



FILM REVIEW

Bacurau: The 'Deep Brasil'

Aileen El-Kadi *

Bacurau (2020)

Film

Written and Directed by
Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles
Original languages: Portuguese and English
More information at [IMDB](#)

The Brazilian film *Bacurau* (2020), a mixed-genre dystopia set in the near future (written and directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles), intends to nullify any lack of representation of the social margins and prioritize more than one of the so-called social minorities. This film is not about the Brazil of the favelas, nor the world of prisons, or Rio de Janeiro's beaches, but it employs a well-known national geographic trope: the backlands of underdevelopment.

Bacurau is a tiny fictional town surrounded by vast caatinga landscapes of desert vegetation in the northwest of the country. The opening scene of the film shows two individuals in an old truck arriving in town on a desolate dirt road. The female character is Teresa (played by Bárbara Colen), who is traveling to Bacurau to attend the funeral of her 94-year-old grandmother, the matriarch of the village who has just passed away. To enter or to leave that uninhabited and remote natural space means to penetrate an invisible border dividing urbanity from wilderness. The directors emphasize the seclusion of towns like Bacurau -'non-existent' communities on the nation's political map.

Bacurau not only appears to exist outside of any modern border; it also appears to be frozen in time. Its people seem to be living as they did in previous centuries despite the



presence of modern and sometimes futuristic technology, including large digital screens cellular communication networks. In fact, *Bacurau* seems to avoid change in order to maintain its traditions. In that sense a contradiction arises. In the name of tradition, they exist in a form of paralysis. Thus, there are both spatial and temporal boundaries that contain the town's development.

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When the only thing that signals progress disappears—the town's communication network mysteriously goes down—the community's isolation and backwardness come to the fore. A mercenary gang, white men and women who only speak English, have settled in a kind of bunker nearby. Armed with machine guns, they have one purpose: to hunt down the local inhabitants—apparently just for fun. The caricatures of American neo-Nazis allude to real-world contemporary politics, with the emergence of far-right groups bolstered by the rhetoric of authoritarian leaders like President Donald Trump and Brazil's own President Jair Bolsonaro. In the movie, there are two Brazilians working for the white foreigners. They arrive in Bacurau on motorcycles, to the surprise of its inhabitants, who are unaccustomed to strangers visiting them. The 'outsiders' are Brazilians working as spies like CIA agents. They speak English with their employers, and they are white, but not white enough to belong to the elite. "We are not from this region"—one of them justifies themselves to their superiors—"We are from southern Brazil. A rich region, with German and Italian colonies. We are more like you." This is about the "You versus Us", where color is not necessarily the dividing line that allows them to side with those who have the power to kill and spare lives. "Why are you doing this?" asks the town's new female leader, a strong-willed doctor whom everyone respects, named Domingas (played by Sônia Braga), when confronting the head of the terrorist group, Michael (played by Udo Kier). But there is no comprehensible answer; it is 'because we can'. The desire for power and domination and to subjugate and murder mark the dividing line between inferiors and superiors. The perpetrator builds himself on the basis of fascist beliefs, where his victims lose their humanity to become 'social waste'.



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In one of the scenes, when an American kills a child, he justifies the shooting by thinking that the child was armed, when in fact he was carrying a flashlight. In the United States, cases in which black people have been killed by the police or who died in their custody sparked protests at the national and international level. In July 2020 there were also demonstrations in Brazil against this type of racial violence. In a country like Brazil, which is systematically and historically racist, and where exhibiting European genealogy represents superiority over African and native ancestry, where prestigious professions and positions of power are in the hands of whites, and where the great majority of inmates are black, the film's criticism is timely, despite its future setting.

Bacurau appears to be an inclusive democracy. The leadership is in the hands of women, and the deceased matriarch has been replaced by another well-respected woman. There are transgender characters, gays, blacks and whites, prostitutes and criminals, children and elderly citizens, and they all live in apparent harmony. The scene of the funeral collation is a window on that social democracy. The church serves as a repository, but there is no religion, and, to ensure every citizen never forgets the proud history of their town, a sacred museum displays, as trophies, the weapons used by their ancestors during a revolt. These weapons will be resuscitated to defend themselves from the new invaders. Echoes of Quilombo dos Palmares, Canudos, resonate here. History repeats itself.

In a post-modern Western makeup, this dystopia, which flirts with sci-fi, attempts to create a multi-layered temporal universe. The historical past is reiterated in the present and is projected into a future that will surely repeat, albeit with variations, a past of violence, colonial submission, stagnation, indifference from the rulers, and geographic, economic and social isolation. There are two types of violence in the film, one internal, the other external. But only one is presented as a threat. The internal violence is inherited, it is a violence of a historical and national nature. It is the violence of everyday life, naturalized and accepted as the 'way of life'. Only in the face of external violence do the inhabitants of Bacurau react as a unit, as a community. But it is an intentional and temporary unit to defend themselves against the external otherness. There is a constant invisible border separating Bacurau from the rest of the world, whether past or future, fiction or real life; there are communities that were and will continue to be invisible.

Perhaps there is, in this political allegory, an intention to contrast the existential emptiness of these foreign sociopaths with the identity of 'authenticity' of the rural community, a community that finds peace in its apparent stagnation. A community that seems to sleep calmly over its violent past but can erupt if threatened.