

Classic *Vidas Secas* by Nelson Pereira dos Santos released on DVD

“Hell” in Brazil

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6 March 2006

Vidas Secas, directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, based on the novel by Graciliano Ramos

The 1963 classic film *Vidas Secas* (*Barren Lives*), by director Nelson Pereira dos Santos, newly released on DVD by New Yorker Video, is one of the pivotal works of Brazil's *Cinema Novo*. Based on the novel by Graciliano Ramos, the documentary-style film is set in Brazil's drought-plagued *sertão*, or northeastern backlands.

In light of the fact that the Ramos novel has often been compared to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, it may not be coincidental that the film's narrative begins in 1940, the year that John Ford filmed Steinbeck's work.

With stark black-and-white images, unfiltered light and a soundtrack primarily consisting of the rhythmic grinding of an oxcart wheel, the film follows Fabiano (Atila Iório), an itinerant cowhand, his wife Sinhá Vitória (Maria Ribeiro) and their two young sons and faithful dog Baleia as they migrate across the desolate landscape, attempting to make their way to the urban south. As a cow handler, Fabiano can only find work when the terrible droughts abate. The rest of the time, the family is in a struggle to keep one step ahead of becoming carrion for the vultures—a fate that befalls the many creatures that die in the fierce desert heat.

In the course of their seemingly endless journey, the family kills their pet parrot for a meal and one child collapses from heat exhaustion. They eventually come upon an abandoned farmhouse. The family is grudgingly allowed to shelter in the house by its owner, a well-to-do cattle rancher, who employs Fabiano at slave wages and then proceeds to rob him of his earnings.

Even so, their newfound stability feeds their dream of owning a leather bed, a possession symbolic of no longer having to run “in the wild like animals.” Their luck, as slim as it is, takes a turn for the worse. Fabiano's false arrest and jailhouse beating is intercut with the town's elite enjoying a Sunday ceremony, a dance fusion of Catholicism and motifs from African ritual that harks back to the slave trade. While the village bureaucracy, including the ranch owner, is entertained, the population in its meager but best finery is

distracted from its oppression.

At one point, Fabiano is invited to join a leftist guerrilla band, but declines for the sake of his family, and out of political passivity. This is the film's only reference to an organized opposition to the social conditions.

As *Vidas Secas* unfolds, the characters develop an increasing awareness that they cannot “go on living like animals hiding in the desert.” When the older child persistently demands to know, “What is Hell?,” it hits the family that its existence is little different from the Christian conception of eternal damnation.

“There must be a place for us in God's world,” says Vitória as the intense sun shrivels life and the family is again forced to move on.

Born in São Paulo in 1928, dos Santos is the creator, according to the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York City, of what is “the most important and coherent body of work in the history of Brazilian and, arguably, Latin American cinema.”

A cinematic career that dates back to the 1950s, dos Santos is considered the heart and conscience of *Cinema Novo*, the Brazilian New Wave of the 1960s that included filmmakers such as Glauber Rocha, Ruy Guerra and Carlos Diegues. In the DVD's liner notes, dos Santos states: “Cinema Novo was never a monolithic or one-dimensional film movement. Rather, each director brought his own style, thematic concerns, and social vision to play in his films, resulting in a diverse and heterogeneous movement with a common-core belief in the need to transform Brazilian society and the important role that cinema could play in that process.”

Indeed, *Vidas Secas* does not spare in its hatred of a cold-blooded social order that inflicts a misery so fierce it leads Vitória to plead at the film's end, “Could not we be real people some day?”

The filmmaker explains, “In Brazil there is a permanent struggle to reduce poverty. Obviously, poverty in Brazil is a political question, because the Brazilian elites, ‘the lords of power,’ have to be aware of the threat of poverty because interests combine to make this situation permanent.” He

describes film “as a form of expression” and attributes his attraction to Italian neorealism in the aftermath of World War II to its belief that filmmaking must bypass “the world of high finance.”

Dos Santos explains that he was drawn to neorealism not for its themes, which he felt considered social issues separate from their social context (a somewhat questionable criticism), but to its methods of production, best articulated by the phrase of one of *Cinema Novo*’s initiators, Glauber Rocha (1938-1981): “A camera in the hand and an idea in the head.”

In Rocha’s famous 1965 manifesto, “The Aesthetics of Hunger,” the filmmaker argued that the originality of *Cinema Novo* lay in its insistence that “violence is a normal behavior for the starving” and “the moment of violence is the moment when the colonizer becomes aware of the existence of the colonized.”

About Rocha, the WSWs wrote in May 2003: “Rocha emerged from the political-cultural radicalization that swept Latin America. He advocated a break with ‘European bourgeois film’ and an indigenous Brazilian approach to cinema, making use of folk culture, local rhythms and symbols. Such ambitions were common at the time in the colonial and semi-colonial countries of Latin America and Africa. Various national schools of cinema and theater ‘of the oppressed’ appeared at the time. Often with the best of intentions, these efforts, which remained trapped within a radical bourgeois nationalism—encouraged by various Stalinist, Maoist and Castroite currents—rarely went further than populist explosions of anger and despair.” (It is worth noting that Dos Santos, who was active in the Brazilian Communist Party from his youth, broke with the CP after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956.)

Vidas Secas is one such effort that does partially go beyond the artistic and ideological constraints of a nationalist, populist cinema by virtue of its extraordinary humanism. Entirely lacking in sensationalism, the film’s transcendental and poetic quality means that each moment is treated with care and intelligence, thereby carrying the spirit of neorealism into deeper waters.

The camera lingers on dignified but battered and troubled faces, worn and torn by intolerable pressures (Vitória: “These eyes have only seen misery”). The children—beings still open to the world—are treated harshly by the parents. After a while, one senses that Fabiano and Vitória’s hardness veils an acute, unimaginable pain and also functions as a lesson in self-protection for their children. In general, the family’s chronic state of anguish is evocative of a reality far more encompassing than the film’s immediate physical and historical terrain. It is a generalized agony. The film presents the family’s specific run-ins with the cattle

rancher, the local police and village officials, the cruelty inflicted on them from every quarter—including nature—in such a way as to point to their generic quality as a basic feature of class society. No small achievement!

With sparse dialogue, the film succeeds in communicating viscerally the *feeling* of a universal poverty. Fabiano’s family is at the bottom of the social rung, but his immediate abusers are not much better off, which accounts for their viciousness. Crushed from the top, they in turn stomp on those beneath them. The struggle for survival is all too raw and primitive, a fact that deeply motivates dos Santos to protest through his art, “It’s inadmissible for a man of the twentieth century to live alongside poverty.”

Artistically, the film’s elements work to illuminate this sensation of privation and its subsidiary horrors.

In the DVD’s notes, dos Santos reveals that *Vidas Secas* was the first film in which he was able to convey that the film’s lighting was “the clear result of an aesthetic position.” He attributes this to his cinematographer, Luiz Carlos Barreto, who was a “follower of the Cartier-Bresson school of thought.” Says dos Santos: “It was a shocking experience, revolutionary radical, to film without a filter, with naked lens, to shine the light directly on the characters’ faces.” The effect is both moving and chilling.

In fact, the film was banned after Brazil’s 1964 military coup for its depiction of horrific poverty and police brutality. In March of that year, the military junta under Humberto Castello Branco overthrew the bourgeois government of João Goulart. A second coup in 1968 brought stronger censorship and harsher repression. It was in this period between the coups that Rocha penned his polemic, in essence, calling for a cinematic style that would express the “real” Brazil as a paradigm of failure of hope.

In *Vidas Secas*, hope remains intact with a revolutionism, although embryonic, contained in the iron will of dos Santos’s characters. At some point, as consciousness emerges, the human forces to which they belong will be welded into an indestructible force.



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