constant threats. The invaders present themselves above all as holders of lethal technologies and, recognizing themselves as holders of a superior status, as in the original western, the “culture” was placed in relation to the “savage”.

Despite being an imaginary story, it is related to the history lived in Brazilian culture, either through the historical episodes of the War of Canudos, in constant allusions in Brazilian artistic production, as in the opening of the film “O Canto do Mar” (1953), and the *cangaço* phenomenon.

The fictional side, however, was also lived by the legacy of the “*cangaço*” films produced simultaneously with Cinema Novo, in the 1960s, and even by the western itself, a cinematographic reference that influenced the relationship with the audience both on the part of “nordestern” films, as in relation to the work of Glauber Rocha.

Cinema Novo’s struggle to reflect national political issues in cinematography, without falling into the traps of classic and commercial cinema, leads, however, to reflection on the very condition of cinema as an instance of

an internationalized and dominant aesthetic. What happens in the imaginary town of *Bacurau* translates the historical condition of the Brazilian people, as well as the very condition of the cinema that tries to be made in Brazil, both the work of Glauber Rocha and the film in question, establishing themselves as true exponents.

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