

## Politics and Aesthetics of Myth in *Black God, White Devil*

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*Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* is a synthesis-film that poses central questions of Glauber Rocha's thinking. It is also a key film in the context of the first phase of the Brazilian "Cinema Novo" (from 1962 to 1965), a cinema that rediscovers and gives visibility to the social and human landscape of the Brazilian Northeast. The Northeastern *sertão* ("backlands") is rife with social conflicts and becomes a symbol of another nationality, a paradoxical one, on the margin of traditional representations.

This rural Brazil became the backdrop for important works of the early Cinema Novo, such as the classics *Vidas Secas* (*Barren Lives*) by Nelson Pereira dos Santos (1963), *Os Fuzis* (*The Guns*) by Ruy Guerra (1963), as well as *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (*Black God, White Devil*) by Glauber Rocha (1964). These are films that thematize the *sertão* as a territory of social borders and fractures (misery, injustice, abandonment) but also, as in the case of Rocha's film, as a mythical territory, full of symbols and signs of a culture of resistance full of possibilities.

The Northeastern *sertão* was always the "other" of the modern and positive Brazil: a place of misery, of mysticism, of the disinherited, a non-place, and simultaneously a type of perverted postcard, with its reserves of typicality where tradition and invention are extracted from adversity. The *sertão* is an important figure in the construction of the idea of the nation and of "Brazilianness," which surfaces with different meanings in the literature of Euclides da Cunha, Graciliano Ramos, and Guimarães Rosa. The mythic and imagined *sertão*, literary and cinematic, is a territory of utopias linked to the nation, to religion, and to *cangaço*, or "banditry."

In *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, Rocha is able to synthesize and combine, in an exceptional and paradigmatic way, different angles from modern Brazilian literature (again, Euclides da Cunha, Graciliano Ramos, Guimarães Rosa) with the cinema. He sifts through realism and documentaries and selects the mythic and allegorical, which achieve in this film a monumental and operatic form. The film also makes a real contribution to studies of the relations between myth, politics, religion, and popular culture, recreating and politicizing popular myths from historical and living myths.

The narrative of *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* has as its context three important cycles of Northeastern life juxtaposed: the popular messianic movements (“*beatismo*”), the cycle of banditry (“*cangaço*”) and the power of the local political bosses (“*coronelismo*”). These are three distinct forms of parallel power, combining crime and belief and challenging laws and customs. In choosing the characters—the cowboy Manuel, the pious Sebastião, the bandit Corisco and Antonio das Mortes, the killer for hire—Rocha creates synthetic types that concentrate in their actions and their pathos entire moments of modern Northeastern history. The characters bear the features of historical figures who are easily identifiable, yet who at the same time attain the stature of legendary and mythical figures, characters from popular backlands fables, such as in the “*literatura de cordel*.”<sup>1</sup> History, myth and fable combine in a hybrid narrative.

Rocha samples from history and from realism, but transcends them by transforming the backlands into a mythical and metaphysical territory. As in the literature of Guimarães Rosa, in Rocha “the *sertão* is the world,” a place of possible utopias and of radical transformations, a place distant in time and yet also crossed by the wars of the present.

It is this articulation between myth, politics and real life, between a narrative that is at the same time pathetic—in the Eisensteinian sense—and critical, epic and didactic. It makes the film an exceptional work, capable of rivaling a sociological study, without abandoning the concerns of an expressive and aesthetic order.

The film is structured from the story of the cowboy Manuel and his wife Rosa, two common characters who pass through three rites of initiation. These rites provide three very well delineated phases through which the narrative synthesizes the fundamental historical cycles in the Northeast, historical elements that are deconstructed and re-elaborated in the construction of a new mythology.

The film is set in a territory that is both actual and atemporal. In the beginning, it describes a Northeast that is perfectly contemporaneous, marked by the domination of local political bosses (“*coronelismo*”), and where the cowboy Manuel kills a landlord after being cheated and humiliated by him. For revenge, his house is invaded and his mother is killed. The unequal labor relations, the subsistence economy of the *sertanejo* (“peasant”), and the small commerce of the fairs are all presented to the viewer in a synthetic form. This is done in a raw narrative with short cuts, where the story is at the same time told and sung by the character of the blind singer who “witnesses” the story and circulates the myth.

The film’s first rupture and inversion takes place in a scene of immobility, in which actions and habits are repeated. The first gesture of Manuel’s revolt has as its outcome the crime, that is, justice performed by his own hands. The theme of personal exile after an act of individual rebellion is of course a hallmark of the American Western movies. The difference is that Rocha provides a political rationale for this revolt, whose horizon in the film is a radical transformation: a collective revolt in the making. Contrary to the Western genre, the violence is not “natural” or a “given” but a symptom of a larger change, which Rocha tries to approach and explicate in his manifesto “Eztetyka da Fome.”

Everything in the first sequences recalls the hardness and cruelty of life on the *sertão*, in a kind of explicated prologue that describes the land, the scenery of immemorial and actual fights, and the man who survives in that hell. The images elongate in a movement of repetition and exasperation, descriptive images like those in the initial sequence that present the vastness of the land burnt by the sun, constituting a natural theater that will be transformed by Rocha into a Brechtian platform. In contrast to the vast landscape, the foreground shows the head of a dead steer and the solitary cowboy mounting his horse.

Already in these initial sequences, Rocha punctuates the realist and almost documentary aesthetic—marked by the monotonous sound and repetition of the process of making flour and by the grandiose and indifferent face of Rosa carrying out the chores—with a playful vision, that of a group of *beatos* who sing and pray following Saint Sebastião, grasping flags in the desolate landscape like a magical apparition.

The camera oscillates between indifferent description and the subjective expression of a vision of the cowboy Manuel who patrols the group of *beatos*.

Fascinated he says to Rosa upon arriving at home: "I saw!" All of the initial sequence is given in a "silent monologue"—so to speak—in which Manuel talks to himself and comes up with a better future for the couple after the vision of the saint: "A miracle might happen!"

The conversation is punctuated by the skeptic, indifferent and exhausted face of Rosa. In this introduction, Rocha comments on and narrates the story through the voice of a singer, in the style of the popular singers of the Northeast and the *cordel* literature. The song advances the narrative, anticipating and commenting on the story, as in the ballads of the Westerns. It also functions as the place of the construction of the myth. The music precedes and triggers comments on the action.

The second movement of the film arrives with the transformation of the cowboy into a *beato* or pious man, who searches for an expiation for the crime he has committed. "It was the hand of God calling me through the path of disgrace. Now there is no other way besides asking for help from the *beato* Sebastião. Let's go quickly, there is nothing for us to carry except our destiny."<sup>2</sup>

Rocha pulls away from the initial realism to create a grandiose vision of a mystic trance. Inspired by the Euclides da Cunha's descriptions in *Os Sertões (Rebellion in the Backlands)* of the religious community of Canudos founded by Antonio Conselheiro and exterminated by the Brazilian army, the director recreates, in an original format, the genesis of the popular religious leaders who construct powerful religious communities, threatening the hegemony of the Church and the established powers. "Imagined communities"—as Benedict Anderson<sup>3</sup> has called them—that rival the nation and the state that have abandoned them, ushering in a new "reign" of justice and abundance.

From the personal revolt that leads him to the crime, Manuel arrives on the other side of misery: from the mysticism that turns him from a cowboy into a *beato*. Throughout the second movement, the film immerses itself in a trance, in messianism, religious utopia and the technologies of mastering the body and spirit. Humiliation, martyrdom, the exaltation of pain and suffering, penitence and redemptive expiation lead the way to the Promised Land, described by the *beato* Sebastião as a kind of exuberant *sertão*:

On the other side of the sacred mountain there exists a land where everything is green, the horses eat the flowers and the children drink milk in the waters of the river... There is water and food, there is abundance from the heavens and every

day when the sun rises Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary appear, Saint Jorge and my Saint Sebastião filled with arrows in his chest.<sup>4</sup>

The ascension and initiation of Manuel takes place on the way to the sacred mountain, in a painful climb on a trail of penitents, which becomes a type of natural and monumental “Via Sacra,” and which today is still undertaken by the faithful of the Northeastern *sertão*.

The film builds through music, the monumental and playful space of the hills and mountains, from the sound of the wind to the voice of Saint Sebastião—a climate of growing exaltation that arrives at hysteria, at commotion and exasperation. “I hand over my power to my saint to liberate my people!” cries Manuel. In a few sequences, the songs of praise mix with the sound of bullets. Weapons and rosaries, crosses and rifles, transform the *beatos* into the armed guard of the Saint: “Jesus ordered that a warrior angle with his lance to cut off the head of his enemies.”<sup>5</sup>

Religion is depicted as a place of pacification, conformism, humiliation, but also as a theater of violence, of exaltation and of ecstasy. In these sequences the montage breaks with the realism for a final effect of violence and pathos. Visual and audio violence created by the movement of an unstable camera that watches, pursues, and surrounds the characters. Violence is treated in different forms that both oppose and complete the film, creating a rhythm of dissension and exasperation. Violence is experienced through the extension and exhaustion of time, as in the sequence of Manuel’s penance as he slowly carries an immense rock on his head while he is flogged by a *beato*’s whip.

Violence is represented in a ritualistic and hieratic form, recorded with natural sound, like the sequence in which the Saint sacrifices a child offered by Manuel. The camera remains motionless, impotently contemplating the scene, in a narrative indifference that contrasts with the explosion of hatred and revolt in Rosa, who ends up stabbing and killing Saint Sebastião. With this second liberating crime Manuel and Rosa free themselves from the Saint’s influence.

The other form of violence that defines the film is the trance of the handheld camera rotating between the characters. Rocha turns the trance into the most remarkable feature of his camera in sequences such as those of the mystic exaltation of the people of the “Monte Santo” listening to the prophecies of the *beato*, of the delirium and pain of Rosa’s character as she

tries to free her husband Manuel from the influence of Saint Sebastião, and finally of the massacre and horror of this very people, decimated by Antonio das Mortes.

The production of a trance or a crisis is the most prominent figure of Rocha's thought and cinema. The trance is the transition, the passage, duty, and possession. In order to enter into a crisis or into a trance one has to be possessed by the "Other." The characters' trance is presented and experienced by means of the handheld camera and the rhythmic montage.

Rocha makes the trance a form of experience and understanding. To enter into a trance is to be in tune with an object or situation; it is to know from within. And it is this crisis and trance of the land, of man and of the social formations that we follow in *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, in which the images do not represent the trance, but enter into a trance, or in tune, with the characters, the scenes and objects, as well as with the spectator, forming, in many sequences, one sole flux.

The trance and the possession also mark the character of Corisco, the "two-headed bandit," who has one head to kill and one to think. This marks the third moment of the film: the conversion of the cowboy and subsequent *beato* Manuel into banditry. "Órfão do Deus Negro," Saint Sebastião, whose faithful are decimated by Antonio das Mortes, sees in Diabo Louro, Corisco, a new force of leadership and command, a new myth that makes sense to the exploited life of the peasant. The Saint as well as Corisco appear in the cinema of Rocha as primitive rebels, in a revolt that also marks the character of the killer for hire, Antonio das Mortes.

The Saint, the bandit and the killer are in *Deus e o Diabo* our primitive rebels, carriers of a diffuse revolutionary hatred, emissaries of a hatred of the earth and of man. Rocha uses the imagination of Euclides da Cunha in *Os Sertões*, where the violence, the ferocity, the hunger and the revolt are attributes or conditions of man and the earth, and proceeds to transmute them in such a way that all of the violence of the earth, whether from the environment, religion, banditry, the massacred people, or from rebellion (both crime and mysticism) becomes an embryonic form of revolutionary ire. Rocha tries to give political, ethical, and aesthetic meaning to this rebellion.

This was Galuber Rocha way of transforming *beatos*, cowboys and killers-for-hire into potential agents of the revolution. For Rocha, "only through violence and horror, can the colonizer understand the power of culture that he exploits," he writes in "A Eztetyka da Fome" (31-32). The violence is not

just a simple symptom, it is a desire for transformation, “the most noble cultural manifestation of hunger,” he writes (31). Rocha’s Marxism has something sadistic and hysterical about it. A revolution has to be preceded by a crime or massacre.

The *beato* Sebastião inflicts penitences and punishments on the faithful; the bandit Corisco kills with his rifle “so that the poor won’t be left to die of hunger.” Antonio das Mortes kills *beatos* and bandits in the name of the revolution that will come: “a war larger than this *sertão*, an enormous war, without the blindness of God nor the Devil”—he says to justify why he indifferently kills the religious mystics and bandits, saints and demons. Figures of a past that must disappear forever, just like himself, Antonio das Mortes. Saint, bandit, killer are these primitive rebels, destabilizing forces in their blindness, prophets and announcers of a “great war” that will come.

Rocha subverts the Christian Gospel, combining Christianity, messianism, Sebastianism and Marxism, in an incredible political twist that appropriates immemorial symbols and myths in the construction of a pre-revolutionary mythology. The character of Corisco, beautiful, violent, amoral and anarchic, a destabilizing force that comes to “mess up the ordered,” functions as a character who synthesizes of this revolutionary process. When Manuel sees Corisco, he falls to his knees, in ecstasy with the figure of the bandit: “This is my Saint Jorge”—the Christian warrior saint. Corisco takes and baptizes Manuel, giving him a new name: “Satan.” Religion and banditry get along with the same forces of belonging that give meaning to the group, the reign, the band or nation.

Corisco is a character who is a mystic himself, but it is a hybrid and syncretic mysticism that mixes the practices of different religions: baptism, exorcism, possession, and “closing of the body” (*fechamento do corpo*), namely, getting a strong spiritual as well as physical protection to one’s body. Christianity, *beatismo* and *candomblé* form a part of his religious experience, but Corisco also proclaims the power of arms, rifles, and of force, as instruments of transformation in the place of prayers and of rosaries.

The entrance of Manuel and Rosa into Corisco’s band constitutes a new rite of initiation, where the idea of rebellion and anarchy brings with it a sexuality devoid of taboos and prohibition that involves and unites Corisco, Dadá, Manuel and Rosa. In three sequences this free sexuality is expressed: in the encounter of Rosa and Dadá, expressing a sensuality and admiration in which women desire and touch one another. There is also the scene in which

Rosa gives herself to Corisco, succumbing to the charm of the Diabo Louro. A third example is when Corisco's band invades a farm and sets up a theater of orgy and cruelty, in which they kill and rape.

Almost symmetrical to the sufferings imposed by Saint Sebastião, Manuel, after doubting the bloody methods of the bandit, is also humiliated and whipped by Corisco until he "converts" to banditry. Manuel, guided by Corisco's hand, commits a new crime, affiliating himself with the bandits through the blood and the sacrifice of an innocent, just as he became affiliated with Saint Sebastião through the sacrifice of a child. Mysticism and banditry are equated and propose a world with its own ethics and rules, beyond good or evil, a world that makes sense to the life of the disinherited and outlaws.

The scenes in the presentation of Corisco's band are marked by an extraordinary use of sequential shots and the movement of actors who displace the natural stage: the white and infinite *sertão*, an almost abstract scene that valorizes the gestures and dislocations of the space. The handheld camera delineates long plain sequences, accompanying the coming and going of the characters: moments of hesitation, of oscillation, of uneasiness, which characterize all of the "theater" surrounding Corisco.

The anti-naturalism of the interpretation, the almost operatic character of Corisco, who spins, jumps, rotates, in an admirable and dazed way, links him to the effect of the Brechtian interpretation of Othon Bastos and the Eisensteinian montage of Rocha, which confers to the character an epic and monumental character. An example is the scene in which Corisco incorporates Lampião and engages in a dialogue with him, alternating the voices and gestures of one then the other, transforming himself into the bandit with two heads in the same body. Ownership and possession resuscitate the dead: "Virgulino [Lampião] died in the flesh but his spirit is alive here in me," says Corisco. Possession is achieved through the effect of montage and impressive interpretations.

The cycle of mysticism and banditry are brought together in the hands of the same agent: Antonio das Mortes, presented in the song that describes the man without god and without law: "praying in ten churches, without a patron saint, Antonio das Mortes, killer of the bandit." The character of Antonio das Mortes is constructed as a paradoxical figure, at the same time critical and conscious of his acts to serve the church and the local political bosses in the extermination of the religious fanatics and bandits who upset



the good business of the priests and landlords. Antonio das Mortes kills out of the belief that mysticism and banditry are forces of the past that should disappear, like himself, in the name of a radical transformation. Mixing the figures of a solitary horseman, mercenary, righteous person, bodyguard, Zorro, the black cape, hat and rifle in hand he is completely in the realm of legend. He is a character from a Western and at the same time a type of politicized killer, who kills the fanatics of the Saint and at the end, Corisco himself in a stylized duel that ends with the cry of the bandit urging on the fight: "Strongest are the powers of the people."

Removing himself from conciliatory or paternalistic solutions in the representation of the relationship between the Church, the landlords, the bandits, the mystics and the poor people, Glauber Rocha proposes a pedagogy of violence and of revolt in a pure state. In *Deus e o Diabo*, there is no intellectual character who serves as a legitimate representative of or mediator for the people, nor is there a discourse of praise or victimization of this people, as was common in the 1960s.

In the film the people are whipped, humiliated, flogged, massacred on different levels. Contrary to morally condemning the violence and exploitation of these people, Rocha represents violence with such radicalness and force that it becomes intolerable to the viewer. Rocha also points to new agents and intermediaries in this process of change (the bandit, the *beato*, the mercenary), who deprive the intellectual of his privileged position as an agent of change.

After so many trials and humiliations, Manuel and Rosa, free from Deus and the Diabo, of mysticism and the banditry, assume the place of a people to come, a people who invent themselves, a mythic couple, who run in a desperate chase across the *sertão*, in a long and magnificent sequence of shots that end in the finale of the film, realizing cinematographically the prophecy of Saint Sebastião that "the *sertão* will become the sea and the sea will become the *sertão*." The film adopts a messianic or mythic version, juxtaposing, at the end of the sequence in which Rosa and Manuel run aimlessly, the image of the *sertão* to the image of an immense sea, which covers everything.

A cinematographic utopia of transformation, with the voice of the blind narrator who chants: "My story is told, truth and imagination. I hope that you have learned a lesson. This is how the barely divided world goes wrong, that the land belongs to man, not God or the Devil."<sup>6</sup> The film changes its register abruptly and passes from the popular to the erudite, invading the

sertão of the cordel with the sea and the symphony, ending with the music of Villa Lobos.

With *Deus e o Diabo*, Rocha constructs a narrative that expresses his infinite belief in transformation and in destabilizing forces, whether impure, ambiguous or fragile (the mystic, the bandit, the poor, the killer). He also brings a new understanding of movements such as mysticism and banditry, viewed not as “obscurantism” or “alienation,” but as expressions of discontentment, rebellion capable of constituting powerful communities. The film emphasizes this force of the unification of religion, such as in the violent destabilization of banditry, a violence that could serve any ideology, including the revolution. Rocha pursues this rebellion in its pure state, a type of intolerable from which a real revolution could arise.

In this way he tries to build a new national mythology “on the margins of a nation” and to promote radical change, calling attention to the different forms of identity and belonging created by the mystic experience, by communities, by groups of disinherited and exiles of the nation. In this construction of different “imagined communities,” Rocha believes that the cinema itself, or “a group of films in evolution could give, in the end, to the public, the conscience of its very existence” (33).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sebastião, the pious man, was inspired by Antonio Conselheiro, the religious leader of the Canudos community, destroyed in 1897 by the Brazilian army, as well as by other “saints” such as Lourenço do Caldeirão and Padre Cícero, both considered performers of miracles

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from original film dialogue.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* was translated into Portuguese as *Nação e Consciência Nacional*.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from original film dialogue.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from original film dialogue.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from original film dialogue.

## Glossary

*Beatismo*: a recurrent phenomenon in the Northeastern *sertão* or backlands in which priests and devotees appear, declaring themselves to be saints or prophets, and are considered as messianic saviors by the people. The Northeastern *beatos* become important political and religious leaders, capable of bringing together great multitudes and communities around themselves. Some examples of beatos who even today are cult figures in the Northeast, are Antonio Conselheiro of Canudos, São Lourenço of Caldeirão and Padre Cícero.

*Beato*: an excessively devoted man or a fanatic that follows a "saint."

*Cangaço*: Northeastern Brazilian social banditry that flourished in the *sertão* between 1870 and 1940.

*Cangaceiros*: the bandits of the *sertão*. Those who belonged to the *cangaço* were heavily armed, living off raids on farms and settlements. Bandits such as Lampião and Corisco became symbols of a way out from the misery and of the freedom for the poor backlanders.

*Coronelismo*: a system of land concentration in the hands of few owners that became a political and economic force parallel to the government.

*Coronel*: a landowner, influential political leader or owner of lands in the Northeast.

*Sertão* (plural: *Sertões*): hinterland, in opposition to the coast. In Northeastern Brazil, the *sertão* is a semi-arid region, subject to periodic droughts, and where there is an impoverished population as well as large landowners.

*Sertanejo*: an inhabitant of the *sertão*, a peasant.

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