

***Bacurau*: humour and speculative fiction in contemporary Brazilian cinema**

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Abstract

When released in theatres, Bacurau sparked a massive controversy due to its graphic depiction of violence and its alleged connection to Brazil's socio-political climate, marked in recent years by profound political polarisation and cultural wars. This article explores an often-overlooked aspect of the film: the use of humour and its articulation with horror and science fiction imaginations. Our argument is that humour plays a key role in Bacurau, establishing connections between speculative fiction and historical reality, which underpins the film's political work. We look at the significant attention that the interactions between humour, horror, and science fiction have received in Brazilian cinema produced over the last decade, and we conduct a detailed analysis of the use of humour in Bacurau, one of the most prominent films produced in the country during this period. We seek to understand how the interweaving of humour and speculative fiction is employed in the film, and if it is used to address controversial issues such as identity politics, racism, regionalism, and colonial legacies. We also investigate the extent to which this unconventional combination serves as a strategic tool for engaging with Brazil's contemporary landscape of social and political unrest.

Keywords: humour, speculative fiction, contemporary Brazilian cinema, political polarisation, cultural wars.

1. Introduction

In the final sequence of *Bacurau*, the inhabitants of a remote town in the Brazilian countryside unite to confront a group of outsiders from the Global North.¹ Throughout this sequence, we

¹ The terms Global North and Global South do not have a strictly geographical connotation; instead, they should be understood as referring to nations, regions, or peoples operating within power dynamics established in

witness the execution of these characters one by one, amidst much bloodshed, gunfire, and decapitations. The explicit representation of these deaths sparked a series of controversial reactions in the weeks following the film's release in Brazilian cinemas. Cultural journalists with divergent opinions went as far as exchanging critiques and sarcastic comments across various media outlets in the country (Araújo, 2019; Magnoli, 2019). In many of these texts, the controversy transcended the mere analysis of the film's graphic violence as to suggest its relation (or a *possible* relation) to the Brazilian socio-political landscape of the time, characterised by heated cultural wars and deep polarisation. However, in cinema theatres, the violent scenes did not exactly evoke reactions of shock or fear; they were primarily accompanied by laughter, shouts of support, and applause, culminating in a cathartic explosion recorded in several screenings of the film. Although some analyses of *Bacurau* mention these reactions, they are treated only as evidence of the transposition of the polarised logic of cultural wars into cinematic narrative. Interestingly, very little — in fact, practically nothing — was said about the role of humour in *Bacurau*. The film is generally examined solely based on its contact points between reality and fiction.

Bacurau, along with a significant body of recent Brazilian films (Hoefel & Aparício, 2021; Hoefel, 2024), is a cultural text that indirectly and symbolically re-enacts socio-political conflicts, using allegorical constructions (Hoefel, 2021). The story unfolds in the near future, where a group of foreigners comes to Brazil to engage in a macabre form of shooting game, using real firearms and lethal ammunition. The group's target is the population of a small inland town. The death of each local inhabitant would score a point for the player who caused it. Recognising the risks they face, the town's inhabitants devise a resistance plan, intending to kill the foreigners before they are killed. In essence, a diverse group of individuals, spanning various racial, sexual, and gender identities, come together to oppose the necropolitical actions of a white, heterosexual, cisgender colonial elite. This opposition mirrors the deep and pervasive conflicts between progressives and conservatives that have characterised Brazilian society over the past decade.

In the film, it is possible to identify the intertwining of elements from different cinematic genres, particularly science fiction and horror. We will refer to this combination using the term *speculative fiction*, which can be understood as a “fuzzy set super category that houses all non-mimetic genres — genres that in one way or another depart from imitating consensus reality — from fantasy, science fiction, and horror to their derivatives” (Oziewicz, 2017, p. 1). In *Bacurau*, these genres are used to emulate public impasses and controversies. This emulation has been interpreted in some analyses as a form of resistance to the advance of neoconservatism and the strengthening of the Brazilian far-right (Araújo, 2019; Bentes, 2019;); and in others as a superficial response to changes in the national socio-political landscape (Teixeira, 2019), potentially contributing to increased polarisation and the reinforcement of hate speech (Muniz, 2019). This discussion becomes especially controversial due to the film's uncensored violence. If *Bacurau* emulates historical reality, then the presentation of massacre scenes risks being understood as a call to arms from one end of the political spectrum against its array of opponents.

However, discussions surrounding the film's graphic violence often overlook the role of humour in the narrative, particularly in the presentation of scenes depicting collective extermination. In this paper, we argue that humour plays a crucial role in *Bacurau*, being employed in various ways to establish connections between speculative fiction and historical reality, which is a substantial part of the film's political work. To examine the intersections of

the past, such as colonialism and imperialism, and perpetuated by current conditions, including globalisation and global capitalism. In *Bacurau*, we observe different forms of colonial oppression, originating not only from Euro-American foreigners but also instigated by individuals from the southeastern region of Brazil. Throughout history, this region has consolidated itself as a political force grounded in social distinction in relation to the Brazilian Northeast, where the fictional town of Bacurau is situated.

humour, horror, and science fiction in *Bacurau*, we employed a cultural studies framework combined with qualitative textual analysis. This approach involves an in-depth analysis of the film's narrative and genre elements, embedded in broader socio-political and cinematic trends². In the first section of the article, we explore the historical relationships between humour and speculative fiction to contextualise *Bacurau* within a larger framework of interactions between the horrific and the laughable, the scary and the comedic. Next, we situate this discussion in the context of contemporary Brazilian cinema, considering the particularities of the turbulent and conflict-ridden period in which the film was produced and screened. Finally, we provide a detailed examination of *Bacurau*, identifying and discussing its various uses of humour. This exploration contributes to the development of tools that enable the identification of the intricate entanglements between humour and speculative fiction in contemporary times, while also questioning the extent to which this articulation has been employed as a strategy to critically address Brazil's national context of social and political crisis.

2. Politics, humour and speculative fiction

There is a rich tradition discussing the links between humour and politics, with significant work highlighting humour's role in establishing symbolic power relations, often by creating a sense of superiority in those who laugh at the expense of others (Aristotle, 1997; Hobbes, 1928, p. 32). This tendency, in some cases, manifests in a type of hegemonic humour that targets specific groups or minorities (Davies, 1997; Lockyer & Pickering, 2009; Davies & Ilott, 2018). Humour has also been interpreted as a social control mechanism, reinforcing community boundaries and repressing undesirable behaviours (Bergson, 1983; Billig, 2005; Kuipers, 2008). Conversely, other perspectives view humour as a tool for subversion and resistance in oppressive contexts (Bakhtin, 1987; Obrdlik, 1942; Lewis, 2006), or as a way to express ideas that serious discourse might not convey (Freud, 2017; Mulkey, 1988). In all these approaches, humour's societal impact is evident.

Similarly, there is robust discussion around how science fiction (Weldes, 2003; Jameson, 2005; Suvin, 2016) and horror (Carroll, 1990; Clover, 1993; Kracauer, 2003; Creed, 2005) serve as platforms for social critique, symbolically exposing collective fears and anxieties. Noël Carroll (1990) notes that horror often emerges in times of socio-political tension, integrating social anxieties into its iconography. Luiz Nazário (1998) echoes this, observing that social crises often give rise to new cinematic monsters. Recent studies explore how horror and science fiction reflect and intersect with feminist, anti-racist, queer, and decolonial movements, further highlighting the genres' multifaceted roles in societal critique (Calvin, 2016; Carrington, 2016; Freitas & Messias, 2018; Lothian, 2018; Baccolini, 2019; Moynagh & Cornum, 2020).

While there is potential for engaging with political discourse through humour, horror, and science fiction, fusing these three tonal qualities is challenging due to their initial incompatibility. Humour typically evokes relaxation and laughter, whereas horror and science fiction often induce awe and tension. The convergence of comedy and fear requires an unusual combination of codes and techniques that seem to evoke conflicting emotions, a topic that has long intrigued scholars. Since at least the 1980s, when films like *Gremlins* (1984), *Ghostbusters* (1984), and *Beetlejuice* (1988) gained immense notoriety, the need to rethink the boundaries between humour and horror became evident.³ In investigating this set of cultural texts, Carroll

² By drawing on textual analysis, genre theory, and cultural critiques, the study explores how *Bacurau*'s hybrid genre composition serves as a medium for political discourse.

³ In Brazil, *terrir* (a term coined by filmmaker Ivan Cardoso by combining the words *terror* and *laughter* – in Portuguese *rir*) emerged as a subgenre of popular success in the 1980s with films such as *The Secret of the Mummy* and *The Seven Vampires*, both directed by Cardoso in 1982 and 1986, respectively. In *terrir*, there is a recycling of

(1999) identifies an alternation between moments of levity, marked by the presence of jokes and the use of comic timing, and others of vigilance, where tension and fear are added to the narrative. This interplay makes it seem as though the audience is experiencing a comedy in some scenes and a horror film in others. The mobilisation (or lack thereof) of fear is one way to explain this cadence of states discussed by Carroll, something that is particularly applicable to films that blend fantastical imagery with a tonal quality close to humour.

However, this alternation does not apply to some cultural texts also produced throughout the 1980s, in which the audience experiences a *simultaneous* state of comic amusement and fear. This fusion is what constitutes, for example, the *killing jokes*, a type of morbid humour that Paul Lewis (1997) argues is identifiable in the sadistic games of the villain Freddy Krueger, from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). The killing jokes “defy standards of decency not only to amuse but to shock, terrify and appal as well: shock by amusing, amuse by shocking” (Lewis, 2006, p. 25). A similar intertwining, but between humour and science fiction, is pointed out by some scholars (Baccolini, 2000; Donawerth, 2003) as a characteristic trait of the so-called “critical dystopias” (Moylan, 2001), i.e. a wave of literary texts also originated in this same period, composed of narratives that speculate about a dystopian future as a strategy to problematise socio-political issues. Instead of oscillating between fear and humour, these works seem to conjugate them, resulting in a hybridism that Donawerth calls a “genre blending” (Donawerth, 2003, p. 29) and Baccolini (2000, p. 13) refers to as a “blurring of the boundaries between genres”. Dystopia, Donawerth (2003, p. 29) argues, began at this moment to absorb “the characteristics of other genres, such as comedy”.

In all these analyses, there is consensus regarding the link between the production of specific types of non-realistic narratives and the changes in social, political, and economic paradigms that marked the 1980s. During this period, the world — and especially the Global North, from where a substantial part of these narratives originates — witnessed the emergence of neoliberalism and the strengthening of conservative discourses, associated with religious agendas and social moralisation. The Reagan-Thatcher era “proclaimed the end of history and celebrated simultaneously the end of radical social dreaming and the achievement of an instantaneous ‘utopia’ of the market” (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003, pp. 6-7). In response, speculative narratives began to emulate what Jameson called a “direct representation of the present”, arising from the “final collapse of historicism, where it was no longer possible to imagine the future” (Jameson, 1990, p. 286). This direct representation explicitly connects the speculation of fantastic texts to the political impasses of the society in which they are produced.

Over the past few years, a new wave of cultural texts equally non-realistic and critical appears to mirror a new moment of global prominence for the ultraconservative right. Recent scholarship argues that neoliberalism underwent a series of “mutations” (Callison & Manfredi, 2020) following the global financial crisis of 2008 and allied with neoconservatism to improve its electoral performance (Fraser, 2023). Faced with this conjuncture, the cultural response through works that navigate between humour and mobilisation of fear has also been significant — as it was in the 1980s. *Bacurau* is part of this new wave, but it is not an isolated film. The phenomenon is not limited to Brazilian cinema either; it can also be identified in the cinema produced in various other countries. According to Rubenstein (2019, p. 268), the prominence of the conjunction between humour and horror can be related to the prevailing logic during the Trump administration years, “that doubles down on fake news and fictionality”, characteristic of what has come to be known as the “post-truth” era (McIntyre, 2018). In her text, the author starts from the idea that there is an “implosive insanity” in the recent expansion of American

Hollywood cinema clichés, adapted as much as possible for Brazilian cinema. Terror is primarily incorporated as a “cinematic stereotype” (Lyra 2006, p. 140). This incorporation is notably precarious, both in terms of budgetary and technical aspects, which ends up being assimilated into the films as a set of comedic propositions.

conservatism, “where the point is not to think, much less to understand, but to win and to win at all costs” (Rubenstein, 2019, p. 268). This insanity calls for a type of cultural production that seeks to respond (in the same tone) to the “permanent kill or be killed rivalry” that has spread across different strata of American society. In this context, Rubenstein’s central argument is that comedy-horror has become the characteristic hybrid genre of the Trump era (2019, p. 268), a kind of condensation both bizarre and symptomatic of the “semiotic or psychoanalytic logics” (2019, p. 267) that marked this period.

While Rubenstein’s analysis accurately maps a recent trend of convergence between humour and horror, her diagnosis overlooks a prominent set of cultural texts that have also experienced a notable emergence in recent years as specific forms of critiquing contemporary ideologies and political practices, albeit without necessarily incorporating the codes of horror cinema. This is the case of the hybridisation between humour and science fiction, which encompasses texts like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Black Mirror*, and *Lovecraft County*, just to name a few of the most notable examples. The definition of “speculative satire” (Dischinger, 2017; Combe, 2021) broadens the framework proposed by Rubenstein and includes, in addition to convergences between humour and horror, also these distinct fusions with science fiction. In parallel, this concept also argues — as Rubenstein proposes — for the recognition of the existing set of relations between the phenomena that marks a particular society and the emergence of a specific form of cultural response.

In Combe’s view, speculative satire is inherently a “tri-genre” (Combe, 2021, p. 73), resulting from the convergence of satire, science fiction, and monster tale.⁴ For instance, the film *Get Out* is considered by Combe as speculative satire not only for constructing its critique through the combination of comedy and horror (as indicated by Rubenstein) but also for incorporating elements of science fiction, such as hypnosis, brainwashing, and the entire laboratory and surgical setting presented in the film’s final part. *Bacurau*, as we will detail in the analysis section, would also fit into this definition given its blend of humour, horror, and science fiction. In his book, Combe seeks to theoretically demonstrate the viability and promotion of the crossover between the three tonal qualities, citing various approaches that justify this fusion, whether through the anticipation of a genre blend in satire theory, or through the openness to comedy in the parallels between fiction and reality, present in both science fiction and the monster tale.

Combe’s (2021) primary contribution lies in recognising a modern correlation between humour and speculative fiction, formulating a theoretical framework that encompasses the interaction of genres found in cultural works created since the 1980s. This model facilitates comparisons with recent productions, enabling a deeper understanding of the evolving relationship between humour and speculative fiction over time. However, his thesis presupposes a rather specific junction between elements and generic codes, based on the idea of a triple intersection between satire, science fiction, and the monster tale, forming the supposed “tri-genre”. The risk of this approach is to focus on the criteria for framing a cultural text within a particular cinematic genre, neglecting the dynamic and constantly changing relationship between the socio-political moment, the formation of critical discourses, and the emergence of different generic interplays, created as tools of contestation, activism, and/or resistance. Additionally, it should be noted that such a perspective seems to stem from a rather static view of the cinematic genre, which obliterates the historicity and pragmatic dimension present in the continuous dialogues between the thematic and aesthetic repertoires of genres.

⁴ Combe initially draws his definition of monster tale from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Monster Theory* (1996). At no point in the book is there a distinction between horror and monster tale, but rather a focus on understanding monsters as constructs and projections, that is, as signs linked to certain categories or social referents.

An alternative approach would be to focus not on a specific hybridity, subject to constant mutations, but rather on the humorous mechanisms resulting from the interaction between humour and speculative fiction. This represents a shift in approach since focusing on the different elements that enable this fusion leads the discussion to the intersection between genres, rather than delving into the specifics of humour in its relationship with speculative fiction. However, humour seems fundamental for this type of analysis not only because it is often overlooked (as evidenced by its absence in academic and media analyses of a film like *Bacurau*), but also (and especially) because it is the odd element in this coalition. Its set of elements diverges from both the tradition of horror and science fiction, making it a key point of specificity in a significant set of contemporary speculative narratives, especially those that position themselves critically against the current moment of neoliberalism and neoconservatism.

In this path of analysis centred on humour, we chose to analyse *Bacurau* as the film allows us to explore a cinematography different from that examined by Combe (2021), Rubenstein (2019), and their predecessors: contemporary Brazilian cinema. Brazil has recently undergone significant transformations in its socio-political context, placing neoliberalism and neoconservatism as central themes in its national public sphere. During this same period, we have observed the emergence of cultural texts that, much like *Bacurau*, are simultaneously unsettling and terrifying, funny and frightening.

3. Humour and speculative fiction in contemporary Brazilian cinema

In the last decade, Brazil has gone through a turbulent phase of profound instability, not only politically and economically, but also legally, socially, and culturally (Alonso, 2017; Singer, 2018; Almeida, 2020). The period has been marked by significant national conflicts and controversies, from broad and ambiguous street demonstrations (the so-called “June Protests” in 2013), the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff (2016), the imprisonment of Lula (2018), to the election of Jair Bolsonaro (2018), an extreme right-wing populist leader. These events have fuelled widespread social division and deeply polarised public opinion. The result was that, over a relatively short period (between 2014 and 2018), the country’s more conservative forces managed to garner the support of an electorate that, in the previous sixteen years, had leaned toward the centre/left-wing of the political spectrum.

Since then, the neoliberal agenda has thrived, with the implementation of measures having a significant impact on the flexibilization and loss of collective rights, such as the Labour Reform (2017) and the Pension Reform (2019). In parallel, a portion of Brazilian society has embraced agendas of social moralisation, a growing phenomenon fuelled by intense and widespread cultural wars (Souza & Azevedo, 2018; Goldstein, 2019). This “conservative wave” (Almeida, 2020) has, for example, led to the discontinuation of sexual education initiatives in schools (Miskolci & Campana, 2017), the closure of visual arts exhibitions (Landini, 2018) and several attempts to censor artistic works (Sacramento & Santos, 2020).

Simultaneously with this profound set of social, political, and economic transformations, several studies also point to a substantial change in contemporary Brazilian cinema, with a noticeable departure from the realism that had characterised it since the so-called “*Retomada*”.⁵ While works like *Central Station* (1998), *City of God* (2002), and *Elite Squad* (2007) — three

⁵ Although questionable from a historiographical standpoint, the term *retomada* was adopted by sectors of the press to refer to the period immediately following the impeachment of Fernando Collor de Mello in 1993, when Brazilian cinema resumed a more or less continuous flow of production. In Portuguese, *retomada* means *restart* or *revival*. The term is controversial and has been questioned by various filmmakers (Nagib, 2002), but serves as a common designation for referring to the recent period of Brazilian cinema, which began around the second half of the 1990s.

of the most internationally recognised Brazilian films from the late 1990s and early 2000s — relied on realism as a “strategy to convey urgency and credibility to the audience” (Carréra, 2018, p. 351), the same cannot be said of *Bacurau* (2019), *Divine Love* (2019), or *All the Dead Ones* (2020) — just to mention three films that premiered in the official selections of major international festivals such as the Cannes Film Festival (*Bacurau*), the Sundance Film Festival (*Divine Love*), and the Berlinale (*All the Dead Ones*). This, of course, does not mean that realism disappeared from Brazilian cinema, but only that there has been a noticeable emergence of speculative fictions that diverge from the interest in the everyday and the common, which had been central since the second half of the 1990s.

According to Angela Prysthon, “realism (...) is giving way to more ambiguous narratives, a kind of realism under erasure” (Prysthon, 2015, p. 68). In these works, artifice is not used in isolation but as a strategy to “lacerate, underline, and criticize the real” (Prysthon, 2015, p. 68), leading Prysthon to coin the term “furious frivolities” (Prysthon, 2015, p. 69). Carréra remarks that “the idea of ‘frivolity’⁶ associated with the genres of horror and science fiction embraces ‘furious’ as an adjective, as these films contain fury in their narratives due to the problematic reality they try to emulate” (2018, p. 352). Both Prysthon and Carréra point to a merging of political problematisation around national impasses and speculative narratives. This is similar to what Figueiredo and Miranda diagnose, noting a “significant increase in literary and cinematographic works that (...) make use of generic procedures from the fields of science fiction and horror” (Figueiredo & Miranda, 2020, p. 3). In their text, Figueiredo and Miranda analyse different cultural texts (including novels, films, and graphic novels) and argue that speculative fictions, until recently relegated to a secondary position, have gained prominence in recent years in the country as a cultural response to the set of recent socio-political transformations — and their impact on the imaginary about the possibilities of both the present and the future.

This proliferation of speculative fictions in Brazil goes beyond the realm of entertainment cinema and can be seen in various authorial proposals, as attested by examples such as *Bacurau*, *Divine Love*, and *All the Dead Ones*. These cases challenge the distinction between authorial narrative and genre narrative advocated by Martín-Barbero (2003, p. 195), indicating a possible blurring of boundaries, or even a “process of reciprocal cannibalisation” (Figueiredo, 2010, p. 58) between art and mass culture. In parallel, Netflix — the most utilised streaming platform in Brazil, which recently surpassed cable television in the number of subscribers (Rodríguez, 2020) — has included several speculative fictions in its catalogue of series produced in the country in recent years, among which stand out *Invisible City* (2021), *3%* (2016-2020), *Kissing Game* (2020), *Spectros* (2020), and *The Chosen One* (2019). Additionally, YouTube itself has become a channel for promoting speculative works — often independent — produced for a particular audience or niche. This is the case with the gospel channel *Feliz7Play*, which produces original content for distribution on the platform. In its catalogue, there are cultural texts such as the series *23:59* (2020), which narrates the eve of the apocalypse from the perspective of three evangelical teenagers, and the feature film *The New Government* (2019), a dystopia that retells the story of Jesus, placing it in Brazil in the near future, where a left-wing government is established and persecutes evangelical leaders. In this brief overview, one can perceive the immense proliferation and scope of these narratives, their connection to different positions on the political spectrum, and their dissemination in specific circuits of cultural consumption.

There have been numerous academic attempts to analyse the recent proliferation of speculative narratives in Brazil. Most of these discussions focus exclusively on auteur cinema

⁶ The idea of frivolity, in Prysthon’s analysis, emphasises “a very focused attention on elements such as costume, art direction, set design, in other words, on details” (2015, p. 69), in which, according to the author, the aesthetic choice is emphasised by the artifice present in speculative narratives. For further details on this discussion about frivolity and artifice, see Barbosa (2017).

and are dedicated to linking some of these cultural texts to studies on horror (Doria, 2016; Caetano, 2018; Cánepa, 2020) and others to studies on science fiction (Carréra, 2018; Figueiredo & Miranda, 2020; Hora, 2020; Lins, 2022). However, most of these analyses fail to even mention an articulation that is present in many of these cultural texts: the combination between speculative narratives and different operations of humorous construction. When there are allusions to the presence of humour, as in Mesquita's analysis (2015) of *White Out, Black In* (2014) and also in Prysthon's broader mapping of what she calls "furious frivolities" (2015, p. 66), the texts are limited to detecting the presence of irony (Mesquita, 2015, p. 11; Prysthon, 2015, p. 73). "If the future is bleak", says Prysthon, "it's better to face it with humour, even if it's furious, tense" (2015, p. 72). However, there is no in-depth exploration of the specificities or consequences of this (let's say, *peculiar*) intertwining between humour and fury, or between humour and tension. Nonetheless, identifying a concomitance between comedy and the mobilisation of fear brings us close to recent analyses of the relationships between humour and speculative fiction (Dischinger, 2017; Rubenstein, 2019; Combe, 2021), something we will delve into in the analysis of *Bacurau*.

4. *Bacurau* (2019)

Bacurau discusses and problematises relationships of exploitation between nations, classes, and races by staging the conflict between the inhabitants of a small town in North-eastern Brazil — a region characterised by low socioeconomic indicators and intense inequality — and a group of individuals originating from areas with greater geopolitical and economic capital, both in the South-Southeast of Brazil and in the Global North. In doing so, the film satirically internalises discussions about how the colonial legacy relates to "necropolitical" actions (Mbembe, 2008) directed at marginalised populations around the world. In Brazil, these practices were facilitated through a series of reforms that weakened labour relations, recognised precarious forms of employment, and reduced the rights of the poorest, including access to retirement (Krein & Oliveira, 2019). These actions were supported and/or implemented by Jair Bolsonaro, which intensifies and makes more direct the film's criticism of the ultraconservative leader.

Bacurau was a tremendous success in Brazil. It remained in theatres for over ten weeks and drew approximately 730 thousand viewers to cinemas. This number is significantly higher than expected in the national arthouse circuit, which typically includes films premiering at the Cannes Film Festival. However, *Bacurau* was not confined to this circuit alone. It was screened both in the massive screens of multiplexes and in small cultural centre venues — not only in the capitals of each Brazilian state but also in the country's smaller towns. In responses to the film, there was evident collective empowerment sparked by the narrative, a kind of "strengthening of morale" (Obrdlik, 1942, p. 716) among those opposing the government. Such empowerment is connected to a phenomenon described by various commentators regarding the film's reception: the fact that it elicited a range of exhilarating reactions (including shouts, applause, laughter, etc.) during its most violent and brutal sequences (Bernardes, 2019; Magnoli, 2019; Dias Jr, 2020). While on screen the villains were being gruesomely dispatched; in the cinema halls, the audience celebrated, cheered, and laughed.

As previously mentioned, a considerable portion of the discussions about the film revolves precisely around these scenes, where there is intense graphic violence (Muniz, 2019; Teixeira, 2019). In the press, critics' opinions were divided between those who advocated for these aesthetic-political procedures (Araújo, 2019; Bentes, 2019) and those who raised significant reservations about this type of construction (Bosco, 2019; Escorel, 2019; Magnoli, 2019). Among these reservations, one particularly stands out: a concern with the potential bellicosity of the extremely polarised moment in which the country was immersed. One of the notable

pieces of criticism during this period was made by Escorel (2019), published in *Revista Piauí*. In his text, Escorel associates the film's graphic violence with a "celebration of barbarism". According to the critic, the danger of this type of celebration would be to invoke the use of violent means to resist the rise of the far-right in the country, potentially exacerbating conflicts between the opposing ends of the political spectrum.

This concern revolves around the articulations between narrative and reality, established in the film through allegorical mechanisms. In *Bacurau*, characters associated with the conservative pole are treated as heinous antagonists, against whom there seems to be no other alternative but a bloody, cruel, and ridiculing extermination. The staging of this extermination has the potential to strengthen the morale of those who, together, were uncertain about the nation's future. Hence the idea of *celebrating barbarism*. The death of the antagonists is not presented by the film merely as a necessary evil. It is transformed into an immersive and *amusing* bloodbath. A cathartic moment in which those who had lost the election and were frightened by the advance of Brazilian neoconservatism could finally triumph again, even if only symbolically. This operation is sustained by an association between satire, dystopia, and a kind of sadistic entertainment, characteristic of the convergence between humour and horror.

The intense thrill stemming from the violent showdown at the film's climax fosters audience empathy towards the residents of North-eastern Brazil, prompting them to derive amusement from the suffering and demise of the outsiders. This narrative strategy effectively humanises characters who have been historically marginalised or mocked in Brazilian cultural production. Through this empathetic bond, *Bacurau* challenges the conventional comedic norms in the country, departing from stereotypes ingrained in colonial legacies of racism, classism, and regionalism, particularly evident in Brazil.

At the outset, the film introduces the village of Bacurau and establishes certain formal dynamics of the narrative, notably its manipulation of the iconography and tropes from various film genres. It incorporates elements of science fiction, such as the initial shot featuring Earth from space, and the caption indicating a futuristic setting "a few years from now". Additionally, there are western genre elements, including expansive landscape shots and depictions of a world inhabited by gunfighters and hired killers (see Fig. 1). These components form a collage of visual references, further enriched as the film progresses with elements of horror and a consistent use of satirical devices.



Figure 1. The contrast between traditional local elements with futuristic, invasive technologies (a drone shaped like a flying saucer overhead), summarising the clash between the local population and external forces.

Bacurau employs striking visual and sonic elements to heighten its socio-political commentary, aligning with its engagement with genres that embrace excess (Baltar, 2012). The appearance of drones resembling flying saucers, set against wide shots of the arid Brazilian landscape, creates a visual tension that highlights the clash between the local and the foreign, the traditional and the modern. The film's recurring imagery of blood and corpses serves as a stark visual motif, underscoring the brutality of the invaders and the villagers' fierce resistance. Sonically, the film contrasts the use of Portuguese with English spoken by the foreigners, emphasising the cultural and linguistic divide. Local sounds, such as bird calls and the natural soundscape of the Brazilian *sertão*,⁷ are strategically employed to build tension, contrasting the serenity of the environment with the looming violence. These visual and auditory choices reinforce the film's exploration of power dynamics, colonialism, and resistance.

Satire and speculative fiction are intricately woven together in the film, reinforcing each other. The fusion of satire and horror is particularly evident in the closing scenes, where the massacre of the outsiders takes on the form of dark *killing jokes* (Lewis, 1997). As for science fiction, the connection lies in the configuration of the dystopian narrative, which indirectly comments on the present. For instance, there is a scene in which the town doctor presents residents with medication donated by the mayor, appearing to be a painkiller but actually functioning as a mood stabiliser. She advises against its use, revealing it is distributed nationwide by the government, and jokingly notes that the most popular version comes in suppository form. This juxtaposition of humour and dystopia highlights the specific circumstances of the narrative: a near-future scenario where the government manipulates citizens through psychoactive substances, ensuring their compliance in the face of potential resistance.

Another example occurs just before the climax. The antagonists from the Global North advance across the arid landscape of rural Brazil, fully geared up and prepared to initiate the game that brought them to the region. During their trek, one character confesses to the others that he was consumed by rage following his divorce and contemplated murdering his ex-wife. "That's fucked up, Terry", reacts one of his companions. Terry agrees, adding, "Now God has given me the opportunity to deal with that pain here". Clearly, the massacre of the inhabitants of the town of Bacurau is not perceived by the villains as a massacre *per se*. Their conversation reveals a distinction between who is considered killable and who is not, dispensable and indispensable — a dichotomy that the film presents as both funny and frightening. The imagery of horror, and particularly the trivialisation of death, plays an important role in establishing this procedure. Humour is not built directly on what is said or done in the scene, but rather on the invitation to judge the characters' folly and lack of reasonableness. The audience knows that the foreigners' actions are condemnable, inviting a comedic repulsion of their ideas. This repulsion encourages an analytical reasoning about the caricatured representation of the foreigners' behaviour.

This type of exaggerated portrayal is not limited to the visitors from the Global North. Take the town mayor, for instance — a prime example of the populist politician stereotype, solely focused on electoral manoeuvring. He speaks in a perpetually inflated tone, as if his life were an ongoing campaign rally. Similarly, residents from the Southeast of Brazil are also depicted in a schematic manner, comically highlighting their lack of empathy and understanding towards the local population. On the flip side, the characters in the city of Bacurau function as allegorical condensations of various segments of Brazilian society. One standout example is Lunga, the outlaw-heroine who leads the local resistance. Their attire blends elements typical of the *cangaço* tradition, like the machete they wield, with makeup, hairstyles, and clothing associated

⁷ *Sertão* refers to a vast, semi-arid region in the interior of Brazil, particularly in the Northeast. It is characterised by its harsh climate, sparse vegetation, and periodic droughts.

with contemporary cosmopolitan Brazil, ranging from punk to queer aesthetics. This amalgamation portrays Lunga as a sort of postmodern hired killer. These caricatures are believable because the film's universe is not rooted in reality but rather in a dystopian construction set in the near future. Once again, the inherent connection between humour (embodied in allegorical caricature) and speculative fiction is emphasised, allowing for the creation of a universe where the existence of these characters seems plausible.

In the film, humour also operates as a vehicle for eliciting feelings of inadequacy and discomfort. This surfaces in a scene where a couple of motorcyclists from South-eastern Brazil arrive in the town and step into a small market for a drink. Their presence is met with suspicion, resulting in scenes tinged with unease for both the couple and the locals working in the market, a woman and her son. These scenes harbour a type of discomfiting (Holm, 2017, pp. 89-118) and awkward humour (Page, 2008). “*What is that?*” inquires the outsider. “*It’s a local soda, would you like to try it?*” responds the woman from the market. “*No*”, the man replies, after some hesitation. Here, a clash of cultures deeply ingrained in Brazilian cultural history⁸ is highlighted: on one side, the South-Southeast represented by the two motorcyclists, where historical advanced industrialisation has ensured wider access to an array of consumer goods, both domestic and international; on the other, the North-Northeast, much poorer and agrarian, with its distinct consumption habits exemplified in the scene by the local soda. Shortly after, the same man asks, “*What do you call someone born in Bacurau?*”, to which the market owner’s son responds, “*We call them people*”, a response followed by a simultaneously awkward and comedic silence.

As the two motorcyclists depart, they encounter a folk musician who serenades them as they make their way to their bikes. The pair find themselves unsure of how to respond as the musician continues to follow them (see Fig. 2). The situation grows increasingly awkward. The woman offers money to the musician, assuming he is a street performer. However, he declines the gesture, explaining that he is singing for fun and merely joking around. The two outsiders mistakenly assume that the man sings in exchange for money, viewing all interactions as inherently transactional. This sequence of events underscores a humour rooted in the discomfort experienced by individuals from the South-Southeast when confronted with the idiosyncrasies of other regions in the country. Their rigidity is portrayed as comical — a self-centred worldview that disregards and ignores anything divergent from their own experiences, thus overlooking the social and cultural nuances of other regions in a vast country like Brazil.

⁸ Regarding the historic construction of the dichotomy between the South-Southeast and the North-Northeast of Brazil, see Durval Albuquerque (2018). In this work, the author highlights how the image of the Brazilian North easterner evolved into a jocular stereotype stemming from the consolidation of a view of the Southerner and South easterner as superior and civilised subjects. This perception was heavily influenced by the financial prosperity achieved by the states in the South and Southeast regions throughout the 20th century.



Figure 2. The awkward interaction between the South-Southeast motorcyclists and the local market workers highlights the cultural and regional tensions within Brazil, portrayed with a mix of discomfort and humour.

A few scenes later, the audience understands that the couple of motorcyclists had been hired by the group of white foreigners. However, the motorcyclists had murdered two men as they left the town. This raises questions from the outsiders, as the deaths were supposed to be reserved for the impending game. They inquire how the couple could have killed their own countrymen. The response reveals a belief in a distinction between the South-Southeast regions and the rest of the country. “*We’re from the south of Brazil*”, the man explains. “*It’s a very wealthy region, with German and Italian colonies. We are more like you*”. The outsiders react in surprise. “*Like us?*”. “*But they’re not white, are they?*”, one of them asks the rest of the group. “*They may look white, but they’re not. Their lips and noses give it away*”, another responds. Adding, “*they actually look more like white Mexicans, to be honest*”.

The group’s uneasiness with the Brazilian couple culminates in a swift draw of weapons, as each member competes to be the first to kill them. Two foreigners succeed, earning points in the process. The bodies collapse to the ground, signalling the end of a scene imbued with dark humour, stemming not from ethnic or derogatory jokes made by the foreigners, but from the death of the couple. The audience is not encouraged to endorse these jokes but to derive amusement from the demise of the two characters, emblematic of the haughtiness of a colonial worldview emanating from the affluent centre of the country towards other regions. These deaths signify the film’s symbolic retribution, evidenced by the casual treatment they receive in the narrative. Rather than heightening tension, the murder of the couple brings relief, blending catharsis with comedic effect.

But this is just the first of a much broader set of *killing jokes* used as symbolic revenge. The final sequence, in which the town’s residents confront the foreigners, is characterised by a mixture of cathartic release and humour portrayed through violent depictions of death. The humour arises from deliberately caricatured, dichotomous, and superficial characterisations. On one side, the foreigners are depicted as deeply inhuman figures, embodying a video game-like experience, and hardly ever questioning the fact that they are planning a massacre for entertainment. Conversely, the resistance organised by the community of Bacurau is a synthesis of the power emanating from otherness and diversity. Led by Lunga, the non-binary killer, this community is composed of a non-hierarchical blend of various strata of society, from teachers to street vendors, from prostitutes to medical doctors (see Fig. 3). Black, white, indigenous people. Transvestites, gays, lesbians, heterosexuals. All united in opposition to what they perceive as an imminent genocide.



Figure 3. Lunga, the non-binary leader, stands with other members of Bacurau after the conflict, embodying the town's racial and gender diversity.

In 2019, when *Bacurau* was released, the threat of a resurgence in attacks against minority populations was on the radar of progressive sectors of Brazilian society, especially due to the anti-human rights rhetoric coming from various representatives of the Bolsonaro government, including himself. This connection between the narrative and the national socio-political moment reinforces the strong allegorical nature of the text. The town of Bacurau is a microcosm of the country within the narrative. Its inhabitants are key players in the composition of a discourse of resistance that is substantiated in various discussions undertaken in the context of the cultural wars over the past few years. This can be seen in the breadth of the identity representations constructed among the characters of the town, starting with Lunga, part man, part woman, with their bracelets and painted nails, holding a fire gun. The emphasis on queer issues occurs at a time when conservative actions against LGBTQIA+ visibility spaces were behind numerous episodes of moral panic in the country (Sacramento & Santos, 2020). The film responds to these conflicts and symbolically elects a person outside hegemonic gender constructions as the leader of a community that also includes, among its members, various other minority populations.

Furthermore, the conversation surrounding the significance of violence as a means of resistance has gained traction in recent years, notably spurred by the actions of black blocs during the series of widespread protests that popped up in the country in 2013 (Matheus, 2013; Capeller, 2014), and also due to a growing interest in post-colonial and decolonial theories within academic circles. Simplified interpretations of Frantz Fanon's writings started circulating on social media, suggesting that progressive factions of Brazilian society might need to resort to armed resistance to counter the encroachment of ultra-conservatism. This idea is invoked in the fictionalised setting of *Bacurau*. Within the narrative, the diverse makeup of the village strengthens the metaphor of a progressive and diverse resistance against the rise of the far right. Consequently, the clash between these opposing forces transcends prevalent discourses in contemporary Brazil, offering the possibility of a symbolic reversal of the setback experienced by the country's progressive forces during that time.

In the film's structure, this is also translated by a reversal. When the outsiders finally initiate their attack on the town of *Bacurau*, the audience does not follow the resistance of its inhabitants but rather the invaders' offensive and the fatal consequences of their failure. This occurs through a change of perspective. Up until that moment, most scenes are presented from the viewpoint of the residents of Bacurau. In the final sequence, this changes. The residents all hide, and the events are presented from the perspective of the villains, as they approach the town, ready to

begin the game that brought them there (see Fig. 4). This change of perspective is quite similar to the structure of dark comedies for children, such as *Home Alone* (1990). There, the climax consists of the setting of various traps by a young hero but seen essentially from the villains' side, who suffer the physical consequences of falling in each trap. In this type of construction, the prospect of possible pain does not evoke fear but rather jubilation because it impinges upon the adversaries, not the hero.



Figure 4. In the climactic final showdown, the perspective shifts to the invading foreigners, whose demise is portrayed through a combination of horror, satire, and cathartic violence.

The same dynamic unfolds in *Bacurau*. The shift in perspective enables fear to be experienced by the aggressors rather than the victims. If we delve into the horror elements, it is almost as if the monsters themselves became terrified. However, because the viewer's alignment is contrary to that of the aggressors, this fear does not resonate with them. Consequently, the sequence of murders feels weightless and unserious — quite the opposite: it's met with enthusiasm, cheers, and humour. This resembles what Bergson (1983, p. 8) described as the “momentary anaesthesia of the heart”, a key criterion for laughter. The humour associated with death serves as a symbolic attack on the (absence of) morality of those whom *Bacurau* defines as enemies both within and beyond the narrative. This “demoralisation of opponents” (Obrdlik, 1942, p. 716), especially when faced with a potentially oppressive regime, closely aligns with classical definitions of gallows humour. If, as Lewis suggests, context is crucial for defining this type of humour (1993, p. 49), the socio-political situation in Brazil provided a favourable setting for this configuration — especially in 2019, when the Bolsonaro government had just begun. Regardless of the nomenclature — since the boundaries between dark, sick and gallows humour are unclear (Beermann, 2014, p. 692) — what appears central to us is the relevance of *Bacurau*'s alignment with humour.

This is, as we have already mentioned, a conceptual key virtually ignored in readings of the film, despite appearing to be one of its central mechanisms. We believe this happens because *Bacurau* traverses various genres, borrowing iconographies not often associated with humour, such as the western, science fiction, and horror. However, it is the humorous depiction of violence and death that provides the most fertile ground for discussing and reconsidering the controversy surrounding an eventual “celebration of barbarism” (Escorel, 2019) in its final sequence (see Fig. 5). In this regard, the film shares similarities with *Home Alone*. While *Bacurau* may exhibit more intensity and aggression, it ultimately presents a light-hearted portrayal of pain and death.

More than a call to arms, *Bacurau* summons a unity on one side to mock the opposing political field. This mockery occurs through the ridicule and symbolic annihilation of different instances and structures of colonial domination, whether internal colonialism (represented by the motorcyclists from the South-Southeast) or external (represented by the foreigners from the Global North). Thus, the film translates the dilemmas of a polarised society into a literal battle, making the death of characters who emulate the opposing side primarily humorous, which explains the screams, applause, and laughter in the movie theatres.



Figure 5. Locals taking photos and selfies with the severed heads of the foreigners, highlighting the film's dark humour and its portrayal of violence as a form of symbolic resistance.

5. Conclusion

In *Bacurau*, a complex web of emotional states and affective connections unfolds, often fuelled by a sadistic humour that glorifies revenge as a tool for social justice restoration. Through the portrayal of symbolic vengeance with a visually intense horror characteristic and the creation of ironic and caricatural elements, the film crafts an allegorical narrative that elicits a cathartic response. Furthermore, it fosters a sense of belonging by delving into the shared sadism among those who come together to ridicule their adversaries' suffering and pain. Hence, a comprehensive understanding of *Bacurau*'s political commentary necessitates acknowledging the entanglement of humour and speculative fiction within its narrative.

Humour in *Bacurau* plays a critical role in its subversion of racial and gender power dynamics, offering a biting critique of the colonial and patriarchal structures that the film seeks to question. The film's comedic moments often revolve around the inversion of traditional roles, where figures of authority — often white and male — are ridiculed or outwitted by the local diverse population. This is particularly evident in scenes where the community's marginalised characters, who would typically be the targets of humour in less subversive narratives, instead become the agents of humour, turning the table on their oppressors. The racialised and gendered bodies in *Bacurau* are central to this comedic subversion, as the film uses their perspectives to challenge and mock the systemic inequalities imposed by external forces. This subversive humour also engages the audience, prompting viewers to reflect on their own positions within the social hierarchies being critiqued, thus transforming the viewing experience into an act of social engagement.

Moreover, the film's resonance with the Brazilian socio-political context goes beyond these allegorical representations. Its impact is tangible as it was commercially distributed and thus embroiled in the ongoing symbolic battles within the country. Essentially, while cultural wars and polarisation are depicted within the film as allegorical operations, they also draw momentum from it, shaping aesthetic-political consequences. In this sense, *Bacurau* has also fuelled Brazilian symbolic conflicts, both for its cohesive effect (in creating a sense of community) and for its combative effect (in the derogatory staging of the humiliation of its political antagonists).

This article set out to underscore the significance of the interplay between humour and speculative fiction in *Bacurau*. It serves as an initial exploration into the proliferation of this unusual convergence, which has gained prominence in contemporary Brazilian cinema amidst profound social and political unrest. This discussion is pertinent, as *Bacurau* serves as an emblematic case, yet it is not isolated in the contemporary cultural landscape. Even if we confine ourselves to Brazilian cinema, it is possible to find a myriad of recent examples, including stories of cannibalism (*The Cannibal Club*), dystopias of a country taken over by a tyrannical government (*Divine Love*; *Sol Alegria*; *Executive Order*), ghosts (*Ghost Killers vs. Bloody Mary*), monsters and aberrations of various kinds (*Medusa*; *Republic*). These films mobilise speculative narratives *vis-à-vis* national material and symbolic conflicts through various humorous strategies. Understanding these interactions is crucial for dissecting public themes and navigating national impasses and controversies.

The emergence of such narratives is justified both as retranslations of their production context and as cultural responses to an intensely conflict-ridden socio-political milieu. But besides that, it also aligns with the *zeitgeist* of a country grappling with the shadow of ultraconservative discourses. Within this context, both opponents and proponents of these discourses perceive the opposing side as a blend of monster and clown. Hence, the fusion of the comic, the dystopian, and the horrifying has become emblematic of a surreal yet alarming period — both bizarre and ominous.

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