



FILM: **BACURAU**

FDG RATING: 3.0 ☺☺☺○○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Kleber Mendonca Filho: *writer, director*

Juliano Dornelles: *co-director*

Barbara Colen: *actress, Teresa*

Udo Kier: *actor, Michael*

DATE: January 21, 2021

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **BACURAU**

Descriptions of the 2019 Brazilian film, *Bacurau*, were somewhat misleading taking you in the direction of sci-fi, labeling it a “Western thriller” with “aliens”, “UFOs”, and the mysterious sudden disappearance of *Bacurau* from maps and GPS. But a single category is too constrained for this cross-genre film that has elements of westerns, thrillers, sci-fi, horror, docu-political-commentary, magic realism, and more. While criticized for being so scattered in genre, causing confusion in many viewers, others saw it as a powerful imaginative story with pointed political jabs about injustice, inequality, domination, power, control, and the intent to obliterate those who stand in the way. The disappearance of *Bacurau* on maps was the initial symbolic event denoting the sinister mission at hand.

Text appears on the opening screen setting the time frame as “a few years from now”, a dystopian existence, a warning of what could/will happen, but when interviewed, the film makers explain, is actually happening now.

We meet Teresa, a pretty young doctor, returning home to her small village in the arid, parched, impoverished, backlands Sertão region, (Brazil’s historically underserved Northeast) for her grandmother’s funeral, the 94year old matriarch of the village. The villagers celebrate her return by placing a psychotropic plant bead (found in the desert) on her tongue, our first indication that these people have an underlying more primal nature and cultural history. She is disturbed by strange occurrences also unnerving other villagers. Water has been stopped to the city for months. The trucker who has to bring their water from much farther upstream, arrives with bullet holes in the sides of his rig. The school teacher notices that the town can no longer be found on maps and GPS (insinuating that those in control have virtually unchecked power). Cell phone service mysteriously drops. A couple wearing fashionable, colorful biking gear (a stark contrast to the villagers) ride their motorcycles into town. One villager spots a UFO (drone). Are they under attack?

We are introduced to the town’s collection of eccentric characters who at the same time, have a deep rooted sense of dignity: a deep-voiced DJ who acts as the town crier from his mobile set of speakers; the stern-faced older female doctor who appears in a drunken rage hurling insults at Teresa’s recently departed grandmother; Pacote, an old flame of Teresa’s; her teacher father, and the children in his classroom. We hear mention of the fugitive fighter Lunga, as the villagers wonder if they will need his help. And then we see the inept, corrupt politician, Tony Junior, (who neglects to care for the town or its people) motor into the village campaigning for votes, dumping torn used books for the school, and other questionable supplies such as food that has expired and medication that is actually a mood enhancer, all designed to garner their gratitude. The mayor drives away taking a teenage girl who later returns and without any explanation, we know what happened to her. The film successfully alludes to many themes without going into any detail.

Many of us expected Teresa to become the film’s main character, but not so. All the villagers, become subservient characters as we meet a despicable band of villains and their sinister leader. They are a pack of blood-thirsty, wealthy westerners who shoot for sport, even if the target is human, (they paid for this blood safari). Among them, several gun loving Americans (the female gets erotically turned on by killing), and the two Brazilian motorcyclists from the big city Sao Paolo, (the male is an assistant judge). Their leader, Michael, is a steely-eyed, purposely German-American (interesting commentary on historical eradication of targeted ethnic people). When the younger American man flippantly calls him a Nazi, Michael replies that he is more American than the 37year old since he has lived in America for 40 years. They believe as white, they are superior. Their mission is to obliterate the village of *Bacurau* as the villagers are considered an inferior breed of people who oppose the Mayor’s dam that diverts water away from their land. We later learn that after the mission is accomplished, Michael will be financially rewarded by the Mayor. The group of misfits discuss their mission as they drop slurs of racism and disregard for human life. Even the two Brazilian motorcyclists from Sao Paolo are bullied for not being white. One published film critic noted that this group is the allegorical stand-in for the ruthless businesses that have come to bleed Brazil dry and let its marginalized people starve.

An insightful scene was when the couple from Sao Paulo entered the small village shop for a beverage, and asked, "What are inhabitants of Bacurau called?", expecting a reply such as "Bacurauians", when a young boy in the corner innocently answers, "People." Another foreboding conversation is when the shop owner asks the couple if they plan to visit the Bacurau museum, which of course they don't. Toward the climatic end of the film, we see the museum wall where all the tribal weapons are hung next to news stories about the history of the village and how its people have won many bloody battles to survive. (The museum also signifies the importance of history, how horrific events in history are repeated in Brazilian society as well as other societies).

An astute discussion participant enlightened us about Brazil's disturbing political legacy. "I see this film as a condemnation of Brazilian government. While they can't come out and say Jair Bolsonaro, or name any other individuals, you can read through the lines how corrupt it is from top to bottom. As the film opened you could see fires in the distance, an indicator of how the environment is being ruined, the deforestation and the displacement of people by burning the land. Many small towns like Bacurau struggle for resources - water - while at the same time they are victimized by outsiders - in this case, not only Europeans and Americans, but their own people such as referenced by the couple on motorcycles from Sao Paulo."

Another resident reviewer confessed that although somewhat aware of corruption in Brazilian government, understanding and assessing the film in these terms really brings it to life in a visceral way. "It is so hard to see such abuses in country after country around the world where people are crushed, exploited and killed by their own governments. It must be heartbreaking to watch Bacurau if you're Brazilian." Their fight turns the film into a bold social commentary, an active rebellion against classist and colonialist oppression.

A published critic noted that the film brilliantly balances politics and story. A story that many viewers criticized for being hyperviolent to which Filho responded saying, "hyperviolent refers to something beyond reality, which I don't think this is." The film has been described as having the feeling of the wild west where shoot-em up scenes are taken in stride. A wild thriller that can be experienced without delving into deeper meanings. And, satisfying, poetic justice reigns supreme at the end of the film.

One resident reviewer called the film a satire but satire usually presents itself as over exaggerated to the extent of being comic. Others countered that, sadly, what we saw was a mirror on reality. One comment was that it was overly ambitious but definitely distinctive and original. Several discussion participants judged the film harshly because of the extreme violence. Others found the film to be an important, risky portrayal of truth veiled in a layer of film genres revealed for violent scenes. Bacurau stirred strong positive and negative reactions: A dominating 4.5 was riddled with a barrage of lower scores resulting in an enervated but surviving 3.0 cumulative rating of on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)

Footnotes:

Bacurau was a source of great embarrassment for the government. When it premiered in 2019, it was actually the film's commercial success, as well as its capacity to stir debate, that threatened the government. *Bacurau's* box office numbers, the fact that it was screened internationally and won prizes at Cannes, that it premiered to great acclaim in the United States, all of that was hugely embarrassing.

Scouting for locations, the film makers met a lady who invited them to visit her village's museum. The museum was actually a wall with pictures in the woman's living room. That was the museum, small, dignified. At the beginning of shooting, people showed up from the community wanting to work on the film. There were carpenters, electricians, actors, and actresses, many of whom ended up playing characters in *Bacurau*. Many of those people, were actually the most marginalized members of their community — poets, transgender people, musicians, clowns, actors, homosexuals, crazy people. Their presence on the set gave the film an added layer of truth to the film.

Filho says, "... It happens almost every week that some moments in the film, some scene, becomes a mirror image of what is happening in current affairs." When the film makers went to France for post-production, a friend sent them a link to a newspaper, where [it says] the government decided to erase this grid within a protected Brazilian indigenous area.

Filho has been the target of government-backed financial sabotage, and both his 2016 film *Aquarius* (Clara, a 65-year-old widow and retired music critic, vows to live in her apartment until she dies after a developer buys all of the units around her) and *Bacurau* were conspicuously overlooked as Oscar candidates. Bolsonaro's administration has been especially aggressive in its efforts to destroy important cultural institutions like Brazil's National Cinema Agency and the Cinemateca Brasileira. Its savage attacks on arts and education funding are a typical move from the far-right playbook.



See you at the movies!

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