

Sílvia Faustino*

March into the Unknown: Violence and Faith in *The Backlands*

Abstract

This article constitutes an interpretation of the narrative of war found in the third part of the book *The Backlands* by Euclides da Cunha. The main objective is to approach the narrative in the aspect in which it appears as the representation of a march to war towards an unknown target, in a procedure in which the position of the narrator, situated spatially on one side of the struggle, places the reader in the same perspective as that of the advancing attack. It is also intended to show that, from the ideological construction of the enemy to its inexplicable and prolonged intangibility, the narrator elaborates on the tragic subject of the alliance between violence and faith, which will erupt in the clashes at the forefront of the battle. Finally, Glauber Rocha's film, *Black God, White Devil*, will be approached as an evocation of Euclides da Cunha's book, especially regarding issues involving faith and violence in the backlands of northeastern Brazil.

Keywords

The Backlands, violence, faith

This campaign is remembered through the ebb of the past
And, it was, in the true sense of the word, a crime.
Let us denounce it.

Euclides da Cunha, *Os sertões*...¹

The Backlands: The Canudos Campaign (Os Sertões: Campanha de Canudos) by Euclides da Cunha (1866–1909), one of Brazilian literature's most important works, was first published in late 1902. The book tells the story of

* Federal University of Bahia, Brazil
Department of Philosophy
Email: silviassisaes@gmail.com

¹ E. da Cunha, *Os sertões: Campanha de Canudos*, Edição crítica de Walnice Nogueira Galvão, Ática, São Paulo 2003, p. 14.

the Canudos war, a campaign which in 1897 resulted in the destruction of a settlement comprising of approximately five thousand and two hundred dwellings and the extermination of a community led by the charismatic Antônio Conselheiro. In addition, during a campaign spread over four expeditions, the Brazilian army suffered five thousand casualties. Euclides da Cunha witnessed, for just over fifteen days, merely the final moments of the massacre: he traveled to the state of Bahia, as a correspondent for the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, in order to cover the Canudos war. After the war, he spent four years writing *The Backlands (Os Sertões)*, a work that traverses literature, history and science.

Leopoldo M. Bernucci, who makes reproduction a central topic to Euclides da Cunha's poetic narrative, recognizes the "literary side of the world and imagery" of *The Backlands*, and states that when he "abandons the historian's pen to take up that of the writer," his interest rests more in the "artistical narrative potentialities" of the episode itself, rather than in producing a precise report. Luiz da Costa Lima considered it "inappropriate to speak of *The Backlands* as a work of fiction," since it was predominantly a "sociological work." Years later he admitted that in the discursive texture of the book there is a "mimesis machine," which is understood as an imaging device that bursts into the main disposition to describe the facts for the purpose of engaging in science. Berthold Zilly, the translator of *The Backlands* into German, observes that the work contains two contradictory discourses regarding the backlanders (*sertanejos*) and the nation itself: on the one hand, it is a "scientific essay" with academic, deductive, and racist argument. On the other hand, it is a "disturbing poetic and rhetorical historiography in the exasperating struggle against oblivion."² According to these authors, distinct and even opposing discursive tendencies constitute the possible meanings of Euclides's work: fictionalisation and historiography; factual description and mimetic/imagery discourse; the scientific essay and poetic and rhetorical historiography. With this in mind, it can be said that the daring historical narrative of *The Backlands* oscillates between the scientific impulse (marked by evolutionism and the positivism of the time), and the creative impulse, which moves the hand of the writer to use both rhetorical and poetic resources. This work is part of the treatment of historical discourse in alliance with the creative impulse in that it intends to explore: i) the narration of the ideological character of the discursive construction of Canudos as a target object to be eliminated (the narrator's rhetoric that shows the rhetorical

² B. Zilly, "Sertão e nacionalidade: formação étnica e civilizatória no Brasil segundo Euclides da Cunha", *Revista Estudos Sociedade e Agricultura*, UFRRJ/CPDA, 1999, n. 12, p. 37.

character of ideology); and ii) the narration of the struggle for the imitative procedure of a march to war (the poetic imitation that binds the reader to the target's aim).

In the third part of the book, entitled "The Fight," the narrator tells the story. Among the multiple possible ways of interpreting the rich plot presented in this part, I intend to follow the narrative thread that first exposes the contingent and illusory character of the process by which Canudos becomes the target of war: a real target whereby an imaginary, ideologically determined, and politically appropriate cause was created through force. I then emphasize the descriptions of the ethical-religious drama attributed to the soldiers at the front of the combat, and show how these characters symbolize, with their inner experiences and behaviors, perhaps the greatest contradiction of the Republican values on whose behalf that war was waged: it is at the front of the battle that the fratricidal aspect of war is more clearly delineated. Based on what is seen, and standpoints punctuated throughout the text, I emphasize a formal trait in the constitution of the narrative focus by the manner in which the reader engages in a representation in which the focus of the narration intermingles with the focus of the actual marching of the infantry towards the target. In the final part, I discuss elements of the plot and characteristic aspects of the characters in the film *Black God, White Devil* by Glauber Rocha, as allegorical evocations of Euclides da Cunha's book, in order to explore in a new light, the same alliance between faith and violence in the backlands of northeastern Brazil.

The Target and the Fraud

Among the narrative factors leading to the outbreak of war, one draws particular attention: the fanciful and fraudulent process by which Canudos is turned into a target of war. At the beginning of "The Struggle," we find the claim that the Canudos campaign was determined by a "disgraceful incident:" Antônio Conselheiro purchased some wood in the town of Juazeiro in order to complete the construction of a new church in Canudos. The material, although paid for, was not received as promised. The breach of the agreement intentional, according to the author led to rumors that Antônio Conselheiro and his followers would invade the town to seize the wood by force. This prompted a Juazeiro judge to request state intervention against that community, taking the initial step towards the formation of what would become the first of four expeditions. In quoting "Make history, affiliated to official documents"³ the author reproduces the message of the governor of

³ E. da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, op. cit., p. 191.

Bahia to the president of the Republic. In it, the governor refers to the inhabitants of Canudos as “bandits” and the need to “prevent them from invading the town.”⁴ It can be said that here we confront the first of the many great incongruities revealed in the work, but perhaps one of the most significant, insofar as it highlights the genesis of the conflict, i.e. the eagerness of those who were violated to assert their ownership rights of the pre-paid goods. Thus, Antônio Conselheiro and his followers are transformed into invading brigands. The plan was accordingly given strength: the idea that the invasion of the Canudos settlement was also necessary in order to eradicate “the stirring of moral decomposition” that had taken root there in “blatant discredit to authority and institutions.” It was on the basis of such judgment that the state government began to intimate “a threat to state sovereignty shaped as a scarecrow” by the “unpunished turbulent [people].”⁵ Employing the image of a threatening scarecrow, a visible target was put in place, through which an opposition formed of local ethical and political forces was established. But the process of forced fabrication of the targeted object is generalized: rapid publicity of events leads to the intervention by the nation as a whole, and in a very short time Canudos becomes a national target.

At the time of the second expedition, such a situation appears so magnified that it is identifiable with the dimension of civilization itself with its “portentous weapons.” And to the “magic words Homeland, Glory, and Liberty”—which, according to the narrator, “spoken in all tones, contain all the raw material of the reverberating periods,” a need is added: a great example had to be made and a lesson given to the “unrepentant ruffians;” requiring an energetic corrective so that they might “suddenly enter through the portals of civilization through punishment.”⁶ As the narrative proceeds, the assortment of agents who acted in the fabrication of Canudos as a justified target is delineated and comprises: “Brazilian society,” which in 1897 had a “high degree of receptivity to the intrusion of all revolutionary and dispersive elements;” the “people” who had shown non-adaptability to the “superior legislation of the newly inaugurated political system.” The “civil government,” founded in 1894, which “had not had the essential basis of an organized public opinion” and “had been unable to correct a situation which was neither frankly revolutionary nor normal, equally repudiated the extreme resources of force and the serene influence of laws;” A “society that

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 192.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 209.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 217–218.

progressed in leaps and bounds from maximum laxity to maximum rigorism." And to complete the picture: an "imperfect intellectual organization" and an "incomprehensible political organization."⁷

In the case of Brazil, Walnice Nogueira Galvão emphasizes the "extraordinary pioneering" by which newspapers, before the era of electronic communication, were the vehicle for manipulation on behalf of political tendencies interested in "creating panic and concentrating opinions around a single enemy." The Canudos war earned itself a fixed spot on the front page, in addition to invading "editorials, chronicles, reports, advertisements, even the cartoon pages."⁸ The process of the discursive construction of the target object is attested by the scholar Adriana M. C. Johnson who describes in letters (both private and public) and newspaper articles the emergence of a "prose of counter-insurgency" for which Canudos, transformed into a site of inscription and projection of a variety of tensions and fears, is exclusively seen through the bias of a discourse whose central focus is state security.⁹ According to this author, in the construction of this "dense textual web about Canudos" a "hegemonic discursive formation" is revealed, tending to repress other forms of conceptualization.¹⁰ In the narrative of the *Backlands*, the ideological character of the forces that consolidate the war, displays itself in a manner in which the discourses of the existing powers are rhetorically assembled and used to promote violence against the insurgents.

It is at this moment of generalization of a political framework, and of its agents, that the narrator speaks of an "extremely vulgar case of collective psychology:" the passive and neutral majority of the country was taken by surprise, given to the "inheritance of remote biological predisposition" and, thanks to a kind of "psychic minimalism," they adopted a similar "moral feature to that of the mediocre adventurers who took the lead." Apart from the use of psychic determinism, I am interested in emphasizing this societal state that gave rise to selfseeking mediocre leaders and to the predominance of "political fetishism" which, as our narrator tells us, at that particular moment, demanded "uniformed idols." Under these conditions, Colonel Antônio Moreira César, elevated to the role of a "new idol," was chosen as commander of the third expedition. The third expedition is thus clearly commanded by forces of political fetishism by way of apathetic public opinion,

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 245–246.

⁸ W. N. Galvão, *Gatos de outro saco: ensaios críticos*, Brasiliense, São Paulo 1981, pp. 71–72.

⁹ A. M. C. Johnson, *Sentencing Canudos: Subalternity in the Backlands of Brazil*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2010 (e-book), pp. 90–91.

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 96–97.

both steered by mediocre opportunists, who lack the slightest insight in the country's situation, "courted" the army, and are "illogically" erected as a balancing element amidst national agitation. The narrator gives the reader the idea of a great scenario aided in its fabrication by fetishes and scarecrows with a paradoxical anchor in the institutions perpetuating the false moral and political basis for the fatal harassment of Canudos.

For the narrator, colonel Moreira César "was unbalanced" because of a "biological fatality," namely epilepsy.¹¹ Influenced by the prejudices of that time, our author places great emphasis on the unstable, impulsive, wild and nervous aspects of the colonel's behavior. Prone to fits, alien to affection, and subject to fleeting delusions, the head of the third expedition, with its shaky and degenerate intelligence, emerges as the most perfect symbol of the irrationality of that war. But the complicity between society and its psychotic leadership becomes clear: instead of the "straitjacket," he became an idol.¹² At the same time, Moreira César is presented as the protagonist of the order and as "exponential in the neurosis" of the combatant soldiers.¹³ Under his command, "hurried" missions took place, attached to "fantastic triangles" and "ramblings."¹⁴ Under his command widespread irregular misconduct was carried out, in which combatants, for example, would cross long stretches of *Caatinga* brushland in mid-summer, obliged to carry in vain an artesian pump to sink a well "as if they who ignored the surface itself could be familiar with the deep underlayers of the earth; and as if there were among their ranks ardent diviners, capable of marking, with a mysterious divining rod, that exact spot from where the stream of liquid flowed..."¹⁵ More often than in other parts of the narrative, the march of the army appears to be heading "into the unknown,"¹⁶ towards an "imaginary enemy."¹⁷ So much so, that the soldiers, suddenly seized by a great fear, felt the threat of a serious setback: that of "coming across a settlement that is deserted." In these passages on the third expedition, the references to the completely altered psychic states of the combatants in the war intensify; the narrator refers to "dangerous mental inebriation," "panic," "crazed bravery," "the extreme fear and extreme audacity" of the soldiers; to "vertigo," to "tormenting neurosis,"

¹¹ E. da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, op. cit., p. 249.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 253.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 272.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 254.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 255.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 266.

to “the painful anxiety”¹⁸ that afflicted them. With these observations, I intend to show that the use of psychic determinism is not intended to “explain” the facts of war, but to reinforce the incomprehension, perplexity, and psychic instability of those who set out to attack a target created as an absolute fabrication by the prevailing powers in the political game.

The “mysterious feature” of the struggle

On the evening of the day that Colonel Moreira César was shot, the Backland struggle began, in the narrator's words, “to take on the mysterious feature that would remain until the end.”¹⁹ Having said this, he continues with the following account:

Mostly half-castes, and of the same stock as the rustics, the soldiers, crushed by the counter-coup of inexplicable setbacks in which their reputedly invincible leader had been struck down, were subject to the thrilling image of astonishment; they were imbued with supernatural terror, further aggravated by extravagant comments. The gunman, brutal and thick-set, diluted himself into an intangible goblin...²⁰

The mysterious feature of the struggle appears to be linked to the fact that, in addition to most soldiers having failed to see a single gunman, those who had taken part in the previous expedition believed they had seen two or three “insurgents” whom, they said with conviction, had already “perished in Mount Cambaio.”²¹ These soldiers now saw their opponents as “ghost fighters; invisible almost.” But what springs most to attention and gives the most mystifying face to the struggle is that these soldiers were also half-breeds and “of the same stock as the rustics.” According to the narrator, most of the soldiers were from the northeast, and had been raised listening to, and surrounded by, the heroes of children's tales; the name of Antônio Conselheiro, “his extravagant legend, his miracles, his feats of unparalleled sorcery.” Now, after the “unexplained setback,” all the legends they had heard seemed to them “verisimilar.” And when, at this moment, the supplications, the “sad litany,” the “crippled and mournful *kyries*” of those enemies descended on their ears, they were amazed and said that there was no manner in which to react against opponents so “transfigured by religious faith.” This is a curious moment in the narrative, because, equally affected by the

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 271.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 287.

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 287–288.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 288.

“exciting suggestion of the extraordinary,” the fleeing soldiers the retreat from the field during the third expedition “was a stampede”²² attributed to the “intangible” enemy a transfiguration by faith, while, at the same time, the narrative itself shows that a “transfiguration” also occurred on the part of the half-caste soldiers. Was the “supernatural terror” felt by the half-caste soldiers provoked by their own faith, or fear of the faith of those whom they fought?

While this “mysterious feature” of the struggle is indeed present from its inception, its characteristics become stronger and sharper as the war proceeds. These features were already noticeable in the first expedition, when the narrator justifies the reluctance of the commander and the soldiers to continue in the fight because of their amazement of the courage and daring in the faces of the settlers. Those backlanders, who had no warlike appearance, guided by their “symbols of peace” the banner of the dove and a large wooden cross and who, all of a sudden “raised the saints and arms,” were nonetheless capable of tenaciously resisting four hours of attack. Haunted by the unexpected assaults of the *jagunços* gunfighters, the commander was “terrified.” Just as the force’s physician had “lost his reason” rendering him useless to the wounded²³ thus was “the feature of the struggle” similarly afflicted. The aspect of the battle that unnerved the commander and the doctor in the wilderness the most was that the backlanders seemed to surrender themselves to the war as if seeking “the decisive proof of their religious souls.”²⁴ As it was clear that the strength of the backlanders did not come from their weapons, it came from their faith, which the commander, the troops, and the physician of the first expedition were afraid of. I would suggest that, beneath the language of cause and psychic effects, there are always ethical conflicts triggering the actions of the protagonists.

It may be said from the point of view of dramatic construction that the characters of the half-caste soldiers, “of the same stock as the rustics,” are central to the interpretation of Euclides da Cunha’s narrative as a writing that elaborates the trauma of a nationality which he believed to be in the early stages of construction. The republican ideal that espoused extermination was torn to ribbons, absurd and scandalous in the face of the inner drama of those characters who, at the end and before the end of the battle were seen as morally defeated and religiously condemned:

²² Ibidem, p. 290.

²³ Ibidem, p. 199.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 197.

Silence fell dampeningly on both camps. Then while pressed up against the thick walls of the half-ruined temple, the soldiers listened to the mysterious and vague melancholic cadence of the prayers... That singular stoicism impressed them, and dominated them; and as their superstitions and the same naive religiosity had barely vanished in their own souls, they finally faltered before their adversary, who had allied himself with Providence. They envisioned extraordinary resources.²⁵

The strong impression that the rituals of the faith of the inhabitants of Canudos made on the soldiers appears to be linked to the fact that they shared the "same" superstitions and the "same naive religiosity." That is to say, the soldiers *identified* with those backlanders who fought. Despite the fact that the backlanders were the enemy, the soldiers, nonetheless, were unable to eliminate an identification that led them to recognize the value, and to give respect to the same beliefs that seemed so powerful in their opponents. The soldiers were so touched by the same enchantment of the world that their own defeat seemed to them to be the work of an alliance between their adversaries and Providence. But through all those happenings in the backlands, to use Glauber Rocha's inspired expression, it was as if God and the Devil were in the land of the sun. For, that very covenant with Providence which presumably invigorated the backlanders for battle, was also that which enabled them to perform barbarities. For we also see the allies of Providence acting as protagonists in a "cruel drama:" they hung the body of Colonel Tamarindo from a dry branch of a tree; his "dismembered body" was displayed in the wilds as "a terribly lugubrious mannequin" a "demonic vision."²⁶ The unexpected setback of the third expedition caused a "great national commotion," a "general delusion of opinion," a "complete disorientation of the spirits." In this atmosphere, some began to think that the "turbulent tabargues" were not acting in isolation, and that they constituted a "vanguard," to the fore of unknown phalanges, poised to erupt against the new regime.²⁷ As a consequence, a united voice was emerging: "it was necessary to save the Republic" with this becoming a kind of "dominant cry against the common outrage." Through the publication of news extracts, Euclides da Cunha shows that those who promoted the view that there was an alliance between the inhabitants of Canudos and "revolutionary monarchism," also played an important *rôle* in the theatrical spectacle of politics, and that just as the nonconformist monarchists, Antônio Conselheiro and his followers aimed to destroy the Republic, together with "the unity of Brazil."²⁸

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 363.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 294.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 297.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 298.

Unity can only be destroyed if it has first been consolidated. However, what is shown in *Backlands* is that there was no stable political unity in those early times of the Republic. And the war in Canudos was aggravating the darkened face of its own impossibility. The persecuted backlanders, rather than destroying a union, in reality denied its very existence. Once again, we are faced with a fatal inversion: the possibility of nationhood was destroyed under the false premise that it was already consolidated. The narrator states that “one looked at history through an inverted eyepiece...”²⁹ This may mean that those in pursuit of a modern ideal of civilization, who ordered the devastation of Canudos, ended up ruining this ideal. In the name of a supposed construction of unity or national identity, what is seen at the bloodiest peak of the war is the total destruction of this ideal, through the basic fact that those of the same simple and religious birth as the people of the backlands were set in the role of mortal enemies.

Experiencing the fratricide was so traumatic that, according to the accounts of the wounded soldiers, there was a movement contrary to that of unified identification: the figure of the “imaginary enemy” is transposed from that of the common mortal and acquires fantastic and mythological traits:

The *jagunço* [gunman] began to appear as a separate entity, teratological and monstrous, half man, half goblin; in violation of biological laws, in displaying inconceivable resistances; hurling himself neither seen nor tangible on the adversary; sliding, invisible, through the *caatinga* bushland, snakelike; tumbling and sliding down the hillside, as though a specter; lighter than the scraping rifle; thin, dry, fantastic, a self-diluted goblin, weighing less than a child, having tanned skin, rough as the epidermis of mummies, glued over bones...³⁰

Monster, snake, specter, goblin, mummy an intangible being, invisible, formed of slippery matter, sliding and diluted, not letting itself be apprehended, and yet, resistant. But there is another kind of impalpability that the narrative produces and this one concerns Antônio Conselheiro, central protagonist of the backland resistance, whose powerful presence exists only in the sense of an intense and constant evocation. In this part of the work, narrating the war, the living figure of Antônio Conselheiro appears only once, and is described in six sparse lines. Attired in a long blue tunic flowing over his body in an ungraceful manner, he appears with his “forehead lowered and eyes downcast;” Remaining “still and silent before the hushed and

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 387.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 401.

reverent congregation,” slowly raising his face, which is suddenly illuminated by a “glowing and steady look”³¹ as he preaches. His figure will only reappear as a corpse on the penultimate page of the book. Apart from this fleeting mention, in this crucial part of the work presenting the script of the events of the war, nothing is described, no action, no movement, no practical action in the conflict. Little, almost nothing was known about his thoughts and plans, so that this impalpability was, in essence, a reflection of the ignorance concerning the meaning and purpose of his existence and the existence of those who accompanied him. An ignorance which, let us admit, can not be remedied by the prejudiced features of his personality presented in the earlier part of the work. In fact, it should be noted that at no moment of the tragic narrative do we have a clear expression of the beliefs and values of those who accompanied and defended the Conselheiro. What exists is a silence, an absence of voice. It is no wonder that those who lost their discernment most acutely were those who, at the forefront of the struggle, perpetrated the extermination of this paradoxical “strange entrail:”

It was terribly paradoxical that a motherland sought by its native sons armed to the teeth, enlivened by the sound of war, their entrails drawn by Krupps’ artillery, was completely ignored, they never once having seen it...³²

The narrative focus of the conflict

After reading *The Backlands*, we can ask: from what perspective is the Canudos war narrated? What is the angle from which the narrated facts are focused? Where do judgments, appreciations, choices of symbols and characters come from, as well as all the options pertaining to the manner in which matter is distributed and treated? With regard to the problem of narrative focus, the narrator of *The Backlands* presents some curious characteristics. If we want to classify him as an “omniscient narrator,” understood as the one who dominates all knowledge of history, and who as a god can scrutinize even the mental life of his characters, then we can not, since his so-called omniscience would have a limit: it never reaches as far as the minds of the Canudos inhabitants. The intimacy of their thoughts, their desires, their way of life remain unknown to us. But the striking feature of the narrator’s focus is the adoption of the first person plural perspective, the position of a “we” that has the effect of creating an opposition between this “we,” and “they,”

³¹ Ibidem, p. 261.

³² Ibidem, p. 423.

those who are attacked, the hunted, the destroyed. This relationship of opposition, in addition to restricting the narrative focus to the logic of conflict, is a linguistic-formal resource that necessarily places the reader within the perspective of those attacking. Let us establish certain aspects of the complexity inherent in this game in which the perspective of a certain “we,” a certain first person plural is created:

- a) The narrator is included on one side of the “march” to war, his angle of vision obeys the logistics of war.
- b) But this “we,” far from being homogeneous, involves a complicated game of identification, insofar as it includes political and religious authorities, the press, public opinion, the army, all Brazilians who are not inhabitants of Canudos, all those who defend republican ideals, all who support the ideals of the French revolution, and in short, all those who defend modern civilization.
- c) The target of attack, the vector through which the narration is directed, is in many respects used to point out a blind spot. More precisely: the narrative vector is literally confused with a vanishing point, so that everything that lies at the opposite pole of the conflict is presented by those of this and not that side of the struggle. Apart from this one-sided mode of presentation, where the image of the other is always filtered and decoded by visions that are often fraudulent and fanciful, there is the incessant search for a true reference that escapes the gaze of the narrator and the reader.
- d) It can not be said that the narrative is neutral, since it comes from the exclusive point of view of those who won the war. On the other hand, the narrator’s logistical situation does not encourage him to defend the position in which he is included; on the contrary, war is seen as a crime which he intends to denounce. However, it cannot be said that he tells the story of the vanquished, for they are largely unknown to him.

The dramatic narration engages the reader in the representation of the tragic events, forcing him to stand to one side of the struggle, which means that, in the very act of reading, he is induced to experience the same ethical conflict of that war. Through the narrative strategy adopted, the reader experiences the conflict of the war in the struggle with the text itself. The narrative points to a target that is seen only from afar, but which remains always out of reach, delayed, thrust away, postponed. The perspective and progress of the reading is confused with the perspective and progress of the

army: the march is slow and invariably interrupted by the resistance of the attackers who do not allow themselves to be *surrounded*, do not allow themselves to be *captured/taken*. The torpor of war is expressed in the slowness of the narrative plot. The reader struggles against the sluggish and truncated rhythm of a reading that evolves in leaps towards a point that is never reached, a terminal point that the reader longs to arrive at, to get to *know*, to *see* what it holds an expectation never to be fulfilled. The reader fights this resistance by the backlanders against the attacks, because only the resistance can separate the reader from his cognitive harassment of Canudos. The reader is part of this expedition. When he finally reaches the concluding lines, an uneasy feeling grips him: what he sought was the knowledge of something now destroyed forever, without ever having been known to him.

Art and violence, monument and memory

One of the most important works in Brazilian literature, *The Backlands* is a book that may be considered as one of the richest and most relevant monuments to historical consciousness, in the same sense in which Walter Benjamin employed this expression in the fifteenth thesis of "On the Concept of History."³³ As well as constituting itself as a work whose complex structure and singular narrative form raises, yet again, careful reflection, this book offers the real possibility of knowledge and revision of the directions and meanings that could be attributed to the constitutive movements of history never peaceful in the consolidation of the republican regime in Brazil, officially established in 1822. The monuments of a historical consciousness, as theorized by Walter Benjamin, do not follow the chronometer times of clocks, but rather the cyclical time of calendars in which the same day returns as a day of remembrance. As Michael Löwy asserts, calendars "are an expression of a historic, heterogeneous time, full of past memory and present times."³⁴

³³ W. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", [in:] *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4: 1938-1940, eds, H. Eiland, M. W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2006; idem, "Sobre o conceito da história", [in:] idem, *Obras Escolhidas. Magia e Técnica, Arte e Política*, trad. S. P. Rouanet, prefácio J.-M. Gagnebin, Editora Brasiliense, São Paulo 1985, p. 230.

³⁴ M. Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: aviso de incêndio. Uma leitura das "Teses sobre o conceito de história"*, trad. W. C. Brandt, trad. das teses J.-M. Gagnebin, M. Müller, Boitempo Editorial, Harvard 2005, p. 124.

In the same manner as that of the book *The Backlands*, the film *Black God, White Devil*, by the Bahian film-maker Glauber Rocha, might be considered in the light of the same Benjaminian concept of monument of historical consciousness of a certain type of life as lived, in those times, in the backlands of northeastern Brazil. First released in 1964, at the beginning of the military dictatorship in Brazil, the film explores and presents, making use of an original cinematographic language, the same types of conflicts and impasses that were reported throughout the narrative of the struggle in *The Backlands*. An icon of *Cinema Novo*,³⁵ the film constructs a backland world through the saga of Manuel and Rosa, in its different and successive phases. Presented as a *Cordel* poem,³⁶ the story is told by Blind Julius, who accompanies them in this trajectory of their lives, in a predominantly open and absolutely sun-baked semi-desert northeastern landscape. Canudos and Antônio Conselheiro are evoked in the allegorical construction of another story. Apart from explicit references told in words of different characters, pertaining to the massacre that took place in Canudos, one of the central figures of the story recounts what is a clear Antônio Conselheiro allegory: Sebastião, the messianic leader, the “Saint who works miracles” (*santo milagreiro*), grouped with his followers in Monte Santo (symbolic configuration of Canudos), preaching against the landowners, promising miracles and foretelling the fulfillment of the prophecy taken from Antônio Conselheiro’s sermons that “the backlands will become the sea, and that the sea will become the backlands.”³⁷ As narrated by Euclides da Cunha concerning a Canudos, both empirical and real, as well as in the fiction of Glauber Rocha, the leadership practiced by Sebastião proved troublesome to local landowners

³⁵ The “New Cinema” artistic movement emerged in the early 1950s, as a reaction of young filmmakers to the collapse of the great São Paulo film studios. It advocated a more realistic and less expensive film production, in opposition to the mainstream of the Hollywoodian film industry. Inspired by the Italian Neo-realism filmmakers and the French *Nouvelle Vague*, the aesthetics of this cinema movement is characterized by slow displacements, no luxury environments, most of the films being in black and white.

³⁶ *Cordel* literature is a popular literary genre, characteristic of northeastern Brazil. It has a rhymed form and stems from the oral tradition, printed on leaflets. The name came from the way in which the leaflets were put on sale in Portugal, hung on strings or twine (*Cordel*, or in plural: *cordéis*).

³⁷ In the words of Antonio Conselheiro: “the backlands will become the coast [sea] and the coast [sea] will become the backlands.” We altered Elizabeth Lowe’s translation. In the original, “sea” (“mar”) is used, not “coast.” E. da Cunha, *Backlands: the Canudos Campaign*, trans. E. Lowe, introduction I. Stavans, Penguin Publishing Group, London 2010, p. 42.

and the Catholic church to such an extent that a priest and a colonel finally commissioned Antônio das Mortes, the “killer of gunfighters (*cangaceiros*),” to wipe out Sebastião and his followers.

In spite of this poetic evocation, the film’s plot bears no direct relation to the contents of Euclides da Cunha’s book. In contrast to what takes place in *The Backlands*, in the film *Black God, White Devil*, messianism and guerilla warfare (*cangaço*) represented through the figures of Blessed Sebastião and Corisco, the “devil of Lampião” are representative characters of ideologically separated primitive cultural sources, whereas, in the book, they are presented as intrinsically united. According to this strategy, messianism might be represented as an essentially hallucinatory and irrational attitude, a characteristic by which it will remain completely unfeasible and unauthorized as a possible solution, since in the film it is presented as pure alienation, passivity, and as old-fashioned; on the other hand, the other line of ideological force, represented by warfare (*cangaço*), appears endowed with a more positive revolutionary connotation, and may be constituted in those dark times as a genuine revolt against the established order. Consider the scene depicting Sebastião sacrificing a young child with a long dagger in order to anoint Rosa’s forehead with that innocent blood, so that her unbelieving soul can be purified; such a sequence in which Manuel participates in an unconsciously solicitous manner shows a follower of messianism engaged in an absolutely unjustifiable act of violence, however it is viewed. Nevertheless, Rosa’s equally violent reaction, where she ends up killing Sebastião with the same knife that he used to strike the child within the plot, this reaction achieves an almost “revolutionary” sense. The same ambiguous treatment will be dispensed via the violent acts of Corisco, the gunfighter who in the figure of a vigilante on the side of the people appears as justified in the face of the supposition of a perverse need to demand that everything be solved based on “the rifle and the dagger” and “not with the rosary.” It can be said that it is Corisco’s point of view that reveals in its highest degree what the author himself called the “aesthetics of violence.” According to theorist and film critic Ismail Xavier, in a book that analyzes Glauber Rocha’s film in the light of his artistic project, the defense of an aesthetic of violence by the filmmaker is taken as a revolutionary way of performing art, in which it is shown that “the violence of the oppressed gains legitimacy as a form of response to institutional violence, often invisible.”³⁸ As can be seen, Glauber Rocha himself seems to authorize this interpretation in the following interview:

³⁸ I. Xavier, *Sertão Mar: Glauber Rocha e a estética da fome*, Editora Brasiliense, São Paulo 1983, p. 123.

On the Cinema Novo: an aesthetic of violence, before being primitive, is revolutionary; that is the starting point for the colonizer to understand the existence of the colonized. Only by raising awareness of its unique possibility, violence, can the colonizer understand, through horror, the strength of the culture he exploits. As long as he does not raise arms, the colonized is a slave; it took the first death of a policeman for the French to become aware of an Algerian.³⁹

This discourse defending the aesthetics of violence in its revolutionary aspect seems to echo, in *God and the Devil*, the one of the gunfighter leader Corisco when he says that “man in this land is only of value when he takes up arms to change destiny.”

Now, close to the end of the book *The Backlands*, is the striking account of the effects of the violence of war on a child’s face. She was carried by an old lady, her white hair covered in earth, who appeared suddenly, walking shakily, among the huddled miserable masses. The old woman attracted attention wherever she went, for she had with her “a little girl, granddaughter, great-granddaughter, perhaps,” described as follows:

And this child horrified. The left side of its face had been torn open, some time ago, by a grenade splinter in such a way that the jaws were prominent between the red lips of the already healed wound [...] The right cheek smiled. And it was frightening to behold that incomplete and painful laughter shown on one side of the face and immediately extinguished on the other, in the void of a scar. That old woman carried the most monstrous creation of the campaign.⁴⁰

It can be said that this child is the most complete symbol of the violence of a story that is effected through the most absurd brutalities against those who have no possibility of reaction or resistance. This girl of indefinite age one cannot tell whether she is the granddaughter, great-granddaughter or great-great-granddaughter of the old lady is the figure of dehumanization itself, the expression of a denatured face that nevertheless smiles, horrifyingly, with the only part of the face that remains. Sinister metaphor, baleful omen: the creature-saplings of the nation-people, crushed and repulsive, perfectly symbolize the catastrophe, the ruin, and the massacre of a future made impossible. The face not only loses age and identity, but also the human character of its features and its possibilities of expression, forever interrupted by the “vacuum” of a great scar. Here is the tragic irony of a destiny foreshadowed by the torn laughter, an excrescence; disturbing.

³⁹ G. Rocha, “Uma estética da fome”, *Revista da Civilização Brasileira*, 1965, I, 3, p. 165; I. Xavier, op. cit., p. 153.

⁴⁰ E. da Cunha, *Os sertões...*, op. cit., p. 494.

The purpose of bringing this Euclidean description to the surface is to show that, although it is not possible to speak of an “aesthetic of violence” in *The Backlands*, the game of identifications itself that we attempted to establish in the previous section the soldier with the gunfighter and the reader with the soldier, which through transitivity leads to the identification of the reader with the gunfighter this game or circuit of identifications is entirely permeated by the awareness of a violence embodied in the *télos* of that history. In the complex and ambiguous position of a *The Backlands* reader, who in turn identifies himself with the oppressor and also the oppressed, there echoes the same idea that, although it is said that it is necessary on both sides, the violence of the oppressed seems to have greater legitimacy. Thus, between Euclides da Cunha’s book and the film by Glauber Rocha one can see then a point of coincidence: the violence of the oppressed in the face of institutionalized violence seems justified.

As for the film *Black God, White Devil*, despite the clear separation between the tendencies of messianism and guerilla warfare (*cangaço*) which also represent two distinct phases of the process of conversions experienced by Manuel, who goes from simple cowboy to blessed, and from blessed to gunfighter messianism and guerilla warfare (*cangaço*), symbolized by the characters of Sebastião and Corisco, are as Xavier says: “two sides of the same metaphysics, accentuating, in the symmetry of their inversions, their profound unity.”⁴¹ It is the metaphysics of Good and Evil, of God and the Devil, that regulates the fate of the backlander’s soul in its unknown religiosity, diffused and permeated with legends and superstitions. The word ‘destiny’ is uttered repeatedly in the film, by almost all its characters. Fate always means something greater, transcending death itself and is part of the divine plan, which also includes redemption and damnation. At the beginning of the film, after Manuel’s mother was executed by a henchman of the former chief, he admits that “it was not from the death of God” that he lost her, and reflecting on what happened he declares that it was “God’s own hand” that summoned him to the “path of misfortune,” in as much as through this tortuous path he would find the Good. The image of a God who compels misfortune is that which places him in a transcendent order which recognizes and justifies Evil as one legitimate obstacle to be overcome in order to arrive at the true Good.

This is also seen in the long and extended scene where Manuel climbs a staircase with a stone on his head at the moment of his religious conversion. This sequence of images is paradigmatic in the sense of showing an

⁴¹ I. Xavier, op. cit., p. 98.

ethos of the backlander very close to that portrayed by Euclides da Cunha: the ethos of the human being who, by assuming a practically impossible task, nevertheless manages to accomplish it by the force of faith which enables him to surpass the natural limitations of his own condition. For faithful Manuel, striving to the end of his physical strength, must first keep the stone on his head and then carry it up the hill. He tries many times, he sometimes falls, but he prays and tries again until he can finally overcome all normal limitations, as though only the inner strength of his faith moves him. When he attains success in this literally Herculean task, he is filled with a happiness whose only meaning is that he has succeeded in overcoming the superhuman effort that was imposed upon him by the necessity of a transcendent order: the enigmatic fate from which he flees, and at the same time seeks. This sequence shows the ethos of a people able to unite the effort of messianic resignation with the use of rifle and dagger in a combination that produces and preserves a natural disposition and is secretly available for the manifestation of the revolt. It is the very way of life understood as the interweaving of determinations of nature with the force of culture that calls for violence as an already costly resistance in the most basic existential plane of the people of the backlands, because it is part of his being and his continuing to be driven by the hardness of the stones, the dryness of the climate, the caustic light of an imperiously permanent sun. It is not a question here of making an appraisal of determinism, but rather of recognizing that, in Rocha's film as in Cunha's book, the world of the people of the backlands cannot be depicted when material conditions are neglected, even when and especially when they mean to emphasize ethical and aesthetic aspects. Thus, in the film, scenes of crossing and procession through the semi-arid regions, gain more pungency amidst the cacti, which seem to open their dry and prickly branches like lean arms and evoke the infinite. It is a form of life in which weaponry is held in hand, with rosary beads round the neck, and in which divine praises echo to the sound of bells and gunshots, with the bullets directed towards the sky, in exaltation of sublime desperation.

In light of the above, it may be concluded that, as Walter Benjamin claims, the film *Black God, White Devil* actualizes the awareness of the possibility of blasting the continuum of history by a revolutionary action, represented allegorically by the flight of Manuel and Rosa to a backlands that turns into sea. However, in Euclides da Cunha's book, the sea never reached the backland. There is no redemption, no dream, no possible revolution, only a historical teleology in deep acute crisis. However, in both works of art, the question seems to reverberate: are violence and war inevitable? And both works seem to respond in a certain way: they are inevitable whenever a so-called

'civilizing' process rather than incorporating alternative forms of life and social projects into their structures is dedicated to massacring them, exterminating them, incorporating certainly a barbarity, which continues to be called "construction."

Translated by Robert Neil Wall

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