CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL
ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

Political Cinema as the Reproduction of Collective Subjectivity
A Case Study of *Bacurau* (2019)

Csaba András, University of Pécs, andras.csaba@pte.hu

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Abstract

This article interprets *Bacurau* (2019) as a cinematic model for the reproduction of collective political subjectivity. Rather than confirming the modern thesis that "the people are missing," the film stages the reactivation of a historically sedimented communal form grounded in shared memory, spatial practices, and genre transformation. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau's theory of populist articulation and Alain Badiou's concept of fidelity to an event, the study argues that Bacurau mobilizes populist aesthetic devices while ultimately anchoring collective agency in loyalty to the Canudos rebellion as an enduring rupture. Through its revisionist western framework and radicalized aesthetics of violence, the film renders perceptible a collective "we" that persists beneath contemporary regimes of enforced individualization.

Keywords: political cinema; collective subjectivity; populism; Bacurau; Alain Badiou

This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.

Article History

Received: 18 February 2026

Accepted: 18 May 2026

Published: 28 June 2026

Political Cinema as the Reproduction of Collective Subjectivity A Case Study of *Bacurau* (2019)

Csaba András

Introduction

The interpretation of Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles' 2019 film *Bacurau* presented in this study is part of a broader research project that examines how popular, widely accessible cinema can acquire an emancipatory force. There are, of course, numerous possible paths to achieving this. Here, however, I focus on only one: an aesthetic practice which, following Bertolt Brecht, transforms the "people" from objects of politics into subjects of politics (Brecht 1986, 108) by offering a model for the relationship between the "I" and the "We", giving the community an aesthetic form.

The revolutionary political subject, or, more precisely, the lack thereof, has been an important question in critical thought in recent decades. Seeing that the proletariat has not carried out the historical task for which Marxist theory considered it both suitable and destined, theories concerning the revolutionary subject have also been transformed: concepts have emerged that place new social agents into the vacant position (Laclau, 1990), and theories have appeared that attempt to conceive of changing the world without such a subject (RanciÈre 1999). Here I am not concerned with how to judge the historical role of certain political subjects

or what tactical possibilities are rooted in different conceptions of this subject. Instead, I am interested in the aesthetics of creating the political subject: by what means cinema is able to compose a "we" capable of pulling the recipient out of the position imposed on them by our extremely individualistic era.

Against this background, this article approaches *Bacurau* as a case through which this problem can be examined at the level of cinematic form. In my interpretation, I argue that *Bacurau* offers an aesthetic framework for the reproduction of the collective subject of politics. By "reproduction," I do not mean simple representation or reflection of an already existing social body. Rather, reproduction designates a cinematic operation through which historically sedimented forms of collective life are reactivated and made operative within the present. The film does not create "the people" ex nihilo; it mobilizes an already existing, though fragmented, horizon of shared memory and political experience. The aim of this study is to interpret the film from this perspective and, in doing so, to present it as a model for the cinematic reconstruction of community. As Alain Badiou writes, "every we-subject is a product of forms" (Badiau, 2007, 109): my study explores a specific case of the forms through which a "we-subject" is produced in the film by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles.

From this perspective, *Bacurau* not only depicts a rural Brazilian community resisting

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

external threats, but stages the conditions under which a collective political "we" is sustained and reiterated. Drawing from Ernesto Laclau's theory of populist articulation and Alain Badiou's concept of fidelity to an event, I propose that the film functions not merely as a narrative of resistance but as a model of collective subjectivation grounded in historical continuity and genre transformation, thereby addressing what Gilles Deleuze famously described as the problem that "the people are missing" in modern political cinema.

The people are missing

Gilles Deleuze writes in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* that a profound transformation can be observed in the history of film regarding the representation of the people. According to the philosopher, in classical cinema the people are still present, since for its filmmakers they are taken as given. With Pudovkin, the existence of the people is still virtual, but through gradual awakening to self-awareness, it becomes actualized; Eisenstein "shows them performing a qualitative leap"; while "in Vertov and Dovzhenko, in two different ways, there is a unanimity which calls the different peoples into the same melting-pot from which the future emerges" (Deleuze 2001b, 216). At the same time, it is not only Soviet cinema that renders the people visible: according to Deleuze, they are present in the films of King Vidor, Frank Capra, and John Ford as well, but there "the economic crises, the fight against moral prejudice, profiteers

and demagogues, which mark the awareness of a people, at the lowest point of their misfortune as well as at the peak of their hope" (Deleuze 2001b, 216). According to the philosopher, however, this fundamental situation, that we can take the people as a given, changed in the era of modern film:

> In American and in Soviet cinema, the people are already there, real before being actual, ideal without being abstract. Hence the idea that the cinema, as art of the masses, could be the supreme revolutionary or democratic art, which makes the masses a true subject. But a great many factors were to compromise this belief: the rise of Hitler, which gave cinema as its object not the masses become subject but the masses subjected; Stalinism, which replaced the unanimism of peoples with the tyrannical unity of a party; the break-up of the American people, who could no longer believe themselves to be either the melting-pot of peoples past or the seed of a people to come (it was the neo-Western that first demonstrated this break-up). In short, if there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet ... the people are missing. (Deleuze 2001b, 216)

From Deleuze's perspective, the "people" are no longer a given, and "this acknowledgement of a people who are missing is not a renunciation of political cinema, but on the contrary the new basis on which it is founded" (Deleuze 2001b, 217). While I do not adopt

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

a strictly Deleuzian framework, I follow him in identifying the problem of the "missing people" as a defining condition of modern political cinema. However, while Deleuze emphasizes the absence of "people" and the other possibilities arising from this absence (Lambert 2021), I focus on something else: *Bacurau* suggests that the political task of mass cinema lies less in *invention* than in the *reactivation* of an already established collective horizon.

Contemporary critical theory has repeatedly described late capitalism as a regime of enforced individualization. In Jodi Dean's account, communicative capitalism, with its emphasis on individual voices, opinions, and identities, undermines collective agency and obscures the possibility of acting as a "we." So much so that, in a reversal of Althusser's formulation, ideology no longer interpellates individuals as subjects, but subjects as individuals (DEAN 2016, 73–74). As Alain Badiou states, "today we are suffering under the reign of artificial individualism" (Badiou 2007, 98), a condition in which collectivity appears as an outdated and even discredited abstraction. Mark Fisher similarly links this "mandatory individualism" to the contemporary neoliberal restructuring of social life, which erodes previously existing forms of community (Fisher 2018, 672).

Political subjectivity, based not on sameness but on difference (Badiou 2001, 20–28) and rooted in individual experience, has in recent decades contributed to a suffocating

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

atmosphere to which numerous films have responded. Rather than reaffirming fixed identities, these works often stage unexpected forms of collectivity that cut across them: from the alliance of miners and LGBTQ activists in *Pride* (Matthew Warchus, 2014), to the rearticulation of class solidarity in *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016), or the collective struggle against corporate power in *Sorry to Bother You* (Boots Riley, 2018). In this context, Bacurau can be understood as part of a broader tendency within emancipatory mass cinema to construct frameworks of political struggle that transcend established group boundaries.

Emancipatory theories typically conceive political struggle as universalizing: the part acts on behalf of the whole. The feminist struggle aims to liberate not only women but everyone from the rule of the patriarchal system; the struggle of the proletariat aims not merely at the domination of workers but at the abolition of class society as such. At the same time, the emergence of collective political subjects has been theorized in multiple ways. These should be understood as models rather than mutually exclusive accounts. Marxist theories of proletarian self-consciousness (LukÁcs 1971), Alain Badiou's conception of the subject based on fidelity to an event (Badiou 2005), Slavoj Žižek's account of subjectivity grounded in an unsymbolizable remainder (Žižek 2005, 276), Ernesto Laclau's theory of populist articulation (LAclau 2005), or Jacques Rancière's concept of political subjectivation based on disagreement (Rancière 1999) may differ in their premises, yet none exhausts the field of possible

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

constructions of the political subject.

From the perspective of post-millennium political mass cinema, Laclau's work is particularly relevant, as it offers a model of political community that emerges through the articulation of social demands. In *On Populist Reason*, he argues that "the people" is constituted through a unifying process in which particular demands are articulated into a chain of equivalences (Laclau 2005, 93–96). This process is organized around what he calls empty signifiers: terms and images that do not express a pre-existing unity but instead performatively institute it, producing coherence within a given political field (Laclau 2005, 95–96). From this perspective, cinema can be understood not merely as representing a people, but as participating in the construction of such a unity.

Another important model for the formation of a political community is offered by the philosophy of Alain Badiou. In *The Century*, he emphasizes that "the subject is dependent on an event and only comes to be constituted as a capacity for truth" (Badiou 2007, 100). Here, the event does not refer to a historical occurrence in the ordinary sense, but to an evental rupture that initiates a truth-producing process (what Badiou calls a generic procedure), through which the subject is constituted through fidelity to the event. In this sense, the subject does not originate truth but sustains and unfolds it through a commitment that exceeds individual

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

existence and inscribes the event within a given situation.

Emancipatory culture can either produce new forms of subjectivity or reactivate existing ones. While the former pushes the boundaries of political imagination by developing new models of collectivity, the latter operates by reconfiguring already available forms and rendering them perceptible and experiential. In this sense, contemporary emancipatory mass cinema, rather than producing new formal paradigms, does not necessarily invent new figures of the political subject; it makes existing configurations of the relation between the "I" and the "we" imaginable. Such films can participate in the reproduction of the political subject either through the articulation of unity (in Laclau's sense of empty signifiers) or by providing aesthetic forms for collectivities sustained through fidelity to events (in Badiou's sense). In both cases, these theories are used not in their full philosophical scope, but as conceptual models for thinking about different possibilities of political subjectivity in relation to the specific capacities of mass cinema. Mass cinema does not inaugurate singular artistic events; rather, it recalls and reshapes forms of collective experience within a shared cultural horizon. Cultural reproduction, therefore, can contribute both to the emergence of a "people" where it appears to be absent and to the continuation of forms of collective subjectivity across historical situations.

While Deleuze's diagnosis of the "missing people" highlights the historical challenge of

politically legible collectives in modernity, Laclau's notion of populist articulation and Badiou's concept of fidelity offer more precise frameworks for thinking how a collective "we" might be constituted or reproduced rather than simply assumed. In the context of *Bacurau*, these frameworks allow us to show how the film's formal strategies, from genre subversion (as in its reworking of the western) to the staging of shared histories (as materialized in the museum), function not as mere metaphors but as configurations that actively organize the reproduction of a political subject.

Bacurau as a Historical-Allegorical Community

Bacurau is about a fictional settlement of the same name, located in the distinctive landscape of Brazil's northeastern region, the *sertão*. The sertão was the setting for one of the defining events in Brazilian history, the War of Canudos (1896–1898), during which the newly established First Brazilian Republic launched multiple military campaigns in an attempt to destroy the Canudos area, where, under the leadership of the monarchist and millenarian religious leader Antônio Conselheiro, a unique, egalitarian community had formed (Johnson 2010). Slavoj Žižek writes the following about the latter: this was a "fundamentalist" community if there ever was one, run by a fanatic "Councillor" advocating theocracy and a return to monarchy. But at the same time it sought to create a communist utopia with communal

property, no money or laws, full egalitarian solidarity, equality between men and women, the right to divorce, etc. (Žižek 2009, 71)

Žižek further notes that Canudos's outlaw community "was home to prostitutes, freaks, beggars, bandits and the most wretched of the poor, […] a utopian space without money, property, taxes and marriage," which, as a kind of realized utopia, stood in such stark opposition to the surrounding social reality that, at the end of the war, "*all* the inhabitants of Canudos, children and women included, were slaughtered, as if the very memory of the possibility of freedom had to be erased" (Žižek 2004, 82). At the end of the film, we see images of the suppressed and avenged uprising on the walls of Bacurau's museum, making it clear that Canudos is the utopian model that shapes the portrayal of the film's fictional settlement. This relation between Canudos and the fictional space of Bacurau does not simply function as a reference or allegorical layer. Rather, it exemplifies the film's operation of reproduction: the past is not represented as a closed historical episode, but returns as a living horizon that structures the present of the community.

The sertão holds immense significance in Brazilian culture: it is the land of the cangaceiros, bandits often regarded as folk heroes, and serves as the distinctive setting of the Brazilian *Cinema Novo*, which revitalized the tradition of the Third Cinema. In the film,

Bacurau and its landscape combine a multitude of features from various local communities, yet in a constellation that does not occur in the actual region itself. As one of the film's directors, Kleber Mendonça Filho emphasized in an interview, filming began in a village inhabited mostly by white Brazilians, and it was only during production that they discovered a nearby *quilombo*, a mainly black-populated settlement founded by runaway slaves. In *Bacurau*, not only do professional actors perform, but also local residents from both locations. According to Filho, their aim was to create a "remixed quilombo," one that embodies both a legacy of resistance and a kind of cultural/ethnic diversity not characteristic of the area's present-day population (Bittencourt 2019).

The Bacurau depicted in the film is an unusual settlement in many ways. For example, it seems clear that the village's most respected resident was Carmelita, who recently passed away at the age of 93. She led the community as a matriarch, a figure of authority matched only by the local doctor, Domingas. However, there is no sign of a clear hierarchical structure among the villagers. What prevails in the village is solidarity and fraternity: residents help each other, act in unison to serve their common interests, see neither nudity nor sexuality as taboo, and regularly partake in the ritual consumption of psychoactive plants. Despite the high bounty placed on him, the locals do not surrender Lunga, the bandit who once stormed out of the village and now camps nearby, or Pacote, the infamous hitman hiding there under an assumed name.

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

When, thanks to the area's corrupt mayor, they receive some, mostly expired, food and medicine, they distribute it not by dividing it into equal portions, but by placing it all on a communal table, from which everyone can take what and as much as they need. This reveals an exceptionally high level of cooperation and mutual trust. Bacurau is not depicted as an idealized community in the film; there are conflicts (at the start of the film, Domingas causes a scandal at a funeral), unresolved social issues (such as prostitution), and residents who do not trust the community (when threatened, a couple attempts to flee the village by car). Nevertheless, this portrayal is distinctly characterized by the utopian impulse of fraternity.

At the beginning of the film, we get to know the surroundings of Bacurau by following Teresa, who is just returning home; together with her, we arrive at the settlement. We see the mourning rituals of the residents and their tradition of singing together the song of the village. The song is not staged as an individual expression of grief, but as a shared act that organizes mourning as a collective experience. What becomes perceptible here is not a series of isolated emotions, but a mode of presence in which the community appears as a "we" grounded in shared participation. The sequence allows the spectator to encounter collectivity as something enacted rather than merely represented. We then learn about their conflict with the district mayor, Tony Junior, who, while not helping the locals restore their water supply, tries to placate them by delivering expired food, mood-altering drugs, and books in poor condition. It gradually

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

becomes clear to the viewer that Bacurau is under threat: a team equipped with high-tech devices from the United States has settled near the village. They are participants in a remotely coordinated game in which they prepare to hunt locals with antique weapons. At first, the attackers only kill around the village, but at one point, one of them also kills a little boy playing on the outskirts of the settlement. During their final assault, Bacurau surprises the outsiders, who are mercilessly slaughtered by the villagers in the last third of the film. In the end, the collaboration of the mayor, who arrives at the scene intending to collect the "tourists," is also exposed, and the last attacker is buried alive by the villagers.

Bacurau aims to evoke a strong emotional response in the viewer: it employs a range of strategies to awaken antipathy toward the attackers, who are depicted in an almost caricatured manner as corrupt and arrogant. At the same time, the film constructs a gradual process of misrecognition. Although the team arriving to massacre the locals encounters an increasing number of signs that could arouse suspicion, their conceit prevents them from interpreting these properly. About a third into the film, two Brazilian accomplices are sent to the village to install a device that blocks Bacurau's telecommunications connection with the outside world. They are repeatedly confronted with signals that hint at the nature of the community they have entered. When they ask the shopkeeper whether the bird after which the village is named has gone extinct, they are told that it has not; when they inquire whether it is small, they learn that the

bacurau is in fact a larger bird of prey that hunts at dawn. As they return to their motorcycles, they encounter the notorious hitman hiding in the village, who unexpectedly introduces himself under his real name (Pacote) rather than his alias (Acácio). The locals also attempt to lure them into the museum at the center of the village, later revealed to contain the weapons used in past uprisings. Further signs accumulate: digital wanted posters indicate a bounty on Lunga's head, and a bullet-riddled police car stands abandoned at the edge of the settlement.

This is not simply the accumulation of narrative clues, but a structured asymmetry of perception. The attackers, unable to speak Portuguese and unfamiliar with the local history, remain blind to the meaning of these signs, while the villagers demonstrate an acute sensitivity to them, recognizing threats early on and actively interpreting their environment. The film progressively aligns the spectator with this collective knowledge of the village, so that the significance of these elements emerges unevenly, becoming gradually legible to the viewer even as it remains inaccessible to those who pose the immediate threat. In this way, perception itself becomes a site of alignment: the spectator is not positioned alongside the attackers but is instead drawn into the epistemic horizon of the community, anticipating the moment in which this shared knowledge is translated into collective action.

Among the Americans, the senior figure, Michael (Udo Kier), calls the village "a little

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

innocent shithole of a town," and he could not be more mistaken. The attackers assume that the locals will not notice Bacurau's disappearance from Google Maps and that they will be unable to identify their drone, designed to resemble a flying saucer. Meanwhile, every resident owns a smartphone, and on the eve of the attack they watch video compilations of Pacote's most famous killings on a large screen attached to a DJ's car. According to the conventional codes of popular culture, Bacurau should appear as a "natural" community of noble savages who keep their distance from technology and modernity. However, Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles' film does not employ this characteristic scheme of romantic anti-capitalism. In Bacurau, the shaman who grows medicinal herbs ritually distributes psychoactive plants, while Teresa brings modern vaccines to the local clinic, and although the mayor is chased into the cactus fields on a donkey, lessons are taught at the school using Google Maps. The mixture of these elements prevents the unfolding of conventional clichés in the narrative (Sticchi 2022).

The very existence of the village's museum also prevents us from seeing Bacurau's residents as ecologically attuned natives. The history of the village only becomes clear to the viewer at the end: until then, the audience merely suspects that the settlement is capable of defending itself, but upon seeing the images in the museum and the vacant spots where weapons have been removed from the walls, the turning point becomes predictable. The museum does not simply preserve the past as representation: the empty outlines left by the weapons removed

from the walls mark the transition from memory to action, collapsing the distance between historical record and present conflict. Rather than functioning as a site of passive remembrance, it operates as an active interface between past and present, where the revolutionary history of the village is repeatedly reactivated: the past is not simply recalled but sustained as an active truth. The local church is used as a storage space (which also sets them apart from the traditions of the Canudos community), but the museum remains open, and at the end of the film, a bloody handprint is left on its wall, preserved as a mark of their latest battle against the oppressors.

Genre, Violence, and the Reproduction of the "We"

The story is built on a revenge fantasy (Dias 2020), which is so significant in popular film culture that we could even classify the films based on this formula as their own genre. From a genre perspective, Bacurau is remarkably heterogeneous. It is set in the near future, evoking the logic of dystopian sci-fi; it is closely tied to the tradition of thrillers built around the trope of manhunting as a spectacle; it employs certain techniques from horror and war films; it readily makes use of characteristic western elements; and it also draws on the aesthetics and themes of Brazilian Cinema Novo. For example, the radical depiction of violence connects it with the latter, clearly evoking the programmatic text of Glauber Rocha, regarded as one of the greatest Brazilian filmmakers in "The Aesthetics of Hunger":

From Cinema Novo it should be learned that an esthetic of violence, before being primitive, is revolutionary. It is the initial moment when the colonizer becomes aware of the colonized. Only when confronted with violence does the colonizer understand, through horror, the strength of the culture he exploits. As long as they do not take up arms, the colonized remain slaves; a first policeman had to die for the French to become aware of the Algerians. (Rocha 1997, 60)

The brutal response of the residents at the end of the film to the attack they suffered is connected to this mindset, and this is emphasized by the conversation between Pacote and Teresa, who agree that Lunga did not go "too far." The beheadings carried out by the bandit and the public display of the severed heads carry additional historical significance. Lunga, using Eric Hobsbawm's term, is a *social bandit* (Hobsbawm 1959), who embodies social protest in the eyes of the oppressed, and who is also an important figure in political film (Wayne 2001, 82–107). The cangaceiros, that is, the bandits of this region who were widely respected (and sheltered) by the local people and famous for their extravagant style, were brutally massacred by the Brazilian state in the 1930s, and their severed heads were paraded around the country. In Juliano Dornelles's interpretation, the queer Lunga is a late heir to this tradition (Barlow

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

2019); his revenge is thus the revenge of the bandits.

The extremity of Lunga's violence invites comparison not only with Brazilian bandit traditions but also with twentieth-century reflections on revolutionary cruelty. The relevant context for Lunga's acts is not only Brazilian history and Cinema Novo or hyper-stylized grammar of contemporary genre cinema, drawing on exploitation traditions and the revenge aesthetics popularized by directors such as Quentin Tarantino, but also the tradition of anti-colonial violence (Fanon 2004) and the twentieth-century history of the aesthetics of cruelty, which Badiou makes visible through his analysis of Fernando Pessoa's *Maritime Ode* and Brecht's lehrtück *The Measures Taken*. In his interpretation, the moment of cruelty is decisive in these works, in which the individual is in some way transcended by something vaster than himself […]. This is a moment in which personal subjectivity explodes, dissolves, or is otherwise reconfigured. Ultimately, cruelty is the moment when the integral dissolution of the 'I' must be decided. As both Alvaro de Campos and Brecht aver, cruelty is necessary so that the 'we' and the idea become one, so that nothing comes to restrict the self-affirmation of the 'we'. (Badiou 2007, 115)

Bacurau follows this pattern when, during the battle, Lunga is possessed by something far greater than himself (the spirit of anti-imperialist struggle) and thus becomes the raw force

of destruction. By the end of the confrontation, the entire village assumes his actions as its own: in the moment of affirming their own cruelty, the inhabitants of Bacurau become one with the idea that defines the history of the settlement.

This logic of collective action is further articulated at the level of genre. Like Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* (1964), and more broadly the Brazilian northeastern genre (Phillips 2014), *Bacurau* is primarily structured by the codes of the western. At times, the film merely uses certain elements from this tradition. A good example of the latter is the scene in which Teresa, arriving with the water truck, wakes up to find that their vehicle has collided with one of the coffins fallen to the roadside; true to the conventions of the trope, the multitude of coffins functions as a generic signal that anticipates the violence to come, positioning the viewer within a familiar horizon of expectation before the narrative itself fully unfolds. Another striking connection is the siege of the one-street village in the finale, a hallmark scenario in western films. However, *Bacurau* does not simply apply inherited genre codes, it regularly subverts them, and these interventions are always meaningful: from the transformation of genre norms, a political metacommentary emerges. For example, in *Bacurau*, there is no single central hero as in westerns, nor is the main duel fought between two central figures; instead, every attacker faces all the villagers. At the end of the film, it is not a hero who rides off into the sunset, but the mayor, Tony Junior, disgraced, half-naked, bound, and astride a donkey, driven

among the cacti, humiliated for having placed his own interests above those of the community.

When Gilles Deleuze discusses the large form of the action-image, partly in connection with the western, he writes that in such films, the situation that motivates the hero to act must first "permeate the character deeply" (Deleuze 2001a, 165), the character must be imbued with it before taking action. *Bacurau* includes a scene that recalls this process but significantly reconfigures it: on the night before the battle, the villagers, accompanied by John Carpenter's 2015 track *Night*, practice capoeira outdoors. Before the music shifts to Carpenter's electronic score, the villagers form a circle, playing instruments and clapping in unison while pairs rotate through the center. Individual movement is thus continuously generated and sustained by a collective rhythm. Rather than preparing a single protagonist, the scene distributes this "permeation" across the community as a whole. Movement, rhythm, and spatial proximity organize the bodies into a shared pattern, producing not the readiness of an individual hero but a collective disposition toward action. In this sense, it is no longer the situation that permeates an individual character, but the collective itself that is permeated by the situation, as the coordinated movements of the villagers articulate a shared bodily form.

According to the tradition of the western, a fallen village should seek help from external heroes who are ready to rush to the aid of the natives living there (ŽiŽek 2010). Instead, in

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Bacurau, it becomes clear that the town is anything but defenseless, and it is precisely the attackers, raised on the popular myths of westerns and mafia movies, who misunderstand their new environment. *Bacurau* is thus a politically conscious *revisionist western*, with affinities to the *weird* and *acid* subgenres as well. The movie deliberately subverts the cinematic tradition perceived as an aesthetic form of American imperialism. As the directors regularly emphasize, the situation outlined in the film offers a commentary that goes beyond current political relations (BARLOW 2019). The attackers represent not just the United States, but imperialism itself, and the corrupt mayor allegorizes not only Jair Bolsonaro, who came to power during the filming, but also the local comprador elites who serve imperialist interests. *Bacurau* emphasizes these figurative meanings in several ways. For example, the Americans set up camp in the former hacienda near the settlement, surrounded by photographs and instruments of colonial oppression. Furthermore, the settlement itself does not merely represent rural Brazil, but the people themselves: as mentioned earlier, the fictional village is a unique combination of two types of settlements in the sertão, and as such, from a figurative perspective, it encompasses far more meanings than the depiction of a plausible location in a sociographic sense ever could.

We can consider *Bacurau*'s aesthetics as a form of populist aesthetics: Bacurau or Lunga are decidedly suitable to become, in the Laclauian sense, empty signifiers, signs with no fixed content, but which serve to homogenize the political struggle. Additionally, *Bacurau* is a film

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

that constructs an allegorical system to stage collectivity: the depicted fictional settlement, in all its diversity, is meant to embody the Brazilian people, who, in the fight against oppression, become, as a people, political subjects, which is a key element of populist political logic. In the film, however, the unity of collectivity does not unfold in the present, in the struggle against a current adversary (as that unity is already present at the beginning of the film), but in an old, popular struggle that has lasted for over a century against the powers oppressing the locals. The film deploys populist aesthetic devices without fully embracing the contingent logic of populist subject-formation. Populist logic is therefore undeniable in *Bacurau*, yet the political subject in the film is not constituted in a populist manner, but rather on loyalty to a former absolute event, the Canudos rebellion. To use the language of Alain Badiou's philosophy (BADIOU 2005), the fictional inhabitants of Bacurau are subjects of a true, absolute event whose truth is actualized in ever-new historical situations. The film itself participates in this same generic procedure.

While *Bacurau*'s aesthetics resonate strongly with populist strategies of articulation, the film ultimately resists a purely populist logic. The political subject it stages is not constituted through the contingent construction of an antagonistic frontier alone but through fidelity to a historical rupture that precedes the present conflict. What *Bacurau* ultimately stages is not the emergence of a people from absence, but the persistence of a collective form of life under conditions of erasure. The village does not become political through the sudden invention of

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.965 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

unity; rather, its political character appears as something already embedded in shared memory, spatial practices, and material culture. Cinema, in this sense, does not create the collective; it renders its latent continuity perceptible and operative. Michael's final vision of Carmelita extends this logic even to the film's antagonist, suggesting that the community's historical memory acquires a perceptual force that exceeds the boundaries of the village itself.

The understanding of the concept of "the people" presented here is rooted in the tradition that Badiou calls the *communist invariants*, that is, in the tradition of popular uprisings unfolding in the name of the pure idea of equality (BADIOU 2008, 100). In the film, Bacurau is a utopian place whose inhabitants remain loyal to these invariants' local traditions. The fictional settlement is a late echo of Canudos, which, according to Žižek, was a contradictory but realized communist utopia of the outcasts (ŽIŽEK 2004, 82). In this sense, the film operates not by positing a people as something to be constituted, but through the cinematic reproduction of an already existing form of collective subjectivity. It does so not primarily through the strategies of modern political cinema described by Deleuze, but by returning to the codes of the western and to the large-scale logic of the *action-image.* In this way, the film recalls sedimented forms of collective experience and renders their persistence perceptible in the present. The political subjectivity of the community depicted in the film stems from the settlement's past and from an ongoing process of fidelity through which the truth of a founding event, the

Canudos rebellion, is sustained and actualized across different historical situations.

In this light, *Bacurau* suggests a shift in how political cinema can be understood today: not as the site where a people is invented, but as a medium in which already existing forms of collective subjectivity are reactivated and sustained. Rather than responding to the problem that "the people are missing" by attempting to construct them anew, the film demonstrates how cinema can make perceptible the persistence of a collective "we" within contemporary regimes of enforced individualization.

REFERENCES

Badiou, A. (2001). *Ethics* (P. Hallward, Trans.). Verso.

Badiou, A. (2005). *Being and event* (O. Feltham, Trans.). Continuum.

Badiou, A. (2007). *The century* (A. Toscano, Trans.). Polity Press.

Badiou, A. (2008). *The meaning of Sarkozy* (D. Fernbach, Trans.). Verso.

Badiou, A. (2009). *Theory of the subject* (B. Bosteels, Trans.). Continuum.

Barlow, H. (2019, June 6). 'Bacurau' filmmakers on pulling inspiration from Brazil's broken system. *Collider*. https://collider.com/bacurau-interview-kleber-mendonca-filho-juliano-dornelles/

Bittencourt, E. (2019, May 21). Interview: Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles. *Film Comment*. https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/cannes-interview-kleber-mendonca-filho-and-juliano-dornelles/

Brecht, B. (1986). The popular and the realistic. In J. Willet (Ed. & Trans.), *Brecht on theatre* (pp. 107–115). Methuen.

Dean, J. (2016). *Crowds and party*. Verso.

Deleuze, G. (2001a). *Cinema 1: The movement-image* (H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. (2001b). *Cinema 2: The time-image* (H. Tomlinson & R. Galeta, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Dias, J., Jr. (2020). Bacurau as science-fiction revenge fantasy. *Film Quarterly, 74*(2), 84–86.

Fanon, F. (2004). *The wretched of the earth* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press.

Fisher, M. (2018). *K-PUNK: The collected and unpublished writings of Mark Fisher (2004–2016)*. Repeater.

Hobsbawm, E. (1959). *Primitive rebels: Studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*. Manchester University Press.

Johnson, A. M. C. (2010). *Sentencing Canudos: Subalternity in the backlands of Brazil*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Laclau, E. (1990). *New reflections on the revolution of our time*. Verso.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.

Lambert, G. (2021). *The people are missing: Minor literature today*. University of Nebraska Press.

Lukács, G. (1971). *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics* (R. Livingstone, Trans.). MIT Press.

Phillips, W. D. (2014). O Cangaceiro (1953) and the Brazilian Northeastern. In C. J. Miller & A. B. Van Riper (Eds.), *International westerns: Re-locating the frontier* (pp. 243–262). Scarecrow Press.

Rancière, J. (1999). *Disagreement: Politics and philosophy* (J. Rose, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Rocha, G. (1997). An esthetic of hunger. In M. T. Martin (Ed.), *New Latin American cinema, Volume I: Theory, practices, and transcontinental articulations* (pp. 59–61). Wayne State University Press.

Sticchi, F. (2022). The precarious multitude of Bacurau. *Theory, Culture & Society, 39*(7–8), 201–215.

Wayne, M. (2001). *Political film: The dialectics of third cinema*. Pluto Press.

Yakalı, D., & Erdogan, Z. (2024). Green Border: Cinematic storytelling as history of the present. *CINEJ Cinema Journal, 12*(2), 244–268. https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2024.680

Žižek, S. (2004). *Iraq: The borrowed kettle*. Verso.

Žižek, S. (2005). *Interrogating the real*. Continuum.

Žižek, S. (2009). *First as tragedy, then as farce*. Verso.

Žižek, S. (2010, March 4). The return of the natives. *New Statesman*.