



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*Guerra de Canudos* by Mariza Leao; Jose Walker; Sergio Rezende; Paulo Halm; Sergio Rezende

*Passion and War in the Backlands of Canudos (Paxao e Guerra no Sertao de Canudos)* by Antonio Olavo

Darien J. Davis

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## Film Reviews

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GUERRA DE CANUDOS. Produced by Mariza Leão and José Walker; directed by Sergio Rezende; screenplay by Paulo Halm and Sergio Rezende. 1997; color, 170 minutes. Brazil. Portuguese. Distributor: Colombia Tristar Video.

PASSION AND WAR IN THE BACKLANDS OF CANUDOS (*Paxão e Guerra no Sertão de Canudos*). Produced and directed by Antônio Olavo. 1993; color; 78 minutes. Brazil. Portuguese with English subtitles. Distributor: Portfolium Laboratório de Imagens/ Blue Light Productions.

In 1889, the year after Brazil officially abolished African slavery, Brazilians dismantled their archaic constitutional monarchy and created the First Republic (1889–1930). Influenced largely by the ideology of positivism, which permeated the top ranks of the army and civilian elite, Brazilian republicanism adhered to the words that adorned the Brazilian flag: “order and progress.” By stressing order as a condition for progress, Brazilian authorities underestimated (or ignored) the deep social problems that continued to plague Brazil. In 1890, Brazil boasted a population of over ten million people, the majority of whom lived in rural areas. Literacy was appallingly low, much of the population continued to be socially marginalized and politically disenfranchised, and high unemployment was chronic. The transition from monarchy and slavery to post-abolition republicanism meant very little change for the majority of Brazilians, particularly those living in peripheral areas such as the northeast.

Not surprisingly, Brazil experienced diverse challenges to the social order during the First Republic. These included the establishment of an antirepublican community at Belo Monte (later known as Canudos) in the state of Bahia in the 1890s; the Revolta da Chibata, a naval revolt against capital punishment in Rio de Janeiro in 1910; and the lieutenants’ revolt of 1922. Of all these events, none has captured the imagination of Brazilians more than Canudos, the community founded by the religious leader Antônio de Conselheiro (or simply the Conselheiro, or Counselor) that at its height had a population of 25,000. Canudos was religiously inspired, but it also provided a viable and dignified existence for many Brazilians marginalized by the nation’s neoliberal, coast-dominated society.

Over the last hundred years, Canudos and the personalities involved in its foundation and destruction have inspired historical monographs, novels, songs, plays, films, and even Brazilian soap operas. Two recent films, *Guerra de Canudos* (1997), a feature film, and *Passion and War in the Backlands of Canudos* (1993), a documentary, provide provocative though uneven historical recreations of the legendary Canudos. Both films attempt to place the events surrounding Canudos within their proper social and historical contexts. Both rely on important secondary and primary texts, although both also take artistic liberties to enhance the cinematic experience. The continuing influence of *Rebellion in the Backlands* (1902), the classic account written by military journalist Euclides da Cunha in the immediate aftermath of Canudos, is clear in both films. Da Cunha cast the republican campaign against Canudos squarely within a positivist framework, as a struggle of civilization and progress against barbarism and backwardness. At the same time, da Cunha provided a sympathetic, romanticized view of the populations of the northeast *sertão*, or dry lands, although he never quite understood the dynamics that gave rise to the social vision of the rebels. The films also benefit from more contemporary scholarship, such as Ataliba Nogueira’s *Antônio Conselheiro: Revisão Histórica, A Obra Manuscrita de Antônio Conselheiro e que pertenceu a Euclides da Cunha* (1974), and Robert Levine’s *Vale of Tears: Revisiting the Canudos Massacre in Northeastern Brazil, 1893–1897* (1992), as well as from oral histories such as those collected and preserved by José Calazans.

*Guerra de Canudos* tells the story of Canudos from the perspective of a poor *setaneja* family from the interior of Brazil. Like many of the rural poor, they have been economically and spiritually alienated by such policies of the newly established Republic as the imposition of taxes and by its anti-church rhetoric. The parents of the family (Zô Lucena and Penha) see hope in the preaching of the Conselheiro and decide to follow him with two of their children. The oldest daughter, Luiza, refuses to join them, fleeing instead to a life of ill repute before finally marrying a young soldier who takes part in the military campaign against Canudos.

The film follows the development of Canudos and

registers the reactions of various sectors of Brazilian society to Canudos and the growing community from 1893 to 1897. Director Sergio Rezende utilizes the fictionalized familial conflict between Luiza, who abhors the Conselheiro, and her family, who join Canudos, to expose the divisiveness of the events for the Brazilian nation. In epic fashion, the film succeeds in portraying the calm and determined disposition of the Conselheiro, the allegiance of his many followers, and the myopia, ineptitude, and brutality of the Brazilian army. Most of all, the film helps to dispel the myth that the Conselheiro and his followers were a gang of radical, politically motivated millennial fanatics. Although Canudos was envisioned as a New Jerusalem and its inhabitants, who lived lives of austerity, were prepared to defend themselves, they were hardly fanatics. They had gone into the wilderness to create a new society, free from the trappings of the republican world, but their existence challenged and threatened the so-called "march of civilization."

Misinformation about Canudos, combined with republican paranoia, fueled the many military campaigns. Many writers, da Cunha among them, marveled at the resiliency of Canudos and the residents' willingness to defend their community. Few have been able to place these facts within a larger context of life in the northeast. Rezende partly succeeds in this endeavor by providing visual images of life in the backlands and recreating its social dynamics. He bases his views on da Cunha's work, although he avoids many of the journalist's negative characterizations of the residents of Canudos. The Conselheiro is presented as a deeply religious mystic who opposed the republic because he believed that the state had become too intrusive in the spiritual and economic lives of Brazilians. The residents treat him with a mixture of awe and respect. Moreover, they choose to live in the community and resist state authorities because Canudos offers them a lifestyle virtually unattainable elsewhere in the northeast.

After four major military campaigns and a year of intermittent fighting from 1896–1897, Canudos finally succumbed to the Republican army (less than two weeks after the Conselheiro died of dysentery). More than 15,000 people died in the conflict, and many more were wounded. Many of the surrendering residents of Canudos were severely malnourished, because food supplies were severely restricted during the military campaign.

The main strengths of *Guerra de Canudos* are its believable portrayal of the *sertaneja* family, its emphasis on the naiveté and arrogance of the army, and its faithful reproduction of the roles of the officers, soldiers, journalists, and the other men and women who lived both inside and outside of Canudos. The recreation of the scenes inside Canudos during the military campaign, as well as the scenes among the military officers and their wives who camped on the town's outskirts, are well done and closely follow the historical accounts. Women played crucial roles in

Canudos, and many wives went to the battle front with their husbands. The film is not as faithful in the ethnic representations of the residents or survivors, however. The historical literature and photographs suggest that an overwhelming number of survivors were Afro-Brazilians, many ex-slaves and mixed-race people who were concentrated in the interior, a fact not reflected in the ethnic appearance of the actors.

*Passion and War in the Backlands of Canudos* is an innovative documentary, but it is not only about the republican campaign in Bahia. Instead, it begins as a biography of the Conselheiro, providing a number of perspectives about his personal and family life, tracing his pilgrimages through four major northeastern states (Ceará, Pernambuco, Sergipe, and Bahia) and ending with the war and subsequent destruction of the community. The film contains a number of beautifully executed musical performances about Canudos, including a *bumba-meu boi*, a northeastern folk song and dance about the Conselheiro that opens the work. Brazilians also perform a variety of contemporary songs about the Conselheiro, Canudos, and the war with passion and spontaneity. These compositions, combined with visual recollections (paintings and murals, for example), give the impression that Canudos has been deeply etched into the collective memory of the inhabitants of the northeast.

Through interviews with descendants of relatives of the Conselheiro, descendants of residents of Canudos, and descendants of military officers involved in the war, as well as with contemporary historians, the audience receives a multiplicity of views about the Conselheiro and Canudos, many of which are contradictory. The conflicting opinions about the historical events are often juxtaposed on contemporary or archival photographic images of the northeast, although many of the images of animals, water, and landscapes are not adequately integrated into the narrative. The list of interviewees are nonetheless impressive, and the narrative flows from one to the next with relative ease. Historians will be bothered by the lack of historical contextualization of the interviews, however. The informants are introduced with legends that bear the full names, age, and place of residence of each. We learn, for example, that the first informant, Pedro Gomes, is ninety-three years old and comes from the state of Ceará, the state where Antônio Conselheiro was born. Another interviewee, Maria Madelena, sixty-three years old, comes from Bahia. It is not made clear, however, why particular individuals have been chosen to give their opinions.

Josô Calazans, who began collecting oral testimonies in the 1940s, was able to preserve the views of many of the actual survivors of Canudos, but when this documentary was made none remained alive (although Antônio Olavo consulted Calazans). At the same time, the spirited and intimate testimony of so many relatives of survivors, coupled with that of scholars and other contemporary Brazilians, illustrates how important the legacy of Canudos is to Brazilians today.

The documentary succeeds in depicting the passion Brazilians continue to have about Canudos. In addition, Olavo provides images of important northeastern sites as well as historical documents that would otherwise be inaccessible to the general public. Unfortunately, the English version of the documentary requires some patience; many American students, for example, will have trouble following the narrator's pronunciation. (Curiously, the narrator of this documentary, José Wilker, is a well-respected actor in Brazil who also plays the character of Antônio Conselheiro in *Guerra de Canudos*.)

Canudos began as a religious movement of poor and landless people seeking not only to free themselves from republican authorities but to carve out a better spiritual and temporal existence for themselves. *Guerra de Canudos* reconstructs these dynamics, highlighting the fanaticism of the republic and its armies and the resilience of the residents. Despite the shortcomings of *Passion and War in the Backlands*, the innovative documentary offers an untraditional way of examining history. Both films warrant our attention.

DARIÉN J. DAVIS  
Middlebury College

TEA WITH MUSSOLINI. Produced by Federico Muller, Giovannella Zannoni, and Clive Parsons; directed by Franco Zeffirelli; screenplay by John Mortimer and Franco Zeffirelli. 1999; color; 117 minutes. Italy/U.K. English. Distributor: MGM/UA.

Benito Mussolini and Italian fascism continue to enjoy an enviable historical fate: the Italian dictator and his heterogenous mix of radical ideologies have benefitted from being in the dark shadow of Adolf Hitler and Nazism. Scholars and the public alike have universally agreed that Mussolini and his *squadristi* were not in the same league as Hitler and his diabolical SA and SS. Yet Italian fascism was a criminal regime, and its violence was a foretaste of what the Germans (and other Europeans) would experience later under the Nazis.

*Tea with Mussolini* is a charming film, but one whose charm is derived from the culture of nostalgia and childhood memories. It, too, glosses over the real nature of the fascist regime. Based on thin material scattered across several chapters in Franco Zeffirelli's autobiography (1986), the film concerns the intertwined fate of a young, illegitimate boy, Luca Innocenti (standing in for Zeffirelli), and an eccentric group of elderly English women, long-time residents in the British community in Florence. Called the *scorpioni* behind their backs because of their stinging wit, the women are obstinate, insufferably snobbish, and convinced that they are better custodians of fifteenth and sixteenth-century art than the Italians. They are also politically sheltered and naïve, convinced (as was much of the world) that Mussolini and fascism were just what those unruly and childish Italians needed to

make them behave and insure that the trains run on time.

The women's idyllic world is rudely interrupted (during tea, no less) when a fascist mob, outraged by British sanctions in the wake of the Ethiopian War (autumn 1935), storms Dorney's, an English establishment near the British consulate in via Tornabuoni. A similar scene is enacted in the sacred precinct of the Uffizi Galleries. Refusing to leave their beloved Florence, the women are eventually declared enemy aliens and arrested in 1940, passing the war in semi-splendid isolation in San Gimignano. Luca (played by Baird Wallace and Charlie Lucas) is caught between his unrequited love for his father and his admiration for the *scorpioni*. As bildungsroman, however, the film comes up short, for Luca's character is never fully developed, and the *scorpioni* steal every scene.

Luca is the bastard child of a clothing merchant and a fashionable dressmaker. Unable to take his father's patronym, he is named Innocenti (a reference to the foundlings left at the Ospedale degli Innocenti, but also the name of Zeffirelli's beloved wet-nurse). He may be innocent, but Luca is not very sympathetic. Here, Zeffirelli violates an honorable Italian cinematic tradition: from Bruno in *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) to Toto in *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), Italian film directors have shamelessly wrung our hearts with images of Italian children. In his autobiography, Zeffirelli is both less innocent and more worldly, but it is curious that an autobiographical film has a central character whose presence does not dominate.

Luca's father wishes the boy become the "perfect English gentleman" and therefore entrusts his care to Mary O'Neil (Joan Plowright), his secretary and one of the more benevolent and maternal of the *scorpioni*. O'Neil and her companions, Lady Hester Ransom (Maggie Smith) and Arabella (Judi Dench) are joined by Georgie, a dedicated American archeologist (Lily Tomlin) who makes no effort to hide either her lesbianism or her liberal politics, and Elsa (Cher), a former Ziegfeld Follies dancer who turns to avid art collecting as her elderly husbands die off. (Neither of the last two characters appears in the autobiography.)

The title derives from a visit that Lady Ransom pays to Mussolini. Concerned about the escalating anti-British violence in the streets of Florence, she capitalizes on her deceased husband's status as former ambassador to Italy to wrangle a meeting with Il Duce. Accompanied by an intelligent and attractive correspondent for an English newspaper, she is granted the interview, and Mussolini personally guarantees her safety. In a fine gesture, Il Duce has tea brought in at four o'clock, and the women are charmed. Lady Ransom is completely won over. Speaking of Ethiopia, she asks rhetorically: "Why shouldn't Mussolini have an empire? All the best people have an empire." She insists, too, that the antifascist partisans are "terrorists." Gender theorists might ponder the symbolism of Lady Ransom's grandson, who must dress in drag to avoid deportation to a POW camp, but who finally