Turning Cannibalism inside out: Re-Reading the Chronicles in "Como Era Gostoso O Meu Francês"

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TURNING CANNIBALISM INSIDE OUT: RE-READING THE CHRONICLES IN COMO ERA GOSTOSO O MEU FRANCÊS

Nina Gerassi-Navarro

The opening scene of the Brazilian film Como era gostoso o meu francês [How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman, 1971] directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, begins with an announcement: “Latest news from Terra Firme,” suggesting that we are about to witness a tragic event; and to the extent that Terra Firme was one of the colonial names of Brazil, it might also indicate that this story of the colonial past has implications for the present. What follows is the reading of a letter sent to the Protestant reformer John Calvin, by the French Protestant Nicolas Durand de Villegaignon who led an expedition to Brazil, in the Guanabara Bay region, between 1555 and 1559.1 The letter, dated March 1557, describes how Villegaignon learned of a conspiracy against his life and how he imprisoned the four principal instigators: “The next day we released one of them from his chains, so that he might plead his case in greater liberty; but breaking into a run, he threw himself into the sea, and drowned.” The verbal account however, is undermined by the visual images that portray a completely different event. Rather than seeing the soldier escaping and drowning, we are shown the man captured while enjoying a meal with native women. He is subsequently chained, blessed by a priest and thrown into the sea from a cliff, all actions portrayed with jubilant orchestral music.

Both texts, the visual and the oral, are referring to the exact same event. As spectators we must draw our own conclusions. On the one hand, this first scene is parodic, and clearly sets out to ridicule and undermine the carefully selected “documented” materials that the film includes. It is impossible not to feel at odds with the contradictions embedded in what we are presented. At the same time the film reproduces and affirms its historical anchor in the documents, letters and illustrations of the colonial period. Hence, from the beginning of the film we are confronted with an “official” version of conquest and the existence of other silenced “versions.” The tension between narratives and understandings of events will be even more apparent once we enter the world of the cannibal. By constantly superimposing a multiplicity of discourses embedded within a “historical” reconstruction, the film succeeds in revealing and questioning the power relations implicit in the act of narrating from a literary point of view as well as from a cinematographic one. Furthermore, as the film disentangles the power relations of the narration, gender becomes instrumental in displaying cultural differences. At first, gender roles appear to transcend the European and Indigenous worldviews. But as the film progresses, this commonality begins to fade.

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exposing the cultural assumptions embedded in the European narratives. Hence, by 
offering a 
gendered reading of this film and unraveling its narrative contradictions, the purpose of this essay 
is to shed light on the ways in which Como era gostoso o meu francês questions the construction 
of Brazilian identity and the past it has embraced.

Man-eating creatures belong to a long emblematic tradition of myths, legends, and fantasies 
demarcating the frontier between civilization and the land of barbarians. Homer, Herodotus, 
Aristotle, Ptolemy, Saint Augustine, Isidore of Seville, Marco Polo, John Mandeville, and Pierre 
d'Ailly are only a few of those who have offered detailed descriptions of human otherness 
throughout the centuries. Among those monstrous beings the anthropophagi were the hallmark 
of the ultimate barbarian, humans so disturbingly foreign they were almost inhuman. Christopher 
Columbus was well acquainted with the images of exotic beings that lay beyond the charted 
territories. Thus, when he set sail across the Atlantic in search of a new route to the Indies he 
expected to encounter some form of human otherness.

Although Columbus never saw these monstrous beings, in the chronicle of his first voyage 
summarized and edited by Bartolomé de las Casas he affirms their existence based on his precarious 
understanding of the Taino. On 4 November the entry reads:

[El almirante] entendió también que leyes de allí avía hombres de un ojo
Y otros con hoçicos de perros que comían los hombres, y que en tomando uno lo
degollaban y le bevían la sangre y le cortavan su natura. (Varela 51)

[The Admiral understood that far from there one could find men with one
eye and others with the dogs' heads who ate men and that on capturing them they
decapitated them, drank their blood, and cut off their sex organs.]

Columbus refers to the Carib Indians as canibales (23 November), canimas (26 November), and 
caribes (26 December). He is convinced these enemies of the Taino are ferocious man-eating 
creatures, and soon the words cannibal and Carib are synonymous. The Caribs become the 
cannibals of the New World. From then on, and despite lack of first hand evidence, Europeans 
will build the myth of cannibals. The absence of actual anthropophagi (which in Columbus's 
text is substituted discursively with the distorted term canibales) is what enables the myth of the

3For an illustrated collection of the variety of monsters that represented the dangerous beings 
of otherness, see Miguel Rojas Mix, América imaginaria (Madrid: Lumen, 1992).

3Columbus does so for the first time in his first voyage on 23 November. “Y sobre este cabo 
encavalga otra tierra o cabo que va también al Leste, a quien aquellos indios que llevava lla-
mavan Bohio, la cual dezían que era muy grande y que avía en ella gente que tenia un ojo en la
frente, y otros que se llamavan canibales, a quien mostravan tener grn miedo.” [And above this
cape there is another land that my indians called Bohio. They said it was very large, and therein
one could find men with one eye on their forehead, and others called cannibals, whom they
feared very much.] Cristóbal Colón. Textos y documentos completos, ed. Consuelo Varela (Ma-
drid: Alianza, 1982), 62. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

4For two excellent studies on the history between the Caribs and Europeans see: Philip P. 
Boucher, Cannibal Encounters: European and Island Caribs 1492-1763 (Baltimore: Johns Hop-
kins University Press, 1992); and Peter Hulme, Colonial Encounters: Europe and The Native 
cannibal to take preeminence. Hence, as Michael Palencia-Roth tellingly states: “The history of the presence of cannibals in the New World begins with the discovery of their absence.”

In his book The Man-Eating Myth, William Arens disputes the extent to which certain accepted “facts” about anthropophagi can actually be accepted as such. Cannibalism, he claims, is a myth used to enslave or oppress a hostile “other.” Despite Arens’s provocative argument, the idea that cannibalism was in fact practiced in the New World remains still today relatively unquestioned.

Among the people who practiced cannibalism when the Europeans arrived, Brazil offers the greatest variety among its Tupi inhabitants. The first chronicler to bestow upon Brazil a cannibalistic identity was the German explorer Hans Staden. Seeking adventure and riches, Staden embarked on a number of trips that would take him across the Atlantic. It was during his second trip, in 1549, when he was headed for Peru and its recently discovered riches that a severe storm practically shipwrecked Staden off the coast of Brazil. The Portuguese who were building a fort against the “savages” hired Staden as an artillery soldier. Soon after, the Tupinambá captured him. Staden lived among his captors for nine months until a French ship rescued him. His narrative was published in Germany, in 1557. Of the fifty-five chapters that comprise his text, thirty-five are on his frightening ordeal among the Tupinambá accompanied by eleven illustrations, most of them portraying their cannibalistic rituals.

Under the generic name of Tupinambá, the Tupi were the largest group who spoke the Tupian language. These groups, which included the Potiguara, Caeté, Tupinambá, and Tupiniquin, occupied a vast territory that extended from the lower Amazon down to Paraguay as well as from the mouth of the Amazon River to that of the River Plate along the Atlantic coast. But according to the documentation provided by numerous sixteenth-century chronicles, it was mainly in Brazil where the cannibals were located. Hence, in many of the early maps Brazil stands out with the inscription of the cannibal engraved upon its territory, as if it were its signature identity. The legacy of the Tupi continues as the word “Tupiniquin” (or Tupiniquim in Portuguese), originally the name of one of the Tupi groups, today stands as a synonym for a Brazilian. In the twentieth

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7Warfare among these groups was constant. Furthermore, these people had at different times different alliances with the Europeans. For example, in the area of Bahía the Tupinambá traded with the French and considered the Portuguese their enemies, while the Tupiniquin traded with the Portuguese and fought the French. However, further south other groups of Tupiniquin traded with the French and considered the Portuguese their enemies. See Florestan Fernandes's, A organização social dos Tupinambá (São Paulo: Instituto Progreso Editorial, 1949), 16-17.

8In addition to the chroniclers mentioned in this essay, the Tupinambá were observed by other chroniclers such as Joseph de Anchieta, Pero Vaz de Caminha, Fernão Cardim, Manoel da Nóbrega, and Gabriel Soares de Souza.

century Brazilians would go back to this powerful image that so forcefully marked their past identity, reinventing and appropriating it to explore and address contemporary issues that corroded their society.

Roberto Fernández Retamar’s analysis and critique of the carib/cannibal image is perhaps the most well known outside Latin America. But long before Retamar’s seminal essay, Brazilian writers had begun to dismantle the ideological connotations embedded in that image. Oswald de Andrade’s *Movimento Antropófago* or Cannibalist Movement of the modernist period (1922-1930) was the first step toward reappropriating the symbolism of the cannibal. Working with the concept of ingestion, Andrade’s literary movement advocated the creation of a genuine national culture through the consumption and critical reexamination of both national and foreign influences. Import influences were to be digested and reworked until they blended within Brazilian culture and could no longer be distinguished as separate. The purpose was to parody the European trope of America as “The Land of Cannibals” and use it instead to “devour” the techniques and influences originated in developed countries. This would be the basis of raw material for a future synthesis of cultural influences. “Tupi, or not Tupy that is the question” is perhaps the most famous aphorism of the Cannibalist Manifesto that illustrates the synthesis and humor with which Andrade transforms the noble savage into a bad one, who devours and assimilates the European—and is therefore feared and dangerous—thus inverting the traditional relationship between colonizer and colonized.

The Cannibalist Movement continued the dichotomy between barbarism and civilization that had so tellingly marked Latin American culture during the nineteenth century as it was emblematically articulated by the Argentine writer and educator Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. But unlike Sarmiento who feared the vast “uncivilized” territory of Argentina for its lack of modernization and overwhelming backward population, the members of the Cannibalist Movement sought to redefine these two concepts on their own terms. Rather than seek to open up one’s territorial frontier to the European civilization in order to ensure progress as Sarmiento and Juan Bautista Alberdi among other Argentine intellectuals had advocated during the nineteenth century, the members of the Brazilian Cannibalist Movement considered the primitive to be the more pure and innocent cultural element. Barbarism in turn was identified with the corruption European modernization had imposed upon Brazilian culture. In this sense, Andrade advocated the return to a mythical past, an age of innocence that lay within the indigenous cultures of Brazil, to reclaim Brazilian identity.

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12In his manifesto, published May 1, 1928, in the *Revista de antropofagia*, Andrade reworks revolutionary concepts taken from Marx, the idea of primitiveness in the civilized man set forth by Freud and Breton, and a revision of the terms “barbaric” and “primitive discussed by Montaigne and Rousseau.

13Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: civilización o barbarie* 1845 (Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe, 1994).
In the 1960’s the use of the cannibal metaphor resurfaced with the Brazilian Cinema Novo.\textsuperscript{14} This movement challenged not only the mainstream mechanisms of cinematic practice, but also more importantly it set out to promote a political and aesthetic agenda that questioned the terms and images used to construct national identities.\textsuperscript{15} Cinema Novo arose during a period of traumatic social change. In 1964 a military coup deposed Joào Goulart’s government. Four years later another military uprising followed. The 1968 coup installed a hard line military government that spread repression, censorship and torture. In the late 1950’s a group of filmmakers such as Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, Glauber Rocha, Carlos Diegues, and Nelson Pereira dos Santos began focusing on national themes and problems. Their goal was in part to rewrite the history of Brazil and question their national characteristics through film. With the repression of the 1968 military coup, Cinema Novo entered its “cannibal-tropicalist” phase (Johnson and Stam, 37). The directors began using allegorical metaphors to continue their ideological quest and to resist censorship. This is where \textit{Como era gostoso o meu francês} fits in.

Considered the ideological “Pope” of Cinema Novo, Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s films exemplify the birth and evolution of the movement.\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Rio 40 graus} [Rio 40 Degrees, 1955], \textit{Vidas secas} [Barren Lives, 1963], \textit{Fome de amor} [Hunger for Love, 1968] and \textit{Como era gostoso o meu francês} are some of Pereira dos Santos’s works that cover the span of this movement. Strongly influenced by the Italian neo-realists and the French New Wave, the young filmmakers of Cinema Novo set out to portray Brazil from a different perspective, absent in Brazilian commercial films. They created a distinct style that combined their social concerns with a production strategy that articulated their revolutionary aesthetic. They focused on slum dwellers of the \textit{favelas} in Rio de Janeiro, the hardships of the Northeasterners, particularly in the backlands of the \textit{sertão} with its social bandits, \textit{cangaceiros} and messianic figures. These directors sought to undermine Hollywood films and aesthetics that reinforced foreign colonization of Brazil. Using non-actors and shooting on location, their goal was to visually expose Brazil’s violent and anguish reality. Drawing on the concept of ingestion previously set forth by Andrade, Glauber Rocha termed the revolutionary guiding spirit of the movement “An Aesthetic of Hunger.” According to Rocha:

\begin{quote}
The Brazilian does not eat, but he is ashamed to say so; and yet, he does not know where this hunger comes from. We know—since we made these sad, ugly films, these screaming, desperate films where reason does not always prevail—that this hunger will not be cured by moderate governmental reforms and that the cloak of Technicolor cannot hide, but only aggravates, its tumors. There-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14}Randal Johnson and Robert Stam eds., \textit{Brazilian Cinema} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 82.


\textsuperscript{16}Randal Johnson, “Toward a Popular Cinema: An Interview with Nelson Pereira dos Santos.” \textit{Studies in Latin American Popular Culture} s.n. (1982): 225-38. It is also interesting to note that despite Johnson’s affirmation, in May 1962 Carlos Diegues published one of the first formulations of the basic project of Cinema Novo in \textit{Movimentos}, 2, in which he stated that Cinema Novo did not have any manifesto nor were there any popes or idols. See Carlos Diegues’s, “Cinema Novo,” in \textit{Brazilian Cinema}, 65-67.
fore, only a culture of hunger, weakening its own structures, can surpass itself qualitatively; the most noble cultural manifestations of hunger is violence.\(^1\)

Hunger, a recurrent theme for these filmmakers, is articulated as a double-sided metaphor. The first image that appears reflects the passivity embodied in being hungry, exposing the absence of food, work, and, for the directors of Cinema Novo, a lack of true Brazilian culture. But this lifeless state unfolds into a desire to have, a hunger that brings about action. This second movement triggers a different kind of hunger, a hunger for violence, a dynamic desire to ingest, appropriate, and consequently create. The transformation Rocha formulates presents ingestion as the process of giving birth to a subversive act, which defies the limits imposed by privation. In this context cannibalism becomes a form of empowerment.

Another level of the hunger metaphor, perhaps not so obvious to the filmmakers themselves, is the role gender plays in its articulation. The fear of ingestion is particularly severe because it is an emasculating process. Not only is cannibalism an act of savagery but from the European standpoint the danger also lies in its defiance of hierarchy; the individual as well as his culture (and it is his culture) is completely stripped of power. The colonial chronicles portray women as active participants in the cannibalistic ritual; they surround the captive and erase him before the final blow that will kill him, and they too consume his body. Because the ingestion and appropriation is not only physical but also symbolic, women’s participation transforms the cannibal act into a deadly act of castration.

In Como era gostoso o meu francês, Pereira dos Santos used the cannibalist trope to illustrate how the alienation and destruction of Brazilian life were directly linked to the idea of economic progress and modernization generated by foreign projects. The film is also an attack on the flawed developmentalist strategies of presidents Juselino Kubitschek (1956-1961), Jânio Quadros (1960-61), and João Goulart (1961-1964), as well as on the military coup of March 1964 for opening Brazil to the foreign markets as a form of modernization. Focusing on the first years of the colonial period, the film is a carefully crafted cannibalist critique of European colonialism.

It visualizes the battle between cultures through a constant struggle for narrative control. Filmed in the beautiful colonial village of Paraty, South of Rio de Janeiro, it is the story of a French Huguenot who is captured and sentenced to death by a tribe of Tupinambá Indians. In accordance with the tribal custom however, he is allowed to participate as a member of the tribe for eight months, during which he is given a wife, learns to hunt and fight against other tribes and even participates in the Tupinambá religious ceremonies. It is this unique gaze that the European captive has into the culture of the “other” that allows the filmmaker to redefine the stereotyped images of Brazil’s past, and critique in both a historical and humorous way Brazil’s “official” history.

The particular sub-genre of this type of European discovery narrative—that of the narrator turned captive—has a considerable tradition in colonial literature.\(^2\) Although Staden’s text is

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\(^2\) Hans Staden, Hans Staden: The True History of his Captivity 1557, trans. Malcolm Letts (New York: McBride and Company, 1929). Staden’s text has been the inspiration of contemporary texts such as El entenado by the Argentine writer Juan José Saer (Buenos Aires: Folios Ediciones, 1983). In this case, the narrator, a young orphan, lives among indigenous cannibals.
considered the first to inaugurate this autobiographical form, the Spanish explorer Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca published his *Naufragios* three years prior, in 1554. His narrative reconstructs his walk across the continent, from La Florida to the coast of California all the way down to Mexico City, recounting the events of his captivity from 1527 to 1537. Unlike Staden who portrays himself primarily as a witness and unjust captive, Cabeza de Vaca portrays himself in a variety of ways: sometimes as prisoner and slave, other times as healer and merchant, and finally when he returns to the Spanish as a spiritual conqueror. What Staden and Cabeza de Vaca share is the ability to turn the position of the captive into that of conqueror. Despite having been “temporarily” stripped of their European identity and lost all their powers as such, the subjects of these narratives present themselves as “extra-ordinary” individuals who have gained a unique insight into the dangerous culture of the “other.” Their stories seek to construct their experience as a privileged one by offering indispensable information for future conquests. They have learned the customs and languages of these other cultures and can therefore provide important data on them. Thus, in his preem dedicated to his Majesty, Carlos V, Cabeza de Vaca states:

[No me quedó lugar para hacer mas servicio deste, que es traer a Vuestra Magestad relación de lo que en diez años que por muchas y muy extrañas tierras que anduve perdido y en cueros, pudiese saber y ver, así en el sitio de las tierras y provincias y distancias dellas como en los mantenimientos y animales que en ellas se crian y las diversas costumbres de muchas y muy bárbaras naciones con quien conversé y vivi...]

[I hope in some measure to convey to Your Majesty not merely a report of positions and distances, flora and fauna, but of the customs of the numerous, barbarous people I talked with and dwelt among, as well as any other matters I could hear of or observe.]

At least in Cabeza de Vaca’s case, the position of captive was legitimated to the extent that he was awarded prebends, the official recognition of the Spanish Crown endowing its subjects with properties in the New World. And although little is known about Staden after his trip, his book was successful enough to warrant three consecutive editions the year it was published.

Cabeza de Vaca’s and Staden’s narratives manifest the powerful role of the subject who is capable of inverting his position of defeat into one of triumph. In other words, the captivity texts highlight the power of the narrator, because it is precisely in the way the story/adventure is told that the lack of riches or territorial conquests is substituted by the narrative. The lack of proof, except for the amazing survival of the narrator, is what grants the telling of the ordeal to take center stage. And it is no wonder that these narratives fascinated readers. Intertwining history (the

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chronicling of the customs and ways of life of indigenous inhabitants) and fiction (the adventure story and survival of the narrator), these captivity narratives sought to visualize in an entertaining way the dangers of the unknown territory of the New World and, more importantly, create a hero of the desperate survivor.\footnote{This reversal of positions (from survivor to conqueror) is exemplified in the film \textit{Cabeza de Vaca} (1988) directed by Nicolás Echevarria. Here Cabeza de Vaca is not only a hero for having survived his ordeal but more importantly he becomes a messiah, healing the Indians and liberating them from evil forces as he introduces them to Catholicism.} They succeed because the subject carefully crafts his narrative. Everything is filtered through his eyes. In much the same way as in any autobiographical texts, as readers or viewers, we are positioned as witnesses who share the hero’s fears and adventures. Thus, his triumphs become to a certain extent our own.

In \textit{Como era gostoso o meu francês} Pereira dos Santos purposefully breaks the alignment between subject and audience as he brilliantly exposes the contrivances of the narrating act. His film plays with the layered readings of how cannibalism has been interpreted throughout the centuries. The camera constantly alternates between different omniscient perspectives as well as the captive’s and the Tupinamba’s point of view, completely destabilizing the narrative. The audience constantly has to reaccommodate its gaze as the film progresses. This movement enables the film to stress and expand the space between the “documented” acts and their explanations, while exposing the falseness of the “official history.”

Historically, there were often many dissenting “official” versions. Villegaignon’s expedition, which is at the onset of the film, is a clear example of the implicit political and religious confrontations that took place as new territories were explored and conquered by Europeans. Although Villegaignon was Catholic he acquired financial support from Catholic as well as Protestant leaders. The Cardinal of Lorraine, leader of the Catholic clergy in France, and Gaspard de Coligny, a Hugenot sympathizer and a future Protestant leader, both contributed to Villegaignon’s expedition. Ultimately, his mission failed and by 1560 the colony he established in Brazil was taken over by the Portuguese. Among those traveling with Villegaignon was a Franciscan friar, André Thevet, who remained in Brazil for only ten weeks. Upon his return to France he published \textit{Singularités de la France antarctique} (1556), a book that popularized the figure of the Brazilian Indian. In 1575, prompted by the Wars of Religion (1562-1598) that were ravaging France, he published \textit{Cosmographie universelle}. This text repeated much of the material from his \textit{Singularités}, but it also included an accusation of the Calvinist ministers for the wreck of the Villegaignon colony.

Shortly after Thevet left Brazil, a representative of Calvin’s church in Geneva, Jean de Léry, joined Villegaignon’s expedition. Léry returned to Europe in 1558 to resume his studies and a few years later wrote a report of his trip. The report was subsequently lost, rewritten, and lost again until 1576 when the original version was recovered. The chronicle, \textit{Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil}, was eventually published in 1578. Léry’s motive for publishing his \textit{History} after so long is stated in his preface:

\begin{quote}
[L.]isant la Cosmographie de Thevet, j’ay veu que il n’a pas seulement renouvelé & augmenté ses premiers erreurs, mais qui plus est...sans autre occasion, que l’enuie qu’il a eue de medire & detracter des Ministres, & par c’oseuent de ceux qui en l’an 1556 les accompagnèrent pour aller trouver Villegaignon en la terre du Bresil, dont n’estoys du nombre, avec des digressions fausses, piquantes, & inu
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
... nous a imposé des crimes: à fin di-e de repousser ces impostures de...
\end{quote}
Thevet, i’ay esté com me contraint de mettre en lumiere tout le discours de nostre voyage.  

[Reading Thevet’s *Cosmography*, I saw that he has not only revived and augmented his early error, but what is more . . . with no other pretext than the desire to backbite and, with false, stinging, and abusive digressions, to slander the ministers and those—of whom I was one—who in 1556 accompanied them to go join Ville-gaignon in Brazil, he has imputed to us crimes. Therefore, in order to refute these falsehoods of Thevet, I have been compelled to set forth a complete report of our voyage.]  

More than just the need to set the record straight, as Janet Whatley notes, Léry’s text reveals the process by which Protestants began staking out against Catholics “their ground of moral and intellectual influence over the experience of discovery and expansion of the New World.” In his account, Léry presents himself as a faithful witness who simply documents the landscape and resources of the Tupi as well as the “customs and strange ways of life of the American Savages.” Although he was not a captive, Léry’s text reproduces almost verbatim parts of Staden’s written account describing the cannibalist ritual. But his portrayal of the Tupinamba is far more complex than Staden’s. They are human beings who elicit his respect and admiration as well as his disgust and fear. Léry corroborates his descriptions by repeatedly offering examples that add veracity to his narrative and engage his readers. For example when describing how the enemy reacts when taken prisoner he asks the reader: “Do you think that he bows his head, as our criminals over here would do?” (122). He then proceeds to describe in full detail what the Indians do to their prisoners with other examples: “Although these barbarian nations have great fear of natural death, nonetheless such prisoners consider themselves fortunate to die this publicly, in the midst of their enemies, and are utterly untroubled. In demonstration of this I will cite an example” (125). Léry’s text is interspersed with dialogues, comments, reflections, comparisons between America and Europe, and anecdotes that expose his unique access to and understanding of this “other” culture that turn his chronicle into a fascinating tale.

Despite their noticeable differences, authors like Staden, Cabeza de Vaca, and Léry, among others share an obsession with boundaries. Their descriptions of the New World are implicitly addressing the boundaries between conquerors and conquered, civilized and uncivilized, Protestants and Catholics. Cannibalism identified the barbarian, the one positioned outside civilization. But as Europeans found themselves immersed in religious wars, the cannibal became a figure that moved beyond the New World. The tortures and slaughters that occurred during the violent religious wars in France, for example, in particular during the siege and famine of Sancerre or the Massacre of St. Bartholomew (1572), where Frenchmen were seen roasting other Frenchmen’s hearts, were also signs of barbarism. So as European cultural and religious boundaries became more and more unstable, authors like Léry and Michel de Montaigne used the portrait of the

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cannibal to elaborate a critique of their own culture to stake out their position.25 Thus even in the sixteenth century, for some authors the figure of the cannibal became a metaphor to expose the dark side of civilization, even if it was one's own.

Pereira dos Santos’s film goes beyond relativizing the figure of the cannibal. He presents a collage of voices, interspersed with quoted extracts from the rich colonial legacy of documents, letters, diaries, illustrations, that are used not only as ironic historical counterpoints to the events depicted, but go beyond circumstantially de-stabilizing the audience’s view to question the veracity of the reconstruction itself.26 The awkward eye of the camera that refuses to align itself with the narrating voice underscores this. The result is a constant displacement of the spectator’s place while simultaneously questioning the concept of the hero who is nevertheless implicitly telling the story. The Frenchman is first captured by a group of Tupinambá and Portuguese. But soon after Tupinambá overtakes them. The Tupinambá (who are French allies) think the Frenchman is Portuguese because he was captured with other Portuguese. When interrogated the Portuguese recite cooking recipes, jokingly reinforcing their stereotyped image of gluttons for contemporary Brazilians. In Staden’s text the author insists he is not Portuguese, but he is not believed. The Tupi take him to a French trader to corroborate his nationality. Staden states that he could not understand the Frenchman, but he felt happy because the Frenchman was Christian and he would “speak well.” Nevertheless, the Frenchman tells the Tupi to “kill him and devour him, the wretched is truly Portuguese, your enemy and mine” (91). In the film the captive is also taken to a French merchant who claims his compatriot is in fact Portuguese. The French merchant betrays his own countryman for fear that his commercial exchanges with the Tupinambá might be severed. The inability to determine the Frenchman’s nationality is underscored by a series of staccato-like camera movements, quick zooms and a play-in-reverse sound track. The link between this constant narrative displacement and the issue of betrayal is the most significant aspect of the film critics have analyzed.

What critical readings of this film have not focused on is the subversion that takes place through the relationship between the French Huguenot and his Tupinambá wife. Unlike the model that has been traditionally assigned to women like the Malinche “la madre de la chingada,” blamed for enabling the Europeans to gain access to and conquer the “other” culture through her, the woman in this film refuses to give in. At first, Sebiopepe is dedicated to pampering the Frenchman and they seem to become a couple. But when both worlds collide, Sebiopepe makes sure her Frenchman is unable to move outside her realm. Her actions are proof that she refuses to cross the cultural barrier and unite with the white man. She is sure of her identity and will not give in. When it is time for the cannibalist ritual to take place, she does not shed a tear, nor doubt what to do; in fact she appears to look forward to the event as she cautiously instructs him what to do. At this moment she ceases to be a woman and becomes, in the eyes of the captive, a dangerous savage. Consequently, her resistance is not only personal but cultural as well.

The first scenes of the Frenchman as a captive highlight his separation and distance from the Tupinambá. He is blond, very white, bearded and partially clothed. Upon his arrival, he is taunted
