

Document Citation

Title	A cangaceiro Saint George
Author(s)	Jean-Louis Bory
Source	<i>Grove Press International Film Festival</i>
Date	1970
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	38-39, 86
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Antonio das Mortes, Rocha, Glauber, 1969

A CANGACEIRO SAINT GEORGE

by Jean-Louis Bory

Grove Press Int'l. Film Festival
(1st, 1970)

"Touched by grace, the killer of 'cangaceiros' becomes a 'cangaceiro.' This is the political meaning of the film... The imagery, the epic mysticism are deliberately revolutionary..." It is a film of the "humiliated 'sertao.'"

In the arid Brazilian backlands, a bloody carnival in which dragons die only to be reborn

Glauber Rocha prudently and courteously gives directions on how his film is to be taken, even before the credits appear on the screen. A few indispensable historical facts, the minimum vocabulary that we will need: *Jagunco*, *cangaceiro*, *sertão*, *coronel*, and the general meaning of the film: Saint George slays the dragon. This is the third Rocha film to come our way and we are beginning to familiarize ourselves with certain Brazilian realities, so that henceforth the headgear of the *cangaceiro* — a wide-brimmed cocked hat studded with hardware in star-shaped clusters above a forehead decked with medals — will be a part of our cinematographic mythology.

With Antonio das Mortes Glauber Rocha, by his own admission, closes a cycle. *Antonio das Mortes* resumes and sums up his previous work: gods and devils, blacks and blonds, a land and the trance that it is in.

The land is once more the *sertão*, an immense arid space in the northeast of Brazil that outlines a geography of hunger. We recognize the *sertão* from the very first image: a vast, flat, sterile

terrain bristling with clumps of thorny bushes and dotted here and there with stunted, twisted trees that often are dead. It was against this background that the passion, death, and transfiguration of *Black God, White Devil* took place. It is the theater of the passions and the transfiguration of Antonio das Mortes, as necessary to this passion and this transfiguration as the pass at Roncevaux to the death of Roland. Determined, explained by this geography, the combat leaves its mark on the landscape. Immediately. The *cangaceiro* that Antonio kills staggers and crumples to the ground in this landscape; in it Antonio takes the last solemn steps along the long path that has led him to this execution. This double movement, which sums up the whole film beforehand, is forcefully *situated* by Rocha as soon as the credits appear on the screen. It will continue to the very last images: very beautiful pan shots in which processions glide past and then stand stock-still in a fold of the mountain until they merge with it.

A rosary of corpses

On this land and for it, because of it, there is war. On the one hand there is the *coronel* (colonel), a large estate-

owner who enjoys feudal privileges; he is the master, he wields the power, pulls the strings, watches over the cogs in the wheels — the police, the Church, the school. Rocha incarnates each of these cogs in a character: the cop, the priest, the teacher, who soon become puppets of their function rather than living beings. The *coronel* is also the master of love, represented by the woman, the mistress, a splendid blonde with tousled hair enveloped in clinging transparent veils.

Confronting the *coronel* are the starving people. Their revolt has taken the form of obsessive prayer, chanted and danced to the point of exhaustion. A mystic protest incarnated by a female saint, another image of the woman and of love, set in opposition to the mistress. For the *coronel*, the dragon is this rabble in the form of a religious procession. For this rabble, it is the *coronel* and his clique. Each of the two camps has its Saint George. For the rabble, it is the *cangaceiro*, an honored bandit, and his black "double." For the *coronel*, it is his *jagunco*, an assassin hired to kill the *cangaceiro*. And the most important of the assassins, the number one marksman, the one whose *nom de guerre* trails after

6 / ANTONIO DAS MORTES

him like a rosary of corpses, is Antonio das Mortes. Such are the elements of the struggle whose events Rocha sets before us.

And now comes the trance. It is made up precisely of these violent and macabre events. Rocha's first concern is to conserve the epic color of his previous films. There are few interior shots; space is constantly present, with the camera underlining its vastness by solemn lateral traveling shots or by wide pan shots that remain respectfully motionless. To match the enormity of this space, the gestures enlarge to the point of being carefully exaggerated gesticulation, the dialogue heightens to screamed tirades, close to prophecy or a vatic curse, the contact of body with body for death or love becomes dance (and the camera then becomes frantic and whirls round and round), the movement of the crowd suddenly blossoms into choreography. The vocal lyricism and the choreography transform the Brazilian Western into an opera, whose magnificent lyric flights are constantly suggested by the sound track. Once before, in *Terra em Transe*, Glauber Rocha had worked toward deforming the epic by making it an opera.

The uprising in the form of a procession

Here the epic, taken over by opera, is turned back into epic by an imagery that comes from the people. This reconquest is announced by the sort of initial illumination, as in a medieval manuscript, that points to the popularity of the legend of the dragon of evil and the holy warrior. Each one of the characters—who become strong, highly colored types endowed with their symbolic attributes—contributes to a fable whose allegorical meaning is clear. The *coronel* is old and blind: read out of date, anachronistic, unconscious of the realities of today's world. The saint, in the armor and white dress of the virgin warrior, is a Joan of Arc wearing an immaculate lampshade-miter. With his long dark cape and his black felt hat, Antonio das Mortes, seems to be a Judex crossed with a Bruant [Aristide Bruant was a famous French popular singer] without a red muffler.

Around these symbolic characters, the uprising in the form of a procession develops, as the rabble stamp on the ground and sing, so that the allegorical, epic combat is no longer separate from this procession. It becomes one with it. The myth and its cult mingle and

..... continued on page 86 ➡

CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR ANTONIO DAS MORTES

Grand Press Intl. Film Festival (1st, 1970)

"... In his new film—perhaps his most brilliant—he has drawn a startling fresco of folkways and folk-legends of the arid Brazilian plains where passions match the tropic temperature... A weird and savage melodrama, it is elevated by the fierce poetic lyricism of its narration and becomes a form of screen ballad. It paints its exaggerated dramatis personae in loud and lurid hues and its wild action is accompanied by a chanting chorus. The stuff of a thrilling Western is here in the hands of a unique artist."—Thomas Quinn Curtiss, *International Herald-Tribune*

"The very simple plot is used in a baroque style to present an extraordinary mixture of religion, mythology, history, and politics, not to mention the scenes with singing and dancing. All this is combined to give a surrealist impression of the condition of the Brazilian peasant in his arid environment."—*The Daily Telegraph* (London)

"What is surprising from the very beginning of this film is its violent beauty, which is utilized for tragic ends. Glauber Rocha is a genuine poet and it would be fruitless to try to establish a direct and elementary relationship between the characters he uses (who nonetheless are real people who actually existed) and any immediate reality, for he uses characters symbolically to express the deep currents marking a situation whose contradictory truth as a

whole is no less real... [Antonio das Mortes has] a formal beauty going far beyond anything that has been offered us previously by Glauber Rocha, whose masterful use of color is beyond question..."—François Maurin, *L'Humanité* (Paris)

"An astonishing, inspired, free, rich, lyrical film, a film which restores to cinema its grandeur and its magic, a *romancero* mingling the tragic and the sublime... The beauty, the power of this film are moving and captivating."—Yvonne Baby, *Le Monde* (Paris)

"... The newest, the most disconcerting, the most beautiful of the films that have been seen up to now at Cannes..."—Giovanni Grazzini, *Corriere della Sera* (Milan)

"It is one of the most personal, the most stimulating, and the most interesting films of the festival..."—Paolo Pillitteri, *L'Avanti* (Rome)

"... It might be called a tragic Western, a popular parable on the politics, religion, and ingrained social problems of sprawling Brazil... Rocha has a dynamic sense of place, time, and movement and an ability to create a tragic, implacable rhythm that raises it above ordinary derring-do or overdone melodramatics. The use of songs, operatic arias, and the timelessness of the tragic and classic struggle plus sudden returns to more modern Brazil give this a romantic, lyrical, primitive tang that makes all its forays into violence a means of ritual rather than exploited mayhem... It is technically extraordinary with brilliant hues and composite acting, especially by Mauricio do Valle as the implacable, fanatic killer who changes sides."—Gene Moskowitz, *Variety*



A Cangaceiro Saint George
continued from page 39

become permanently linked. The result is a grandiose carnival, with stamping dances and melodies sung to the clapping of hands. This carnival-opera soon becomes spectacle, reminding us of the mystery plays of the Middle Ages, the performances that an entire population organizes in the mountains of the Tyrol or the villages of Provence to illustrate the Passion of Christ or Christmas.

This saint is evidence that popular imagery is religious imagery; it is a vulgar imagery of the *sertão*, which no longer distinguishes carnival from religion. Glauber Rocha does not reject this vulgar imagery; quite the contrary. The colors affirm it, together with the fixed, highly composed, hieratic quality of many shots which are set up as living tableaux. But he saves it through his use of the baroque, and through an extraordinary plastic sense. The idea of a spectacle — and a popular spectacle — never leaves him. This blood — so much blood! — is bright red. Violence is a figure of style. The dead, all the “superlatives,” the massacres that lay out whole mattresses of corpses, all are figures of rhetoric — a style and rhetoric that find their unquestionable poet in Glauber Rocha.

This style and rhetoric sings of Antonio das Mortes. There is a passion

and a transfiguration. Touched by grace, the killer of *cangaceiros* becomes a *cangaceiro*. This is the political meaning of the film. Glauber Rocha does not unfold this whole carnival, this whole opera, just to produce something pretty to look at. The style and rhetoric are not intended to be merely decorative. The vulgar popular imagery, the epic mysticism are deliberately revolutionary. The hymns of the crowd celebrate the exploits of legendary *cangaceiros*, such as Lampião, who died in 1938. “Arise,” the chorus repeats, “shake off the dust, stand up.”

This summons might well apply to a struggle that is still going on — a struggle whose cast of characters, both the stars and the bit players, has not changed. The *jagunco* is a present reality: he is a hired bandit in the service of Brazilian parties and wields his pistol very effectively when election time comes. And it is still true today that the large landowners use the *jagunco* to make sure that the poor stay orderly and obedient. This is not just folklore but a social and political reality of present-day Brazil.

The yellow shell

At the end of the fight — at the end of the film — it is quite clear who is the dragon (the colonel) and who is Saint George (Antonio das Mortes, the *can-*

gaceiro). The priest in his white cassock with the guerrilla's rifle slung over his shoulder guides the mule on which the saint is riding, and before them is the black man, the archangel, the heir to the battles against slavery, clad in red and carrying the lance of the holy warrior-knight decorated with ribbons like a matador's *banderilla*. An image that speaks. They go off to one side. So much for the Brazilian past and whatever there is in the present that still clings to that past. Antonio goes the other way, alone. He has cleared away the confusion and the illusions that he was the victim of and that are favored by the events of the carnival that is the prisoner of legend. Today's reality is different: trucks, whose traffic jams are immobilized processions, and roads that offer the *sertão* yet another aridity. But the struggle remains the same: that of the poor and the starving and the oppressed against those who starve them and oppress them. That of the “humiliated *sertão*.”

In the final shot, the Shell Oil Company emblem, at the end of its nicely curved pedestal. The shell of Saint James stamped with red letters. It is pretty. But it, too, is not there merely to look pretty. It is the new dragon, against which Antonio das Mortes takes to the road, a Saint George of modern times. □

— Translated by HELEN R. LANE

