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Research article

## A decolonising approach to genre cinema studies

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## Abstract

This paper examines the pedagogical and decolonial possibilities of teaching genre cinema through non-Western perspectives. As a sessional instructor teaching across multiple institutions in Vancouver, Canada, I elaborate on how I have taught genre cinema as a decolonial and pedagogical project. Through course design that recognises the way that the evolution of film theory in general, and genre theory in particular, has been encoded in Euro-Western-centrism and analysis, my teaching practice brings into conversation other knowledges and approaches to film-making and film studies that have often been excluded from film studies pedagogy. My pedagogical project is to decolonise film studies, including genre theory, as exemplified in such courses as: Re-Visioning Genre Theory, a fourth-year course at Emily Carr University of Art and Design; Genre Cinema: From Classical Hollywood to Global Contemporary, a third-year course at the University of British Columbia; and Refiguring Futurisms, a fourth-year film seminar at the University of British Columbia. Some of the questions explored in my research and teaching practice consider how genre cinema is adopted and subverted in contemporary non-Western films. In this paper, I use Latin American decolonial theory to focus on Brazilian cinema as an exemplar of non-Western and decolonial approaches to genre theory.

**Keywords** genre cinema; decolonisation; Brazilian cinema; Latin America; film pedagogy

## Introduction

I propose a pedagogical strategy for film studies and genre theory that underscores plural knowledge systems as part of a decolonial film pedagogy and praxis. To position myself, I am a feminist, mixed-race person with family in Brazil and Canada. As such, I have a stake in advocating for the recognition of a plurivocal cinematic voice that includes a critical decolonial Latin American presence as part of dismantling universalising paradigms and epistemic racism (Dabashi and Mignolo, 2015: x). As a practising media artist and film-maker, working within Latin American diasporic contexts and communities, I apply my experiential and practical knowledge to theorising film-making praxes in and out of the classroom. Further, I view the interconnectedness of research, teaching, lived experience and community engagement as a pedagogical asset in the classroom.

Here, I focus on the decolonial possibilities of teaching genre cinema through non-Western and pluriversal perspectives, using the practice of film analysis as a critical pedagogical tool. I teach contemporary non-Western genre cinema as a means to develop a 'critical consciousness of the present' (Baker, 2008: 4), in order to better understand the modern world as an interrelated knowledge system. As a sessional instructor teaching across multiple institutions in Vancouver, Canada, on unceded Indigenous land, I have taught genre cinema as a decolonial and pedagogical project. Through course design that recognises the way that the evolution of film theory in general, and genre theory in particular, has been encoded in Euro-Western-centrism and analysis, my teaching practice brings into conversation knowledges, cosmologies and approaches to film-making and film studies that have often been neglected in film studies pedagogy. I argue elsewhere that we can reflect on 'how subalternised forms of knowing are moving into virtual and screen spaces; how we can think of this knowledge as a cosmopolitical technology' (Shamash, 2018: 12). This idea of subalternised forms of knowing that underscore spiritual, social, political and economic relations to the world and the cosmos are constitutive of cosmologies of difference that in my film course curation become a provocation to see the world from a multiplicity of perspectives.

I use the term 'non-Western' to include cultural, ideological and geopolitical frameworks outside Eurocentrism, as well as frameworks that apply critical consciousness of, and resistance to, Euro-Western dominance and the hegemony of a one-world order. As articulated by Arturo Escobar (2020: 9), 'Up against the hegemonic idea of "One World made from one world" – the capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial globalised world – the text suggests a transition to a "world in which many worlds fit," the pluriverse.' Thus, to undo, unlearn and unthink Eurocentrism (Shohat and Stam, 2014), I employ a pluriversal approach that critically engages films from the Global South as part of reframing cinema histories. I use the term 'pluriversal' as theorised by Latin American decolonial thinkers Arturo Escobar, Marisol de la Cadena, Mario Blaser and Walter Mignolo, since much of my teaching features cinemas of the Global South, with a strong focus on América Latina/Abya Yala/AfroAmerica Latina.

These thinkers have put forward notions of radical relationality as part of pluriversal politics and cosmovisions for the future of our planet. These theories have primarily evolved from models of living on this earth, outside the capitalist paradigm in sustainable and non-extractive ways, as exemplified by communities, artists, collectives and movements outside the academy and situated in the Global South. These communities are essentially embodying geo-epistemic and ontological autonomous configurations of the art of living. While many groups are on this path, the Zapatistas are a notable example; indeed, this is the group advocating for 'un mundo donde quepan todos los mundos' ('a world into which all worlds fit'). This idea of a world of many worlds is also relevant to cinema studies, as cinema is essentially a (re)worlding art form that has the power to imagine the possibility of different reals. Just as different reals are possible, different possibles are real (Escobar, 2020). As many before have astutely stated, a change in the real is impossible without a simultaneous change in the imaginary (Kuokkanen, 2008; Irigaray, 1985). I make this direct connection with pluriversality as articulated by Latin American thinkers to better understand non-Western cinemas as acts of resistance to the one-world order, and to recognise a diversity of ways of

relating to, and being in, the world. This notion of the coexistence of multiple worlds is also embodied in the classroom with students from diverse backgrounds, gender expressions and lived experiences. I invite the diverse perspectives, knowledges and experiences each student brings to our collaborative learning process throughout the term, and frame our class culture in a way that fosters film appreciation and respects diversity and difference.

Just as communities of resistance are imagining different ways of life, so too are film-makers who both propose resistance to a neoliberal extractive model and envision other coexistence models. Inspired by these alternative models of living with the earth, I attempt to re-imagine the space of the classroom as a space of connection with the unceded and ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations, where all Vancouver-based universities are located. I often conduct an experiential land-based exercise as part of an extended land acknowledgement and grounding in our local geo-socio-historical and political context, which continues to be impacted by colonial legacies and the violences of modernity. This land-based exercise is one where we go on the land and ask the land for a gift (such as a rock) which we keep with us throughout our term, before returning it back to the land. This exercise is a way to establish an anti-oppressive, non-extractive, anti-neoliberal relationship to land, knowledge production and classroom dynamics.

Starting a film course with an experiential land acknowledgement is also a way to lead the imagination of film grammar beyond the classroom and open it up to other knowledge and ecosystems. As Potts and Brown (2015: 20) explain, in anti-oppressive research, 'we do not look to prove or disprove a singular truth about the social or political world. We look for meaning, for understanding, for insights that can enable resistance and change'; I incorporate this notion of meaning making as part of developing critical consciousness in all of my film courses. As part of an anti-oppressive ethos, I promote film analysis as a critical tool to make meaning, to resist colonial violence, and to imagine beyond the narrow confines of Eurocentric film education grammars. In this way, meaning making through film analysis, through consciousness raising, is part of the reflection/action (praxis) that we as humans are capable of transforming the world.

My larger pedagogical project is to decolonise film studies, including genre theory, and to move towards epistemic justice as exemplified in such courses as: *Sci-Fi, Cli-Fi, and Other Futurisms*, a fourth-year seminar course; *Re-Visioning Genre Theory*, another fourth-year course; *Genre Cinema: From Classical Hollywood to Global Contemporary*, a third-year course on genre studies; *Refiguring Futurisms*, a fourth-year film seminar – all conducted at Emily Carr University of Art and Design and/or the University of British Columbia on unceded Indigenous land. Some of the questions studied are: How can a theory of cinema be developed to better serve and articulate Latin American, Afro-descendant, Indigenous, diaspora and other non-Western narratives within film studies? How do these films propose radical resistance, critical consciousness and refusal politics to the dominant one-world order? How does a cross-cultural analysis of genre cinema reveal diverse culturally and politically rooted histories, traditions and functions beyond Eurocentric narratives and anglophone media monopolies? How can an analytical framework rooted in the Global South expand how we make meaning from non-Western genre films today?

As I teach films that engage complex histories and legacies of colonisation, I include a participatory and collective exercise to establish group guidelines at the beginning of each course. Such guidelines are used to create a respectful and inclusive class culture that is open to hearing and sharing diverse opinions, histories and experiences on topics related to colonial legacies, patriarchy, White supremacy and representations of race on screen. As a media scholar who is concerned with how geopolitics, race, class, gender, racialisation and sexuality intersect with film and media, an important focus is to help students acquire a critical and respectful awareness of the ways that various intersecting categories of difference shape media studies and even classroom dynamics. Indeed, applying a pluriversal pedagogic strategy that incorporates and values diverse knowledge systems becomes a means to counter the notion of universal reason and history.

Introducing students to Latin American decolonial theory (for example, Escobar, Lugones, Stam, Mignolo) in my course on genre cinema, with a focus on Brazilian cinema as an exemplar of pluriversal approaches, allows for a more in-depth analysis of the films: *Bacurau* (Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, 2019), *The Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão* (Karim Aïnouz, 2019) and *In the Heart of the World* (Gabriel Martins and Maurílio Martins, 2019). These film analyses are designed to provide some answers to the above questions, as well as to explore the synergies developed between teaching practice and film analysis. I examine how these synergies are constitutive of alternative approaches to academic cinema studies, epistemologies that ultimately de-centre the canons of Whiteness and Eurocentrism still so dominant in university film pedagogy. Plainly spoken, higher education was developed for White men; my courses are meant to disrupt the perpetuation of Eurocentric knowledge systems and colonial legacies of academic film teaching. The practice of analysing the contexts of production of non-Western film-making is a pedagogical strategy to: (1) validate knowledge systems outside Eurocentrism; (2) centre the histories and experiences of Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) students; and (3) provide students with counter-hegemonic frameworks to access and evaluate a diversity of film languages and cultures.

The three Brazilian films that I analyse here were taught in my course, Genre Cinema: From Classical Hollywood to Global Contemporary. The films include one set in a near future (*Bacurau*), one set in a present (*In the Heart of the World*), and one set in a not-so-distant past (*The Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão*); all of these films adopt, subvert and weaponise conventions of genre cinema as political allegory and refusal politics. As part of a plural approach to knowledge valuation, we read traditional genre theory texts (for example, *Film Genre Reader IV* – Grant, 2012), and combine the existing literature on genre cinema with theoretical tools and conceptual frameworks pertinent to our screenings (from critical race theory, visual sovereignty and Indigenous knowledge systems, to Latin American decolonial theory and praxis) and grounded in historical-social-geopolitical contexts. The dearth of non-Western genre film theory means that, as a class, we work to develop theoretical frameworks for Global South cinemas that better serve their contexts of production and political subjectivities. Briefly, *Bacurau* can be framed within a relatively new subgenre – ‘outback noir’ (a western and film noir) – which forecasts the rise of state oppression through foreign invasion. Karim Aïnouz’s *Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão* pays homage to the melodrama genre in all of its excesses, namely, emotions, drama and aesthetics, while illuminating the legacy of patriarchy and male toxicity plaguing Brazil today. *In the Heart of the World* has elements of the social thriller genre, using a spatial imagination that re-centres the lives of marginal populations.

Notably, these visionary film-makers are unmasking the realities of what we can term ‘Operation Condor 2.0’ through the adoption (and subversion) of genre cinema. The original Operation Condor was a cross-border, systemic and sinister campaign of terror by the United States to bring ‘order’ into its backyard – that is, Latin America – under the banner of anticommunism during the Cold War. This repressive campaign started in the late 1960s; the trans-American network was formally institutionalised in 1975, code name Operation Condor. In a Brazilian context, one could argue that Operation Condor 2.0 culminated with the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016, ultimately paving the way for the current authoritarian government in power.

Notwithstanding the current political crisis in Brazil, the cinematic memory of *Bacurau*, *Invisible Life* and *In the Heart of the World* is intertextual, intermedial and metacinematic; the films point to multiple genres, forms and histories. From Cinema Novo in the 1960s, to Cinema Marginal in the 1970s and 1980s, to Cinema da Retomada in the 1990s, we can draw connections between filmic and extra-filmic texts, all within a cinematic language that potentialises a critical vision of Brazil today, during what Karim Aïnouz aptly called ‘Operation Condor 2.0’ in a post-screening discussion of *Invisible Life* at the Lincoln Film Centre in New York (filmlincdotcom, 2020). From Washington to Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia, El Salvador, Haiti, Chile and Argentina, we are witnessing a wave of neoliberal dictatorships spiralling towards neo-fascism across Latin America. Mike Pompeo, serving under former President Donald Trump as Secretary of State, said in 2019 that the US will help ‘legitimate governments’ in Latin America in order to prevent protests

from ‘morphing into riots’ (Thomson Reuters, 2019: n.p.). His message was clear – he was signalling the strong arm of US interventionism, which many have called Operation Condor 2.0.

Although the more recent repression witnessed in Latin America is not homogeneous, these three films, through diverse cinematic strategies, explore how an authoritarian, patriarchal and neo-fascist government serving US economic interests was installed and supported in Brazil. The seductive aesthetics and conventions of genre cinema, a codification system established during the classical Hollywood period (1930s–1960s), are not used in these Brazilian productions to promote an elitist heteropatriarchal agenda. I argue that the adoption of genre cinema ultimately serves as a strategy to access circuits of highly visible and commercial dissemination, in order to expose deeper political processes to a larger audience base. While the Cinema Novo film-makers sought to forge a new aesthetic language, I propose that *Bacurau*, *Invisible Life* and *In the Heart of the World*, along with a number of other contemporary Brazilian productions, offer radical resistance and refusal politics to the dominant White supremacist, patriarchal, neoliberal and neo-fascist order through a cinema of ‘genrification’.

It is noteworthy that the filmic production discussed in this paper is possible, for the most part, only among established film-makers. Kleber Mendonça Filho and Karim Aïnouz have made multiple feature films which have circulated in prestigious international film festivals and film circuits. Both Mendonça Filho and Aïnouz have been able to leverage international co-productions and external funding bodies. In contrast, the film-makers of *In the Heart of the World* (Gabriel Martins and Maurílio Martins) are newcomers on the international film scene with this first feature film, which has garnered much attention in international film festivals. In general, compared with film funding opportunities available in Europe and in the US, independent Latin American cinema is typically more vulnerable to geopolitical processes.

In a classroom setting, the process of framing these films with the relevant social, cultural and political depth, context and reference points that they require means that these courses must be taught by someone well-versed in Latin American culture, geopolitics, history and liberation movements. It is also important to note that teaching this content in Vancouver universities, in predominantly White institutions, requires great effort to: (1) attain employment that allows for this content to be taught; (2) prove that there is a need and demand for this content to be taught; and (3) demonstrate that one is the only person (or one of the only people) qualified to teach this content. Lastly, as reflected in the hiring practices of my local universities, this content that integrates non-Western, Global South film studies, particularly Latin American cinema, is often considered a last-minute addendum to departmental course offers. Global South cinema continues to be farmed out to precariously employed faculty, as opposed to being part of a wider institutional decolonial strategy which would create secure conditions of employment.

This lack of academic investment in Global South cinemas and media cultures in the university spaces I occupy makes the topic more personal and more urgent, and ultimately more of an emotional investment. I counter the institutional discrimination against any teaching scholar who researches and teaches content that connects to their own subjectivity and positionality. Objectivity itself is a fallacy promoted by a discourse of scientific reasoning within a neoliberal and patriarchal logic. I have learned that I am more qualified to teach this content because I have more background to articulate Latin American concepts, contexts and experiences. I bring my lived knowledge and experiences from the significant time I spent growing up, or on the ground, or in the field, in Brazil. This ability to bring experiences and historical contexts based on lived realities into the classroom arguably makes for a more engaging and exciting learning experience compared with a more distant abstract exercise.

Conceiving film itself as a form of public pedagogy, I curate film courses so that students are taken on a cinematic and pedagogical journey. I teach critical film analysis as a tool to decolonise our minds – our assumptions about the Global South, about Latin America, about ourselves, our bodies, our notions of beauty, our racial and gender politics, our ways of being, our consumer habits, our priorities, our historical points of reference – with the aim of what Paulo Freire (2020), the Brazilian educator and philosopher, calls *conscientização* (awareness raising), along with the aim of broadening cinematic syntaxes and film culture at large. The ideas of learning to perceive social, political, economic,

colonial and racial differences, and of being able to take action against oppressive systems of power, are integrated into our film analysis and classroom discussions. Applying film analysis to explain how these visionary film-makers present dystopic temporalities (present, past and future) using genre cinema tropes as metacinematic social and political commentary is thus part of a pedagogic strategy towards critical consciousness (*conscientização*). I follow bell hooks's (2014) practice in *Teaching to Transgress* of discussion generating excitement in the classroom through collective effort to sustain a learning community throughout the term, while recognising difference. I apply film analysis as a means to activate anticolonial, critical and feminist pedagogies.

Next, I demonstrate how the three films challenge heteropatriarchy and colonial capitalism through a cinema of resistance and liberation. This demonstration relies on non-Western epistemologies from the South. Film analysis anchored in Global South, Latin American frameworks becomes a tool to challenge oppressive systems of power in and out of the classroom to foster conversations about the intersections of power relations on and off screen.

## **Bacurau (2019)**

*Bacurau* starts with Caetano Veloso's 1969 song 'Não Identificado', or 'Unidentified', performed by Gal Costa. The camera moves over a black screen as the spectator hears Tropicália sounds; the camera moves from outer space to planet Earth, slowly zooming in to Brazil's Northeast. Tropicália arose in the late 1960s, incorporating local and imported influences, and highbrow and lowbrow cultures and tastes; it was a cultural phenomenon that encompassed music, art, theatre, poetry and film. As articulated by Brazilian film scholars Nagib and Solomon (2019: 123), 'Tropicália collected and made sense of the debris of the left-wing revolutionary utopia shattered by the military coup in Brazil in 1964'. As a result of merging Brazilian and African traditions with American psychedelia and rock, Tropicália broke down boundaries and hierarchies, and was strongly associated with political resistance and revolution.

Veloso, one of the biggest proponents of Tropicália, was arrested in Brazil in 1969, as the US-backed dictatorship viewed his music and political action as threatening. *Bacurau's* opening sequence evokes the wave of US-backed terror and tyranny under the original Operation Condor in Brazil, using science fiction as genre motifs within the film. The intertextual cinematic memory of this opening sequence featuring Caetano Veloso, Gal Costa and Tropicália evokes political resistance.

Glauber Rocha's 1967 *Terra em Transe* is highly relevant to better understanding *Bacurau*. Made the same year that Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica first presented his installation titled 'Tropicália', thereby giving currency to the term, at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio, Rocha's *Terra em Transe*, translated into English with both the titles *Entranced Earth* and *Land in Anguish*, allegorically evokes Brazil's 1964 coup d'état. The opening of Rocha's iconic film features a camera moving from left to right over a body of water to a fictional El Dorado, which represents the Brazilian nation state. I see a parallel between how Mendonça Filho and Dornelles's camera moves from outer space, from right to left, before eventually landing on the fictional town of Bacurau, with how Rocha's *Terra em Transe* is concerned with the notion of Earth, entranced, in anguish, through evolving social-political processes, which is also evident in *Bacurau's* opening. The meaning of earth, *terra*, in Rocha's filmography, an obsession with the national project and multiple meanings of earth as land, territory, nation and planet, extend to this 2019 contemporary filmic production.

In the first film of Rocha's trilogy, *Deus e Diabo na Terra do Sol* (1964) (in English, *Black God, White Devil*), the prophecy of the *sertão*, or Brazilian outback, becomes a cinematic motif: 'O sertão vai virar mar, e o mar vai virar sertão' ('The backlands will turn to sea, and the sea will turn into backlands'). This famous cinematic vision punctuates Rocha's film, and seems to come true to some degree in *Bacurau*. While Bacurau is a fictional town in Brazil's semi-arid Northeast Region, it is not the drought-ridden land of *Barren Lives* by Nelson Perreiro dos Santos (1963), which depicts a poor, oppressive, cruel, dry and infertile land, which one can only wish to survive or to escape.

Certainly, *Bacurau* evokes the sertão in the national cinematic imaginary, while providing a futuristic utopia of its potential as a place for a socially progressive, diverse and technologically advanced community to band together against the powerful forces of colonial capitalism or Operation Condor 2.0. Under the Afrocentric matriarchy of the deceased Dona Carmelita, White supremacy, foreign invasion and predatory colonisers have no place in Bacurau. Drawing upon Rocha's cinematic prophecy of the sertão, we see in *Bacurau* its ability to transform into a lush and green landscape. Here, water flows from the coffin of the town's new patron saint, Carmelita, albeit with the aid of psychotropic drugs. Upon entering Bacurau, we see Teresa (played by Barbara Colen) greet Damiano (Carlos Francisco). The latter, as if performing a welcoming ritual, instructs her to open her mouth. She then swallows a small pill, smiles, and kisses him on the cheek.

The roles of setting and genre reign supreme in *Bacurau*. We are definitely not in Hollywood, nor in Kansas anymore, as indicated by the dented, rusting and weather-beaten green and white sign 'Bacurau' in the first minutes of the film; the camera lingers on the sign with its clearly stated admonition under the town's name, 'if you go, go in peace'. As an audience, we are made conscious that we are in Bacurau, a speculative place deep in the heart of Brazil's Northeast, or Brazil's wild west, where there are different rules, cosmologies, histories and realities, as well as cinematic frameworks. Unlike the hegemonic cultural structure of Hollywood cinema, which first codified categories of films into genres, the intentional heterodox adoption of genre, its hybridisation, imbues the genrication of *Bacurau* with a Brazilian anthropophagic strategy similar to Tropicália's syncretic lineage. Significantly, Glauber Rocha's filmography, and, more specifically, his film *Terra em Transe*, is cited in Veloso's (2004: 61) book *Tropical Truth* as a critical conceptual influence. The film-makers of *Bacurau* reference this intermedial and intertextual history, and merge it with genre cinema.

While many US westerns of the classical Hollywood period served as origin stories for settler colonialism, painting White men as heroes and Indigenous people as savages in need of being civilised, *Bacurau* subverts this trope when the gun-crazed White supremacists come to Bacurau to shoot its population for sport. There are no White male heroes in this story. This film intentionally bends genres, drawing from the western, the thriller and science fiction, and every genre in between. For instance, *Bacurau* contains elements of the weird western genre – a genre that tends to include supernatural menaces of horror fiction within a western setting.

A dystopic future converging with the rise of ultra-conservatism is interrogated through these overlapping genres, intertextual and intermedial references, as well as a memory of place, Brazil's Northeast, which reaches back to the colonial era and its resistance struggles. Mendonça Filho has explained in an interview that: 'the unstated but absolutely crucial idea for our film was that Bacurau is a type of "remixed quilombo"' (Bittencourt, 2019: n.p.). The Quilombo dos Palmares was the largest area of slave resistance, a refuge of quilombolas or escaped slaves (mostly from Bahia and Pernambuco's sugarcane farms and mills) that lasted for almost a century, starting at the end of the sixteenth century, and ending in 1694, when it was destroyed in colonial Brazil (Anderson, 1996).

The idea of the remix can be read as a cinematic worlding that critiques the slave-based colonial regime and ongoing struggle for economic and political freedom, while simultaneously offering another possibility. In this way, the remixed quilombo is a utopian space where an intergenerational and diverse mix of people – sex workers, teachers, doctors, outlaws, DJs, children, queer, transgendered, non-normative bodies, from diverse ethnic and racialised backgrounds – come together as community to resist White supremacy, political impunity and foreign invasion. The speculative historical revenge plot in the film's final act, when we see the attacking intruders' heads lined up outside the town church, calls up the history of the 'cangaçeiros', a social phenomenon of rural banditry specific to Brazil's Northeast. In fact, several key scenes highlight the town's local museum, which features this 'cangaço' history beginning in the late nineteenth century and peaking in the 1920s and 1930s with the folk heroes Lampião and his bandit lover, Maria Bonita.

On a metacinematic level, the meditation on the cultural memory of resistance to oppressive government through the image of the cangaçeiros in Bacurau's museum functions as cinematic chronotype.

Moreover, the film's speculative revenge alludes to a historical event in 1938, when the government killed and beheaded a number of Lampião's outlawed banditry, and displayed their slain heads in front of city hall as an example of what would happen to anyone who disobeyed the law of the land as defined by the officials and wealthy elite of that period. In this cinematic allegory, the social utopia of *Bacurau* is a violent and hard-won battle that narratively subverts and temporally overlays multiple histories. The film depicts how real transformation is an intergenerational process spanning colonisation, the quilombos, the cangaços, Operation Condor, neoliberalism, foreign invasion, government corruption and impunity. Liberation and autonomy are battles that are won by the resistance struggles of the oppressed.

## ***The Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão (2019)***

Karim Aïnouz embraces a Latin American melodramatic imagination through image, sound and narrative. While Hollywood may have defined the conventions of genre cinema, Latin Americans arguably invented melodrama. Indeed, Sadlier's (2009: 4) book on Latin American melodrama explains that, 'the domestic films from Latin America are somewhat closer in spirit than their Hollywood counterparts to the original melodramas of the early nineteenth century'. While Latin American melodrama goes back to theatrical and operatic traditions, Aïnouz cites the significance of growing up watching telenovelas in the 1980s with his mother and aunts. The casting of Fernanda Montenegro, who, like Sonia Braga in *Bacurau*, is one of Brazilian cinema's great female actors, references this soap operatic history.

Significantly, all of the elements of melodrama are present: pathos, excess, heartbreak, sensuality, suffering, music, tears and smudged mascara (a key marker of melodrama), along with mirror shots signifying the protagonists' social-political entrapment within a patriarchal system. Aïnouz develops an aesthetic that operates on a heightened multi-sensorial level, achieved by means of saturated colours, sounds and *melos*, the Greek word for music, which manifest as motifs in the film.

Set in Rio de Janeiro in the 1950s, Aïnouz demonstrates how segregation works in a city such as Rio, with its distinct neighbourhoods functioning as self-contained worlds within the same geographic confines. Class differences and social realities are explored in these separate worlds that coexist, but, in the case of our two protagonists, never meet. In fact, at the core of the great tragedy of this film are the systemic barriers – class and patriarchy – that separate two sisters in 1950s Brazil. The film is set in the time of Aïnouz's mother's coming of age. The film (and film-maker) seem to ask: How can a single mother raise a child in a patriarchal society that completely oppresses and excludes her? How does a woman who dreams of becoming a world-class pianist still make music, or even dream, when she is forced to live out her life serving her husband, father and children? In an interview, Aïnouz explains how he was raised by his single mother who passed away in 2015, and how he 'wanted to talk about this generation of women who are now in their eighties and nineties, who are about to disappear' (Aftab, 2019: n.p.). Using melodrama to talk about 'moments of crisis' (Aïnouz, quoted in Elfadl, 2019: n.p.), the film makes a parallel between conservative family values in the post-war period in Brazil and the conservative values of contemporary Brazilian politics.

Based on a 2016 novel of the same name, the film tells the story of a Portuguese immigrant family in Rio in the 1950s; it focuses on the lives of two sisters, Eurídice and Guida, one a shy aspiring pianist, the other an intrepid and irreverent rebel set on escaping her father's restrictive household. The characters and themes embody the tropes of melodrama particular to the virgin/prostitute dichotomy: 'the suffering mother and all-powerful father, the sacrament of marriage and the sin of unholy alliances, self-sacrifice and martyrdom' (Sadlier, 2009: 10). Aïnouz embraces this melodramatic imagination, its tropes and conventions, and uses sound, movement and colour to recodify the language of melodrama as an act of freedom of expression within a totalitarian national context. In his own words: 'I sought to celebrate melodrama as a radical aesthetic strategy to offer a social critique of our times, one that is visually splendid and tragic, grand and raw' (New Wave Films, 2020: n.p.). Aïnouz's radical aesthetic strategy is developed in collaboration with the women in front of the camera, and also those behind it.



Filed by French cinematographer H  l  ne Louvart (who has worked with everyone from Agn  s Varda to Wim Wenders), lighting, colour and framing are used to heighten emotion, memory and mood. The sonic dimensions of the melos, both diegetic and non-diegetic, are effectively used to examine and resist patriarchal oppression. The sonority of sorority (Aceves Sep  lveda, 2021; Lagarde, 2009) between the two sisters becomes an acoustic motif that weaponises the melos of melodrama as anti-patriarchal. A particular scene that highlights this melos of sorority is when, three-quarters through the film, Eur  dice, after postponing her dream of being admitted into the Viennese school of music, finally secretly arranges to do so by auditioning. Her father and husband do not and cannot know her plan. We see her walk onto the stage in an old theatre; she bows, sits on the piano bench, significantly removes her wedding ring, and starts playing.

The framing of the scene features a montage sequence between close-ups of her fingers racing over the piano keys, the diegetic sound of piano flowing from those fingers, medium-close-ups of her profile, and a wide shot of her tall, lanky frame poised over the piano, immersed in her creative act. This suggestion of a trance-like state achieved through music making is heightened as the scene is intercut with a fantasy sequence between Eur  dice and her sister, Guida, from whom she has been separated. Eur  dice, after years of performing the roles designed by the patriarchy and enforced by the men in her life, as a dutiful mother, wife and daughter, seizes a moment to defy these powerful forces and auditions for the Vienna music conservatory. While this act of auditioning is significant as an act of defiance to the patriarchy, and as an act of freedom to pursue her dreams and desires independent of her gender and repressed social position, true to melodramatic convention, she is ultimately thwarted.

The scene is evocatively tied to the ecstasy of music/art/film-making, to the eroticism of feminine desire, and to the everlasting bonds of sisterhood. As Eur  dice is transported by her music making, we see Guida and Eur  dice in a nuptial dance surrounded by tropical foliage. The wedding dress worn by Eur  dice symbolises how Eur  dice's lifelong alliance is not to her husband or father, but to her sister. Furthermore, this ecstasy only occurs when Eur  dice disappears into her piano playing. It is as if Eur  dice Gusm  o embodied the aesthetics of the impossible and the invisible: the life she never had as a famous pianist despite the fact that she comes first place in the competition; her unrequited love for her sister; the repressed and unseen life of women in the 1950s who are expected to reproduce, to care for their children, to serve and to hide behind their husbands and fathers.

In many melodramas, nature is coded as solemn and religious (Sadlier, 2009: 11); however, in this fantasy sequence surrounded by tropical foliage, it is queer coded as a marriage of sisterhood solidarity, thus subversively coding nature as queer, tropical and feminist. Ainoz has discussed how melodrama as a genre allows him to represent his experiences as a queer man: 'We are always put at the margins and I think melodrama is kind of perfect to talk about people who are kept outside for no reason' (quoted in Elfadl, 2019: n.p.). Arguably, the Portuguese father in *Invisible Life* is representative of patriarchal and colonial forces in Brazil. *Invisible Life* in effect becomes an act of creative freedom and a challenge to the heteropatriarchal agenda set out by President Bolsonaro, who has explicitly censored any LGBTQ+ cultural and filmic content. In brief, the cinematic act re-worlds resistance through sisterhood solidarity, through a queering of melodrama, as an aesthetics of liberation that is coded in the language of genre cinema.

## ***In the Heart of the World (2019)***

Belo Horizonte, the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, is the sixth-largest city in Brazil, with a population of 2.7 million. It is where my father grew up, and where most of my paternal family live today. Teaching a film that is connected to a geography that I know, and that I can imagine and relate to, brings relevance and lived experience to the course content. However, as a result of curricular Euro-Western focuses in film studies, teaching Latin American cinema, and more specifically Brazilian cinema, has placed me in a film studies periphery within the academy. *In the Heart of the World* takes place in a periphery of the periphery, in a suburb of Belo Horizonte called Contagem.

In counterpoint to the film's title, *In the Heart of the World*, Contagem remains not only a cinematic periphery, but also a geographical one. In a global context, it is part of the urban sprawl spillover of a city (Belo Horizonte) that few Canadian film studies academics have ever heard of. Furthermore, the film's characters are from the margins of this periphery. From its very title, the film plays on re-centring a marginal population and subverting our conceptions of periphery. We see a close study of the daily lives of these characters, and of their desires for more – for an escape from marginalisation, crime, poverty and dead-end jobs. The filmic realism and genre tensions all stem from the same source – a dream of a social class of escaping the confines of socio-economic and geopolitical entrapment.

In a message posted to our online discussion forum about the film on 31 March 2021, one of my students, David Wu, astutely stated: 'The possibility of violence at a moment's notice kept me on edge throughout. The unpredictability of everyday life, along with the pressure to survive and search for "the heart of the world" fills the characters with anxiety.' *In the Heart of the World* could be framed within the social thriller genre; nonetheless, the meditation on social realism in this Brazilian suburb takes precedence over the thrills, chills, horror or suspense typically seen in other social thriller films, such as *Parasite* or *Get Out*. While the term 'social thriller' has been applied to films since at least the 1970s (Wilson, 2020), Jordan Peele used the term in its modern incarnation in 2017 with his groundbreaking film *Get Out*. Peele examines horror through a racialised lens; his film poses existential questions about racial terror and body horror through genre cinema.

Examining existential questions of social class, peripheral thinking and racialisation in a Brazilian context is also pertinent to an analysis of *In the Heart of the World*. As Peele explains in an interview about *Get Out*, 'Society is the scariest monster' (Zinoman, 2017: n.p.). Certainly, *In the Heart of the World* critiques global capital and how it has produced otherness and marginalisation. While the film does not directly address race in the same way as *Get Out*, the film, arguably, can and should be analysed for greater insight through a critical race theory lens.

*In the Heart of the World* brings Blackness and Black lives in Brazil into focus through its casting and under the direction of a duo of film-makers, one of whom is of Afro-Brazilian descent. In one particular scene, Selma (played by Grace Passô) points out her racial difference when she states, 'Are you stupid, I'm Black, damn it. In which world do you live in?' This moment highlights the tension between the genre-bending cinematic universe created to build suspense, thrills and chills, and the existential realism of being a Black woman in an all too real world that discriminates based on race and gender. The film's genre-bending shifts between social realism and social thriller reflect the porosity between realism and fiction visually embedded in the film. The discursive space between the social realism on which the film-makers comment, their cultural inheritances, their spatial imagination and the thriller film elements they construct all combine to form the film's metacinematic logic.

Filmes de Plástico, the production company founded over a decade ago by the film-makers Gabriel Martins and Maurílio Martins, along with André Novais de Oliveira and producer Thiago Macêdo Correia, has made a number of films about and from this Brazilian periphery. *Temporada* (Long Way Home in English) by Afro-Brazilian director André Novais de Oliveira (2018) is the second feature-length film produced by Filmes de Plástico, and also stars Grace Passô. Both *Temporada* and *In the Heart of the World* present meticulously constructed social realist narratives or counter-narratives from within similar socio-geopolitical universes.

In Filmes de Plástico, the spatial imagination is produced outside Euro-Western worlds. Without imposing a Western geographic imagination, nor imposing what Edward Said (1978) called 'orientalism', the specificity of place dominates the production company's narratives. As Ivone Margulies's (2020: 39) article on Filmes de Plástico explains, the company's founding members set out to make a 'a *cinemão* [a popular cinema assertive in its technique and language] at their very doorsteps'. Here, realities of being marginal, of being Black, of being poor are not static; the film-makers and films show us that those from socially peripheral positions have their own agency to produce culture and knowledge.

Just as the Cinema Novo film-makers spoke to their oppressive social political moment, to their material limitations, and then transformed those negative realities into an aesthetics of liberation, of 'hunger', of 'garbage', so too do these film-makers from Contagem reassess their socio-geographical context and the notion of the periphery. The Brazilian trope of cannibalising the other, of *mestizaje*, of syncretism, of manipulating Afro-Indigenous-European and/or other foreign inheritances often imposed by the colonial state is used to produce a new aesthetics embedded in a Brazilian cinematic legacy. The film comments on being in the periphery of the periphery, of embodying 'the negation of the negation' (Stam, 2003: 36).

As Brazilian film scholar Robert Stam (2003: 3) lucidly puts it:

This 'negation of the negation' also has to do with a special relationship to official history. As those whose history has been destroyed and misrepresented, as those whose very history has been dispersed and diasporized rather than memorialized and incorporated into the grand récit as have dominant histories and as those whose history has often been told, danced and sung rather than written, oppressed people have been obliged to recreate their past out of scraps and remnants and the debris of history.

When it comes to the grand récit, in historical terms, the population represented in *In the Heart of the World* is the product of this discontinuity, of these ruptures, erasures and exclusions. This film made by film-makers from inside a marginal population produces an alternative aesthetics that is consciously self-reflexive of its social position, while incorporating non-Western traditions, other narrative structures, and attitudes towards the body and spirituality. *In the Heart of the World* portrays these peripheral, often non-normative, bodies, young and old, Black, White and Brown, as part of an implicit self-recognition and inclusive conception of humanity. These corporal representations relate to alternative aesthetics, social realisms, and other attitudes about bodies beyond the confines of White bourgeois acceptability and respectability. Certainly, the Black presence in the Filmes de Plástico productions should not be understated. *Temporada* and *In the Heart of the World* are part of a new and rising Black Brazilian cinema.

For instance, the Black and overweight Brazilian funk artist MC Carol, hailing from the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro (Niterói), is cast as Brenda, a neighbourhood character and Marcos's confidante and weed supplier. Brazilian funk is typically deemed as a peripheral form of music from the favelas, or slums, blending multiple influences from Candomblé to American hip hop. Brazilian funk music has become a statement of Afro-Brazilian identity and youth culture, giving voice to an oppressed population. While the film features an ensemble cast, Grace Passô guides the narrative with her charismatic cinematic presence. In an interview, she articulates how, 'Seeing those bodies there, they are bodies from my childhood, from my universe, they are the bodies from my dreams that have characteristics that are part of my subconscious. They are bodies that remind me of my family ... I recognise my future and ancestry' (programaagendatv, 2019: n.p.). She goes on to explain that while this sensation of body recognition should be normal, seeing those (Black) bodies on screen is still highly unusual in Brazilian film production.

The film-makers' gaze arises from a cinematic language that is informed by their physical environment and their imaginary universes. Their symbolic universe is centred in Contagem, their 'heart of the world'. Thus, a cartography of difference de-centres Eurocentric spatiality by underscoring the narrative value of self-representation of bodies and existences on the periphery as part of a critique of modernity. Critically, this cinema arising from the margins, from a de-centred perspective, 'the negation of the negation' (Stam, 2003: 36), opens new theoretical possibilities in terms of film studies pedagogy and social theory. We need to consider how theories of power and theories of spatiality can be used to better understand these cinematic practices. In Contagem, the subaltern can not only speak – they make films and create new cinematic languages. From a pedagogical perspective, those languages can only be deciphered and taught by film educators versed in Global South universes, more specifically, scholars whose research and experience are based in Brazil.

## Conclusion

An analysis of all three films speaks to a necessary decolonising shift in Western film studies, and highlights a dialogical encounter between Brazilian film-makers who provide a geopolitical critique of Western modernity. In *Bacurau*, *The Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão* and *In the Heart of the World*, the expressive acts of cinematic freedom visibilise the colonial legacy of patriarchy, capitalism and foreign invasion. In effect, from attacks on education, culture, human rights and the environment, Brazil's far-right genocidal president's playbook is as old as Hollywood's depictions of 'cowboys and Indians'. These film-makers' cinematic languages adopt genre as a re-worlding of resistance to histories of colonial matrices of power (Quijano, 2000) in the form of sisterhood, matriarchy, Black and Brown bodies, and queer outlaws who band together as a unifying force in an aesthetics of liberation.

Teaching genre cinema from the Global South with my focus on Brazil to a highly diverse student body in the Global North amplifies the need to address the ongoing colonial politics of knowledge in these institutions. Our course content, class discussions and film analyses are particularly empowering to gender non-conforming students and students of colour, whose sites of enunciation have been othered in the academy. Thus, providing analytical frameworks (such as visual sovereignty, critical race theory, Third and Fourth Cinema theory) that address how power relations and knowledge hierarchies are constructed, while orienting students to draw from their lived experiences, is part of a decolonial pedagogy to make visible how cinematic production, systems of power and our lived realities are all interconnected.

Certainly, the history of European and American imperial expansion, 'is also a history of how particular canons [*sic*] of knowledge came to dominate, marking the knowledge ecologies of the Global South as inferior, premodern, and irrelevant' (Khoja-Moolji, 2017: S149). Focusing on films from the Global South, from Latin America, Asia and Africa, as a conscious curricular practice that adopts pluriversality as a pedagogical framework is a reparative measure to counter the epistemic erasure of these critical geo-cinematic bodies of knowledge.

Film as teacher, film as political ontology, and political ontology as pedagogy, ultimately shift our understanding, orientation and relationship to life and being. Film analysis as pedagogical tool becomes a means to provide students with a more just and expansive cinematic, ontological and epistemic literacy. I apply pluriversality to integrate the coexistence of diverse knowledge systems and worldings as integral to the analyses of films that reflect non-Western approaches to storytelling, to worldbuilding and to other ontological universes. My current pedagogical journey is moving towards a pluriversal understanding of cinema studies as a means to expand the current epistemic lexicon, away from a universalising White, male, European voice that has dominated film studies pedagogy. In an era of truth and reconciliation, of Black Lives Matter, where my departments' concessions are to outsource decolonial labour to precariously employed faculty, the scope of decolonial film pedagogy is limited within predominantly White and male-dominated film departments. In this way, I see my courses as a kind of decolonial film hack or pedagogical intervention that broadens the epistemological diversity of film cultures and theories that film students are asking for, and that they deserve if we believe that education enhances our capacity to be free and that learning can be liberatory (hooks, 2014). Indeed, the act of sharing these reflections on film teaching is an act of resistance to the colonial systems in which I work, and also one of joy in celebrating the incredible cinematic wealth and diversity of Latin American, Brazilian cinema.

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## Declarations and conflicts of interests

### Research ethics statement

The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with University of British Columbia standards.

### Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

## Filmography

- Bacurau* (BR/FR 2019, Kleber Mendonça Filho, Juliano Dornelles)  
*Barren Lives (Vidas secas)*, BR 1963, Nelson Perreira dos Santos)  
*Black God, White Devil (Deus e Diabo na Terra do Sol)*, BR 1964, Glauber Rocha)  
*Get Out* (US 2017, Jordan Peele)  
*In the Heart of the World (No Coração do Mundo)*, BR 2019, Gabriel Martins, Maurílio Martins)  
*The Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão (A Vida Invisível)*, BR/DE 2019, Karim Aïnouz)  
*Land in Anguish (Terra em Transe)*, BR 1967, Glauber Rocha)  
*Long Way Home (Temporada)*, BR 2018, André Novais de Oliveira)

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