

Ganga Bruta (1933)

Ana M. López

dir. Humberto Mauro; prod. Adhemar Gonzaga; screenplay Humberto Mauro, based on an idea by Octavio Gabus Mendes; photography Edgar Brasil; music Hacket Tavares and Radamés Gnattali. 35mm, black/white, 82 mins. Cinédia, distrib. Cinédia.

Described by George Sadoul as »a landmark of Brazilian cinema« (123), *Ganga Bruta* deeply impressed the future directors of Cinema Novo when they saw it at a 1961 retrospective. Glauber Rocha, the best-known Cinema Novo director, celebrated the film as one of the best twenty films of all times and as a precursor of what the nascent movement was trying to accomplish. Yet, at the time of its release, *Ganga Bruta* was a box office failure and a disappointment for critics: Audiences were already used to imported »talkies« and the film's sound on disk with sparse dialogue did not resonate (Schwarzman). It was a huge setback for producer Adhemar Gonzaga, owner of the Cinédia studios, who was intent on proving that cinema that speaks Portuguese would be commercially successful in the pages of the well-known film magazine *Cinearte*. The film's failure almost derailed Humberto Mauro's directorial career, but Cinédia's subsequent musical films, closely linked to carnival and to urban popular music (and the impact of radio), would indeed prove Gonzaga right. The historical conjuncture of *Ganga Bruta*'s release was marked by profound uncertainty and change in media production and use: The early 1930s were interim years between the almost artisanal silent cinema era and the institutionalization of sound cinema as an industrial practice; at the same time as the emergence of sound cinema, radio, recording, and the discographic industries were growing as well (López). Neither Mauro nor Brazilian cinema had yet identified a route to commercial success in 1933.

Mauro had had a successful stint in silent films in his home state of Minas Gerais and had moved to Rio de Janeiro to work at Cinédia (which had new modern facilities). He went on to direct six more feature films after *Ganga Bruta* and more than 200 short and mid-length documentaries when he went to work at the National Institute of Educational Cinema, INCE (inaugurated in 1936). He eventually became a sort of »film laureate of Brazilian culture« until his death in 1983 (Rist).



Ganga Bruta is, above all, a family melodrama. The film begins with an upper class wedding and Marcos' (played by Durval Bellini) fatal shooting of his bride (played by Lu Marival) in their luxurious honeymoon suite upon discovering her alleged infidelity (that is, the fact that she is not a »virgin«). After being acquitted in the capital (with much press coverage) because of a law that allowed men to protect their »honor,« Marcos arranges for a high-ranking job in the countryside overseeing the construction of a mining plant. There, he is hosted by a middle manager at the plant, Décio (played by Décio Murillo), and moves into the company's large compound with him (and his wheelchair-bound mother and her beautiful, adopted daughter, Sônia [played by Déa Selva], who is also Décio's girlfriend). Marcos becomes infatuated with Sônia who instigates a romance and is very responsive to his romantic approaches. Eventually, after their relationship is disclosed, he accidentally causes Décio's death in a waterfall during a fight and marries Sônia, following the double funeral of Décio and his mother.

This plot summary is the stuff of most classic family melodramas of the early 20th century. Yet Mauro's film is surprising in its execution of this basic melodramatic plot. Beyond the over-the-top explicit representation of the film's melodramatic events, especially the bride's murder and Sônia's very sexually explicit attempts to seduce Marcos, Mauro uses the melodramatic mode to organize the film's stylistic heterogeneity. Take for example the very beginning of the film in which we only know what we know through dramatic close-ups of a luminous bride's face, a ring on a finger, gruesome shots of the »other« man, and the sound of shots when the bride is murdered. Similarly, the aftermath, shot in a super realist documentary-like style in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, the faces of newsboys hawking papers, the sounds of cars and trolleys (the sounds of modernity) and Marcos, on a trolley reading the headlines about himself. Above all, most of the film's key moments are presented via close-ups that would be disorienting were it not for their melodramatic force.

This formal heterogeneity does not undermine the melodramatic mode of the film; indeed, I would argue it heightens it. So much in *Ganga Bruta* depends on the spectator making narrative connections, deciphering, and anticipating the next steps as the plot unfolds. Without the melodramatic thread that Mauro keeps alive through his and Edgar Brasil's superbly poetic and extremely sensual cinematography, the film would not cohere. Their images are suffused with *chiaroscuros* and are romantic when the camera focuses on Sônia's almost innocent playful sexuality, dramatically expressionist when framing the construction site (machinery, sharp angles, nameless laborers at work, juxtaposed against the rolling hills of the landscape and the bucolic ways of country life), or almost like a neorealist rendition of a John Ford Western when depicting Marcos' visit and subsequent brawl at the local tavern, drunk over his remorseful attraction to Sônia.

Thematically the film follows a conservative social impulse that favors the patriarchal elite (rather than the working class). After all, Marcos does escape punishment after the femicide, has extraordinary physical strength, the will power, and professional savvy to build and manage a mining plant in the countryside, and manages to get the beautiful girl at the end even though he caused the death of her boyfriend. This is in fact, what the film's title alludes to: The »ganga« in the title refers to gangue, the waste materials of mining processes. The title of the film leads us to read Marcos, the protagonist, as the valuable ore that results from processes that also generate human discards (the first wife, Décio), certainly the profile of the type of man socially valorized at

the time (Schroeder Rodríguez). Although thematically the film seems to fully support a heteronormative conservative social position, its stylistic heterogeneity undermines that »message« at every turn and underlines the director's ironic perspective on the narrative. For example, the tavern brawl in which Marcos demonstrates his physical prowess and which is filmed like a saloon fight in a western proves his alleged superiority, but in a subsequent tavern sequence, he proceeds to misuse that power by demeaning the tavern's customers and making them do circus tricks upon demand. Similarly, Mauro focuses on and prolongs images that capture details of the *mise-en-scène* (leaves, shadows) or of Sônia's languid poses, laying on a hammock or on the grass, distending the »simple« narrative and establishing a cinematic grammar to manage and guide the spectator's emotions.

It is also important to note the shift in the film's narrative from Rio de Janeiro, the modern capital, represented by luxurious garments and mansions, a tuxedoed butler, and all the accoutrements of modernity (fast trolleys, traffic, newsboys), to a town in the countryside. Mauro shows us the *mise-en-scène* of modernity common in other early sound films but leaves it aside for the beauty of the rural landscape and its lush tropical plants, birds, and waterfalls. When Marcos must leave the city, the countryside still offers him hope, the opportunity to engage in what still could be. As the modern construction site—filmed in long shots that amplify its massive hulk—appears to put the human figure in its place, so does the waterfall—a site of beauty and tragedy—in which Décio meets his death. It is doubly ironic, of course, that the film ends almost exactly where it began: with a wedding and a death, only now in reverse order.

Mauro's *Ganga Bruta* points to stylistic directions that were not resurrected in Brazilian cinema until the Cinema Novo decades later. As Glauber Rocha (qtd. in Mauro 20; my translation) put it: »I can't stop thinking about *Ganga Bruta* [...] Mauro is not a poet of words, but a poet of images. [His] poetics completely annuls the primacy of literature, not by overcoming it with ingenuity but by destroying it in a universe created by the visual rhythm.«

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