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POLITICS BY MAGIC:
ANTONIO DAS MORTES

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by JACK FISHER

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The Western, or oater, is basically Arthurian in form and action. A strange warrior rides up to the castle (town), and by his prowess in arms (quick draw) he overcomes the evil baron (cattle baron). After saving the chastity of the local maiden (rancher's daughter), the knight (cowboy) rides off into the sunset (sunset). The knight-cowboy is pure, remains pure and is, therefore, invincible. His only reward is in satisfying his obligation to conquer evil.

Occasionally an Arthurian legend goes beyond the formula with interesting results. The most famous of these is *Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which the quest involves elements of the occult, religion and sexual promiscuity and finally has a social result in the establishment of the Order of the Garter.

If the average Western is Arthurian, then ANTONIO DAS MORTES is the *Gawain* of the genre, for Glauber Rocha's film, too, includes the occult, the religious, the sexually rapacious and a social consequence, as well as all the trappings of the familiar myth.

The landscape, though Brazilian, is as rugged as any John Ford has ever put on film and includes all the standard accoutrements: a corrupt town called Jardim das Piranhas, the Brazilian equivalent of Murderers' Gulch; a band of local Dalton boys, called *con-gaceiros*; a villainous landowner whose response to the bandits is to call in an outside Hired Gun.

True to tradition, the Hired Gun has a prodigious reputation, and the fact that he works with a rifle, wears a shawl-like garment, and speaks Portuguese does not obscure his archetypal role. His name is Antonio Das Mortes, and he is a man whose name is not only frightening, but whose prowess is awesome. He has previously wiped out all the bandits in the area.

In spite of seeming to be the familiar gunman, Antonio, from the moment of his arrival in Jardim das Piranhas, behaves strangely. He immediately fights a machete duel with the *con-gaceiro* chieftain while holding a bandanna in

his teeth. After stabbing the *con-gaceiro*, who dies lingeringly and mysteriously through most of the rest of the film, Antonio finds a local priestess who is both holy and sexy, and he sits down by her side in silence for virtually all the time the *con-gaceiro* is dying.

There are, of course, subclassifications of the basic formula that seem to apply here (not to the bandanna, certainly, but to his behavior). Antonio seems to be suffering from Old Gunfighter's Malaise. This is a common malady, probably invented as Western stars grew older, the symptoms of which are weariness, sadness and lethargy. (The Brazilians even have a special word for it, something like *soldagio*.) The Old Gunfighter recognizes a decline in his prodigious abilities, realizes how empty his life has been and wants to get out while he still can. Like Antonio, he usually sits quietly during most of the film (THE GUNFIGHTER is a classic example of this subgenre) and tries to avoid mixing with the Kid who wants to be the New Gun.

The problem with such a diagnosis of Antonio is that he does not seem to have all the qualifications for the Old Gunfighter's Malaise. He is still young and at the absolute peak of his powers, as the end of the film demonstrates. Although New Guns appear on the scene, Antonio does not seem to care one way or the other. He ignores them and continues to sit, and sit and sit, until finally he gets up and with amazing energy destroys everybody who has been against him in any way at all. What happened to Antonio during the time he sat by the priestess? What caused him to switch allegiances and destroy his former employers and their henchmen?

It is the answers to these questions that put ANTONIO DAS MORTES into a category by itself among Westerns, in much the same way that the answer to the curious contest between Gawain and the Green Knight makes that legend unique.

What has happened to Antonio das Mortes is similar to what happened to his saintly namesake after he meditated

in the desert; Antonio has acquired a revolutionary consciousness and in the process a new identity. The lesson he learns, presumably in part from the priestess, is not the simple one of the heart that satisfied Gregory Peck. Rather, he learns the harsher lesson that he has been serving a corrupt Establishment, that he has been a hired-killer animal rather than a responsible social animal.

Once his consciousness has been aroused, Antonio clearly sees the nature of the Establishment that he serves: the landowner and his court wallowing in material abundance; the people terrorized, bullied and finally murdered. He is confronted, apparently for the first time, with the reality of the Establishment, which, like all Establishments since religion first helped the rise of capitalism, claims a superior moral position based on the possession of goods. He sees an Establishment that cries law and order when its possessions are threatened, while using these possessions to support corruption, sexual depravity, bribery of officials and even murder.

As he watches the brutalization of the people, the maniacal greed of the landowner, the nymphomania of his wife, the corruption of the police chief, all of which parade before him like allegorical figures in a morality play (which they are), Antonio's malaise deepens. He must be undergoing a recognition of his own responsibility. If the *con-gaceiros*, like Lampiao and Coirana, are against these monsters, and if he, Antonio, has killed the *con-gaceiros*, does he become the defender of the exploiters? Clearly the answer is yes, and the sickness deepens further.

Implied in Antonio's dilemma is the all-embracing question of the responsibility of the professional. As a Hired Gun, does Antonio have a responsibility to question the orders and money that impel him? There are many answers that have been given to this question: answers from a glass booth in Tel Aviv, answers from a grass village in My Lai. The answer that Rocha suggests in his film is more complex than most in that

oes beyond the simple "I do what
m told" to investigate the conditions
ecessary for a responsible answer. Ed-
ication would probably be the sugges-
n of a politician. Rocha, the artist,
s something else in mind.

Antonio, as a neutral professional
ler, can have no conscience; his
length is in his commitment to his
profession. Since this is so, Antonio's
asic nature must be changed. He must
aroused to a revolutionary conscious-
s because the creation of the ideal
volutionary involves organic change;
only by some kind of rite of pas-
ge can the irresistible killer become
e irresistible revolutionary. At this
int, the film becomes involved with
e occult, with *macumba* and soul
session.

To understand what happens in the
m, it is necessary to know something
macumba, the nature religion of Bra-
which is part Christianity, part black
agic, part folklore and part the neces-
y of the poor. *Macumba* as a hybrid
igion involves the worship of both
e black and white versions of the
hristian saints. The Virgin Mary, for
ample, is also the *Reina del Mar*,
orshiped with white roses, rum and
gars. The principal spirit is Isshu, who
the Devil, and in whose honor mid-
ght services are held. At these ser-
ces the worshipers are often possessed,
ometimes by friendly spirits, sometimes
y demons. In the film *BLACK OR-*
IEUS, the long *macumba* possession
ervice, complete with cigar-smoking
ipao, was a vital part of Orpheus'
arch.

In *ANTONIO DAS MORTES* there does
ot seem to be any service proper, but
l of the artifacts of *macumba* are
ere: the black and white versions of
e saint, George from Christianity,
xosse (or Oxango) from voodoo; the
hite priestess and the black priest; and,
bove all, the service of possession, al-
ough in this instance it is not achieved
y the usual frenzy found in orthodox
macumba service.

Who is being possessed by whom is
uggested throughout the film by various
cidents. Antonio is being possessed
y the *congaceiro* folk-hero Lampiao
with whom he was associated in the
rst scenes of the film. He kills Lam-
iao, who in turn is revered and studied
y the village people. This act of pos-
session accounts for the mysterious and
ngering death of the *congaceiro* Coi-

rana, who apparently holds the spirit of
Lampiao in a kind of trusteeship until
Antonio, the warrior equal to Lampiao,
has been instructed by the priestess to
receive the spirit. When Coirana is
finally killed, with overtones of Christ-
ian murder, the spirit of Lampiao must
pass on to Antonio or be lost. It is at
this moment that Antonio's novitiate is
over, and seized with the spirit, he be-
gins his massacre of the New Guns.

During this slaughter of the wicked,
Rocha introduces his most daring inno-
vation—the singing of *The Ballad of*
Lampaio—as if it were a description of
what Antonio is doing. Both heroes,
Lampiao in Hell and Antonio in the
Garden, overcome superhuman odds,
and as they proceed we begin to sense
that the two actions, one described, one
seen, are the same action. I think they
are intended to be seen, and that we
are to assume that Antonio has become
infused either with the metaphorical
spirit of Lampiao or with the actual
spirit. Whichever is true, Antonio's
destruction of the landowner and his
henchmen is evidence of the conver-
sion of the former enemy. The line of
power for social justice has passed from
Lampiao through Coirana to Antonio,
and the awesome power of the neutral
hired killer is harnessed for the revo-
lutionary cause.

Whether this is a signal for a turn
in the fortunes of the Revolution, as
the road to Damascus was such a turn
for Christianity, is not answered com-
pletely. After finishing his work, An-
tonio goes back to the city. We do not
know if he has been brought to the
village for this single task, as the astro-
naut in *2001* is taken beyond Infinity
for a single mission. We do not know if
Antonio has served as the vessel for
Lampiao's vengeance or if his trans-
formation has been total and he goes
back to the city with his new identity.

The mysterious future is appropriate
in this film that is so mysterious through-
out. Every device that Rocha can use
to suggest mystery and other-worldli-
ness, he has used. The photography and
setting create a bleak sense of separa-
tion. Seldom has photography so well
suggested people perched on the very
brink of wilderness. The harsh land-
scape, the violent earth and the village
isolated within the hostile surroundings
create an atmosphere that is both beau-
tiful, forbidding and strange. The mo-
dality of the film, which is reminiscent

of Antonioni, suggests a slow-paced sur-
render to the bleakness of the terrain,
until the emotions somehow become re-
flected by the surroundings. Although
Antonioni's landscapes are different,
recking of abandonment by men, this
primitive area reeks of abandonment by
gods; the emotional desolation of *L'AV-*
VENTURA hangs heavy here.

The acting further enhances this
mood. All of the actors take on a ritual
quality, performing with a minimum of
extraneous or unique detail. The lesser
characters have an almost allegorical
kind of representation; the major char-
acters very nearly become personifica-
tion of sins. Of Antonio himself, we
know very little. He shows almost no
humanity, certainly none of the folksy
dog-and-children petting with which
Hollywood dresses its Good Gunfight-
ers. He is much more reminiscent of the
Jesus in Pasolini's *GOSPEL ACCORDING*
TO ST. MATTHEW. Antonio is tough,
serious and professional. Like Paso-
lini's Jesus, he does what he does with
expertise and business-like dispatch.
Neither figure is in the least sentiment-
al, and if there is a difference, it is
that during the course of the film An-
tonio lacks Jesus' sense of vision and
dedication.

There are further suggestions of Pas-
olini in the sparseness of the film, the
matter-of-fact manner with which Rocha
handles extraordinary events. This mat-
ter-of-factness is a hallmark of the
modernity of the film. Unlike the Pearl
Poet who feels required to explain the
events of Gawain's adventure and to
add to the moral, Rocha lets the events
speak for themselves. Like Beckett and
Pinter of the modern stage, Rocha's
method is to arrange events that taken
together will supply their own defini-
tions and explanations. He elects to
examine what happens before a man
can change his mind, and out of that
simplest of actions evolves an entire
structure that is humanistic, ideological
and ethnic.

Too often audiences refuse to accept
a work of art on its own terms. Rather
the work is expected to conform to
whatever vagrant comparisons the
viewer feels are appropriate. Some
works resist this kind of re-creation by
their insistence on their own logic. The
audience that tries to turn *ANTONIO*
DAS MORTES into a mere Western will
be frustrated and confused. All of which
probably means that Glauber Rocha is
a major artist. Certainly *ANTONIO DAS*
MORTES is a major film.