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THE CANGAÇO IN BRAZILIAN CINEMA

Marcelo Dídimo Souza Vieira

ABSTRACT

Cangaço was a form of banditry that occurred in the North-East of Brazil between 1870 and 1940. The movement has inspired many films over the years. This chapter explores the contribution of Cangaço-inspired productions to Brazilian cinema, as well as the particular characteristics of what constitutes the Cangaço genre.

Following a historical survey of the Cangaço, the films were divided into different categories and ranked in terms of relevance. Only the most important are discussed in this chapter.

The Cangaço has been portrayed in Brazilian cinema through the decades in diverse ways, dating back to the 1920s. After becoming a consolidated film genre in the 1950s, then known as Nordestern, the Cangaço finally acquired a proper structure, featuring multiple Western references among its common characteristics. In the 1960s, Glauber Rocha, one of the most prominent filmmakers of the Cinema Novo avant-garde movement, added his own symbolism to the genre. Eventually, the Cangaço was also revisited by directors who combined it with other genres such as comedy, documentary, and erotic films. Another relevant reinterpretation came in the 1990s, when filmmakers of the so-called New Brazilian Cinema offered a new view on the subject.

Despite its strong association with Brazil, the Cangaço has not been thoroughly investigated by researchers. This chapter presents a historical survey

and analysis of Cangaço films, highlighting their relevance to Brazilian cinema.

Keywords: History; *Cangaço*; cinema; genre; Brazil

INTRODUCTION

Cangaço was a cultural and historical phenomenon that took place in the north-east of Brazil between 1870 and 1940, spread across a poor arid region known as the *sertão*. This area is distinctive, both in terms of topography and social environment. Here, the common vegetation, the *caatinga*, is particularly rough and low to the ground. The extreme social and economic inequalities, spurred by the rise of giant rural properties and a flawed legal system, led *sertanejos* (the inhabitants of the *sertão*) to channel their anger and grief into banditry carried out by gangs. The members of these gangs or *cangaceiros* looted towns to survive and took justice into their own hands. The word “*Cangaço*” comes from “*canga*,” the Portuguese equivalent of the word “yoke.” This word is also used to designate the bulky set of equipment carried by the bandits, in turn called *cangaceiros* – the men who walked “under the *canga*” or lived off the “*canga*.”

CANGAÇO AS A GENRE

As *Cangaço* became a way of life in this region, some of its most well-known members, namely Antônio Silvino, Jesuíno Brilhante, Lampião, Corisco, Maria Bonita, and Dadá, went on to become enshrined in cultural myths, remaining a part of the *cangaceiro* helped to establish

the *Cangaço* as a long-standing theme in the country’s film industry in the same way cowboys helped perpetuating the Western in Hollywood. The theme has been diversely portrayed in Brazilian cinema through the decades, having called the attention of filmmakers and spectators for the first time in 1925, when a *cangaceiro* made its first modest appearance on screen. Until 2015, there were over 50 films on the subject, including both fiction and documentary; varying between short-, medium- and feature-length formats; and shot either in 16 or 35 mm.

While it is true that the *Cangaço* has been partly influenced by the Western’s legacy, the stories featured in the films were all inspired by local myths, thus establishing the *Cangaço* as a typically Brazilian genre. What was appealing about the foreign genre was its endless potential for adventure films centered in an outlaw character, which could be easily adapted into the history and culture of Brazil, particularly the North-East. The North-East holds an important place in Brazilian culture, in all branches of art. Cinema is no exception.

The film industry's exploitation of the *Cangaço* actively began in the 1960s, although the theme had already emerged as a genre in the previous decade, with the release of *O Cangaceiro* (*Cangaceiro*, Lima Barreto, 1953). Widely appreciated both in Brazil and abroad, the film caused a significant boost in *Cangaço* productions. It also strongly contributed to the consolidation of the genre by securing a regular audience, consequently attracting more investment. It is thus fair to conclude that the main features of the *Cangaço*, as well as of any genre, became established in mass production through repetition and innovation.

Genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations. They have been exceptionally significant in establishing the popular sense of cinema as a cultural and economic institution, particularly in the United States, where Hollywood studios early on adopted an industrial model based on mass production. (Grant as quoted in Neale, 2000, p. 9)

The connection between genre films and mass production has been repeatedly mentioned by researchers, who inevitably associate the phenomenon with the Hollywood film industry. Taking the Western as a comparative example, both the Brazilian film industry and the *Cangaço* genre are significantly modest in quantitative terms. Every year, Hollywood releases hundreds of feature films, whereas Brazil maintains a balance of dozens. The number of Western productions amounts to thousands, in contrast to roughly 50 *Cangaço* films in 90 years.

It is, however, difficult to compare these two industries, or the aforementioned genres, because of the vast difference in scale. In over a hundred years of cinema, the total amount of *Cangaço* productions in Brazil can only reach the annual average number of Western releases in the United States. Therefore, we should analyze each genre in proportion to the historical involvement of each country in the film industry. Although modest in number, *Cangaço* films have proven consistent in terms of annual release count, consolidating the style as a of production, if not always of quality.

The conquest of the West and the history of the *Cangaço* differ from one another in many aspects. They occurred at different periods of time, when each country was going through a particular episode of social and economic turmoil. Nevertheless, the urge for modernization was analogous for both nations – it became a priority to conquer previously unexplored regions in order to bring progress. Before that happened, however, it was necessary to abolish all archaic practices; that is to say, any unrestrained activity that threatened to disrupt the process of modernization. This became the main conflict both in Western and *Cangaço* films. According to Jim Kitses (2007, p. 13):

In taking an inventory of this diversity, I found it useful to try to define the thematic and ideological structure that so many of the films have in common, and that makes its range of viewpoints possible. The result of that research was a structuralist grid focused around the frontier's dialectical play of forces embodied in the master binary opposition of the wilderness and civilization.

Also part of this context is the landscape of the North-Eastern *sertão*, covered by *caatinga* vegetation and characterized by a dry arid climate. In *Cangaço* films, the *sertão* resembles the Rocky Mountains and long desert plains in American Western productions. Both landscapes consist of large areas with peculiar and easily recognizable geographical traits. In addition to this commonality, both genres hark back to a time when civilization was not yet established and progress was barely recognized, with only a few roads, railway lines, and telegraph poles crossing small towns and unassuming villages. This prominent feature of the genre serves to dramatize the contrast between wilderness and civilization, successfully enriching the drama and turning a simple tale into a saga of epic proportions. Concerning the Western, Philip French (1973, p. 107) argues: “This contrast between open land and the town, between the illusion of freedom and the necessity of compromise, between a relaxed association with nature and a tense accommodation to society, lies at the roots of the genre.”

Given this prevailing condition, violence is not confined to outlaws, but expected from authorities as well. Society is bound to suffer from both sides. The conquest of the West and the *Cangaço* are historically regarded as essentially violent movements, motivated by political, social, and economic reasons. Therefore, the violent character of the films is merely a reflection of history. “The trouble with Western violence lies not with the inflexibility of the genre’s metaphor or the audience’s ability to interpret it, but with its immutability” (French, 1973, p. 122). Each film has its own degree of violence; some choose to show it more explicitly, whereas others tend to focus on social rather than physical violence. Nevertheless, it is always present.

Moving on to more specific elements of *Cangaço* films that serve to supplement the desert landscape of the North-Eastern *sertão*, sometimes replaced by the South-Eastern rocky terrain on screen, we have the peculiar costume of the *cangaceiros*. Each bandit’s iconographic wardrobe consists of a pair of leather pants, a haversack, a half-moon shaped hat and, of course, a *peixeira*, the
 im to perform his duty. The *canga-*
ceiro is essentially an outlaw, sometimes a hero, but never a citizen. In order to be embraced by society, he would have to endure an unthinkable mutation, and leave banditry behind.

Another iconographic feature of the *Cangaço* is the repeated use of the same actors and directors over the years. In the golden era of the genre, some actors would play the same character twice under different names, leaving a déjà-vu impression with the audience. The list of recurring actors included Maurício do Valle, Milton Ribeiro, Alberto Ruschel, Vanka Orico and Aurora Duarte, among others. As for the directors, many went on to become *Cangaço* experts, usually working with the same actors in their films. Some of the most celebrated names on that list were Carlos Coimbra, Aurélio Teixeira, Glauber Rocha, and Rosemberg Cariry. The latter states (cited in Debs, 1998, p. 150, translated freely):

The *cangaço* is the quintessential Brazilian epic; an important mythological universe for Brazilian culture. (...) The Americans impose their cowboys in the same way the Japanese digitalise their samurais and the Europeans sell their knights by satellite. In fact, these nations are experts in spreading their myths through an international modern language. I think it is important that Brazil should keep its soul in this desperate search for modernisation. Why should we renounce our own history? Are we supposed to forget our past and be “the land of the future,” without remorse? As a matter of fact, the *cangaço*, being a popular resistance movement, holds great cultural and historical significance in itself.

THE BEGINNINGS

The first films depicting the *Cangaço* date from the 1920s and 1930s, when the movement was still active. Released in 1925 and exhibited only once, *Filho sem Mãe* (*Son without a Mother*, Tancredo Seabra) is considered the first Brazilian production to approach the theme. According to a local newspaper, the film “portrays the existence of *cangaceiros* as the story unfolds. (...) In [the] film, there is a gunfight between *cangaceiros* and military forces” (Soares, 1963, p. 3, translated freely). Released in the following year, *Sangue de Irmão* (*Brother’s Blood*, Jota Soares, 1926) is allegedly the second production to portray the Brazilian outlaw on screen.

Lampião, o Rei do Cangaço (*Lampião, the King of Cangaço*, Benjamin Abrahão, 1936) is certainly the most important film of that period and one of the most significant for the genre, taking into account that this documentary is key for an anthropological understanding of the *Cangaço*. Featuring the only time Lampião and his gang were ever caught on film, *Lampião, o Rei do Cangaço* plays a fundamental role in Brazilian cinema, not to mention its being an unparalleled historical document. The film was also one of the pioneers in the *Cangaço* genre, serving as inspiration for many filmmakers and fascinating people to this day.

Prior to the film’s release, in 1936, as the police were intensifying their search, the situation became extremely

delicate. It was the beginning of the end of the *Cangaço*. The director Benjamin Abrahão lost contact with the gang and saw his plans of finishing and selling the film ruined.

The remaining footage of *Lampião, o Rei do Cangaço* shows the gang performing ordinary activities, without any trace of violence. “The filmmaker sought to focus on the minimal details of that community; their customs, behavior and structure – political, economic, social and religious” (Dias, 1984, p. 36, translated freely). Virgulino Ferrera da Silva, or simply Lampião, is shown writing verses to Maria Bonita, reading newspapers, praying on the campsite with the rest of the gang and talking to the director of the film. In turn, the *cangaceiros* appear carrying water for general consumption, dancing, standing by their tents holding various domestic utensils or simply posing; smiling and walking toward the camera.

Abrahão's footage was screened in a special session at Cine Moderno, in Fortaleza, Ceará, to a group of local authorities and journalists. According to a reporter from newspaper *O Povo*, who was present in the session, "the tape, 500 feet long, without subtitles, showed the gang performing rather prosaic activities. It did not put to risk the so-called 'national dignity'" (Holanda, 1985, p. 63, translated freely). The film was immediately confiscated by the Federal Government and only recovered 20 years later.

Lampião, o Rei do Cangaço stands out from similar films mainly because of its historical and cinematographic relevance, which makes it a timeless *Cangaço* classic and an important research document. As such, it should be protected and preserved.

Back when the film was released, the *Cangaço* had not yet been defined as a genre. Nonetheless, the subject continued to be gradually introduced on screen, establishing iconic characters and developing a specific structure until its utmost consolidation as a national genre in the 1950s.

THE BRAZILIAN WESTERN

In 1953, Lima Barreto's *O Cangaceiro* was released, thus reputedly "inaugurating the cycle and outlining the main features of what would become the hallmarks of the *cangaceiro* in commercial cinema" (Bernardet, 2007, p. 46, translated freely). Accordingly, the film served as a milestone for the genre, developing a model of narrative structure that would be repeatedly revisited for years to come.

Violence, horses, wide open spaces and the lack of a cinematographic tradition in Brazil: nothing else was required to transform the "*cangaceiro* movie" into a branch of the North American Western, which Salvyano Cavalcanti de Paiva calls the *Nordestern*. (Bernardet, 2007, p. 60, translated freely)

The term *Nordestern* was a neologism created by researcher Salvyano Cavalcanti de Paiva in the 1960s to designate the *Cangaço* genre. The word was a combination of "*Nordeste*," the Portuguese equivalent of North-East, and, of course, "Western." At the time, most *Nordestern* films were strongly inspired by classic Western productions, which were bound to influence all banditry films from 1950 onward. In any case, social banditry had at last become a recurrent narrative theme in Brazilian cinema, with a particular set of structural features that created a national genre slightly analogous to the American Western.

As a rule, the typical Western narrative is set during the period between 1840 and 1890, a period frequently regarded as the "American Old West." It is during this period that characters such as Billy the Kid, Wild Bill Hickock, Frank and Jesse James and Wyatt Earp went on to become iconic in American culture. The emergence of the genre is strongly associated with the invention of cinema itself in the end of the 19th century, when Thomas Edison filmed a few

Western scenes as documentary footage. Nonetheless, Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is considered the first Western film of all times, as it presents a more elaborate and engaging narrative than Edison's. According to Rick Altman (1999, p. 36), however, the Western as a genre began in 1910; until then there were only "cowboy films."

That is, they may have imitated the outward trappings of the currently popular Wild West shows, and offered identifiably Western scenery, but always in association with a dominant already existing genre, and without the civilisation versus savagery plot motifs that later come to characterize the genre. (Altman, 1999, p. 36)

Already quite popular in the United States since the 1920s, the genre proceeded to gain international recognition between the 1940s and the 1950s, around the same time that *Cangaço* films became more frequent in Brazil. In other words, Brazilian filmmakers had a model in mind.

We have already admitted that the two genres hold many similarities. A perfect example is the overarching conflict of civilisation against wilderness, central to both Western and *Cangaço* narratives. However, the way each genre deals with this conflict, adapting the situation to their respective historical and geographical background, is what truly set them apart.

The defining feature of the genre is the elemental conflict between civilization and savagery. This basic conflict is expressed through a variety of contrasts: East vs. West, city against *sertão*, social order against anarchy, individual against community, innocence against corruption, the Indian against the pioneer, the rural teacher against the saloon dancer, and so on. The narrative path of any Western starts with the opposition between civilization and savagery, creating a conflict – or a series of conflicts – that are constantly reinforced until the climatic confrontation becomes inevitable. (Mattos, 2004, pp. 17–18, translated freely)

As stated above, these conflicts are treated as a defining narrative trait in *Cangaço* films: police or *volantes* against *cangaceiros*; city against *caatinga*; girl from traditional family against female *cangaceira*; the authoritarianism of colonialism against the entire population. The different garments worn by both outlaws and policemen are another contribution to the uniqueness of the genre, even in relation to the Western. The same is true for almost every aspect concerning the *cangaceiros*, from weapons to vocabulary to general behavior.

As for other common traits, the two genres follow a similar narrative structure with comparable features, such as character development and plot elements. Filmmakers and actors ultimately became icons of the genres as well – John Ford, Howard Hawks, John Wayne, and Clint Eastwood in the United States; and Carlos Coimbra, Maurício do Valle, Alberto Ruschel, and Milton Ribeiro in Brazil, as previously listed.

Comprising adventure, drama, and romance all at once, *Cangaço* films are often different from each other; some barely influenced by the homonymous movement in which they are inspired, whereas others serve as historical reconstructions entirely based on true events.

The most important film in this section is *O Cangaceiro*, responsible, as mentioned before, for consolidating the genre within the national film industry. It won the Best Adventure Film Award at Cannes Film Festival in 1953, where it also received special mention for the soundtrack, thereby increasing international prestige of Brazilian cinema.

Both *Cangaço* and Western films reinforce the tension between two coexisting worlds: modern and archaic, civilized and uncivilized. They cannot subsist simultaneously. For one to prosper, the other must suffer. This meta-conflict permeates the entire film. The victory of one over the other is not intrinsic to the narrative, although it illustrates a plausible wish – bringing progress to faraway regions would free the government from the unwanted influence of banditry. “As the Western suggests, banditry was a valid option only within this archaic world; and the official rules of justice would come to exterminate the ‘gunshot law’” (Tolentino, 2001, p. 74, translated freely).

The first *Cangaço* film in the 1960s was made by Carlos Coimbra, the man who most directed *Cangaço* films in the history of Brazilian cinema with a total of four productions, all in one decade. *A Morte Comanda o Cangaço (Death Commands Brigandage, 1961)* was a real blockbuster, standing out as the first Brazilian film in widescreen. It received great reviews from critics and was a huge audience success, staying in theaters for weeks. In addition to these plaudits, the film won many national awards and was officially nominated by the country to run for the Academy Award of Best Foreign Film, but did not make the final list of nominees.

In 1964, Carlos Coimbra directed his second film on the subject, *Lampião, o Rei do Cangaço (Lampião, King of the Badlands)*. His other two *Cangaço* films are *Cangaceiros de Lampião (Lampião’s Cangaceiros, 1967)* and *Corisco, o Diabo Loiro (Corisco, the Blond Devil, 1969)*.

In the beginning of the 1970s, two remarkable *Cangaço* films were released, both free adaptations of well-known tales: *A Vingança dos Doze (Revenge of the Twelve, Marcos Farias)*, inspired by the stories of Charlemagne and the Twelve Peers of do C o u t i n h o), based on the Shakespearean character of Mr. Falstaff, an obese, old penniless man full of eccentricities. Falstaff/Faustão’s lack of self-criticism makes him blind to his real condition. A good-natured drunkard and glutton, his disarming innocence gets him entangled in the most comic and embarrassing situations. In the end, he is a typical anti-hero.

As a rule, *Cangaço* films have a classic narrative structure filled with fictional elements. While there will be a few exceptions, the storytelling and visual composition remain the same, or at least predictable; a Manichean confrontation between good and evil, centered on the figure of the lone hero and several henchmen who must help him in his endeavor. “The outlaw” went on to become a recurring character in Brazilian films, establishing a strong sense of cultural identity. The genre became strongly nationalist, in spite of the fact that it bore the traces of foreign narrative influences.

Between 1950 and the beginning of the 1980s, over 20 *Nordestern* films were released, still very much inspired by Western productions. Nevertheless, the

ability to repeatedly portray the same historical phenomenon while making it more and more accessible to the public provided a commercial boost to the genre and increased the prestige of banditry in Brazilian cinema.

CINEMA NOVO AND CANGAÇO

The beginning of the 1960s was marked by political transition in Brazil. The parliamentary system was speedily established in 1961 and then ultimately abolished in 1963, reinstating the presidential system in the country. It did not change the fact that a political crisis was brewing, and various groups demanded immediate reforms.

The year of 1964 signals the beginning of the most tragic period in Brazilian history. Following the “Coup of 1964,” which removed President João Goulart from the government, police forces took control and established a military dictatorship in the country that lasted 21 years. Under the government of Marshall Castelo Branco, between 1964 and 1967, three Institutional Acts were decreed, halting popular participation in elections and thereby ending the Populist era.

The 1960s were certainly an important period in the history of Brazilian cinema. Moved by dissatisfaction with the political situation of the country and the film industry’s almost exclusive focus on musical comedies, a group of filmmakers initiated the *Cinema Novo* movement.

In the 1960–1964 period, the ideological struggle is deepened as social conflicts become more frequent both in the city and in the country. The relationship between society, artists and intellectuals is also intensified, thus making it possible to unite cultural causes to those of social transformations in a more organic way. (...) It is the first stage of *Cinema Novo*, which, although sheltered by its own exuberance and internal confrontations, revolves culturally around this powerful centre of attraction that preaches “de-alienation” and “national liberty.” (Ramos, 1983, pp. 41–42, translated freely)

The filmmakers of *Cinema Novo* launched a campaign to call attention to the cultural reality of the North-East. The movement received solid and mature contributions from its associates in 1962, with the release of socially engaged films that had great historical value to Brazilian cinema.

One of the most respectable members of the movement, Glauber de Andrade Rocha was born in 1939, in Vitória da Conquista, Bahia. As a child, he moved with his family to Salvador. Growing up, he joined theater groups and soon became interested in film. In 1959 and 1961, respectively, Glauber Rocha finished his first short film, *O Pátio* (*The Courtyard*), and his first feature film, *Barravento* (*The Turning Wind*), by which time he was already one of the most important *Cinema Novo* filmmakers and the movement’s most avid supporter. Restless by nature, the filmmaker:

(...) does not allow himself the luxury of a few days’ rest. He writes books, directs films, attends debates, travels, goes to concert halls and never misses a good film – a busy lifestyle

that allows him to be at the beck and call of this young Brazilian cinema, of which he has undeniably become a true leader. (Silva, 1975, p. 22, translated freely)

Rocha directed two *Cangaço* films, *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (*White Devil, Black God*, 1964) and *O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro* (*Antonio das Mortes*, 1969), both unique portrayals of social banditry in the North-East. The filmmaker addresses the issue as a revolutionary ideal, introducing symbols and allegories to the narrative that together form the “aesthetic of hunger” (“*estética da fome*”), an ideology created by Rocha to bring attention to the alarming levels of hunger in Latin America. He proposes that hunger should be described, poeticized, and analyzed.

Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol tells the story of a *sertanejo* who is forced to run away with his wife after an unfair business transaction ends with his killing his master. First, he decides to follow a messianic leader, but eventually he becomes a *cangaceiro* in a gang that is being followed by the famous *cangaceiro* hunter Antônio das Mortes. De Mortes returns in Rocha’s second film to annihilate a new gang that threatens to bring back the *Cangaço*. Antônio das Mortes is a controversial character, an individual who works for the benefit of a community to which he does not belong. Rocha’s directing choices “bring back the dramatization; the long take; the handheld camera; the solemn speech; the long, reflective sequences of characters sinking into stillness and exhaustion, triggering a debate on power, myth and history” (Xavier, 1993, p. 162, translated freely). The filmmaker always used his films to express his indignation toward the social and political system of his time, especially the illegitimate military government and their censorship. The depiction of *Cangaço* in his works is unmatched. In that universe filled with symbolism and iconic characters, Glauber Rocha left his legacy to the history of Brazilian cinema.

DOCUMENTARIES

The historical footage of Lampião and his gang of *cangaceiros* is an unprecedented artifact in the history of the genre. Abrahão’s film became an inspiration to every other *Cangaço* film released after 1936 and a source of information to scholars who researched the *Cangaço*. In addition to that, the diegetic use of these images became frequent in documentaries about the *Cangaço*.

The connection between historical document and historical documentary is evident. Several documentaries make use of documents, visual or not, in order to explore the theme through a historical foundation.

Historical documentaries are quite popular and can take multiple forms, including essays, documentaries and oral tradition, offering extensive research material to filmmakers. Unfortunately, there are many practical and theoretical issues as well. Practical problems involve usage of archives and the way they are filed, not to mention the implication of researchers, witnesses and narration. Theoretical problems involve interpretation and political perspectives. (Rosenthal, 1996, p. 141)

Historical documentaries can play a major role in elucidating historical events. It is important to remember, however, that by only presenting one side of the story they do not establish an objective account of history.

The goal of *Cangaço* documentaries is to present a “slice of reality” about the homonymous movement. *Memória do Cangaço* (*Memories of Cangaço*, Paulo Gil Soares, 1965), for example, was influenced by the aesthetics of Direct Cinema, a trend that became widespread in the 1960s, especially in France (*Cinema Verité*) and the United States. The term was used to designate documentaries shot with a handheld camera and direct sound, usually speaking to contemporary issues. Without a preestablished structure, these films were mostly guided by the unfolding of events, sometimes only taking shape in the editing room. The fundamental aim was to stay as true as possible to history and humanity.

The initial credits of *Memória do Cangaço* describe it as a “research film.” Shot in the countryside of Bahia, the film is based on statements collected by Paulo Gil Soares from several people who were somehow connected to the *Cangaço*, including former *cangaceiros* José Rufino, Saracura, Labareda, and Madame Otília, in addition to the contribution of Professor Estácio de Lima, director of the Museum of Anthropology of the University of Bahia. The narrative’s dynamic structure involves testimonies from witnesses, off-screen narration, real images of Lampião and his gang and rhymes borrowed from *cordel* literature. *Memória do Cangaço* holds cultural, historical, and sociological value to the country.

O Último Dia de Lampião (*The Last Day of Lampião*, Maurice Capovilla, 1975) and *A Mulher no Cangaço* (*Women in Cangaço*, Hermano Penna, 1976) were crucial to the dissemination of the Docudrama. The Documentary Drama, or simply Docudrama, is an alternative genre that lies on the boundary between fiction and documentary. Unfortunately, this condition presents something of a problem when it comes to depicting reality. As mentioned before, even documentaries are unreliable in terms of historical accuracy. The Docudrama, as a hybrid genre, could pass off fiction as fact. “It’s a method of by conventional documentary meth-

ods” (Woodhead cited in Rosenthal, 1996, p. 234).

Aiming to offer a detailed reconstruction of the last 24 hours of Lampião’s life, Maurice Capovilla ran a series of interviews with people who had been in touch with the *cangaceiro* in those fateful hours, from the morning of July 27, 1938 to the following day, when Virgulino Ferreira da Silva, Maria Bonita, and nine other *cangaceiros* were ambushed and killed. *O Último Dia de Lampião* mixes the testimonies of former *cangaceiros*, merchants, and policemen with fictional re-enactments also directed by Capovilla.

A Mulher no Cangaço attempts to describe the participation of women in the movement. Penna collected statements from many former female *cangaceiros* who survived the *Cangaço*, including the famous Dadá, whose life was spared by the police after they murdered her companion, Corisco. Like Capovilla, Penna also uses fictional re-enactments in the film, which additionally includes a few of Benjamin Abrahão’s historical images.

When looking at the history of documentaries in Brazil, the relevance of the afore-mentioned narrative experiments becomes quite clear. While there have not been many *Cangaço* documentaries in the history of Brazilian cinema, they are all very enriching and diverse. In other words, these films must be regarded as significant audio-visual documents, as well as invaluable sociological and anthropological sources of information.

COMEDIES

When theater flourished in ancient Greece, two masks were used to symbolize the traditional division between tragedy and comedy. The latter was involved with laughter; what was, or might become, laughable. It was soon perceived that the ability to laugh was a property of human beings. “The comic does not exist outside of the pale of what is strictly human. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable” (Bergson, 2005, p. 2).

Cangaço comedies usually take a satirical or ironic approach on historical events, parodying characters and even plots of “serious” films of the genre. It can be thus concluded that comedy positively interacts with the *Cangaço* to make the genre more agreeable. Many celebrated Brazilian comedians starred in *Cangaço* comedies. Ankito, Grande Otelo, and Golias, famous musical comedy stars, were in *Os Três Cangaceiros* (*The Three Cangaceiros*, Victor Lima, 1961), whose title is a pun on the celebrated romance of Alexandre Dumas. There is also a scene where the characters of the three comedians dress up as *cangaceiros* and repeat the famous quote “one for all, and all for one.” Nonetheless, the film is not an adaptation of “The Three Musketeers.” The *cangaceiros* are the targets of this satire.

Produced and starred by Amácio Mazzaropi, *O Lamparina* (*The Lamp*, Glauco Mirko Laurelli, 1964) tells the story of a hillbilly who inadvertently

s name, which is also the title of the

film, the character is a satire of the most famous *cangaceiro* of all times, Lampião. Both “*lampião*” and “*lamparina*” mean “oil lamp” in Portuguese, the only difference is that the former is a masculine noun, whereas the latter is a feminine noun. The story begins with the protagonist migrating with his family from the countryside of São Paulo to the North-Eastern *sertão*, looking for a better life. Eventually, he becomes involved with a gang of *cangaceiros* and has to pretend to be one of them. The *Cangaço* genre is decently represented in the first half of the film, notwithstanding its having a comic character, but the second half is poorly managed, as “they lack impetus to move forward with the plot of the *cangaceiros*, which is thus cut short. The second half becomes a different story, completely unrelated to the first” (Bernardet, 1978, p. 79, translated freely).

Another comedy subgenre that experimented with the *Cangaço* was the Brazilian sex comedy from the 1970s and 1980s, known as *Pornochanchada*. “Sustained by humour and the erotic exploitation of nudity, the plots are based

on satirising adventure films, children's stories, cultured versions of Western (...) and especially American blockbusters" (Abreu, 2006, p. 149, translated freely).

As *Cangaceiras Eróticas* (*The Erotic Cangaceiras*, Roberto Mauro, 1974) tells the story of an all-female gang of *cangaceiros* looking for revenge and sex. Dressed in black, wearing micro-skirts and long leather boots, the only part of their outfit inspired by the *Cangaço* is the half-moon shaped hat, producing a false stereotype of "the *femme fatale* of the *caatinga*." The "gay power" in the official English title of the brazen comedy *Kung Fu contra as Bonecas* (*Bruce Lee vs. Gay Power*, Adriano Stuart, 1975) represents the villainous gang of *cangaceiros* led by Severino Azulão. The film went on to become an international cult classic.

The plots of Brazilian sex comedies would always revolve around a group of recurring types: the macho womanizer; the desirable virgin; the unhappy wife; the effeminate homosexual; the prostitute or escort girl; the inactive husband; the old female pimp. These were represented by bosses, students, maids, managers, secretaries, housewives, playboys, hairdressers; sometimes even bandits, policemen, miners, *cangaceiros*, etc. – in a way, all variations of the same "content." (Abreu, 2006, p. 145, translated freely)

During the 1980s, the relationship between television and film in Brazil was quite close. *Lampião e Maria Bonita* (*Lampião and Maria Bonita*, Luis Antônio Piá and Paulo Afonso Grisolli), the first television series about the *Cangaço*, premiered in 1982 and was aired on Rede Globo Channel. A year later, with a similar cast and crew, the last *Cangaço* film of the decade was released, *O Cangaceiro Trapalhão* (*The Bungling Cangaceiro*, Daniel Filho, 1983), starring the comedy troupe Os Trapalhões, led by Renato Aragão. The genre would then disappear from Brazilian cinema for almost 15 years. During this hiatus, a series of measures were taken to regain credibility with production companies and spectators.

BRAZILIAN CINEMA

A genre that had first appeared in the 1920s, crystallized in the 1950s, and become a hit in the 1960s was not simply going to disappear. Although the *Cangaço* remained forgotten for over a decade, one of the main aspects of the genre was its power of self-renovation.

On the threshold of a new century, let us look at a particular case: the "renaissance" of cinema in Brazil; a country which, until quite recently, held a place among the largest film industries in the world and, especially through *Cinema Novo* in the 1960s, won many international awards and greatly contributed to the evolution of film discourse. (Debs, 1996, p. 142, translated freely)

The mid-1990s marked the beginning of the "renaissance" of Brazilian cinema, also known as "*retomada*." Following the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello, new mechanisms were created to resume public investment in culture and art, especially cinema. New theaters were built,

increasing the number of spectators, and production began to spread across the country rather than staying concentrated in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

The successful trajectory of the *Cangaço* attracted filmmakers to the North-East again. Different perspectives were offered, promoting a renovation of the genre. Three films mark this transition, two of them remakes of classic productions. Directed by Rosemberg Cariry, *Corisco e Dadá* (*Corisco & Dadá*, 1996) was a remake of Carlos Coimbra's *Corisco, o Diabo Loiro*. Lima Barreto's 1953 masterpiece was also adapted into a new film, the homonymous *O Cangaceiro* (*The Cangaceiro*, Aníbal Massaini Neto, 1997), which failed to achieve the success of its predecessor.

Last but not least, we have *Baile Perfumado* (*Perfumed Ball*, Lírio Ferreira and Paulo Caldas, 1997), which tells the story of Benjamin Abrahão, the Lebanese peddler who decided to film Lampião and his gang in their pilgrimage across the *sertão* in order to make a documentary about the *Cangaço*, the historical *Lampião, o Rei do Cangaço*, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. The film combines an unusual narrative structure with a unique aesthetic, breaking traditional patterns of camera movement and time construction. *Baile Perfumado* is considered one of the best productions of the Brazilian "renaissance."

These three films loom large during this period because they revitalized the genre with fresh angles of vision, demonstrating that the *Cangaço* still had room to grow. This resurgence also reflects the endurance of a genre that so strongly represents Brazilian cinema. Moreover, it is important to highlight that the Brazilian "renaissance" was not only responsible for the North-East's return to cinema, but also for the cinema's return to the North-East. The *Cangaço* was one of many themes chosen to represent on screen the particular culture, issues, and richness of that region. "The truth is that no other region in Brazil will ever surpass the North-East in terms of illustrious traditions and honesty of character" (Freire cited in Debs, 1996, p. 143, translated freely).

CONCLUSION

After this brief return to Brazilian cinema, the genre experienced a hiatus of over a decade. The first *Cangaço* film of the twenty-first century was Wolney Oliveira's *Os Últimos Cangaceiros* (*The Last Cangaceiros*, 2011). Similar to other documentaries on the genre, the film included part of Benjamin Abrahão's footage, this time digitally colored. *Os Últimos Cangaceiros* tells the story of a *cangaceiro* couple that survived the massacre that killed Lampião, Maria Bonita, and nine other *cangaceiros*. In order to preserve their identity, they were forced to hide for decades, only revealing their true origins in the 2000s, when they were already very advanced in age. Oliveira spent months accompanying the couple and their fascinating story, and the result is a one-of-a-kind documentary.

Hermano Penna used to make *Cangaço* documentaries in the 1970s. In 2014, he returned to the genre with *Aos Ventos que Virão* (*To the Winds to Come*), a fictional film about two former *cangaceiros* who come back to the North-East after years living in São Paulo. Set in a contemporary period, the film follows these characters as they try to adjust to this new reality, meddling with politics and engaging in violent acts as if they were still *cangaceiros*, outraged at the injustice and corruption of the authorities. In 2016, Alceu Valença, a famous North-Eastern musician, released his first film, *A Luneta do Tempo* (*The Time Spyglass*), put together over the course of 14 years. Valença's inexperience, combined with the challenges faced by anyone working with film in Brazil, led to the unfortunate delay. The story is a poeticized account of the adventures and misfortunes of the celebrated *cangaceiro* couple Lampião and Maria Bonita.

As stated before, one of the main aspects of the *Cangaço* is its power of self-reinvention. The genre was, is, and should always be a fundamental keystone in Brazilian cinema. No matter how old the stories are, they remain open to constant interpretation and new approaches, becoming easily adapted to modern technology without abandoning its historical roots. The trajectory of the genre is marked by legendary characters, interpreted by actors who went on to become big film stars, as well as great directors who went down in history as visionary filmmakers.

Through associations with different genres – adventure, comedy, erotic, and documentary – and unusual narrative styles, the *Cangaço* was able to become more than a theme; it was able to become a distinctive national genre. It is thus quite realistic to assume that the genre will continue to be alive for years to come, which leaves us with only one question: what does the future reserve for Brazilian cinema and *Cangaço* productions?

NOTE

1. The year 1940 is the official date of extinction of the *Cangaço*. In 1938, Lampião, Maria Bonita, and nine other *cangaceiros* were murdered and decapitated in Grota de Angicos, in the state of Alagoas, by Lieutenant João Bezerra and his troop. The heads were exhibited as trophies as the troop made their way back to the capital Maceió. Two years later, Corisco was located and killed by José Rufino and his men. The same ritual took place. His companion Dadá, however, shot in the foot during the siege, had her life spared by the police.

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