

## PERFORMANCE OF THE LAND IN *BARREN LIVES* AND *VIDAS SECAS*: THE POETICS OF SILENCE IN BRAZIL

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**Abstract:** This article is about the performance of the land as a barren space in *Barren Lives* (1963) and *Vidas secas* (1938). In this interdisciplinary study I focus on performance (Schechner 2006) rather than representation, for performing implies an action. Through the lenses of Performance Studies and Postcolonial Studies, I analyze the interconnectedness of the cinematic medium and the literary written text in order to discuss how the land, in the aesthetics of Cinema Novo, speaks back to the “reality” of the *sertão* in Brasil. Thus, I depart from the performance of the land as a space of barrenness to discuss how silence permeates and constitutes both media. In order to analyze and interpret this state of the land I focus on the theories of “necropolitics” (Mbembe 2019) and “modernity” by Appadurai (1996) as a way of discussing how *sertão* is put in a dialectical position to modernity in Brazil.

**Keywords:** Performance, Cinema Novo, *Sertão*, Poetics, Aesthetics

**Resumo:** Este artigo discute a *performance* da terra como um espaço árido no filme *Vidas secas* (1963) e no romance de Graciliano Ramos (1938). Nesta intervenção interdisciplinar, o foco é na *performance* (Schechner 2006) e não simplesmente na representação, uma vez que a *performance* implica ação. Pelas lentes de Estudos de *Performance* e Estudos Pós-coloniais, analiso a relação entre a linguagem cinematográfica e o texto escrito a fim de discutir como a terra se relaciona com a realidade do *sertão* no Brasil. O ponto de partida dessa discussão é a *performance* da terra como um espaço árido e infértil, no sentido de que esse estado de silêncio é a ponte entre o filme e o romance. Para essa interpretação da terra, tomo como base as teorias de “necropolítica” (Mbembe 2019) e modernidade (Appadurai 1996) para discutir como o *sertão* é colocado em uma posição dialética em relação ao Brasil todo.

**Palavras-chave:** Performance, Cinema Novo, *Sertão*, Poética, Estética

## **Introduction**

In this article, I address how the aesthetics of Cinema Novo in Brazil recuperates the *sertão* (backlands) in Brazil as a barren space. The portrayal of the land in *Barren Lives* (1963) by Nelson Pereira dos Santos speaks to the description and the constitution of the space in *Vidas secas* (1938) by Graciliano Ramos. The photographic aesthetics in the film adaptation intertexts with the novel's depiction of the *sertão* informing the legacies of the dialectical relationship between modernization and coloniality (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2005).

In this interdisciplinary study, I focus on the performance of the land in both cinematic production and the novel, considering the two types of text and discourse: the written one and the aesthetics of motion pictures. In my argument for this analysis of the *sertão*, I posit that the performance of the land is more adequate than speaking of representation, for the depiction of the land in *Barren Lives* and *Vidas secas* does something, in the sense that it performs an action, thus it communicates. I depart from the field of Performance Studies (Schechner 2006) to sustain this argument, for performance breaks up with the notion of representation as a fixed picture of a body, a land, a space, an identity. Language, being it verbal or non-verbal, is a key element (or living organism) in the performance of the land, because it is the medium through which *sertão* speaks in both *Vidas secas* and *Barren Lives*.

According to the film scholar Robert Stam (2019): “Filmic adaptations of novels inherit and reconfigure a double constellation of transtexts, first the literary legacies that inform the source novel and secondly the cinematic and artistic legacies embedded in or mobilized by the filmic adaptation.”<sup>136</sup> (Stam 2019, p. 67). My aim is to navigate through this interconnectedness between cinematic language and linguistic signs in the novel.

I consider Felinto's<sup>137</sup> (2003) argument that the linguistic lack in *Vidas secas* launches a quest for communication – a thirst that is never quenched in the novel. Based on that, I argue that from the film to the novel, the *sertão* speaks: through images created in the descriptive language, the silences and non-communication between Fabiano and Sinhá Vitoria, Baleia (by “speaking” in “her” very own way about the *sertão*), and by the ingenious voices of the two boys.

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<sup>136</sup> Stam, Robert. *World Literature, Transnational Cinema, and Global Media: Towards a Transartistic Commons*. Routledge, 2019.

<sup>137</sup> Felinto, Marilene. Posfácio. In: Ramos, Graciliano. *Vidas secas*. 89. ed. Rio de Janeiro, Record, 2003, pp. 129-139.

There is a considerable amount of work that has been published over the past decade on the novel and the cinematic adaptation of *Vidas secas* (translated into English as *Barren Lives* by Ralph Edward Dimmick) in the field of literary studies, such as Bonfim (2011) who discusses the process of the cinematic adaptation with a thorough basis on the poetics of the cinematic language. Alfeld (2013) in her study *Vidas secas: do romance ao filme*, also discusses this process of cinematic adaptation and posits, based on Umberto Eco's (1994) argument that the fictional universe is not finite within the story, that the film contemplates an eternalization of the novel. I agree with this perspective, for the representation of the land in the cinematic adaptation offers a faithful mediatized narrative of the *sertão* in Brazil. In this sense, I argue, based on Burch (1991), that the cinematic language and poetics transforms the space and recreates the story that speaks back to the narration of the land in the novel. Furthermore, the poetics of cinematography also brings the importance of the novel to a greater public engaged with redefining the nation 30 years later after the publication of the novel. In this sense, *Barren Lives* (1963) functioned as a sort of "wake-up call" to the representations of *sertão* and also a commitment to Ramos' legacy in communicating what *sertão* was in the 30's.

In order to study the land's performance in the film and novel, several questions guide my analysis: What ideals are showcased in the film that are facilitated by the aesthetics of non-theatricality? In which ways do these ideals value or challenge ongoing hegemonic discourses of a progressing nation? How do these portrayals of the land in both the cinematic adaptation and the novel dialogue and propose a reconstruction of the narrative of the *sertão*?

Considering the aesthetics of Cinema Novo, one of the main figures in this artistic movement, Glauber Rocha, published the manifesto *The Aesthetics of Hunger* (1965), in which he argued that filmmaking should be: representing the reality the way it is.<sup>138</sup> Rocha's slogan for this new style of making film was "a camera in the hand and an idea in mind" (Rocha 1965). Thus, there is no need to be theatrical to represent reality. Additionally, the barren representation of the land purposefully offered by Nelson Pereira dos Santos speaks to a counter-ideology of film-making at the height of the dictatorship and censorship in Brazil. This aesthetics was as a way to denounce or even undo the propagandistic discourse of a progressive "nation" mediated by Getúlio Vargas in the 1930's and by

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<sup>138</sup> This way of representing the "reality" establishes a dialogue with *Cinéma vérité's* aesthetics and ideology, in the sense that this way of filming also raises a tradition of social realism. In accordance with Rothman (2003), *Cinéma vérité*, of course, is a form of documentary film, or a method of making documentary films, in which a small crew (often a cameraperson and sound recordist, sometimes only a solitary filmmaker) goes out into the "real world" with portable synch-sound equipment and films people going about their lives, not acting. (Rothman 2003, 281)

the proponents of the *Coup d'état* in 1964. Influenced by neo-realist aesthetics, the performance of the land in *Barren Lives* reflects the realities of filmmaking in the sixties. In a metalinguistic way, cinema making at that time was as barren as the condition of the land.

The *Aesthetics of hunger* offers a framework for reading the land in *Barren Lives* (1963) and *Vidas secas* (1938) in the sense that the land performs a construction of the idea of “nation” in Brazil. Aesthetically, the way of representing subjects in this cinema wave distanced from high-budget Hollywood industry, as it has been argued by Stam and Johnson (1995). The close representation of reality approximates the film’s nature to a documentary as a way of denouncing the cruelties of the land. Representing the land in such a crude way was a metaphor and a metalanguage of the director attempting to do art in a context of censorship. As Glauber Rocha points out, the directors were the peasants of the land, because they were also struggling with a scarcity of resources and budget to produce the film (Rocha, 1965). According to Stam and Johnson (1995, 122), “If there was any production model for Nelson Pereira dos Santos 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”. Therefore, the urge to showcase reality was the central issue for Rocha’s aesthetics of the hunger, which *Barren Lives* production relied on.

Moreover, a comparison between the novel and the filmic adaptation is rather “instructive”, as Stam and Johnson (1995) posit:

The novel consists of 129 pages (in Portuguese) segmented into 13 chapters. The film consists of 652 discrete shots articulated into 69 sequences for a duration of 120 minutes. 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.. (...) 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. (Stam and Johnson 1995, pp. 122-126)

Although Stam and Johnson (1995) argue that dialogues are more present in the filmic adaptation than the novel presents, I argue that the lack of communication is still there, even though they are actively speaking in the scene. There are other cinematographic elements that surpass and suppress the linguistic value of communication in dialogues on the screen, such as the point of view, camera alternation, and lighting. Camera angulation and yellowish color give the motion pictures a sense of steadiness of the lives in *sertão*, such as it is later explained by the authors:

(...) 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 *sertao*; 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. (Stam and Johnson 1995, p. 125)

*Barren Lives* tells the story of a family that leaves the *sertão* of the Northeast in search of a better life. The film was produced by Luis Carlos Barreto, Herbert Richers, and Danilo Trelles under the direction of Nelson Pereira dos Santos. The film is part of the first phase of New Cinema (“Cinema Novo”) in Brazil, which embraced a philosophy of not embellishing filmmaking in two senses: first, there is no melodrama, in the sense that the story is the “real” and crude portrayal of the land and the lives that occupy that space. And second, there is no theatricality when it comes to acting, once acting in the Cinema Novo ideology is focused on the representation of an everyday life of struggles.

Brazil shares a divide between North (east) and South(east), wherein modernity is virtually the norm, as opposed to the impoverished lives that inhabit the “sertão brasileiro”. How are these media contributing to the construction of knowledge of the *sertão* in the context of the 1930s and 1960s? When it comes to cultural representations of the *sertão* in Brazil, it is pivotal to mention that there has been a distortion in such representations that has historically exoticized and located it as a deserted land, thus “forgotten” (Sarzynski 2018). The portrayal of the land as forgotten – highlighting its rural aspects of subservience – establishes the dialectic relationship between consumerism and modernization that constitutes both the cinematic adaptation and the novel.

The aesthetics of non-theatricality reveals the lack of theatrical elements in the process of filmmaking, such as the quietness, the short dialogues that represent the quotidian, the portrayal of a dry and infertile land, communicate feelings through this arid performance of the land, as a rural and barren space. As I focus on the (non)theatrical aesthetics in the cinematic adaptation, I rely on *Vidas secas* to establish this dialogue between these two medias.

The language used in the cinematic adaptation can be seen as an extension of the literary language, as if the cinematic language would be the materialization of the narrator’s free indirect speech by Graciliano Ramos in 1938. Recuperating Eco’s argument that a cinematic adaptation tends to eternalize the work it originated from, I add Stam’s (2019) discussion on adaptations in the context of the Global South, in which:

The issue of literary adaptation plays a special role in “minor” nations, where adaptations can become a “heritage” genre for the Global South. Adaptations can serve multiple purposes: a means for outwitting censorship through strategic allegory, advancing national prestige, or simply providing viable

stories. Brazil has a proud tradition of brilliant literary figures worthy of transnational attention. Over its more than a century of history Brazilian cinema has adapted scores if not hundreds of classical novels by Brazilian writers of World Literature quality (if not necessarily in terms of reputation and status). (Stam 2019, p. 73)

### **Performance of the land: from the motion pictures aesthetics to the linguistic (dis)articulations in the novel**

The cinematic production by Nelson Pereira dos Santos is a one-hour-and-forty-minute long that starts with a harshly strident oxcart wheel noise and the photographic black and white imagery of the barren land. The second array of noise the spectator hears is of footsteps dragging on the floor and the panting of Baleia, the dog. The first 5 minutes of the film has no explicit dialogue and the director communicates the barrenness of the land through the array of emotions that are produced by the *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari 1980) of black and white photography, the noises of animals, footsteps and dry wooden sticks. In this aesthetics of silence, the spectators feel the lack of communication that permeates the narrative of *sertanejos* (people from the *sertão*) in the Northeast of Brazil. This lack is truly representative of the *sertão*, as it is an element that constitutes this space: lack of resources, water, food, basic conditions of living, education. This lack is both the starting point and the end of the long walk to get to the Southeast.

As it is adapted from the novel, *Barren Lives* has a cyclic plot, which depicts a family of peasants leaving one place and getting to another inside the northeast region of Brazil. The family leaving a place in the backlands of Brazil and getting to another in search of better conditions of life refers, allegorically, to a social movement/demand compelled by the modernizing state and industrialization in the Era Vargas in the 30's in Brazil. The promise of an economic growth and international visibility to Brazil as a progressing nation only served a portion of the country, whilst others, like the *sertão*, remained forgotten.

The cyclical aspect of the novel and the film are key to highlight this idea that for the nation to progress, others are consequently massacred or invisibilized. The situation of the *sertão* as a barren land that does not progress in relation to other parts of the country can be seen through the dialectical relationship between modernity and coloniality (Quijano 2000, Mignolo 2005).

The film portrays a land of scarcity, in which the aesthetics of black and white portrays the reality of poverty – the description of the arid land and the peasants leaving in search of better conditions intertexts with Ramos's words while describing the space in the novel. This scene, at the

very beginning of the film, shows the family's lack of resources, for they are carrying their clothes on their heads and they carry barely nothing else with them.



*Figure 1 (Barren Lives)*

This state of the land recollects Ramos's words in the written piece: "The jujube trees spread in two green stains cross the reddish plain. The drought victims had been walking all day; they were tired and hungry" (Ramos 1938, p. 5). The image portray the land as a space that consumes the human bodies, as if the hunger were personified in the land's desire to "eat" the peasants, as it can be read in the novel when Ramos describes the experience of the older boy with the land:

He, the older boy, had fallen on the ground, which was burning his feet. Everything had gone dark all of a sudden, the cactus had disappeared, he had felt exactly the whacks Fabiano gave him with his knife sheath. (p. 59)

In this scene, we can see how the land is an agent that causes pain and death. This aspect of the land is manipulated by the state of sovereignty that puts the backlands in a forgotten space and mindset in relation to the modernizing cities in Brazil in the 30's.

Furthermore, there is no background music, only a strident sound of the wheel of an oxcart that appears in some moments, specifically when the land is depicted as if the spectator were looking at a painting.



*Figure 2*



*Figure 3*

The intolerable noise of the oxcart wheel (figure 3) causes discomfort and reminds the viewer how harsh that reality is, corroborating Berger's (1987) argument that a painting seen through film "constructs an argument that is irreversible" (p. 26). In this case, the film director holds the authority to denounce the barrenness and the dehumanizing aspect of the land, as much as the author did in the written text. The land is portrayed as a subject that is consuming the peasants' bodies, which is, in a metaphorical sense, a representation of the state against the *sertão* as a "forgotten land".

In *Barren Lives*, this portrayal of the land is combined with the non-theatricality of the acting. The actors are simply embodying quotidian actions. In this aesthetics of non-theatricality, the dialogues are much more voiced, which is a tool for representing that reality. I argue that the lack of soundtrack or background music and the sounds of the conversations together with daily instruments are elements that emphasize the barren depiction of the land. The third person omniscient narrator's voice "Thus, they resumed their journey, dragging along more slowly, in great silence" (Ramos 1965, p. 5) shows a faithful representation of the written text, in the sense that the silence in *Vidas secas* is depicted through the non-theatricality and short dialogues in *Barren Lives*.

In addition to this minimalistic theatricality, the gaze and the camera technique of what Lutgendorf (2006) calls "frontality" is another feature impacting the representation of the land, because "the eyes are communicators of emotions" and the gaze is a "two-way street" which translates "a visual interaction with players" (p. 231). Through the eyes of the younger boy, the viewer can see and feel the emotions of the scene. Thus, the gaze is not only between the boy and his family, but it is a way of interacting with the spectator and transmitting emotions.





*Figure 4*



*Figure 5*

Figure 4 depicts the family in Catholic mass (44:00). While everyone is saying their prayers out loud, the camera centers on the younger boy's eyes as a way to depict his contact with that world, as well as his amazement or wondering. In Figure 5 (1:05), we see the boy sitting far back from the house where they were living at that time and uttering repeatedly his mother's words "horrible place" and "hell" while he constantly gazes at the house: "– "Hell, Hell-". He couldn't believe that a word with so musical a ring could be the name of something bad." (Ramos 1965, p. 59).

The boy's gaze also recalls back the novel's depiction of the innocence of a child that is told through the narrator's voice. The infant's view does not reach the *necro* (Mbembe 2019) status of the land. On the one hand, the camera centralizes the boy's gaze on the land and also his questioning of hell. This scene, in both the narrative voice of the novel and the characters in the film, can either convey the boy's lack of awareness of the situation, or the explicit depiction of the effects of modernization that puts the *sertão* in a forgotten area economically and socially.

The land is so arid that there is no explicit sign of modernization, although the country was going through an economic growth at that time. The only sign of modernization is its absence: the mother's desire to sleep in leather bottomed bed, to live in a cement house, and to give a formal education to her two sons. Therefore, the depiction of the land is much more violent in the sense that it aims at representing the "truth", which is a characteristic of regional cinema and New Cinema aesthetics, such as the filmmaking with minimal resources and non-theatricality, the black and white with natural light and sound, and the family setting and willingness to move from that land. *Barren Lives* portrayal of the land in a violent way to denounce the structural violence that constitutes the nation, a fact which can be seen through the lens of *Necropolitics* (Mbembe, 2019). The state generates violence and death in order to make the nation progress.

The barrenness of the land portrayed in the film speaks to Mbembe's theory of necropolitics in conversation with Rocha's *Aesthetics of the Hunger*. The land is a dead space that does not provide any hope of fruitfulness, meaning that something must die in order to give space for others to survive. In *Barren Lives/Vidas secas* the necro-aesthetics appears in the dehumanization of the people by the land, as follows in the narrator's voice in the novel: "The brush had turned yellow and then rusty brown, the cattle had begun to grow thin, and horrible nightmares had filled the family's dreams." (Ramos 1965, p. 65). The land casts the subjectivity of the characters – especially Fabiano, who appears to be the one most affected by the barrenness – as if this scarcity of the land would resemble the construction of his masculinity in the story. Considering Lugones' (2008) perspective on gender relations and power dynamics in the colonized world, Fabiano, as the man, is supposed to be the one in charge of the family and the one having control and all the resources to sustain the family. If we read Fabiano's masculinity and the social construction of gender in the novel (as well as in the film) through the lenses of the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008), we see that the patriarchal state imposes this responsibility to men, as gender is essentially meant to be the biological sex, which is related to the idea that the masculine part is the one in charge of providing food.

In the following scenes, the assemblage of voices and disarticulation of utterances between Sinhá Vitória and Fabiano breaks the silence, rather in a confusing way, as their voices are intertwined, and they never reach to a consensus in communication. This filmic portrayal of the lack of communication speaks to the disencounters of voices in the novel:



*Figure 6*

*Figure 7*

(...) Fabiano went and squatted on the sidewalk, feeling in a mood for conversation. His vocabulary was limited but in moments of expansion he had recourse to some of the expressions used by Tomás the miller. Poor Tomás! Such a fine man to go drifting off like a mere hired hand, with a bundle on his back! Tomás was a man to be respected; he was a registered voter. Who would have thought this could happen? (Ramos 1965, p. 24)

We know this from the third person narrator in the novel. So, it is as if the narrator were “filming” the situation of this other man to showcase the situation in which those peasants were in the *sertão*: a state of barrenness in resources and communication.

The land establishes power and sovereignty over the humans that inhabit the space. According to Mbembe (2019), “modernity was at the origin of multiple concepts of sovereignty,” for it establishes difference through very basic elements: division of the land and accessibility. Modernity as an ideological apparatus of economic progress or vice-versa, is a notion of progress that does not mean equal opportunities and labor distribution. Thus, in the social, political and economic context observed by both the film and novel, we see the land violently affected by the modernizing state. Modernity entails ambiguous meanings when we consider the land depiction in Brazil through these cultural productions. However, modernity also conveys an opposite meaning of death (Mbembe 2019) because of the relation of sovereignty that is based on power dynamics. These power relations are based on difference and inequality, which generate death and terror. This scenario can be viewed by the barrenness and disgraced land portrayed in *Barren Lives*, which also speaks to the colonial encounter with the colonized.

### **Final considerations**

The performance of the land in these different media establish a “continuum” (Lotman 1996), in the sense that the land in the third person narrator’s voice in the novel is contemplated by the imagery portrayed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos in the cinematic adaptation of *Vidas secas*. The land is represented not only through the poetics of cinema making, but also, through the subjectivities of the characters both on the screen and in the written text. Moreover, their subjectivities are expressed through “non-acting” or non-theatricality, which intertexts with the free indirect speech narrator in the character’s minds in Ramos’ novel, in which this lack of theatricality gives the emotionality of thoughts going on in the character’s minds.

This non-theatricality is a characteristic of Rocha’s *The Aesthetics of Hunger* that observes the barrenness of the *sertão*, and metaphorically speaks to the lack of resources in the cultural realm of filmmaking at the height of the dictatorship in Brazil. According to Appadurai (1996):

What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide (especially in their television, film, and cassette forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscaes to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed (35).

*Barren Lives* (re)constructs the colonial ideals of nation while critiquing the political and economic scenarios of the modernizing state in the on-going ideological project of nation-making. I hope this paper inspires discussion of the acclaimed novel *Vidas secas* (1938) by Graciliano Ramos and its cinematic adaptation, *Barren Lives* (1963) by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, regarding the intersection of cultural studies and performance studies. Through the aesthetics of silence in the film the viewer can access or recuperate the textuality of the narration in the novel. This channeling of emotions produced by the cinematic production is an effective way to show the reality of the *sertão* in terms of the scarcity, but also in terms of its general knowledge and representations across Brazil. In this sense, this contribution aims to celebrate the *sertão* by Graciliano Ramos as a fertile land for re-telling stories and reclaiming voices. Thus this intervention between the filmic production and the novel account for the poetics of land as a medium through which knowledge on the *sertão* can be potentialized.

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