



## BETWEEN THE PREY AND THE HUNTER: THE INSTINCT OF RESISTANCE IN *BACURAU*

### *ENTRE A PRESA E O CAÇADOR: O INSTINTO DA RESISTÊNCIA EM BACURAU*

Prof. Dr. Jack Brandão<sup>i</sup>

**ABSTRACT** – This article analyzes *Bacurau* (2019), film by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, from a historical-sociocultural perspective that links the Brazilian sertão to the imaginary of cangaço and narratives of popular resistance. Based on a dialogue with regionalist literature – especially Franklin Távora’s *O Cabeleira* (1876) – and a critical discussion of 19<sup>th</sup>-century racial discourses (exemplified by Arthur de Gobineau), as well as Brazilian intellectual production represented by Euclides da Cunha (*Os Sertões*), the study seeks to understand how racialized and deterministic representations of the sertão contributed to naturalizing violence and justifying forms of domination. The study also

establishes an analogy between the hunt portrayed in *Bacurau* and contemporary imperialist practices, in which hegemonic powers impose their military and cultural force on peoples considered **inferior**. This relationship is problematized in light of the Vietnam War, in which the Vietnamese subverted the logic of domination, inverting the condition of prey into hunter. To interpret the hunters’ sadistic pleasure and the collective dynamics of violence, the article mobilizes psychological theories of instinct and drives – articulating William James’s reflections on habit and instinct, William McDougall’s focus on instinctual motivators, and Freudian formulations of drives (including the tension between the life drive and the death drive).



These combined perspectives illuminate how individual dispositions, cultural narratives, and racialized ideologies converge in the film's representation of the hunt and popular insurgency.

**KEYWORDS** – *Bacurau*; *cangaço*; hunting; imperialism; resistance; Gobineau, McDougall

**RESUMO** – O presente artigo analisa *Bacurau* (2019), filme de Kleber Mendonça Filho e Juliano Dornelles, sob uma perspectiva histórico-sociocultural que vincula o sertão brasileiro ao imaginário do cangaço e às narrativas de resistência popular. A partir do diálogo com a literatura regionalista – em especial *O Cabeleira* (1876), de Franklin Távora – e da discussão crítica sobre discursos raciais do século XIX (exemplificados por Arthur de Gobineau), bem como da produção intelectual brasileira representada por Euclides da Cunha (*Os Sertões*), busca-se compreender como representações racializadas e deterministas do sertão contribuíram para naturalizar a violência e justificar formas de dominação. O estudo estabelece

ainda uma analogia entre a caçada retratada em *Bacurau* e práticas imperialistas contemporâneas, nas quais potências hegemônicas impõem sua força militar e cultural sobre povos considerados **inferiores**; essa relação é problematizada à luz da Guerra do Vietnã, em que os vietnamitas subverteram a lógica da dominação, invertendo a condição de presa em caçador. Para interpretar o prazer sádico dos caçadores e as dinâmicas coletivas de violência, o artigo mobiliza teorias psicológicas do instinto e das pulsões – articulando as reflexões de William James sobre hábito e instinto, o enfoque de William McDougall nos motivadores instintivos e as formulações freudianas das pulsões (incluindo a tensão entre pulsão de vida e pulsão de morte). Essas perspectivas conjuntas iluminam como disposições individuais, narrativas culturais e ideologias racializadas convergem na representação da caçada e da insurgência popular no filme.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** – *Bacurau*; *cangaço*; caça; imperialismo; resistência; Gobineau, McDougall

## Introduction

We can reaffirm, or even sometimes question, the Darwinian idea of survival of the fittest when

considering, in a broad social context, the persistence and dominance of an empire – reflected in its expansion or collapse; the



prominence or disfavor of a social group – demonstrated by its supremacy or submission to external forces; or the struggle for survival of a human being – perceived or not, within the environment they inhabit.

As history shows, in these three contexts, there is an interrelationship between the ideas of force and domination, sometimes leading to aggression and other times to predation. That occurs when groups are compelled to use strategies to maintain the *status quo*, avoid succumbing to changes in established agreements, or survive amidst chaos. However, despite ongoing negotiations, this order is always broken, altering the previous state.

This becomes clear when those who were **weak** in the relationship reverse the chain of power, free themselves from their bonds, and harm those who previously attacked, oppressed, or **hunted** them, rebuilding themselves on their oppressors' ruins. History provides countless examples, such as the Hellenic peoples under Persian rule, later conquered by Alexander; the Turks, former allies of Rome under Justin II or Heraclius, who overthrew the Empire in the 15<sup>th</sup> century; the

once-submissive bourgeoisie, who took nobles and religious figures to the guillotine, dismantling the *Ancien Régime*; or more recently, the Vietnamese and Taliban rising against the United States.

From these examples, we reach the French-Brazilian dystopian film **Bacurau** (2019), directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, a landmark of contemporary Brazilian cinema. It's a futuristic plot depicting a village in the Northeastern backlands caught in a game of **predation**, with its own residents as the targets. But it's not as easy as it seems; the hunters are unaware not only of the traditions of these people but also that these traditions are connected to their reality. They are very much alive and embodied in the town's neglected museum.

The city is invaded by foreigners seeking adrenaline and dopamine, who buy the right to hunt its inhabitants for fun, with the full approval of local authorities. These authorities show complete contempt for the people and their culture, seeking to dehumanize the residents, seen as **arrogant** and **overbearing**. That was simply because the residents refused to stay silent and accept their abuse.



It is no surprise that the town's mayor saw the extermination of these people as a **final solution** to his own problems and an opportunity to wipe them off the map.

The community, however, rose against the foreign invaders, who, like their own rulers, saw them not as human beings but merely as objects of amusement or manipulation. Unfortunately, this is nothing new, as it is a common theme of imperialism and necropolitics, seen in Nazi Germany in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or in Zionist Israel against the Gaza Strip today.

This article, therefore, aims to analyze **Bacurau** within a broader context – not as an isolated work trapped in its dystopian world, but as part of an ongoing cultural dialogue, especially with universal history, and more narrowly, with a phenomenon in Brazil known as **cangaço**, referenced in the film.

The roots of this movement are also explored in Brazilian literature, particularly in the Northeastern regionalist novel, which sought not only to discover Brazil beyond the court in Rio de Janeiro but also to reveal the reality of rural areas unknown to most Brazilians. For example, O

**Cabeleira** (1876), by Franklin Távora, is a notable work that promotes “literature of the North” or the most authentic Brazilian literature. Its story follows an 18<sup>th</sup>-century bandit, but its purpose goes beyond mere historical recounting, as the author uses fiction to explore the roots of violence in the region. At the end of the book, after the protagonist's execution, the narrator questions the criminal's sole guilt, exonerating society and its leaders:

The courts executed Cabeleira for crimes that mainly stemmed from ignorance and poverty. But isn't the primary responsibility for similar evils, first and foremost, the society that fails to fulfill its duty to promote education, which is the foundation of morality, and to organize work, the foundation of wealth? (TÁVORA, 1988, p. 135)

With this rhetorical question, the author, a pioneer in representing and criticizing the social structures that created it, summarizes the work's central thesis: that the criminal is fundamentally a product of an exclusionary society and an absent state. The figure of the **social criminal** is thus redefined,



becoming a symbol of resistance to an oppression that is increasingly global. Historical violence echoes in his own life, redefining concepts like **good** and **evil**, as well as ideas of **hero** and **villain**, which are reflected across different times and among various peoples worldwide.

### The search for allies and power

Let's look back to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and examine the American Empire. We'll see that it often allied itself with certain groups that, despite being considered **inferior** and insignificant<sup>1</sup>, were seen as essential to its interests. However, what was perceived as inferiority proved, over time, to be quite the opposite; they ultimately demonstrated strength beyond their appearance. Moreover, these groups were skilled at using the funding, training, and weapons provided by a power once considered a friend for their own benefit. The justification for such

cooperation, a common jargon used years later, was always the same: to free its population from European imperialism, communism, local tyrants, or to bring democracy to the country. In reality, it had a single goal: to weaken or subjugate groups and countries that threatened U.S. interests, either by destroying them or subduing them, at least temporarily.

Many of these groups not only broke free from imperialist shackles – both European and American – and faced the consequences, but also inflicted serious setbacks on their former sponsors. Examples include the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS)<sup>2</sup> financing, training, and arming the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh, in French Indochina<sup>3</sup>.

It should be noted that after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. declaration of war on Japan, American power was focused on

---

<sup>1</sup> As absurd as this statement may seem, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are witnessing a resurgence of supremacist groups, especially following Donald Trump's second election. A clear example is how the Zionists treat the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. They see them as inferior beings who deserve to be exterminated, echoing on a large scale what the Nazis did to their own Jews in Europe, occupied by their troops.

<sup>2</sup> The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was the first U.S. intelligence agency, formed during World War II as an agency of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to coordinate espionage activities behind enemy lines for all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces. Its other functions included propaganda, subversion, and postwar planning, and it is considered a precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

<sup>3</sup> Today Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia



defeating the Japanese Empire by any means necessary, which included supporting Ho Chi Minh and China. The Asian coalition, however, aimed not only to defeat and expel the Japanese, who had occupied the region around 1940 with Vichy France's consent, but also to diminish French influence.

However, after the conflict ended and Ho Chi Minh's declaration of Vietnamese independence in September 1945<sup>4</sup>, the Americans not only abandoned the pact signed with the Viet Minh but also sought to restore the pre-war *status quo*, favoring France.

FIGURE 1



Ho Chi Minh with members of the American OSS, whose mission was to train Viet Minh guerrillas, 1945

Photo by the National Archives and Records Administration

However, negotiations between France and the Viet Minh ultimately failed, resulting in the Indochina War, which lasted nearly a decade. As tensions escalated, France was defeated in 1954

despite U.S. aid, resulting in the division of Vietnam: the North, a communist country; the South, an anti-communist one, now directly financed by the U.S.

---

<sup>4</sup>Which only existed in theory, never in practice, since they did not control any territory.



Fearing the spread of communism throughout the region, the United States, despite its failed aid to France, found itself drawn into a war that lasted nearly twenty years (1955–1975). Like France, it aimed to defend the Republic of Vietnam, which proved unable to withstand the offensives of the North and the Viet Cong. What followed was a gradual increase in American presence in the region and the atrocities that came with it.

Yet, who would have imagined that the Western superpower, with all its military strength, would fall to its knees before the seemingly **insignificant** people of tiny Vietnam? Of course, many arguments exist – some claim that Uncle Sam didn't actually lose any war but abandoned the battlefield, or that American civil society hastened the process. But under no circumstances did the U.S. lose this war!

However, the truth is that nearly 60,000 Americans died on the battlefield, along with over 300,000 wounded and 21,000 permanently disabled. That, excluding the victims of ex-combatants on U.S. soil, is due to traumatic outbreaks. Additionally, Vietnam not only gained its independence but also

united, becoming a communist nation. Isn't that, in itself, a major American defeat?

Six years after the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam in 1973, the CIA supported **Operation Cyclone** began, aiming to combat communism and provoke the Soviet Union into a conflict similar to Vietnam. That was reported by Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter's national security advisor. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the U.S. supplied arms to the mujahideen (fig. 2) through the Pakistani Secret Service (ISI) to oppose the Soviets. This support even received the approval of Saudi billionaire Osama bin Laden, who recruited members from other countries to join the effort. Over 100,000 men from various Muslim nations were trained at the U.S. government's expense for this purpose.

After the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, chaos ensued, worsened by a civil war that led to the rise of several terrorist groups, including the Taliban and al-Qaeda, some of which received funding from the United States. The Taliban would come to dominate Afghanistan, establishing a government based on Sharia law, brutalizing women,



and destroying books and the cultural heritage of other religions. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda expanded its operations beyond Afghanistan, becoming an international organization responsible for numerous attacks worldwide, culminating in the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York.

It's interesting to note how these groups, in some way, ended up rising and rebelling against the American *status quo* itself, like al-Qaeda, whose leader was hunted for nearly a decade. However, as early as 1998, the former National Security Advisor was asked in an interview if he regretted providing weapons, money, and training to future terrorists. Brzezinski said, "What's more important in world history, the Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet Empire? A few agitated Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?" (GIBBS, 1998)

Three years after that interview, nineteen terrorists – the so-called "agitated Muslims" – hijacked four commercial airliners, crashing them into the World Trade Center Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. A fourth plane crashed in Pennsylvania

during a revolt by passengers who already knew what was happening. The suicide attacks killed more than three thousand people, prompting the U.S. and its NATO allies to invade Afghanistan in their War on Terror, which has since spread to other parts of the world.

We can cite several other examples of U.S. support for specific groups and their subsequent uprisings: Saddam Hussein's Iraq, pre-Islamic Revolution Iran, Lebanon, Bashar al-Assad's Syria, not to mention the Islamic State, all within the same region and timeframe. Our primary focus is to highlight, in the two cases above, how the U.S., which presented itself as a savior, turned its back on its **partners** when the other side demanded that it fulfill their agreements. That is clear in the case of Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh: as an **insignificant** group, the Americans ignored their request for help against the French, preferring to side with a former ally. But ultimately, they too ended up in a war that was not theirs, and to make matters worse, they faced defeat.



FIGURE 2



President Reagan meeting with Afghan Mujahideen in the White House to discuss the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, 1983

Photo: Michael Evans, US National Archives and Records Administration

Without passing judgment on history, we can see how, at times, those who were previously **insignificant** in the face of certain powers managed to shift the balance of power. However, for this liberation to be achievable, one key factor was essential: the unity of these groups around their own traditions and cultures, ultimately their shared common goals. These are the catalysts, even if, after their victory, they often behave in ways similar to their former opponents.

### ***Bacurau: the power of an inferior race?***

*Bacurau* might seem like just another film attempting to depict the Brazilian Northeastern backlands, many of which are filled with *clichés*. However, the opening scene is immediately striking: besides an accident on the road leading to the village, involving a truck carrying coffins – many of which are scattered across the highway – and a dead motorcyclist, a sudden alert appears via cell broadcast on the water truck headed toward the village. The



notice offers a reward for information about a fugitive from the police, Lunga.

Such scenes challenge the stereotypical ideas often spread, especially by television, which usually promotes a simplistic and biased view of the region. By focusing solely on poverty, drought, hunger, and misery, these media outlets not only shape a negative and exaggerated iconophotological perception of part of the country

but also reinforce the notion of complete misfortune in the region. In these narratives, one sees only desperate migrants, surrounded by funeral processions whose dead are carried in hammocks<sup>5</sup> (fig. 3), accompanied by lethargic, weak, and naive individuals. Yet, this portrayal conceals many other resilient qualities of these people, who do not give up so easily in the face of the area's hostility.

**FIGURE 3**



Net burial in the interior of Brazil in the 1970s,  
Photo by Chico Karam

---

<sup>5</sup> Like all imagery constructs, this one also has roots in facts, even if they are isolated, revealing a reality for the poorest. Coffins, for example, were a luxury item for many families, to the extent that some municipalities lent them out to transport their loved ones to the cemetery, only to

return them later for other processions. This image has also been depicted in literature, as exemplified in 1955 João Cabral de Melo Neto's work, *Morte e Vida Severina* (*Severine Life and Death*).



Although the idea of death is already symbolized in the scene – by the motorcyclist and the coffins – it is further emphasized when Teresa, one of the characters who was riding in the water truck, arrives in the village for her grandmother’s funeral. Over her 94 years, the matriarch of a large family became beloved by the local community, which turned out in large numbers for her funeral.

Returning to the topic of stereotypes, Dona Carmelita, for example, dies of old age, not from hunger or poverty, leaving behind not only a large, socially diverse family but also many friends. Around her coffin, one of the most valued aspects of those people is clear: their sense of belonging.

The village thus becomes a true reflection of Brazilian miscegenation. In this genuine social oasis, issues of **race**, gender, individual choices, or personal traits matter little: the same space hosts blacks, whites, mixed-race individuals, prostitutes, heterosexuals, homosexuals, believers, and non-believers living together harmoniously and depending on each other. Its strength lies precisely in this

mutually supportive and diverse relationship.

Euclides da Cunha (1998), despite being a man of his time and influenced by many of the **racial theories** of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, describes the *sertanejo* in ***Os sertões*** (1902) as follows:

The *sertanejo* [countryman] is, above all, **strong**. He doesn’t suffer from the exhausting rickets common among the neurasthenic *mestizos* of the coast.

However, his appearance at first glance suggests otherwise. He lacks the impeccable aesthetics, agility, and perfect structure seen in athletic builds. (CUNHA, 1998, p. 105, emphasis added)

Though he is neither lethargic, weak, nor naive, there is another aspect that the author of ***Os sertões*** highlights. While praising the *sertanejo* people he observed in Canudos, Euclides da Cunha also reveals his agreement with the racial ideas of his time regarding one particular aspect: the prevailing standard of beauty. It is no coincidence that he states that the *sertanejo*

is ungainly, clumsy, and awkward, inept, and crooked. **Hercules-Quasimodo** reflects



the ugliness typical of the weak in his appearance. His unsteady, nearly waddling, sinuous gait resembles the movement of disjointed limbs. That is heightened by his typically dejected posture, a sign of indifference that gives him a depressingly humble quality. (CUNHA, 1998, p. 105, emphasis added)

In strength, he is a Hercules; in beauty, he is a Quasimodo, the main character of Victor Hugo's novel, **The Hunchback of Notre Dame** (1831). After all, he escapes the standard set at the time – namely, that they were neither white nor pure – as dictated by the various racist theories of that period. Such ideas, which related not only to **race** but also to the supremacy and beauty of white over others, are scientifically unsustainable today. Yet, they gained popularity back then, especially with Gobineau's **Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races** (1915), which states:

I have already observed that the human groups to which the European nations and their

descendants belong are the most beautiful. One has only to compare the various types of men scattered over the earth's surface to be convinced of this. From the almost rudimentary face and structure of the Pelagian and the Pecheray<sup>6</sup> to the tall and nobly proportioned figure of Charle Magne, the intelligent regularity of the characteristics of Napoleon, and the imposing majesty that exhales from the royal countenance of Louis XIV, there is a series of gradations; the peoples who are not of white blood approach beauty, but do not attain it. (GOBINEAU, 1915, pp. 150-151)

Thus, for this author, anyone who did not meet this specific standard could never be called **beautiful**; at best, they could only achieve this:

Those who are most akin to us come closest to beauty; such are the degenerate Aryan stocks of India and Persia, and the Semitic peoples who are least infected by contact with the black race. As these races proceed from the white type, their characteristics and limbs become incorrect in form; they

---

<sup>6</sup> According to *the Narrative of the surveying voyages of his majesty's ships adventure and Beagle*, from 1839, this people are described this way: "About the central parts of Magalhaens Strait is a small and very miserable horde, whose

name I do not know. Their usual exclamation is 'Pecheray, Pecheray!' whence Bougainville and others called them the Pecherays. For want of a more correct term I shall here use the same word". (NARRATIVE, 1839, p. 132)



acquire defects of proportion which, in the races that are entirely foreign to us, end by producing an extreme ugliness. (GOBINEAU, 1915, pp. 150-151)

It is interesting to note that the author, despite excluding all non-European peoples, such as the Hebrew Semites, from his standard of beauty, tries to support his supremacist ideas by using the mythical Adam as the origin of the so-called **white race**:

We must, of course, acknowledge that Adam is the ancestor of the white race. The scriptures are evidently meant to be understood in this way, for the generations deriving from him are indeed white. That being admitted, there is nothing to show that, in the view of the first compilers of the Adamite genealogies, those outside the white race were considered part of the species at all. (GOBINEAU, 1915, p. 118)

If such theories seem absurd today, Gobineau's work, first published in 1855, was widely accepted at the time. Besides asserting the beauty and superiority of white people over others, the Frenchman aims to show that interbreeding between human **races** is always harmful, especially for the stronger group –

the white race, according to him, which he believes loses its core traits: strength, intelligence, and beauty:

Both the good and the bad qualities are seen to diminish in intensity with repeated intermixture of blood. Still, they also scatter and separate off from each other, and are often mutually opposed. The white race was initially perceived as holding a monopoly on beauty, intelligence, and strength. By its union with other varieties, hybrids were created, which were beautiful without strength, strong without intelligence, or, if intelligent, both weak and ugly. [...] Each stage of a perfect mixture produces a new type from diverse elements, and develops special faculties. As soon as further elements are added, the vast difficulty of harmonizing the whole creates a state of anarchy. The more this increases, the more do even the best and richest of *the new contributions diminish in value, and by their mere presence add fuel to an evil which they cannot abate.* (GOBINEAU, 1915, pp. 209-210)

This **Scientific** idea was also used by Adolf Hitler (2001), who, in his *Mein Kampf* (1925) in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, states:



[Nature] has little desire for the individual association of the weakest with the strongest, and it is even less interested in the fusion of a **superior race with an inferior one**. Such an act would be nearly a mortal blow to all its future efforts at improvement [...].

Historical experience offers numerous examples of this. It clearly shows that in every case of blood mixing between the Aryan and inferior peoples; the outcome has consistently been the disappearance of the civilizing element. (HITLER, 2001, p. 212, emphasis added)

It wouldn't take long before the Eurocentric and white ideal also became racial and supremacist, to the point that the culture of countries like the United States still confuses the **phenotypic** idea with the **racial** one: no matter how white a person appears, if they are not of European, let's say Anglo-Saxon, origin, they do not fit the model.

The image of Bacurau's population (fig. 4) is quite different, as their phenotype doesn't follow a single pattern like that of the (pseudo) **Aryan race**, created by Gobineau and popularized by

Hitler. According to both, these people would be nothing more than an **inferior race** because they are deeply mixed. Therefore, his claim that miscegenation would be "an almost mortal blow directed against all the further work of racial improvement" (HITLER, 2001, p. 212) carried out by nature is just a reconstruction of a social model that aimed not only to oppress certain peoples with **scientific** justification but also to enslave or even eliminate them for the benefit of a specific social agenda group.

Contrary to claims made by supremacists, it is essential to remember that the concept of **race** no longer applies to humans, as we all belong to the same species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Essentially, there are no **human races**; only minor phenotypic differences that make up a tiny part of our genetic makeup<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, we can discuss admixture – miscegenation between people of different origins – which, unlike spread in that period, provides benefits not just genetically, by increasing DNA variability and allelic diversity, but

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Lewontin, as early as 1972, had concluded that most human genetic variation occurs within human groups, not between them. This alone would have

overturned the idea that there are biologically distinct human races, as advocated by the eugenic theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.



also health-wise, as it reduces the risk of recessive genetic diseases by lowering inbreeding and boosting the immune system. This idea has been long recognized, for example, in how animals and plants are crossed through heterosis, where increased physical strength and resistance to specific diseases are observed.

Thus, the supposed racial superiority still prevalent in certain parts of the world, such as the U.S. with white supremacists, or even in Brazil in colonial centers in the south of the country, has no biological basis at all. However, Hitler (2001), when addressing the American continent, states:

**North America**, whose population is mainly composed of Germanic elements that have mixed very little with inferior and colored peoples, exhibits a distinct kind of humanity and culture compared to **Central and South America**, where most of the immigrants – almost all of whom are Latin – have merged with the indigenous peoples. That clearly demonstrates the effects of racial fusion. The Germanic peoples of the American continent gained dominance because they remained more pure and less mixed; they will continue to hold power as long as they resist the temptation of blood mixing. (HITLER, 2001, pp. 212-213, emphasis added)

FIGURE 4





## Burial of Dona Carmelita, **Bacurau** (2019)

According to Hitler, therefore, the population of Bacurau, located in South America, which is the result of the miscegenation of white people with people of color and indigenous groups, and therefore considered **inferior peoples**, is destined for failure and domination by the “purest and most unmixed,” such as those from North America. That becomes even clearer when one realizes that they are faced with **dejected, careless** individuals, whose appearance is characterized by “depressing humility,” in the words of Euclides da Cunha (1998). However, those who see them this way are mistaken, since, using the exact words of the author of *Os sertões*, “The *sertanejo* is, above all, a strong one” (CUNHA, 1998, p. 105), despite its appearance revealing, at first glance, the opposite.

The interdependence seen in Bacurau is evident when, as each outsider approaches the village gates, the residents are notified via cell phone and repeatedly over the radio or loudspeaker, alerting the community. This warning ensured

the safety of the town by welcoming those of interest and rejecting outsiders. Once again, the film emphasizes the recurring theme of the relationship between past, present, and future, leading us to one of the key figures in *cangaço* dynamics at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the **coiteiros**.

These were vital for figures like Cabeleira, Antônio Silvino, and Lampião to succeed in the *sertão*, since without their assistance, surviving in that rugged region would have been extremely hard. They provided food, ammunition, and strategic information, such as the movements of the *volantes*<sup>8</sup> that hunted them.

As early as 1876, Franklin Távora, in *O Cabeleira*, recounts the story of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century bandit, the precursor to what would become *cangaço*, using fiction to explore the roots of violence in the area. The novel shows a close relationship between the main character, José Gomes, known as Cabeleira, and the innkeeper Timóteo, who witnessed all of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Name given to the local police, as Franklin Távora himself states in: “each captain-major tried to raise the **flying**

**militia**, which was formed of single individuals over twenty and under forty years old.” (TÁVORA, 1988, p. 89)



bandit's transformations, to the point that the young man "chose the Afogados tavern as his point of operation against the village. This tavern had become a sort of warehouse where he and his father would deposit the stolen goods [...]" (TÁVORA, 1988, p. 26)

In many places, some of these people viewed the cangaceiros as a form of resistance against abuses by colonels<sup>99</sup>, gunmen, or corrupt police authorities. Therefore, in addition to the so-called fixed *coiteiros*, there were those who, out of admiration for the bandit, always tried to keep him informed of the movements of the volantes in the area:

The next day, very early, a knight bumped into Timóteo's bar and, jumping to the ground and hastily knocking on the door instead, asked inside:

"Are you still sleeping, Mr. Timothy?"

"Who are you?" asked the shopkeeper in response to the repeated question.

"Open the door without delay. I have something to tell you."

The newcomer was a tall, thin black man with a kind face and manners that showed great benevolence.

"Look, Mr. Timóteo; listen to me. I know Cabeleira is at your house

with his father and Teodósio, so I ran to warn them. A troop is already on its way from Recife to arrest them. Tell them to get involved in *capoeira* while there's still time."

[...]

"Man, I can't thank you enough for your warning."

"You don't need to thank me. I wanted to do this service for Zé Gomes himself; I don't care much about his father, who, between you and me, is impolite [...]". (TÁVORA, 1988, p. 32, emphasis added)

It is worth noting that the *coiteiro* in the *cangaço* was not always motivated solely by sympathy or admiration, as in the excerpt above, since many were coerced through threats, while others acted out of **economic interest**, like the tavern keeper described above who "had come to associate himself with them in dangers and **profits**" (TÁVORA, 1988, p. 26, our emphasis), receiving payment or a share of the loot.

That differs from what we see in Bacurau, where, for that community, it's not just about safety and survival but about claiming their right, or lack thereof, to demonstrate. The scene

<sup>99</sup> The political leaders in the interior of Northeast Brazil are usually landowners.



of the mayor entering the village to campaign is symbolic because, as he approaches, the villagers, warned, choose to escape rather than face his displeasure. That shows once again that they refuse to accept the control imposed on them – a point often mentioned when discussing regions of the Brazilian Northeast.

The scene clearly demonstrates the hostility of Bacurau's residents toward Tony Júnior, the mayor, and vice versa – a situation that worsened when the mayor cut off the town's water supply. He probably wanted to punish the community for daring to think independently instead of being mere automatons, and to gain political advantage from their eventual reconnection. It is in this setting that, among those despised by the authorities, someone steps up: Lunga.

That would be the embodiment of the region's bellicosity, as depicted in the city's museum, its own version of the *cangaço* – a social banditry phenomenon that took place in the semi-arid Northeast between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Historically, the movement can be seen in two ways: either as simple criminality or as a form of social rebellion against the

oppression of the colonels and the neglect by the State. That is evident in **Bacurau**, where the State, represented by Tony Júnior – likely the region's colonel – oppresses its people to preserve its power and secure electoral advantages.

However, the mayor realizes that the region no longer belongs to him or falls within his sphere of influence, despite being within his authority, which is unacceptable to people like him. It should be noted that the presence of **Júnior** in Tony's surname indicates not only his membership in a distinct social group, defined by his name, but also his continuation.

Historian Eric Hobsbawm (2005), in his work *Bandidos* (1969) states that:

The power and influence of a family head depend on the number of men in his service, who offer protection and, in return, receive loyalty and dependence. These factors measure his prestige and his ability to form alliances. That enables him to lead armed conflicts, influence elections, or exercise any other form of local power. The more backward and remote the region, weak, or disinterested the higher authorities are, the more crucial his ability becomes in local



politics – specifically, his capacity as a magnate or “colonel” to mobilize “his” people. If he contributes enough swords, rifles, or votes to local politics, he doesn't need to be wealthy in the way wealth is defined in prosperous and economically advanced regions. (HOBSBAWN, 2005, p. 110)

Tony is heading to the village to do what every politician does from time to time during election season: to show that he cares about his people. To accomplish this, he brings donations (alms) to the

community, including food (most of which is expired), prescription medicine (to keep the population **crazy**), and books.

However, the mayor shows his impatience with the audacity of those people who, hidden from view, shout from their homes for him to release their most precious resource: water. Despite the difficulties, they are aware of the political game and exactly what irritates the local colonel, who fails to see submission and gratitude in these people.

**FIGURE 5**



Books **donated/dumped** by the mayor to the city library, **Bacurau** (2019)

Upon realizing that the community won't accept him, we see one of the film's most potent scenes because of its symbolism: a dump truck empties books next to

the wall of the local school. These books aren't even packed in boxes to show they are new; after all, the mayor shows no concern for public knowledge. The books, stacked in



its dump bucket like trash, are dumped onto the street in this way. (fig. 5) The scene is shocking, especially for those who view education as the only way to transform society. However, it also highlights not only the authorities' neglect of education but also their failure to provide access to it for the people.

The mayor's primary concern was that the **charity** event be filmed, which highlights the idea that education and culture are not priorities for Tony. Like many leaders, he only needs images to show his kindness, which is why he cares about documenting his charitable acts.

In this context, Hobsbawm (2005) sees the *cangaceiro* as a figure who, although operating outside the law, symbolizes protest and justice for oppressed people, thereby earning him the image of a hero. This image spreads widely in popular culture, turning figures like Lampião or Lunga in **Bacurau** into true myths of resistance against the *status quo*.

If Lunga is seen as a bandit, it's because he, like the village, refused to accept being treated as a second-class citizen, with their fundamental rights – such as access to water – or even their very

existence – being taken away. That's because the village was literally wiped off the map, its existence completely erased.

### **Hunting season is open**

If there was mutual antipathy between the people of Bacurau and the local authorities, represented by Mayor Tony Júnior, he exploited the arrival of foreigners not only to assign them to the region but also to take them on a safari there. From that point on, strange events disrupt the town's peaceful routine, which do not go unnoticed by the residents: a water truck riddled with bullets, a drone disguised as a flying saucer flying overhead, and loose horses crossing the village at night. One incident, however, raises the community's alarm: two motorcyclists, dressed like trail riders, are heading toward the town, wearing helmets – a departure from the usual for the area. The *coiteiros*, by reporting the presence of these outsiders, alert the locals.

They both arrive at the location (fig. 6), enter a small market to avoid the prying eyes of the people there, and order a beer and sparkling water. The strangers' task was simple: to install a device at the site to cut off the cell phone



# IMAGENS EM FOCO

Revista Científica de Cultura e de Imagem  
Nº 4      Ano II      setembro/2025  
ISSN 3085-7309

signal in the area and to photograph the village streets. That not only isolated the village from what was to come – the start of the safari, whose victims would be the residents of Bacurau themselves – but also provided the hunters with information about the area.

In the following conversation, the owner of the place, Luciene, asks: “Did you come to see the museum? [...] This museum is good.” (MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np) The bikers, more concerned

with finding a spot to install the blocking device, say they are riding off-road but are unfamiliar with the area, as it isn't on the map. The biker, trying to sound friendly despite showing an air of superiority toward those people, asks: “What is someone born in Bacurau?”<sup>10</sup> (MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np) A child promptly responds: “It's people!” (MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np) A very significant answer, especially considering what will happen next.

## IMAGE 6



Unknown motorcyclists arrive in the village, **Bacurau** (2019)

---

<sup>10</sup> The correct question would be “What do you call a person from Bacurau?”, however the way it was asked in Portuguese leads

to ambiguity, hence the child's answer "it's people!".



# IMAGENS EM FOCO

Revista Científica de Cultura e de Imagem  
Nº 4                      Ano II                      setembro/2025  
ISSN 3085-7309

Teresa, who was passing by, saw the two strangers and asked the same question as the saleswoman: “Have you come to visit the museum?” (MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np) When they responded negatively, she insisted again: “You don't want to visit, do you?” (MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np) Her insistence was understandable because the key to understanding that place and its people was precisely that repository of the city. More than a picturesque and insignificant spot, just a collection of useless artifacts, it was a living and functional space for those people, where their tradition, culture, and bellicosity were expressed. The museum held not only objects, photographs, and leather clothing but also weapons that told the story of those who constantly had to fight to survive against adversity. Therefore, it served as the guardian of their identity, acting as a catalyst during turbulent times.

If space seemed insignificant to outsiders and invaders, it was because they saw no value in those people, whom they considered inferior. Consequently, anything related to them, like their **decrepit** museum, was also deemed unimportant. Yet, this perception

exposes the arrogance of the conqueror, who fails to recognize worth or danger in those they consider inferior, viewing them solely as objects for exploitation, oppression, or amusement.

With their mission completed, the bikers headed back to their base at Talhado Farm. However, along the way, they ran into Flávio and Maciel, who had gone to Tarairu Farm to take some of the horses that had escaped into the city. When the guys arrived, they saw the aftermath of a brutal massacre: the family of Mr. Manuelito, the farmer, along with his workers, had all been murdered. The strangers, upon noticing the two young men, asked if they were from the area and if they had cell phones. The latter, fearful, described the event to those who had already warned the town about the brutality that had taken place there.

This scene marks a turning point in the plot. When the outsiders executed the two young men, they believed they were acting on behalf of the foreigners who hired them. After all, having witnessed the massacre of those people, they would soon be complicit in those crimes. However, the reaction of their employers was quite



different. Upon arriving at the safari base of operations, the outsiders revealed themselves to be some of the most nefarious figures still present in Brazilian society: traitors to the nation.

These people are not satisfied with just speaking poorly of Brazil or belittling their own country; they also criticize fellow citizens, especially those from other regions or seen as **inferior**. Because they see themselves as **superior**, they side with foreign nations to dominate their own country, believing they will gain from a new regime due to their supposed **racial superiority** or social status.

This situation is similar to what happened in Ukraine during World War II, when part of its population not only supported but also approved Nazi crimes in the region. Despite being Slavs, who were considered **inferior** according to Hitler's plans, they wanted to believe they were viewed as equals by the *Reich* authorities. So, they not only **hunted** Jews and other groups considered undesirable, like Roma and Russians, in Babi Yar, Kolky, Lviv, Lutsk, and Zhytomyr, but also helped eliminate them.

Similarly, in the meeting before the safari in Bacurau began, these

two Brazilians from the Southeast had a discussion with the foreigners. They knew the foreigners aimed to eliminate their fellow compatriots; after all, that's what they were hired to do: provide the support needed for that grim game to start. They were so confident in their superiority over the Bacurau residents that they saw themselves as similar to the foreigners and believed they would soon be safe from the hunters:

CHRIS                      The two you shot... were they your friends, or something?

OUTSIDE                      Friends? No... we don't shoot friends in Brazil... We come from a different region.

WILLY                      So, where do you come from?

OUTSIDER                      We come from the south of Brazil. A very rich region with German and Italian colonies... **More like you guys!**

(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np, emphasis added)

A reality check happens here, often unnoticed, since by our standards (and scientific ones!), being **white** is simply a phenotypic



variation, not a racial marker, much less one that implies superiority over others. That is very different from how many Americans, as well as some Brazilians, perceive this **racial** idea:

WILLY      **More like us?**  
But we're white,  
**you ain't white.**  
Are they white?

TERRY      They look like  
white Mexicans,  
really. **She looks  
white, but she  
ain't white.** Her  
nose and her lips  
give it away.

KATE      Yeah, more  
Latino like.

OUTSIDE      Why do you say  
that?

JULIA      I think he's a  
handsome Latino  
guy.

CHRIS      Come on, guys,  
knock it off, this  
is bullying!

(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np,  
emphasis added)

By flattering foreigners by killing their compatriots, the outsiders tried to hide their employers' crimes and gain praise for their actions. However, they faced intense criticism:

MICHAEL      So, *Friend*, why  
did you shoot  
those people?

OUTSIDE      I'm sorry, but... I  
did what we did  
because they  
would talk.

OUTSIDE      They lied to us,  
they said they  
had called people  
and gave us knew  
they did not.

JULIA      Our point is, you  
came here to  
work for us, not  
to get our kills.

MICHAEL      Yeah, you've  
done a good job,  
finding this little  
harmless shit-  
hole town,  
helping with  
logistics,  
intelligence,  
you've done well.  
But you weren't  
supposed to...  
you know, killed  
people. My point,  
now you are  
murderers.

OUTSIDE      Well, we killed  
those two men to  
help our mission.  
Our mission?

KATE      Yeah, well, I saw  
what happened  
at the farm. Five,  
six dead, we just  
helped...

(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np)

It's interesting to observe the ethical inversions present in the



plot: who is actually the civilized one – the one who kills to cover up murders with an accomplice, or the one who hunts and kills purely for pleasure, claiming they don't use modern weapons or that they are superior to those they hunt? What can be said about the fact that what we call Law is actually its opposite – the complete absence of law? That becomes clear when Michael claims to have “documents that prove they weren't in that place,” meaning that this claim is based on local laws enforced by the city mayor:

MICHAEL            No, no, no, no...  
                          You are foreign  
                          nationals who  
                          killed two of your  
                          own people. You  
                          see, technically,  
                          we are not here.

OUTSIDE            But you are here

MICHAEL            I have documents  
                          that prove that  
                          we are not here...

JOSHUA             It's completely  
                          different. We  
                          only use vintage  
                          firearms.

(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np)

Thus, the outsiders, or Brazilians from the south, not being part of the **superior race**, could not under any circumstances have their own thoughts and

attitudes, such as eliminating those who might eventually report these crimes. That is undeniable for the foreigners upset about losing points, since they weren't the ones who killed those two.

Having already completed the mission they were hired for; it was time for their disposal. The outcome was predictable: all the foreigners, except for Kate, who was without her weapon at the time, shot the Brazilians who fell. After the execution, the hunters only wondered: who had received the points from that kill? They decided that Michael and Julia were the lucky ones.

That marks the end of the traitors who briefly hoped to be like those **white** Americans! However, they failed to see that, as history has repeatedly shown – in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere – those deemed **inferior** only serve to satisfy the interests of their masters until the moment they are discarded.

As grim as this conclusion may seem, even Hitler (2001) expressed similar ideas in *Mein Kampf*, as seen earlier when he stated that the **Germanic whites** in North America would dominate the continent only if they kept their blood “unmixed” (HITLER, 2001, p.



213), which was very different from what happened with the Latinos who “fused [...] with indigenous inhabitants.” (HITLER, 2001, p. 212)

### Hunting instinct and human evolution

What happens in the film could develop into a real horror thriller. But we can ask: is there any scientific basis for the scenes shown in **Bacurau**, or are they just the imagination of the producers and directors? To answer, we should look back at what we mentioned at the start of this article: the connection between force and domination, which can

sometimes lead to predation or hunting, and other times to aggression or violence.

The hunting instinct is an innate trait found in many animal species, but it also played a key role in human evolution. Our ancestors relied not only on gathering fruit but also on hunting to survive. It’s important to note that, unlike other species with sharp claws and teeth, we don’t have those. Instead, we had to develop complex skills to compensate, including tool use and group hunting strategies. These skills became vital for humans to compete with other species for resources.

FIGURE 7





Hunting scene, Cova dos Cavalos, Reproduction in the Valltorta Museum, Spain  
Photo by Joanbanjo, 2013

The hunting instinct, therefore, more than a subsistence behavior, evolved into a complex network of physical and mental skills refined throughout human evolution (fig. 7). It not only involved the ability to detect, pursue, capture, and use tactics to increase success but was also linked to the pleasure of survival and the satisfaction of conquest.

To understand the behavior observed among the hunters in **Bacurau**, particularly their pleasure in participating in that morbid game, we need to distinguish between simple **aggression** and **predation**. Although they are different, both share complex psychological and evolutionary roots. The former generally refers to behaviors aimed at causing harm or injury, while

the latter involves hunting and killing another being for food, as seen in the animal kingdom. However, when applied to human behavior, predation can take on a broader meaning, encompassing the exploitation and control of other individuals for one's own benefit.

From a psychological viewpoint, various theorists have tried to explain this phenomenon in humans over time. For example, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, William James and William McDougall<sup>11</sup> suggested that innate biological instincts drive human behavior. The former identified emotions such as fear, anger, love, and shame as instincts that influence behavior; the latter expanded on this list<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Despite the various criticisms for its reductionist nature and for engaging in circular reasoning, since instincts were often inferred from the very behavior they sought to explain (HAMPTON, 2005; RICHARDS, 2009), it is worth highlighting that McDougall's theory was widely influential at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; therefore, serving as an illustrative character for this article.

<sup>12</sup> McDougall's instinct theory is based on three components: **perception**, which directs a person's attention to certain

stimuli in the environment; **behavior**, understood as the resulting action aimed at achieving the goal; and **emotion**, the affective state that activates the motivation for the pursuit (MCDUGALL, 1910). The theorist used the term **propensity** to refer to instincts because he believed that, in human beings, they do not manifest themselves in a pure form, but are shaped by experience and learning (MCDUGALL, 1923). In his work *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908), the author proposed a



Although McDougall did not explicitly list hunting as a fundamental and separate instinct, such behavior does not appear in its pure form but through combinations, modifications, and adaptations of other basic instincts, such as the search for food, curiosity, pugnacity (which leads to aggression to subdue prey), and learning. While it has an instinctive basis related to survival, hunting behavior is considered more complex than merely responding to fear (flight) or anger (pugnacity), especially in humans. (MCDUGALL, 1926)

Sigmund Freud, when introducing the primary forces of Eros (the instinct for life, survival, and reproduction) and Thanatos (the instinct for death, aggression, and self-destruction), particularly in his work **Beyond the Pleasure Principle** (1920), proposed not only the coexistence and conflict between these two fundamental forces operating within the human psyche but also emphasized their dynamic interaction. The

---

list of instincts, later expanded in subsequent editions: flight (fear), repulsion (disgust), curiosity (admiration), pugnacity (anger), submission (subjection), self-assertion (euphoria), parental instinct (tenderness), reproduction (sex), search for food

formulation of this drive dualism arose as an effort to explain clinical phenomena that defied the logic of the pleasure principle, adding a more complex dimension to subjective experience. (FREUD, 2010)

The concept of Eros, inspired by the Greek god of love, refers to the drive for life; it is the psychic energy directed toward creation, bonding, and the preservation of life. Its most visible expression is libido, which Freud understood not only in sexual terms but also as the vital force that fuels all forms of love, affection, and the building of social bonds. (FREUD, 2016) Thus, the function of Eros is to unite, connect, and support the continuity of life, whether through creativity, forming interpersonal bonds, or the continuation of the species.

Thanatos, on the other hand, corresponds to the death drive and acts silently, guiding the organism toward a return to an inorganic state of absolute equilibrium. It manifests as self-destructive behaviors, aggression directed both

(hunger), aversion, gregarious instinct (sociability), acquisition, construction, crying or calling, rest or sleep, comfort, laughter and locomotion (crawling and walking).



at oneself and others, and the so-called repetition compulsion, when traumatic experiences are relived repeatedly. (LAPLANCHE; PONTALIS, 2001) It thus reflects the psyche's tendency toward dissolution, inertia, and destruction.

Freud, therefore, views psychic life as a constant battleground between these two forces, explaining the ambivalence of human behavior, which can be directed toward construction and pleasure at times, and toward destruction and suffering at others. However, both Eros and Thanatos do not act alone, as they are inseparable.

Aggression, for example, can be used for self-preservation, highlighting the complexity of this interaction. That is seen in Bacurau, where its population uses aggression that escalates into violence – not out of a desire for mere destruction, but in pursuit of survival. It is precisely the balance between these two drives that determines whether the individual leans toward creative and constructive behavior (prevalence of Eros) or toward destructive and self-destructive tendencies (prevalence of Thanatos). (FREUD, 2011a)

Following this dynamic, hunting can be seen as a complex expression that reflects the interaction and conflict between life and death drives. The psychoanalytic interpretation of this practice reveals both destructive (aggressiveness) and constructive (sublimation) elements involved in the activity. (ROUDINESCO; PLON, 1998)

The act of hunting and killing an animal – or a human being, as in **Bacurau** – as an externalization of the death drive (Thanatos) expresses human aggression, where the individual exercises control and power over the life of another being. This gesture can be symbolically interpreted as the return of the living organism to its inorganic state, aligning with the fundamental tendency of the death drive. (FREUD, 2010)

On the other hand, hunting can also be associated with Eros, reflecting one of humanity's most primitive aspects: survival, which aligns with self-preservation. Additionally, hunting carries social and cultural significance, functioning as a collective ritual that transmits traditions and fosters community bonds, as shown by the group of foreigners in **Bacurau**.



In modern times, when hunting is no longer driven by necessity for survival, it can be viewed as a form of sublimation: a redirection of innate aggression into a socially accepted, yet still controversial, activity. In this context, pursuing skill, strategy, and mastery over nature becomes an experience that transcends mere killing, connecting with the libidinal energy of Eros. (FREUD, 2011b)

Hunting exemplifies the blend of Eros and Thanatos, in which both the pleasure and thrill of the chase (Eros) and the destructive urge to kill (Thanatos) coexist. Often, rituals and social justifications – such as species preservation or population control – serve as rationalizations that mask this internal conflict. Furthermore, psychoanalytic interpretations of hunting can be seen as projections of the subject's aggressive conflicts that condemn the practice. (KRISTEVA, 1989)

Although aggression is a fundamental part of human nature, it isn't uncontrollable; it can be shaped and expressed in different ways depending on the context and individual development. Therefore, aggression, whether viewed as an impulse or an act, is often

channeled into **violence** driven by the desire to destroy (OLIVEIRA, 2023), as in Terry's case, who reports that when he left with others to start the hunt, it was the second time he had gone out armed in that manner:

TERRY                      Gotta tell you something.

JAKE                        Yeah?

JULIA                       Shoot...

TERRY                       Well, I don't know, this is it, I guess.

JAKE                        This is what?

TERRY                       We're heading into that village.

JULIA                        Oh yes, we are.

TERRY                        You know, it happened twice, I left home with me backpacked stuffed with ammo, a Glock, and a Mac... I went to the Chandler mall, which was nowhere near my place, and once to the Desert Breeze Park, also pretty far away... Couldn't bring myself to do it. It was right after my breakup... First, I felt like



killing her and her mom and dad; they got lucky, they were out of town in the middle of the crisis. Then I just felt like shooting people, to get it out of my chest. Thank God I didn't, it was a bad idea.

JULIA

Take it easy, man.

JAKE

That's fucked-up, Terry.

(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np)

In the context of human predation, especially in cases of psychopathy or sexual aggression, predatory behavior involves seeking vulnerability, manipulating others, and deriving pleasure from exercising control. Such individuals often present themselves as civilized and socially responsible to deceive their victims and those around them. They primarily use persuasion and influence as their main tools. Their satisfaction may be linked to feelings of power and control, activating the same brain reward circuits involved in other forms of pleasure-seeking.

Therefore, psychological and evolutionary theories suggest that pleasure in hunting and human predatory behavior can be understood as complex expressions of innate instincts, shaped by environmental and cultural factors, and mediated by neurobiological reward mechanisms. The pursuit of control, power, and the satisfaction of conquest are key elements that can heighten these instincts and generate pleasure.

We also need to consider psychological factors, as the pursuit of pleasure and the feeling of reward are processes deeply connected to human neurobiology, with **dopamine** playing a central role. This neurotransmitter is crucial to the brain's reward system, which mediates feelings of pleasure, motivation, and well-being. When released, its levels increase in response to a stimulus or action, causing the body to experience joy, reward, and even euphoria.

In the context of hunting, whether of animals or, more broadly, pursuing goals, the anticipation and achievement of **prey** can trigger a significant dopamine release. That occurs not only at the moment of reward but also during the search and pursuit,



reinforcing the behavior and encouraging repetition. The sense of achievement and satisfaction of conquest, key elements in hunting, are mediated by this dopaminergic system.

We see this when we watch Americans Julia and Jake run to catch up with a car carrying two Bacurau residents, Nelinha and Cláudio, who are fleeing the city, scared of what's happening in the village. Suddenly, the vehicle is hit by gunfire. At that moment, both hunters, very excited, reflect on what they have just done and communicate via radio, confirming what the others already see on the drone.

When they hang up, Julia, unable to contain her excitement, says:

JULIA That was insane!  
JAKE Yeah, it was...  
wasn't it?

Julia breathes heavily and sighs.  
Pause.

JULIA Wanna fuck?  
JAKE Alright.

The couple kisses and removes their gear to have sex. The drone gently descends from the sky, leveling off at eye level. It remains still, silhouetted against

the faint dawn. Jake and Julia are on the ground.

OPERATOR Guys, you do understand you're on camera, right?

JULIA (Looking back, showing the middle finger.)  
Fuck off!!!

(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np)

Dopamine acts as a catalyst for pursuing and achieving rewards, including those linked to hunting. This pleasure has a strong neurobiological basis, driven by the release of this neurotransmitter in the brain's reward system. However, understanding this mechanism also underscores the risks of endlessly chasing pleasure, which can lead to dysfunctional behaviors.

Studying the neural circuits involved in hunting and aggression is key to uncovering the biological roots of these actions. Recent research has shown that specific brain structures play crucial roles in regulating these instincts, revealing a complexity that surpasses a simple response to external stimuli.

The amygdala, a small, almond-shaped structure in the temporal lobe, is well known for processing



emotions, especially fear. But groundbreaking studies have found that a subregion of the amygdala, the central nucleus, is directly connected to predatory behavior. A study published in the journal **Cell**, conducted by neuroscientists from Yale University and the Institute of Biomedical Sciences at the University of São Paulo (ICB-USP), demonstrated that stimulating the central nucleus of the amygdala in mice triggers predatory behavior, not just defensive fear responses. This research identified two distinct neural pathways from the amygdala that are essential for predatory hunting during food search. The first pathway drives prey pursuit, activating brain regions that control the animal's movement toward the target. The second manages prey capture and killing, regulating actions like biting and grabbing. Activation of these pathways can cause rodents to pursue and attack various objects, from insects to artificial prey, indicating a specific neural mechanism for hunting behavior (HAN et al., 2017).

The importance of this discovery lies in the fact that the amygdala is a highly conserved brain structure among mammals, suggesting these neural circuits might be involved in

regulating hunting in other species, including humans. That implies that the pleasure linked to hunting may have a deep neurobiological foundation, rooted in brain circuits that drive and reinforce this behavior. Aggression also has a complex neural basis, with studies pointing to the involvement of multiple brain regions and neurotransmitters in its regulation (SIQUEIRA-BATISTA et al., 2007). The interaction between these hunting and aggression circuits may partly explain the intensity of sensations experienced during hunting and predation, as well as the complexity of human instincts related to these behaviors.

Clearly, distinguishing between animal predation (for subsistence) and human predation (often for psychological or pathological gratification) is vital. However, the instinctive and neurobiological basis of the pleasure associated with pursuit and conquest, along with activation of reward centers in the brain, suggests an evolutionary link. The difference lies in the complexity of human motivations, influenced by social, cultural, and psychological factors, in addition to biological ones. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for addressing and preventing



predatory behaviors in society, such as those observed in Bacurau.

## When the hunter becomes the hunted

With the arrogance of those who believe they are in control, the village was completely dark – no internet signal, no power, and access to the city blocked. The foreigners head into the town to start the safari proper. Dressed in combat gear, armed with rifles, and wearing caps, they go into the caatinga. Willy and Kate, however, head toward Damiano's house.

The drone used by the Americans is captured: they, too, are now blind. That wouldn't have mattered much, since those backward and complacent people probably had no idea what was coming and would be caught off guard.

Halfway there, an image grabs the attention of the foreigners: an old police car riddled with bullets:

JULIA	This one's got bullet holes.
CHRIS	Is this a cop car?
MICHAEL	These are just old cars.
JULIA	<b>Is this area really safe?</b>
MICHAEL	Oh yes, it is, and here is where we split.

JOSHUA      Are you going solo?

Michael doesn't even look at Joshua.

MICHAEL      I am.  
(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np, emphasis added)

Despite all the excitement of the previous day, Julia's question brings a touch of realism. It's important to remember that every safari has its risks, and these risks often provide adrenaline for its enthusiasts. However, the safari unfolding before them is safe, gentle, custom-made, and free of significant dangers, as it has the full backing of the authorities, represented by Mayor Tony Júnior. Still, Julia's concerns are valid; there must be something about that place they are unaware of.

Kate and Willy had just gone to Damiano and his wife's hut a moment earlier to observe them and prepare for the ambush. Their targets appeared as true **savages** of the African savannah – more vulnerable because they were naked and unlikely to retaliate. Confident, the Americans approached the location with a sense of superiority, each trying to score points by taking a shot.



Contrary to what the hunters believed, Damiano realized he was being watched, and, as if everything was normal, he entered the house. Meanwhile, Kate and Willy approached the hut and set fire to the thatched roof to confuse their victims, who would then come outside and would be shot. Kate told her partner, "Go, go ..." The hunter stands in front of the door to surprise and shoot the resident, but was caught off guard by the latter and was struck with a blast from a blunderbuss, the force of which blew his head apart. Completely disoriented, Kate started shooting randomly but was hit by another shot as she passed through the hut window. The American woman, with her hand and forearm shattered, yelled for help. The couple rushed to help her, bringing her to Domingas, the town doctor, but she died.

Joshua and Julia walked to the village and saw a clothesline with blood-stained clothes belonging to both adults and a child. The scene caught attention as a stark reminder of those who perished in such a brutal way. However, upon seeing it, the hunters criticized the action:

JOSHUA                      Fucking savages.

JULIA                      Guys, there's blood-stained clothing hanging by this house. I don't like the looks of it.

(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np)

It's interesting to note, once again, the reversal of values, as the savages for the foreigners or invaders are those who expose the barbarity, not those who commit it. Julia, again, doesn't view the scene favorably; this could be a sign that these people weren't as meek as they initially appeared.

Another fact that puts the hunters on alert is the discovery that the village seems empty, shattering their initial anticipation and excitement. If this disturbed the younger, bloodthirsty, adrenaline-fueled hunters on the front lines – that is, in the village streets – what can be said of Michael, the group's leader and oldest? Alone at the highest point, he watched the village through the telescopic sight of his rifle, searching for his victims, wondering where the locals were: they had no way to escape.

Again, it shows that in the context of **human predation** – such as psychopathy or domination of those who consider themselves



inferior – surprise is vital for achieving goals.

The victims' vulnerability, fragility, and inability to defend themselves are inherent to the process, since this manipulation and control bring pleasure. It is this sense of power and authority over others that activates the same brain reward circuits involved in various forms of pleasure.

However, what the American hunters face is the opposite: they encounter not people fleeing in terror from chaos but empty streets and silence. Something had shattered the pulsating anticipation they had long awaited: where were the screams, the desperate running, and the bodies falling during the surprise attack? The excitement of capture, followed by the reward, did not occur because the brain's reward circuits were not activated, leading to frustration, anger, and discouragement.

The entire operation was supposed to last about 90 minutes, but nothing was unfolding as planned. That caused tensions to run high, and the hunters slowly lowered their guard. Meanwhile, a truck carrying coffins to collect the bodies of the dead residents had already arrived in the village, and

two men, likely city workers, began unloading.

The group's anxiety deepens. One by one, the hunters realize that time is passing and nothing is happening. Julia, tired of waiting and on edge, fires a burst of machine gun fire at the school wall. When she stops, she and Joshua continue their search, but the school windows open and "spit out an anonymous hail of fire that hits them both," and they are killed in front of the school. Michael also starts shooting randomly, hoping something will happen, but nothing does! Bored, the leader finally shoots the driver and the assistant who brought the coffins. Not satisfied, he shoots Chris, one of the Americans, and also tries to hit Jake, who is trying to protect himself.

Meanwhile, Terry, upon entering the museum, becomes aware of the history of that place and its people:

On the walls hang black-and-white and color photographs, almost like a storyboard of Bacurau's history: images from the past, street festivals, 20<sup>th</sup>-century figures, men, women, children. [...] The famous image of the heads of Lampião's gang displayed in *Angicos* (1938), newspaper clippings: *Diário de*



**Pernambuco** — "*Coiteiros de Bacurau são alvos da volante*" (Bacurau's *coiteiros* are targets of the *volante*). The last photo shows severed heads arranged in a row on the steps of the Bacurau church.  
(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np)

Upon entering another part of the small museum, he noticed that several exhibits on one wall had been removed. As he approached the identification tags, he realized they were weapons: a Colt .45, a Smith & Wesson, a Luger, and a Winchester. These residents were probably far from what anyone would call indolent, so he warned the others that the locals were likely armed. Given this, he didn't continue searching the room; instead, he headed for the exit. He didn't notice, however, that there was a trapdoor in the other room from which a hand holding a Colt .38 fired three shots, hitting him. Stumbling, Terry clutched his bleeding neck, trying to escape, pressing his bloodied hand against the wall. Lunga, along with other villagers, violently attacked the foreigner, decapitating him.

Jake, somewhat disoriented after Chris's death, seeks shelter in the museum and searches for Terry, who hasn't been heard from since. Seeing a trail of blood at the

scene, he calls out to his missing compatriot, who doesn't respond. Meanwhile, Lunga and others are on the lookout. Suddenly, the hunter is surprised and killed. Like the others, he is decapitated. Michael, realizing that all his plans had failed and that he had crossed the line set by the game, grabs a revolver and puts it in his mouth, but a vision of the black woman Carmelita makes him change his mind. The German ends up being captured by one of the locals, Galeguinho, whose appearance reminds one of the typical *sertanejo*: here comes Hercules-Quasimodo once again.

Once the conflict ends and the invaders are defeated, the exhausted population gathers at the front of the church where the hunters' heads are displayed. Iza, a museum caretaker, doesn't want to waste time and, along with others, starts cleaning the place. However, she makes one thing clear:

IZA                      We clean the floor...

She looks at the wall, which is stained with blood by Terry, the wall of missing weapons.

IZA                      ... but no one touches the walls. We leave them exactly as they are.



(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np)

The marker will symbolize the event, showing that it not only happened but also highlights the resilience of those who succeeded, giving them the chance to tell their own story. Therefore, it will not be spoken by the invaders but instead will stand alongside the other displays in the museum. Similarly, the coffins that the hallcity sent to gather the residents' bodies, to illustrate the hardship faced by those people amid **unknown** hostilities, are displayed with the bodies of the defeated who underestimated the strength of those they considered **inferior**.

The gruesome scene became part of history, captured in photographs like those in the city museum, and entered the local history. Below, we see an image of foreigners' heads in front of the church, reminiscent of the famous 1938 photo of Lampião's head and his gang's heads displayed on the steps of the Dom Pedro II Palace in Piranhas, Alagoas.

Suddenly, after the chaos subsided and life started to return to normal – at least for the locals – Tony Júnior arrived in the village

in a van. He was there to pick up the tourists after what the mayor hoped would be a successful safari for his guests. As he slowly walked through the area, he noticed not only signs of struggle and blood on the ground and walls, but also that the residents were still present. However, there was no sign of the Americans.

Iza, who was cleaning the museum floor, spilled a bucket of water inside the museum, mixing it with the blood of the dead, and narrowly missed the mayor, who was trying to understand what had happened.

TONY JR.                      What happened here, people? Where are the foreigners, the tourists?

A group of people begins to close in around Tony Jr. [...] When he sees the tourists' heads at the church door, he seems not to react. (fig. 8) He stays silent, swallowing hard. He turns to the aide in the van and says:

TONY JR.                      Close the door...!  
[...]  
LUNGA                      They're dead.

(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np)



**FIGURE 8**



Tony Júnior was frightened when he saw the heads of the dead foreigners in the village,  
**Bacurau** (2019)

Appearing confused by what he saw – the death of his tourists, whose heads were exposed in front of the church – along with the fact that a large part of the population was armed, the mayor tries to deny any cooperation with the foreigners and what they came to do in Bacurau. In this way, he reveals himself to be a very different man from the candidate campaigning just a few days earlier. Hesitantly, he claims to have nothing to do with it. However, at that moment, Michael's voice – who had seen the mayor – resonates and begins calling his name:

MICHAEL Tony!!

TONY JR. Oh... Who's that?  
I don't know him!

MICHAEL *Amigo!!*

TONY JR. I don't know him,  
Lunga, I have  
nothing to do  
with this! I don't  
know who that is,  
Lunga!

[...]

MICHAEL Tony, what's  
happening? You  
promised! Tony!

TONY JR. I don't know  
you...

MICHAEL Tony... *dinero!*

[...]

(MENDONÇA FILHO, 2020, np)

There was no longer any doubt  
about the authorities' collusion in



the failed massacre in Bacurau, especially when Michael called the mayor “*amigo*” (friend), showing they had known each other before. Furthermore, after witnessing what had happened to his group members, the German questioned him, asking how things had turned out this way, as he had likely promised an easy ride, not a confrontation like this.

These people had no choice but to deliver an exemplary punishment to the mayor because of his lack of character and complete moral inversion. After all, instead of seeking the common good, he sold his fellow citizens to be hunted and killed by foreigners, not to mention that he showed no honor whatsoever.

Thus, the final scene of Tony Júnior shows the mayor in his underwear, riding backward on a donkey, his face turned toward the animal’s tail and covered by a mask (fig. 9). In such punishment, even used in the Middle Ages, the condemned becomes an image of dishonor and ridicule. This representation not only inverts the natural order – man should dominate the animal, not the other way around – but also reduces him to a semi-beastly state. Furthermore, it also demonstrates

his own moral inversion, as he loses his rational dignity, denying him the right to have his own face exposed. He thus becomes the instrument of public shame, unable to move forward because he opposed the norm, morality, or law established by the very society of which he was a part.

Regarding Michael, his execution serves as a symbol, illustrating not only the connection between the village’s name origin and the hunter’s confinement within the very region he sought to destroy.

Bacurau is a nocturnal bird; at first glance, it seems weak and sickly – unlike other birds that perch in trees – preferring to stay on the ground. Its beak appears tiny compared to its wingspan, emphasizing its harmless look. But when it opens its mouth, its actual size becomes evident: it’s much larger than expected.

Just as the bird opens its mouth to feed, the village of Bacurau also opens its mouth – not to feed on the one who tried to destroy it but to swallow him whole, turning him into a trophy inside its guts. Michael is thus metaphorically trapped inside the village’s large mouth, which, like the bird’s, is close to the ground. His execution,



like that of the other hunters, served a purpose: to be part of the history of resistance there.

**FIGURE 9**



Tony Júnior's Punishment, **Bacurau** (2019)

The event becomes a cathartic moment because, unlike Adolf Hitler's claim that South American people were doomed to failure and domination due to their admixture of races, Bacurau – despite being a work of art – clearly shows that real history is quite different, as history has proven over generations.

It's no coincidence that the group's leader, Michael, a German, was the one commanding the

Americans: Aryans and whites who, according to late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century eugenics and supremacist theories, were born to dominate the world. But the German Third *Reich*, which was supposed to last a thousand years (*Tausendjähriges Reich*), only lasted twelve; and the American Empire also faces its impending collapse.



## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- CUNHA, Euclides da. **Os sertões** (Edição crítica). São Paulo: Ática, 1998.
- FREUD, Sigmund. **Além do princípio do prazer**. Obras completas. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2010.
- FREUD, Sigmund. **O ego e o id**. Obras completas. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2011a.
- FREUD, Sigmund. **O mal-estar na civilização**. Obras completas. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2011b.
- FREUD, Sigmund. **Três ensaios sobre a teoria da sexualidade**. Obras completas. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2016.
- LAPLANCHE, Jean; PONTALIS, Jean-Bertrand. **Vocabulário da psicanálise**. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2001
- GIBBS, David N. “1998 Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski on Afghanistan” in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, <https://dgibbs.arizona.edu/content/brzezinski-interview-2>.
- GOBINEAU, Arthur. **The inequality of human races**. London: Heinemann, 1915.
- HAN, Wenfei et al. “Integrated Control of Predatory Hunting by the Central Nucleus of the Amygdala”, in *Cell*, vol. 168, issue 1, p. 311-324.
- HAMPTON, Stephen. **Giving Up Instincts in Psychology – or Not?** Passauer Schriften zur Psychologiegeschichte, v. 22, p. 45-67, 2005
- HITLER, Adolf. **Minha Luta. Mein Kampf**. São Paulo: Centauro, 2001.
- HOBSBAWN, Eric. **Bandidos**. São Paulo: Terra e Paz, 2015
- KRISTEVA, Julia. **Poderes do horror**. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1989.
- LEWONTIN, R.C. “The apportionment of Human diversity”, in DOBZHANSKY, T. et al. (ed.). **Evolutionary Biology**. New York: Springer, 1972, pp. 381-398.
- MCDUGALL, William. **Social Psychology**. Boston: John W. Luce & Company, 1910.
- MCDUGALL, William. **An Outline of Psychology**. London: Methuen & Co., 1923.
- MCDUGALL, William. **Outline of Abnormal Psychology**. New York: Scribner’s, 1926.
- MENDONÇA FILHO, Kléber. **Três roteiros**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2020.
- NARRATIVE OF THE SURVEYING VOYAGES...** London: Henry Colbourn, 1839.
- OLIVEIRA, Maria Paula T. “Reflexões sobre agressão e violência: da biologia à cultura”, in *Junguiana*, v. 41-2, p 117-126, 2023.
- RICHARDS, Graham. **Putting Psychology in its Place: A Critical Historical Overview**. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2009.
- ROUDINESCO, Élisabeth; PLON, Michel. **Dicionário de Psicanálise**. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1998.
- SIQUEIRA BATISTA, Rodrigo et al. “Neurobiologia das emoções”, in *Archives of Clinical Psychiatry*, v. 35, 2, 2008.
- TÁVORA, Franklin. **O Cabeleira**. São Paulo: Ática, 1988.



# IMAGENS EM FOCO

Revista Científica de Cultura e de Imagem

Nº 4

Ano II

setembro/2025

ISSN 3085-7309

---

<sup>i</sup> Ph.D. by the University of São Paulo (USP/SP), and a retired university professor in São Paulo, Brazil, an imagery researcher, theoretical of the iconophotological question, director and researcher at the CONDES-FOTÓS Imago Imaging Studies Center. E-mail: jackbran@gmail.com