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Vera Karam de Chueiri \*

**«Sertão is where the strong and the shrewd call the tune»:  
From Guimarães Rosa's Novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas*  
to Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles' Film *Bacurau***

**«Sertão è il luogo in cui i forti e gli astuti dettano legge»:  
dal romanzo *Grande Sertão: Veredas* di Guimarães Rosa  
al film *Bacurau* di Mendonça Filho e Juliano Dornelles**

\* Universidade Federal do Paraná, vkchueiri@gmail.com

ABSTRACT. This article aims to discuss Guimarães Rosa's novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* and Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles' film *Bacurau* focusing, respectively, on Zé Bebelo's trial in the novel and the cut-off heads of foreigners in the film. Both narratives take place in the *sertão*, but the issues they address regarding the experience of being/existing, resisting, and reexisting could occur anywhere in the world. In both narratives, to be or not to be in the *sertão*, a place of difficulties, precariousness, and "outlaws" is at stake. Despite the time difference between the book's publication and the film's release (1954 and 2019), both confront the (violent) process of colonization in Brazil, constantly dealing with the following opposites or aporias: order and disorder, law and exception or non-law, love and hate, God and Devil, bond and disagreement, justice and injustice, resistance/violence, and re-existence.

ABSTRACT. Questo articolo si propone di discutere il romanzo *Grande Sertão: Veredas* di Guimarães Rosa e il film *Bacurau* di Kleber Mendonça Filho e Juliano Dornelles, concentrandosi, rispettivamente, sul processo di Zé Bebelo nel romanzo e sulle teste mozzate degli stranieri nel film. Entrambe le narrazioni si svolgono nel *sertão*, ma le questioni che affrontano circa l'esperienza di essere/esistere, resistere e riesistere potrebbero verificarsi ovunque nel mondo. In entrambe le narrazioni è in gioco essere o non essere nel *sertão*, un luogo di difficoltà, precarietà e "fuorilegge". Nonostante la differenza temporale tra la pubblicazione del libro e l'uscita del film (1954 e 2019), entrambi affrontano il processo (violento) di colonizzazione in Brasile, confrontandosi costantemente con i seguenti opposti o aporie: ordine e disordine, legge ed eccezione o non-legge, amore e odio, Dio e diavolo, legame e disaccordo, giustizia e ingiustizia, resistenza/violenza e re-esistenza.

KEYWORDS / PAROLE CHIAVE: Violence; Resistance; *Grande Sertão*; *Bacurau* / Violenza; resistenza; *Grande Sertão*; *Bacurau*

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«The Sertão is like that, you know:  
everything uncertain, everything  
certain»

Riobaldo, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*

«And what I am relating is not the  
life of a backwoodsman, a jagunço  
though he was, but the relevant  
matters»

Riobaldo, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*

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## 1. Introduction

Silviano Santiago says that João Guimarães Rosa is an inventor<sup>1</sup>. He takes this esthetical category from Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading*<sup>2</sup>. As a

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes of Rosa's book are from the 1963 English edition translated by James L. Taylor and Harriet de Onís. Quotes from secondary literature about Rosa and *Grande Sertão: Veredas* and *Bacurau* were freely translated by me and Ana Cláudia Milani e Silva whom I would like to thank. Nonetheless, we must be aware of Rosa's assertion: «each language guard in itself an inner truth that cannot be translated» (Lorenz, 1991, p. 87). I would like to thank Lucas V.L. Zwicker for adjusting the quotations and reading the text. I am very grateful to Cristiano Paixão who provoked me to write this article.

matter of fact, Rosa is an inventor of a language that is, at the same time, local and universal: the backlands (from now on I will use the Portuguese word *sertão*), «which is as big as the world»<sup>3</sup>, is (in) everywhere. It is a space and a time that contains in itself all the elements that make the great universal dramas, with their battles between life and death, between good and evil<sup>4</sup>, at the same time that is the narrative of a particular region of Brazil and its people. In this sense, the narrative of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* exceeds itself. In writing to his Italian translator, Edoardo Bizzarri, Rosa says: «I'm sorry [...] But it's just dangerous to try to probe these infralogical, hypersensory intricacies; they are contagious, 'the evil dog possesses me again', invention is an ever-present demon...»<sup>5</sup>.

As a matter of fact, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (from now on *GSV*) is the unfolding of a short novel published two years earlier, in 1954. Rosa himself says that the first title of the novel was *The Devil in the Street, in the Middle of the Whirlwind* (*O Diabo Na Rua, No Meio do Redemoinho*). But right after typing the title of the novel, he scratched the paper with a pencil and wrote above the title *Dead Paths* (*Veredas Mortas*). Not satisfied, he scratched the paper again and added below the title: *Backlands*:

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<sup>2</sup> Pound (1951), p. 39: «WHEN you start searching for 'pure elements' in literature you will find that literature has been created by the following classes of persons: 1 Inventors. Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process».

<sup>3</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Duarte/Assis César (2020), p. 60: «The dizzying dive of the camera, which transports us from outer space to the opening scene where a water truck delivers water to the town of Bacurau, also establishes an important relationship between the universal cosmos and the regional microcosm, which will further unfold throughout the movie in the relationship between the periphery and the center. Here is a subtle way to remind us that the «sertão» (the Brazilian hinterland), with its regional peculiarities so well represented in the past by Glauber Rocha and Guimarães Rosa, continues to this day to harbor the elements that compose the great universal dramas, with their battles between life and death, between good and evil, between the hegemonic center and the deviant margins. Not coincidentally, *Bacurau* makes allusions to the literary world of Guimarães Rosa, the Brazilian writer whose unique prose elevated the local dramas of the «sertão» to the realm of the universal».

<sup>5</sup> Rosa (1980a), p. 49.

*Paths (Grande Sertão: Veredas)* which ended to be the one he chooses for the novel<sup>6</sup>. The fact that the word *sertão* appears in the last version of the title of the book is meaningful as it is the leitmotiv of the novel: an experience, an existence and a resistance that is at once local and global. From the *sertão* one crosses straight to the world, but the world is also internalized in the *sertão*.

This relationship between the singular (local) and the universal (global) underscores the contradictory character of experience and existence, insofar as it is pure singularity (as unique) and complete universality (when described in a language, for example). There is language; and there is Rosa's invention, a particular language to address the experience, existence and resistance in the backlands. *GSV* is all about it: the contradictory character of experience, existence and resistance/re-existence.

Although the properly historical markers are few in the narrative of *GSV*, historical temporality is present within the *sertão* as a process, the flowing matter that the narrative deals with: existing, resisting, re-existing. This is precisely why the category and the experience of the *sertão* can be universalizable<sup>7</sup>. In *GSV* each experience of the narrator with his band/gang moves the plot which, in turn, drives narratives that are, on the one hand, unique to the *sertão* and, on the other hand, more general about Brazil and the world. After all, the experience of being, existing and re-existing marked by disputes about power, authority, law (or exception), justice (or injustice) have a proper local name but can be either generalized worldwide. The two first decades of the twenty-first century (not to say the short twentieth century – «the age of extremes», according to Hobsbawm)<sup>8</sup> – are plenty of examples, such as the Age of Catastrophe from 1914 to the aftermath of the Second World War.

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<sup>6</sup> Costa (2006), pp. 200-201.

<sup>7</sup> «What seemed to be, at first sight, a simple description of local colors or particularities, turns out to be a philosophical reflection on good and evil and on the essence of human existence»: Rosenfield (2000), pp. 198-199.

<sup>8</sup> Hobsbawm (1995).

By the same token, literature and law are narratives that are constructed and reconstructed by means of a general/universal language (at this point both have normative claims) yet each leads to a particular experience. If «literature is a vast laboratory in which we experiment with estimations, evaluations and judgments of approval and condemnation [...]»<sup>9</sup>, the same applies to law. Both are constructions of possible (aesthetic or legal) that involve the responsibility of their authors. In fact, they are constructions of possible (or calculable) to deal with the impossible (or incalculable) such as life and justice. The incalculable requires us to calculate<sup>10</sup>.

According to Rosa, «language and life are one», then, contradiction, such as the sensation of completeness and emptiness, are in both experience (language and life)<sup>11</sup>. The writer's job is to dedicate to «each word all the time it needs to be(come) life again»<sup>12</sup>. Riobaldo, the character who narrates the story, bridges the life's gaps with the feeling of completeness produced by the narrative: «while narrates, it organizes facts, building with its language the life which one only realizes at the very moment of narration»<sup>13</sup>. At some point of the novel, Riobaldo says: «But you, sir, are an unexpected visitor, a man of good sense, faithful as a document: listen to me, think and think again, and repeat it, then you will be helping me»<sup>14</sup>.

Paulo Ronái says that a trait of Brazilian backwoodsman is «his unconscious preference for that which is implied and for ellipses, his instinct of emphasizing, specifying and impressing»<sup>15</sup>. Such traits indicate the style of Rosa together with the presence of «unusual words, labelled by

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<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur (1992), p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida (1999), p. 971.

<sup>11</sup> Lorenz (1991), p. 83.

<sup>12</sup> Lorenz (1991), p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Albergaria (1977), p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> Ronái (1969), p. 199.

dictionaries as localism, colloquialism, archaism or brazilianism»<sup>16</sup>. They are neologisms, inventions, «with which the ludic spirit has the pleasure of infinitely mingle the language»<sup>17</sup>.

In a letter written on February 9, 1956, to his friend Antônio Azeredo da Silveira who was the Brazilian ambassador in Madrid, Rosa says

Let me tell you that, in the last week, before handing over *Grande Sertão* to José Olímpio, I spent three days and two nights working without interruption, without sleeping, without changing clothes, without seeing a bed, without taking pervitin or any other drug: it was a sudden sensation of rebirth, of complete and uncomfortable liberation, of rejuvenation: I was going to fly, like a dry leaf. Imagine, I spent two years in a tunnel, an underground one, just writing, endlessly writing... Then, I caught a strong flu, naturally; and, as you well know, the flu is one of the mothers of humility<sup>18</sup>.

The intensity and anxiousness of Rosa's existence and experience is felt in the language he invents. He was a man who spent a lot of time reading dictionaries, grammars as he had great interest on the names of things. But he also had great interest on experiencing the things themselves. So, his writings turn to be an experience in seeking the name of things and again one is faced with the relation between the singular and the universal. In passage of *GSV*, Riobaldo asks: «What is a name? A name does not give; a name receives»<sup>19</sup>.

Proper names also mean a lot in Rosa's narrative as far as they address the entirety of the text or even that which is beyond the text<sup>20</sup>. The name of the character/narrator of *GSV*, Riobaldo, is a combination of 'rio' (river) and 'baldo' (frustrated) and he is a character who is always changing his path. According to Ronái, syntactic is the most daring undertaking of Rosa: «Rosa's sentences are plenty of exceeding senses for

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<sup>16</sup> Ronái (1969), p. 199.

<sup>17</sup> Ronái (1969), p. 199.

<sup>18</sup> Santiago (2017), p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> Machado (1976), p. 41.

what they do not say in a game of anacoluthon, suspension points and popular inspiration [...]»<sup>21</sup>.

The love story between Riobaldo and Diadorim (a transversal element of the narrative for the purpose of this article), appears in the revelation of a name: «Riobaldo, there is something personal that I must tell you [...]: my name is not really Reinaldo. [...] Well, then, my name, my real one, is Diadorim. Keep this secret, but always, when we are alone, you must call me Diadorim [...]»<sup>22</sup>. Riobaldo understood that «he wanted me alone to know his true name, and for me alone to pronounce it. I understood the significance of this. [...] He was given me his friendship. And friendship given is love»<sup>23</sup>. The elements of Diadorim's name seem to summarize the future of this love: devil, God, day, pain, hate, river, not to mention the suffix 'in' which refers either to male or female<sup>24</sup>. In a certain sense *GSV* (con)founds prose and poetry in the polysemy of words of which is written.

On August, 29, 2019 a film called *Bacurau*, directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, was released for movie theaters in Brazil. Begging with a song by Caetano Veloso called *Não identificado* it brings back Tropicalism<sup>25</sup>, «an aesthetic, political and (counter) cultural movement that took place in 1960s and exposed the contradictions of a

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<sup>21</sup> Ronái (1969), p. 199.

<sup>22</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 131.

<sup>23</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 132.

<sup>24</sup> Machado (1976), pp. 66-67.

<sup>25</sup> The name *tropicália* refers to an installation art by Hélio Oiticica. According to Caetano Veloso (Veloso, 1997, p. 188) the musical movement had no name, but Luis Carlos Barreto suggested to name it *tropicália* because of the affinities with Oiticica's work. The installation was a labyrinth, or kind of snail, with wooden walls with sand on the floor so that people could walk barefoot on it. In the end of the maze there was a TV showing the regular schedule. For Nelson Motta (Motta, 2000, p. 154), Brazilian music in the sixties was so far very good but it needed change, just like the country, which was under the military dictatorship. Caetano and Gil revolutionized Brazilian music by using electric guitar and other electrical instruments, creating a contemporary, popular and provocative local/universal sound/language. Tropicália was a countercultural and aesthetic revolution (Veloso, 1997, p. 188; and Motta, 2000, p. 154).



country deeply divided between urban centers and rural areas. Such division opposes modernization and stagnation, future and past, the acceleration and retraction of time»<sup>26</sup>, local and universal. *Bacurau* (the film and the small town, which is not in the map) also refers to the *sertão* of Brazil and to *GSV* and *A hora e a vez de Augusto Matraga* (another novel by Rosa), that is, Rosa's literature and tropicalism's aesthetic and are there in the film. For this very reason, this essay interweaves both narratives.

The perspective of the backlands confronts the urban perspective in either *GSV* and *Bacurau*. The characters in the novel and in the film of a supposedly primitive world (the *sertão*) do not appear at all diminished before their interlocutor(s) (or enemies) from the urban areas supposedly a place of formal education and erudition. On the contrary, they show a taste for speculation, which makes them keen trackers of ideas, ever-restless inquirers, inquisitive beings who recognize the mark of his own difference from others, who suspect many things and, above all, pose questions that no one, not even the urban-erudite doctor, can answer<sup>27</sup>.

*GSV*, the book, is a narrative of the *sertão*, as well as *Bacurau*, the film. *Sertão* defines and delimits the existence of the characters and the place they belong to, either in Rosa's book or in Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles' film. *Grande Sertão: Veredas* and *Bacurau* narrate the backlands by the (dis)entanglement of voices that are in these two narratives.

In the book, the narrator/character mingle his interpretation of the facts with the facts themselves in a sort of a game of truth<sup>28</sup>. He manages the facts back and forth in the narrative by means of a proper, beautiful, enchanting and challenging language (which sometimes turns to be violent). In the film, the characters are also in a kind of game, but a game of death. They are also constituted by a proper, beautiful, enchanting and challenging language (which is violent since the very beginning of the

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<sup>26</sup> Assy/Chueiri (2020), p. 83.

<sup>27</sup> Arrigucci Jr (1994), p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Chueiri/Torres (2014), p. 3.

movie). In both narratives, the *sertão* interweaves opposites in a kind of dialectics without sublation.

In fact, to overcome contradictions generated by opposites accelerates both plots and that which remains there, in the book and the film, all the time and with no relief, is the tension: among the characters, their identities, world's views and affections.

Both narratives (the book and the film) pose the following dilemma: to be or not to be in the *sertão*. A place of difficulties, precariousness and 'outlaws'.

Despite the time difference between the book release and the movie release (1954 and 2019), both face the process of colonization and violence in Brazil, which accordingly could be in any other country that likewise was subjected to it. A law of the 'outlaws' or an exceptional law is at stake. There are two noteworthy circumstances: there is the state law which is not enforced and the exceptional law (of the outlaws) which is enforced; and there is the state law which is enforced in favor of a few and the exceptional law which is enforced as a kind of resistance on behalf of all. Whenever the state law is not enforced or enforces privileges a dispute takes place between order and disorder, law and not-law, God and Devil, or rather, between two kinds of orders.

Given these introductory remarks, my paper is on this contradictory yet necessary relation between local and global, singular and universal, the Brazilian *sertão* and the world concerning law and literature. So, I want to focus on two narratives in order to develop my own narrative in this paper: first, *GSV* and second *Bacurau*. Both address the *sertão* of Brazil and the world; both show the reality and its reverse, and the reverse of the reverse putting into question moral, legal and political standards such as the law, God and justice. In these two narratives I want to stress two moments: the trial of Zé Bebelo in *GSV* and the cut-off heads of the invaders in *Bacurau*, in order to ultimately reflect about order (or disorder), law (or exception), love (or hate), God (or Devil), bond (or disagreement), justice (or injustice), resistance (and violence) and re-existence.

2. «*the wind that twists*»<sup>29</sup> / «*Do vento que vinha, rodopiado*»<sup>30</sup>: *The Trial of Zé Bebelo*

The event of the trial exposes the opposites and contradictions of the *sertão* or, taking a deconstructivist attitude, I would say, the aporias of the *sertão*. The trial was preceded by a «dry flying leaf carried by the wind that was whirling around us that had lodged against his eye and ear»<sup>31</sup>. A kind of doubt was raised among those men about what was going on:

«The dust devil!» said Caçanje, cursing. «There is a cross wind blowing from the direction of the ocean», said Diadorim. But Caçanje would not have it that way: the whirlwind was His, the devil's. The devil was there, he travelled inside it. I started laughing. What I thought was: «The devil in the street, in the middle of the whirlwind»<sup>32</sup>.

So, what was there before the trial? A manifestation of nature or the presence of the devil? Either one, it is this very fact of the whirlwind that moved the plot (and the men in quarrel) towards the trial of Zé Bebelo who is caught by the opposing gangs of Riobaldo, Diadorim and Joca Ramiro. At the moment this latter appears, «(a)n unusual restlessness among the herd of horses tipped us off that something was about to happen. Suddenly, a large body of men loomed up out of the vastness of the North, heading our way Cries of «Joca Ramiro! Joca Ramiro»»<sup>33</sup>. Then, men were put down. On the one side of the battle, there is Zé Bebelo who is on command and on the other side, Riobaldo, Diadorim e Caçanje. Even being in the opposite side, Riobaldo surprises his gang in saying:

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<sup>29</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 205.

<sup>30</sup> Rosa (1980), p. 187.

<sup>31</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 205.

<sup>32</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 205.

<sup>33</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 207.

How could I have a hand in his death? A man of that kind, with his body, his mind, all that He knew and understood? I thought about that. You always had to think about Zé Bebelo. A man, a weak thing in himself, soft even, skipping between life and death among the hard rocks. I felt it in my throat. Could I live with that on my conscience? Suddenly I cried out: «Joca Ramiro wants that man alive! Joca Ramiro insists on it!». I don't know where I got the sudden impulse to say that – a pure invention<sup>34</sup>.

In a further moment, Riobaldo changes his mind and decides that he should kill Zé Bebelo to avoid someone else to do it in a worst way. He, then, start shooting towards Zé Bebelo to what Diadorim yells «Are you crazy, Riobaldo?»<sup>35</sup>. In fact, Riobaldo just pretended that he wanted Zé Bebelo dead and not even for a minute he intended to kill him. Finally, someone caught Zé Bebelo and immediately João Curiol yells: «No, not kill him. They are going to try him»<sup>36</sup>.

At this point, a step back to the beginning of the narrative of *GSV* is necessary where Riobaldo talks about the trial of two brothers who had killed their father and had sold his cattle and had been forgiven by Zé Bebelo and his gang. The case of the father's murder was the following: one of the two brothers had stolen a gold shrine from Abadia's church and the father, Rudugério de Freitas, sent his other son to kill the one who had stolen the golden shrine. Instead of killing his brother, the two of them decided to kill their father. The arguments of Zé Bebelo to forgive the two brothers were the following:

Didn't the father wish for murder? Well, then, He himself was killed – tit for tat. I find reasons for this decision, which admits of no repeal or revocation, legal and loyal, in conformity with the law. And Zé Bebelo went on, delighting in his own words: «To forgive is always just and right [...]»<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Rosa (1963), pp. 210-211.

<sup>35</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 211.

<sup>36</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 212.

<sup>37</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 62.

Finally, the two brothers were relieved from death penalty, but they had to give the cattle of his murdered father to Zé Bebelo, after all some penalty to the two brothers would apply; law and justice are at stake!

Back to the trial of Zé Bebelo, Joca Ramiro orders his arrest to what he goes: «A prisoner? Ah yes, a prisoner. So, I am, as well I know. But the, what you are seeing is not what you see, old man: it is what you will see»<sup>38</sup>. Despite Joca Ramiro has arrested Zé Bebelo, he was not a man to be caught. This fact impacts the trial and the decision is suspended and postponed because of something that cannot be fulfilled such as justice. A kind of aporetic experience which is as improbable as it is necessary. No decision in the name of law would apply or do justice to Zé Bebelo and a situation of no decision or of what is undecidable remains as a decision that never completely captures the singularity of the other: «It is, it is the world beyond control»<sup>39</sup>. Riobaldo calculates regarding Zé Bebelo's trial, according to the law of the *sertão*, but what actually makes him move forward and step back is his sense of justice, that which is incalculable and requires one to calculate with the incalculable. According to Derrida, there are moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule<sup>40</sup>. That is the case of Zé Bebelo's trial in which the rule of *sertão*, based on the *jagunços*' hierarchy and their code of conducts, does not insure a just or unjust decision as we will see below.

All men are in the 'It's-now camp', but the trial does not happen there but a few miles towards north to the 'Always-green' ranch. Joca Ramiro and his men are in a huddle holding a confab. Zé Bebelo is not cast down, on the contrary, he straightens up and threw out his chest and marches forward. Then, he sits on a three-legged stool with a leather seat and the trial starts to take place around him. Joca Ramiro and his men are standing but he decides to sit on the ground to face Zé Bebelo who gets rid of the stool and sits right in front him. At this

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<sup>38</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 213.

<sup>39</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 213.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida (1999), p. 947.

moment, Joca Ramiro tells Zé Bebelo that he could be shot to what he answers: «Really! In that case, then, why all these formalities?»<sup>41</sup>. At this point law, justice and revenge are mingled in the trial of Zé Bebelo.

Joca Ramiro asks his men to present charges. Hermógenes is the first: «The recommendation I make is that we tie this scum up like a pig – and bleed him. Or else, stretch him out on the ground and everybody ride their horses over him until there is no live left in him!»<sup>42</sup>. To what Zé Bebelo replies: «My reaction is one of protest, because an accusation has to be made in judicious words, not with affronts and insults!»<sup>43</sup>. Hermógenes is full of anger and the atmosphere is full of tension. Joca Ramiro calls on the next men, Sô Candelário, and instead of presenting charges he wants to duel with Zé Bebelo to what Joca Ramiro adverts: «The decision and sentence, we leave for the last, friend»<sup>44</sup>. Thus, Sô Candelário votes for Zé Bebelo's freedom. Then, it comes Ricardão, a huge and heavy men who says: «The one sentence that means anything is a bullet from a gun»<sup>45</sup>. After having listened to Ricardão, Riobaldo hesitated between what could be fair yet not right.

It was right as far as what Zé Bebelo had done, but wrong as regards what Zé Bebelo was or was not. Who knows for sure what a person really is? Then, if no one knows, a judgment is always faulty, because what one judges is the past. Well and good. But, in the book-keeping of life, judgments cannot be dispensed with, can they? Only, there are some fish that swim upstream all the way from the mouth to the headwaters<sup>46</sup>.

Finally, it is Riobaldo's turn to speak and he goes for Zé Bebelo's freedom and acquittal. He

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<sup>41</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 217.

<sup>42</sup> Rosa (1963), pp. 219-220.

<sup>43</sup> Rosa (1963), pp. 220-221.

<sup>44</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 222.

<sup>45</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 224.

<sup>46</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 224.

[...] is a brave and worthy man, an incorruptible one, who keeps his word to the last jot! [...] But if your verdict is for acquittal, and we turn this man Zé Bebelo loose, with clean hands, and him punished only by the defeat that he suffered, then, I think, our fame will be great. Fame with glory: that first we conquered, and then we freed <sup>47</sup>!

On his turn, Zé Bebelo says:

If I receive a verdict of acquittal, I will thank you with the same courage, but ask for a pardon, that I will not, for I think that one who does so, to save his skin, deserves a half-life and a double death. But I thank you, sincerely. Neither can I offer to serve under the banner of Joca Ramiro – for thought it would be an honor, it would look a miss <sup>48</sup>.

Then, Joca Ramiro has the final word:

The judgment is mine, and the sentence I give holds throughout the North. My People honor me. I am a friend of those I support politically, but I am neither their servant nor their henchman. The sentence will be upheld. The verdict. Do you accept it? [...] Very well, if I consent to your going away to *Goiás*, will you give your word <sup>49</sup>?

To what Zé Bebelo answers:

I give my word and I will go, Chief. I ask only that you grant that my departure take place in a proper and fitting manner. [...] That if any of my men are still alive and being held prisoner, that they too be released, or given permission to come with me <sup>50</sup>.

After the trial all men eat and drink while Riobaldo talks to Diadorim remembering him what Zé Bebelo said: «that the world now was beyond control» <sup>51</sup>, to what Diadorim answers: «But, Riobaldo, that's

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<sup>47</sup> Rosa (1963), pp. 228-229.

<sup>48</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 233.

<sup>49</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 234.

<sup>50</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 234.

<sup>51</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 236.

the way the world has always been»<sup>52</sup>.

The trial of Zé Bebelo, since its very beginning, exposes the opposites and contradictions of the *sertão* or, rather, the aporias of the *sertão*: law and not-law (or exceptional law), God and Devil, friend and enemy, man and woman, revenge and forgiveness, brutal violence and resistance. In fact, the trial exposes a particular world which is the whole world: «You know, sir, the *sertão* is where the strong and the shrewd call the tune. God himself, when he comes here, had better come armed!»<sup>53</sup>. As we can see in this last passage I quoted, the trial also calls attention to violence which is a category that also moves the plot: on the one hand, a kind of violence which is there in the *sertão* (and in the world) as brutal and immediate violence (for instance, disputes for power, friendship, love, land and money) and on the other hand, a kind of violence that plays resistance. In any case, the category of violence belongs to the symbolic order of law, politics and morals<sup>54</sup>. The whirlwind goes in many directions!

At this point, I move to *Bacurau*, specially to the moment in the film that heads are cut-off and exhibited by the community. *Bacurau*, like *GSV*, deals with opposites and their boundaries without sublation. The decapitated heads of the invaders – a group of foreign shooters who intended to massacre the people of Bacurau – is, at the same time, brutal violence and resistance. An ambush for the invaders or the outcome of a trial (that never took place) mingles brutal violence and resistance and exposes the opposites and contradiction of this small town in the north-east of Brazil that could also be the whole world. If, on the one hand, the people of Bacurau hide, ambush, shoot, kill and decapitate the foreign invaders, on other hand, they resist.

Indeed, Zé Bebelo's trial in *GSV* also exposes the brutal violence of the *sertão* as a matter of being, i.e. of existence and resistance in the face of the difficulties and precariousness of the hidden areas in the interior of Brazil in the mid-twentieth century. *Bacurau* somehow actualizes and

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<sup>52</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 236.

<sup>53</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Derrida (1999), p. 983.



potentializes the dilemmas that have always existed in the hinterlands, that is, since the beginning of the colonization process, and that's why brutal violence and resistance bring these two narratives closer together. According to Assy and Chueiri, «(i)t is all about a form of existing in Bacurau, in the backlands. Violence is the only immanent way to avoid likely extermination»<sup>55</sup>. It is all about existing, resisting and re-existing.

3. «*If you go, go in Peace*» (Bacurau) / «*Se for, vai na paz*»: *Cut-off Heads of the Foreign Invaders*

*Bacurau* is a film released in September 2019 in Brazil. It is a film that interweaves western genre with drama, science fiction and action. It moves the spectator back and forth between now and «few years from now» in this part of the *sertão*, a place of expired vaccines, of water scarcity, of useless books, whose coordinates were not in the map. But it is also a place of drones, motorcycles, digital devices. It is nowhere and somewhere<sup>56</sup>. It is a singular place in the *sertão* of Brazil with universal concerns and demands. It is the place of primitive and technological experiences: the consumption of lysergic plants, the use of drones, the possession of antique shotguns and automatic pistols. It is the target of an extermination game played by foreign invaders but is also a place of existence, resistance and re-existence, just like the paths of *GSV*. Order and disorder, law and not-law, justice and injustice, love and hate play the opposites in the narrative.

A group of foreign invaders with the help of a couple of south-Brazilians (who later are killed by the foreigners they have helped) and corrupted officials of Bacurau (mainly the mayor) using of cutting-edge technology address the 'non-white' people of Bacurau as if they were not worth living a life. It is not entirely clear who the foreigners are and what structure sustains them but by being highly well-equipped, using digital

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<sup>55</sup> Assy/Chueiri (2020), p. 21.

<sup>56</sup> Assy/Chueiri (2020), p. 87.

satellite technology and corrupting the local mayor suggests that they are playing a game of death which could not be played without consequences at their homeland.

In the opening scene of the film, the Earth is seen from space suggesting this troublesome relation between the universal and the local and calling our attention to a spot in the globe that somehow can represent the whole of it concerning dilemmas such as inequality, precariousness and violence. As Ivana Bentes says, Bacurau is the «synthesis of brutal Brazil» or a brutal world<sup>57</sup>. A particular place where nasty foreigners attack the local people which attack back with the same brutality they are subjected to. The people of Bacurau, at the same time vulnerable and powerful, are tired with so much mourning, so many losses, so many injustices and so much shattered dignity. According to Magalhães and Amorim, in picturing the earth the camera moves towards Latin America, particularly towards Brazil, which is

seen with brightly illuminated areas – the major cities – and other vast areas dotted with light amidst darkness. From the lights seen from above, it's safe to assert that it's dusk and in an hour or two, it will be night in Brazil. But it's also possible to imagine that there's a dark zone where it's getting dark but there are no lights, a dark and forgotten zone on the map. The references are manifold, to the tropicalist past and futuristic technology, to the global and the local, but also to creative freedom amidst dictatorship and imprisonment<sup>58</sup>.

In one of the final scenes of the film, heads are cut off. Indeed, the act of severing heads is something familiar to the process of colonization Brazil has experienced. Euclides da Cunha in his book *Os Sertões* describes the immolation of the people of Canudos with images of the heads of *cangaceiros*, which also appear in the Historical Museum of Bacurau<sup>59</sup>. The act of mutilating the enemy's body evokes the colonizing past and

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<sup>57</sup> Bentes (2019).

<sup>58</sup> Magalhães/Amorim (2021), p. 297.

<sup>59</sup> Da Cunha (1984).

foreshadows the future, emphasizing the naturalization of violence and drawing attention to this theoretical category and historical practice in Bacurau or elsewhere.

The exhibition of violence is often associated with its spectacle, and this can be observed both in institutions and among individuals. Derrida in his seminars on death penalty stresses the performative nature of this act affirming that it is not only an act of punishment but also a public display of power and authority – almost a theatrical performance<sup>60</sup>. Death penalty is seen as a form of state-sanctioned violence, perpetuating a cycle of brutality and reinforcing the authority of the state over the individual. Moreover, Derrida highlights the paradoxical nature of the death penalty spectacle, as it attempts to uphold justice and prevent crime while also becoming an act that can be fetishized and sensationalized in the public sphere. This dichotomy exposes the contradictions and complexities of capital punishment and the inherent violence and dehumanization associated with it specially in the so-called constitutional democracies.

The cut-off heads are at the same time the inflicted punishment, the brutal violence exerted against the enemy, and the trophy conquered through resistance and that is why they must be showed. The necessity of their exhibition highlights this paradoxical nature of violence, its spectacle, as it inflicts pain and death on the enemy in order the community not to suffer them anymore.

This is as paradoxical as terrible and very much present in *Bacurau*'s characters as far as they openly reveal the dilemmas or the threshold between the law and the law of the 'outlaws' or an exceptional law; between violence and resistance. The scene of the cut-off heads highlights the paradox of violence (on the one hand its brutal nature, and on the other, its role in resistance) but it is not the only one. Other scenes bring out the paradoxes of the Sertão<sup>61</sup>, such as: the opening scene with the

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<sup>60</sup> Derrida (2014).

<sup>61</sup> According to Magalhães and Amorim, Resistance is, above all, a confrontation between someone who holds rights and someone who violates them. Presenting the resist-

coffins fallen on the road leading to this town where one can only reach ‘in peace’; Carmelita’s (Lia de Itamaracá) burial; the use of psychotropics as a kind of activation to move from political passiveness to revolutionary resistance; the museum not as a place of reminiscences of the past, of old and mostly useless objects, but as the place that mobilizes the past to act in the present, allowing the community to take the arms displayed there in order to resist.

Resistance is at the border line of kinds of violence and also non-violence. Particularly in Bacurau, performances of resistance by its people, individual or in groups, embody different activities in order to give visibility to what has been invisible (out of the map). According to Assy and Chueiri<sup>62</sup> «by playing out resistance, the community of Bacurau becomes a collective subject of resistance and each inhabitant of the small and invisible town, a subject of resistance». So, to resist becomes to exist for the people of Bacurau. Either the organized communitarian resistance or the marginalized, queer resistance intertwines power, affects, faith, past, present and future in a contradictory and surprising manner.

Just like in *GSV*, in *Bacurau*, «what surprises is what is not predictable or presupposed, what does not happen as just another episode in the flow of events, but in its occurrence, breaks with the process, shatters expectations. In its surprise, perhaps it is not surprising (to us) that this narrative has so much death and so much life – «do you prefer to live or die?» says Damiano to the wounded foreigner»<sup>63</sup>. By the same token Riobaldo says, referring to Zé Bebelo, «a man, a weak thing in himself, soft even, skipping between life and death among the hard rocks» to finally

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ing subject as a subject of rights definitely places resistance in the realm of law. Thinking from an insoluble paradox, in which both law and non-law participate in the operations of the legal system, it is necessary to assume that non-law is, by definition, law (Magalhães/Amorim, 2021, p. 322).

<sup>62</sup> Assy/Chueiri (2020), p. 97.

<sup>63</sup> Chueiri/Milani (2020), p. 634.

cry out: «Joca Ramiro wants that man alive!» [...] I don't know where I got the sudden impulse to say that – a pure invention»<sup>64</sup>.

The film's plot (and the book's as well) gives clues about its outcome, but these clues are often contradictory. According to Kleber Mendonça Filho himself<sup>65</sup>: «My films bring conflicts that cancel each other out. There is a confusion within the film that I find important». Guimarães Rosa in a dialogue with Günther Lorenz says:

In the backlands, every man can find or lose himself. Both things are possible. As a criterion, he has only his intelligence and his ability to guess. Nothing more. And that's how that backlands proverb, which at first glance seems like another paradox, is also explained, but it expresses a very simple truth: the devil doesn't exist, and that's why he is so strong<sup>66</sup>.

The contradictory signs and confusing clues stress the opposites or rather the aporias to which there is no final answer. According to Derrida,

a sort of nonpassive endurance of the aporia was the condition of responsibility and decision. Aporia rather than antinomy: the word antinomy imposed itself up to a certain point since, in terms of the law (*nomos*), contradictions and antagonisms among equally imperative laws were at stake<sup>67</sup>.

An aporia is neither an apparent antinomy nor a dialectizable contradiction but instead and interminable experience.

As in the trial of Zé Bebelo, the cut-off heads in *Bacurau* deals with law and non-law, rule and exception, justice and injustice, brutal violence and resistance, God and devil and the possible victims from Bacurau, in the most vulnerable of situations, drugged and naked, become, otherwise, very much empowered people. Bacurau's *sertão*, a site of pri-

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<sup>64</sup> Rosa (1963), pp. 210-211.

<sup>65</sup> Mendonça Filho (2019).

<sup>66</sup> Rosa (2006), p. 80.

<sup>67</sup> Derrida (1993), p. 16.

vations, an abandoned set of subjective and community urgencies, local and global, with its people hidden under the ground reveals its brutality, its urgency and its resistance.

In Bacurau there is no room for the recurring discourse about the ignorance or apathy of the people; its people. There, no one is ignorant or apathetic. The way the community organizes itself to exist, resist and re-exist makes this very clear. And if the lack of water, the expired medicines, and the figure of Mayor depict a Brazil of a past that refuses to pass, the same cannot be said of the people of Bacurau and their existence in resisting and (re)existing.

#### 4. *Some Final Remarks*

«isn't life really a dangerous business?»<sup>68</sup>

Guimarães Rosa<sup>69</sup> as well as Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles<sup>70</sup> narrate the backlands from its location, and its location is both in the deepest Brazil and the whole world. According to Riobaldo, «Backlands are good. Everything here is lost, everything here is found... Everything that has been is the beginning of what is to come, every moment we are at a crossroads». Hence, the *sertão*, its crossroads are also the place where everything remains precisely because everything escapes: the blood, the smell of gunpowder, friendship and love, the waters, the dead paths, God and the Devil, man and woman.

To be (or not to be) in the *sertão* is to experiment the tension of the arc of existence as well as its resistance in order to re-exist. It is the dead paths and the city off the map, empty, abandoned, silent, that generate lives and offer a future. In this sense, both narratives unexpectedly sur-

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<sup>68</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 28.

<sup>69</sup> Rosa (1980).

<sup>70</sup> Mendonça Filho/Dornelles (2019).

prise the reader and the spectator with openings and possibilities to move forward (in the plot) and towards the future.

The narrative of GSV, from the old *jagunço* to his interlocutor, moves the past in the face of the urgency of the present of the backlands, which in turn anticipates the future in Bacurau, where everything happens «a few years from now». This is the highly tensed arc of the novel and the film, and it is when the tension of existence exposes its paradoxes or aporias: brutality and delicacy, violence and resistance, God and the devil, a forgiving *jagunço*, a man who is woman, resistance that is creative power. In that (the tense arc of existence as resistance), Brazil shows its ‘hard neck’ as Riobaldo says, when everything suggests otherwise, after all «life has no rhyme or reason. It has parts. It has arts. It has the mist of Siriuz. It has all faces of the Dog and slopes of life»<sup>71</sup>.

As I said in the beginning, GSV and therein Zé Bebelo’s trial entangle us in a perpetual movement of opposites, in a certain dialectical manner, but without *Aufhebung*, so to speak. The opposites tension every action, every word, every silence, as well as every emotion (including ours, the readers):

Everything is and isn’t<sup>72</sup>.

Love, in itself, is a kind of penitence<sup>73</sup>.

God exists even when they say He doesn’t. But the devil does need to exist to be<sup>74</sup>.

How is it that you can like the true in the false? Friendship with the illusion of disillusionment? ... Diadorim was one of those inscrutable persons – He never revealed his inner thoughts, nor what He was surmising. I think I was that way too. Did I really want to know him? I did and I didn’t<sup>75</sup>.

To strive for exactitude makes one blunder<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 409.

<sup>72</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 32.

<sup>74</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 49.

<sup>75</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 49.

<sup>76</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 70.

It is always the same <sup>77</sup>.

Pleasure often turns to fear, fear turns to hate; does hate then turn into these despairs? Despair is good if it turns into a greater sadness, and then into Love, full of longings – then hope comes anew <sup>78</sup>.

God or the Devil? <sup>79</sup>

The *sertão* is good. Everything is lost here, and everything is found here <sup>80</sup>.

All that has been is the beginning of what is to be – we are forever at a crossroad <sup>81</sup>.

Insisting in this idea that either in *GSV* or in *Bacurau* the opposites do not perform a completely dialectical movement yet an aporetic one it might cause a certain discomfort.

This is due by the fact that an aporia is irreducible and demands a decision, for one cannot remain in it. However, its essential irreducibility to the cut that the decision promotes makes this decision contingent, to be taken again. In this contingency lies the promise of the future and the possibilities to move forward just like in Zé Bebelo's trial in *GSV* and in the cut-off heads of the invaders in *Bacurau*.

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<sup>77</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 172.

<sup>78</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 195.

<sup>79</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 343.

<sup>80</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 369.

<sup>81</sup> Rosa (1963), p. 259.



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