

# *Brazilian Cinema*

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# 14

## “The Cinema of Hunger: Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s *Vidas Secas*”

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Even before Glauber Rocha coined the expression “an esthetic of hunger,” Nelson Pereira dos Santos embodied that esthetic in *Vidas Secas* (1963). With its soberly critical realism, its sterling austerity, and its implicit optimism, it represents first phase Cinema Novo at its best. Rarely has a subject—in this case hunger, drought, and the exploitation of a peasant family—been so finely rendered by a style. Rarely have a thematic and an esthetic been quite so fully adequate to one another.

In some crucial respects Graciliano Ramos’s novel on which the film is based elicits comparison with John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Published only a year apart (*Vidas Secas* in 1938; *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939), both are established literary classics in their respective countries, and both form part of what may broadly be called the naturalist tradition. They treat, furthermore, an identical subject: drought and migration. The droughts of the dustbowl drive the Joads from Oklahoma to California, just as the droughts of the Brazilian northeast drive Fabiano and his family to the cities of the south. In both works the trajectory of a single family comes to encapsulate the destiny of thousands of oppressed people. In one case the oppressors are real-estate companies and agro-

businessmen; in the other, landowners and their accomplices.

There are, on a purely sociological level, contrasts as well as similarities between the two novels. The Okies of *The Grapes of Wrath*, while an oppressed minority within the United States, enjoy relative affluence. The Joads have a broken-down truck and some basic necessities; Fabiano and family have only their blistered feet and a single trunk for their possessions. The Okies may be only barely literate, but they are presented as loquacious home-spun philosophers, forever discoursing on the oversoul and the survival powers of the people. The peasants of *Vidas Secas*, meanwhile, are not only illiterate, but they also have a tenuous grasp even on spoken language, communicating only in gestures, grunts, and monosyllables. The Okies, consequently, are better equipped to combat their oppression. Fabiano has only confused resentments and an inarticulate impulse to revolt; Tom Joad is equipped with literacy and a degree of class consciousness.

The distance that separates John Ford’s 1940 adaptation of Steinbeck’s novel from Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s adaptation of *Vidas Secas* is the distance that separates Southern California from the *sertão* and Hollywood studio production in the forties from Third World filmmaking in the sixties. With *Vidas Secas*, as for many other works from the first phase of Cinema Novo, the word “hunger” characterizes not only the film’s subject and its esthetic, but also its production methods. Too often we as First World spectators tend to transfer conventional expectations



Maria Ribeiro as Vitória in *Vidas Secas* (1963)

based on the output of wealthy and sophisticated film industries to works from countries that lack the means to produce such films. The total production cost of *Vidas Secas*, for example, was \$25,000, compared to thirty times that figure for *The Grapes of Wrath*. The film rights to the Steinbeck novel alone cost three times the total cost of *Vidas Secas*. And these differences in production inevitably inflect both the ideology and the esthetics of the films. *Vidas Secas* could afford no highly paid star for its central role, and thus poverty loses some of the glamor associated with a Henry Fonda.

If there was any production model for Nelson Pereira dos Santos it was not the Hollywood system that produced *The Grapes of Wrath*, but rather [Italian Neo-Realism] one of the most important film movements to have emerged in the years separating the two films. Nelson Pereira dos Santos sums up the influence of Neo-realism as follows:

The influence of neo-realism was not that of a school or ideology, but rather as a production system. Neo-realism taught us, in sum, that it was possible to make films in the streets; that we did not need studios; that we could film using average people rather than known actors; that the technique could be imperfect, as long as the film was truly linked to its national culture and expressed that culture.<sup>1</sup>

*Vidas Secas*, then, has certain affinities with Neo-Realism, affinities that extend even to a thematic level. Like many Neo-Realist films, *Vidas Secas* makes the story of a few ordinary individuals the springboard for a discussion of a larger social problem. Just as the lone bicycle thief of *Ladri di Bicicletta* "speaks for" the armies of the unemployed in post-war Italy, so the single peasant family of *Vidas Secas* sums up the lives of the millions of northeasterners who migrate to the cities of the south. The film's final title—"and the *sertão* would continue to send to the city strong people like Fabiano, Vitória, and the two boys"—merely renders explicit the film's basic procedure of socially generalizing its meanings.

A comparison of *Vidas Secas* and its novelistic source is also instructive. The novel consists of 129 pages (in Portuguese) segmented into 13 chapters.<sup>2</sup> The film consists of 652 discrete shots articulated into 69 sequences for a duration of 120 minutes.<sup>3</sup> The novel was originally published as a series of fairly autonomous short pieces whose unity derived from a common milieu and the continuity of the characters. The film manipulates this basic material into a coherent, rather more linear narrative. For example, it groups some chapters that are separate in the novel. The events of chapter three ("Jail") and chapter eight ("Feast Day"), both set in town, are joined. A flashback in chapter ten ("Accounts"), where Fabiano remembers previous difficulties with the town's tax collector, has been placed before the other events set in town. Although both works develop a city-country opposition, in the film the town assumes a more threatening visage than in the novel. Fabiano goes to town twice. The first time he is cheated by the landowner and bullied



*Vidas Secas* (1963)

by the tax collector and a soldier. The second time, on Feast Day, he is pressured into joining a card game and subsequently arrested and beaten by the soldier. Fabiano, a ranch hand, simply does not know how to survive in town. The film offers Fabiano an option not available in the novel. The young *jagunço*, who soothes Fabiano's wounds in jail and later offers him his horse, invites Fabiano to join his band. A shot of Fabiano holding a rifle intimates the possibility of armed struggle, however remote, an option Fabiano rejects in order to remain with his family.

The film also modifies the novel by historically dating the action—1940 at the beginning of the film, 1942 at the end—whereas the novel left the date unspecified. The date corresponds roughly to the time of the publication of the novel, but its meaning goes beyond that elementary fact. The historical specificity constitutes a kind of ironic provocation on Nelson Pereira dos Santos's part. Superficially he has set the film in a safely distant past. [We know from interviews, however, that he intended the film to be an intervention within the contemporary political conjuncture, in this case as part of the debate then raging in Brazil concerning agrarian reform. The precise dating of the film suggests, with a subtlety quite typical of its director, that a situation denounced by Graciliano Ramos decades earlier continued to exist. Peasants like Fabiano continue to be oppressed by landowners and are still being forced to migrate from the northeast. It is precisely the lack of change in the intervening years that constitutes the scandal.]

Nelson Pereira dos Santos also joined entirely new episodes to the material of the novel. One [documentary-like segment] alternates shots of Fabiano in jail with shots of the villagers celebrating the *bumba-meu-boi* ceremony in front of the mayor and the landowner. In this traditional

folkdance pageant, the people symbolically divide an ox and offer it to the local dignitaries. The *bumba-meu-boi* can be seen in this context as the ceremonial representation, the *mise-en-scène* of a situation of oppression, for they offer what is in some sense the product of their labor to the oppressors. Popular culture, the director seems to be saying, is politically ambiguous. On the one hand, it offers a counter pole to elite culture, represented in the film by the classical violin lessons for the landowner's daughter. On the other hand, it can alienate the people by simply representing, rather than challenging, their own oppression.

One area in which the film is imaginatively "faithful" to the novel concerns point of view. The Ramos novel is written from what might be called a subjectivized third-person point of view. It uses an indirect free style, i.e., a mode of discourse that begins in the third person ("he thought") and then quietly modulates into a more or less direct, but still third person, presentation of a character's thoughts and feelings. The discourse of *Vidas Secas*, like that of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, is highly subjectivized in that most of the verbal material is articulated via the point of view of characters. Five chapters are named for the personage whose vision colors their presentation; four others are dominated by Fabiano. At the same time, within particular chapters, a kind of subsystem organizes point of view that passes down a hierarchy of power from Fabiano to Vitória to the two boys and, at times, to the dog Baleia.

The novel *Vidas Secas* is characterized by an intense imaginative empathy whereby the author projects himself into the minds and bodies of characters very different from himself. Graciliano Ramos displays the kind of empathetic power that allowed Keats to imaginatively transform himself into a "sparrow pecking around in the gravel." He brings us into the very physical being of his peasant subjects. In a tour de force, Ramos even psychologizes the dog Baleia, going so far as to give him visions of a canine afterlife. At some points, obviously, he does not strictly limit himself to the consciousness of his characters, but rather includes and transcends them. He makes allusions, for example, which would undoubtedly have been beyond the ken of his characters (e.g., Fabiano's comparison of himself to a "wandering Jew") or he details their confusion (Fabiano's semi-comic attempt to compose an appropriate lie for Vitória concerning his loss of money in a card game) while making it clear that he as author does not share his confusion.

In the film interior monologue in the indirect free style disappears in favor of direct dialogue. Fabiano's internal wrestle with language itself, for example, is dropped; we are given only the fact of his inarticulateness. Fabiano and Vitória's lack of verbal communication is related through a "conversation" as they sit by the fire and listen to the rain outside while both of them talk simultaneously without hearing each other. But Nelson Pereira dos Santos does retain what one might call the democratic distribution of subjectivity. Fabiano, Vitória, the two boys, and the dog are all subjectivized by the film. This subjectivization operates by playing on diverse cinematic registers. Classically, and most obviously, the film

exploits point of view shots that alternate the person seeing with what the person presumably sees. Such shots are associated with each of the four human protagonists and with the dog. One sequence alternates shots of Baleia looking and panting with shots of cavies scurrying through the brush. The film also subjectivizes by camera movement; hand-held travelling shots evoke the experience of traversing the *sertão*; a vertiginous camera movement suggests the younger boy's dizziness and fall. Other procedures involve exposure (an overexposed shot of the sun blinds and dizzies the character and the spectator); focus (Baleia's vision goes out of focus as Fabiano stalks him, as if the dog were bewildered by his master's behavior); and camera angle (as the boy inclines his head to look at the house, the camera inclines as well). It is also noteworthy that the camera films the dog and the children at their level, without patronizing them, as it were, by high angles.

Like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Vidas Secas* elaborates the analogy, characteristic of naturalist fiction and rooted in nineteenth-century biologism and social Darwinism, between human beings and animals. The twist in *Vidas Secas* is that it is not in the descriptive passages that the novelist brings up the metaphor; rather, he has the characters themselves make the comparison, conversely reinforced by the author's "humanization" of animals. While Fabiano and Vitória constantly complain that they are forced to live like animals, the dog Baleia is given almost human qualities and is totally integrated into the family. The human characters are very much aware of their inability to communicate through language, but when Vitória kills the parrot to eat, she justifies her action by saying that it was worth nothing, "it didn't even talk." A leather bed takes on overweening importance for Vitória because it represents the ideal of ceasing to live like animals. While animals hide in the forest and sleep on the ground, "real people" sleep in beds. Thus Graciliano Ramos avoids the reductionism that characterizes many naturalist novels, in which characters become the mere playthings of biological and economic forces, the objects of a grim determinism. In Ramos it is social structures that "animalize" people, while the characters consciously resist their own animalization.

Apart from being a highly intelligent reading of a classic novel *Vidas Secas* also makes a specifically cinematic contribution. Graciliano Ramos's style, a style ideally suited to the rendering of physical sensation and concrete experience, is transmuted into film. Luis Carlos Barreto's cinematography is dry and harsh like the *sertão*. Indeed, he has been credited with "inventing" a kind of light appropriate to Brazilian cinema. The film's soundtrack, meanwhile, is ingenious, providing, as Noel Burch points out in *The Theory of Film Practice*, an instance of the "structural use of sound." The non-diegetic sounds of the creaking wheels of an ox cart accompanying the film's credits are subsequently "diegetized" as we see an ox cart simultaneously with the sound. At another point, the sound forms part of an aural pun as the creaking of the cart modulates in-

Indirect free style  
indirect free style  
line

subjectivized  
subjectivized



Atila Iorio as Fabiano in *Vidas Secas* (1963)

to the (diegetic) sound of a scraping violin. Through the course of the film the sound of the ox cart becomes a kind of auditory synecdoche that encapsulates the northeast, both by its denotation (the ox cart evoking the technical backwardness of the region) and by its connotation, the very unpleasantness of the sound constituting a certain structure of aggression. Simultaneously the wheel of the ox cart operates metaphorically, recalling in its circularity the cyclical droughts and never-ending misery of the region.

The opening shot of *Vidas Secas* intimates aggressiveness toward the spectator. A static camera records the slow progress of four human figures and a dog across an inhospitable landscape. Their slow approximation suggests the cultural distance between the peasant characters and the middle-class urban spectators who constitute the audience. At the same time, the quite unconventional prolongation of the shot in time (four minutes) serves as a warning to the spectator not to expect the fast pacing and density of incident that characterizes most fiction films. The spectator's experience, in short, will be as dry as that of the protagonists. The relative fidelity to the tempo and duration of peasant life forms part of the film's meaning.

Third World peasants form the majority of the world's population, yet they are drastically underrepresented in the cinema. When they are represented they are frequently sentimentalized and pastoralized according to the bourgeois ideology of the western film industry. It is to Nelson Pereira dos Santos's credit that he avoided the pitfalls common to many treatments of similar subjects. Rather than sensationalize his subject by concentrating on pathetic incidents and dramatic confrontations, he por-

trays, generally, only the most quotidian of events. His characters, rather than being rude transcendental poets, strumming guitars at streamside and mouthing the rustic wisdom of the simple folk, are moving in their very inarticulateness, in their unequal struggle with language. Rather than make them the exemplary victims of a quasi-metaphysical injustice or the patient sufferers of human cruelty, his characters are simply oppressed by a social situation; they are neither more nor less noble than other people. Rather than relieving the austerity of the images with a lush musical score, his soundtrack offers only occasional diegetic music (the violin lessons for the landowner's daughter, the music of the *bumba-meu-boi* ceremony), along with extremely harsh sounds (the squawking of a parrot, the grating creak of the ox cart); there is no non-diegetic musical score at all. Too often such scores serve to render poverty palatable as the spectators lose themselves in the music and forget the provocative rawness of the facts depicted. Rather than emphasize picturesqueness, having the scenery compensate for the aridity of the subject, Nelson Pereira dos Santos presents images as harsh and inhospitable as the landscape; the spectator lives there only at the price of a certain discomfort. The relentlessly blinding light of Luis Carlos Barreto's camera leaves the spectator, like the protagonists, without respite. *Vidas Secas* elicits no pastoral nostalgia for a simpler time and place—an attitude frequently projected by city dwellers onto rural people—and entertains no mystical attitude toward "the land." The spectator hungry for conventional sensations, in sum, goes away unfulfilled, but the spectator hungry to learn goes away well nourished.

"ugly, sad, screaming, desperate" film...

#### Notes

1. Quoted in "O Cinema Novo no Jogo da Verdade," *Manchete* 20 (November 1965): 120.
2. Graciliano Ramos, *Vidas Secas* (1938; São Paulo: Editora Martins, 1972). Translated into English by Ralph Edward Dimmick (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973).
3. Information from "Roteiro de *Vidas Secas*" elaborated by students at the University of Brasília. Published by the Escola de Comunicações e Artes, University of São Paulo, 1970.