The Country Bleeds with a Laugh: Social Criticism Meets Horror Genre in José Mojica Marins’s “At Midnight I’ll Take Your Soul (1963)”

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Transnational Horror Across Visual Media
Fragmented Bodies

Edited by Dana Och and Kirsten Strayer
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Social Criticism Meets Horror
Genre in José Mojica Marins’s
À Meia-Noite Levarei Sua Alma

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On November 9, 1964, À Meia-Noite Levarei Sua Alma (At Midnight I’ll Take Your Soul) premiered in São Paulo at the Cine Art-Palácio. Costing less than $6,000 to make, the low-budget movie was the result of José Mojica Marins’s long-lasting ambition: to craft the first truly Brazilian horror movie. To finance his project, the twenty-seven-year-old filmmaker collected donations from friends and family, employed unknown actors, used his own clothes as props, and doubled as protagonist and director. A labor of love as much as a familial enterprise, At Midnight became the most controversial DIY horror film produced in Brazil.

Focused on Coffin Joe, a small-town gravedigger by day and a philosophical murderer by night, the loosely scripted movie follows Joe’s struggle against the strictures of small-minded rurality. Claustrophobically entrapped by his barren surroundings as by his existential doubts, Joe is spurred by a eugenic enterprise: to engineer an offspring that will mirror his superior intellect. So begins Joe’s quest for the ideal Madonna who will carry his descendant. However, Joe’s path to reproduction is riddled with the mutilated corpses of those who attempt to hinder his gruesome generational plan. Bloodshed, nudity, and blasphemy further punctuate Joe’s recurrent diatribes against a country sedated by decades of fear, superstition, and class repression.

Having created such a radically provocative character, Mojica did not know how his film would be received. In the 1960s, Brazil existed in a highly volatile political climate, dominated by a military dictatorship. As a result, all national film productions were closely surveilled by a censorship board; due to its subversive themes of violence, sex, and rebellion, horror was a particularly unpopular genre during the fascist regime. Therefore, Mojica was aware that there was a high probability that right-wing censors would truncate At Midnight, or even forbid its exhibition.

Nonetheless, passing by the Cine Art-Palácio on that November afternoon, Mojica found a line of people snaking around the block. Throughout the day, all five sessions of his film had sold out, and in less than three years, Mojica had been catapulted into a controversial spotlight: From obscure director-for-hire he had become a national celebrity, the personification
of Brazilian nightmares. The protagonist of At Midnight, Coffin Joe—the brutal but cultured undertaker embodied by Mojica—had struck a cultural nerve. More than the first homegrown horror monster, the fictional Joe was recognized by his national audience as the embodiment of an arrested Brazil, "a country-bumpkin ... a repressed being by nature and circumstance. Calígula from the Tropics, guilty and filled with hunger and guilt, a prehistoric sadist and abnormal."3

If the film’s popular reception was passionate, it was also divided. Not surprisingly, censors detested Mojica’s movie. In the popular soap opera genre known as chanchada, villains and heroes were clearly distinguishable. The blurring of lines in otherwise morally hermetic roles was one of the primordial reasons why the Brazilian board of censorship targeted Mojica’s work. Shocked by the blatant blasphemy and amoral message being channeled in At Midnight, censors repeatedly cut and edited its final version. Allegedly, a censor for the Polícia Federal complained that "the film [was in] terrible bad taste, using and abusing beatings, torture, sex and extreme violence"; another was so utterly disgusted by Mojica’s aesthetic choices that he declared him "... a mentally retarded individual ... If it was not out of my jurisdiction, I would suggest his arrest."3 In fact, as a result of censors’ promiscuous interventions, Coffin Joe’s films always sported an awkward moralistic denouement: Invariably, “Joe gets a terrible, battering comeuppance at the conclusion of each film. His victims get their revenge. God sends lightning bolts to drop a tree on him; he’s tormented by visions of Hell ... The overall effect is like watching a driver’s-ed film about heresy.”

Although conservative reviewers echoed right-wing censors, classifying At Midnight as a “primitive film” (“This is not only a primitive film, but primary; it does not shock but stupefies; for Brazilian cinema it is not a step forward, but a step backwards.”), most progressive critics applauded it as “the greatest horror movie ... since Frankenstein ... José Mojica Marins is a genius of horror film.” From the moment it was released, anti-fascist reviewers understood that At Midnight was a rather complex compound of paradoxes and challenging ideas that deserved a closer look than that. First shallow glance audiences normally offer horror movies. Heraldling the film as a watershed moment in Brazilian counterculture, Correio da Manhã reviewer Salvyano Cavalcanti de Paiva even described At Midnight as “an historical landmark. Reflect [sic], certainly, our life. What it narrates is happening here, in front of our eyes, witnessed by our ears ... Right-wing election through coup. Reading of a play makes law enforcement agents beat students ... [The film then] is the rational reflex of a reality—the sad Brazilian reality.”

With this in mind, the ambiguous protagonist Coffin Joe beckons a closer look, one that analyzes him not as a mere exploitative exercise in guts and gore, but as a discerning social critique of a country in crisis. Despite the superficial veneer of “low-budget kitsch and horror, sex and drugs, spiders and snakes, and gore of all sorts” that so perturbed 1960s conservative critics,
Mojica succeeded in producing the first distinctively Brazilian horror film. More importantly, he wove legible horror tropes with a pointed social attack on Brazil’s right-wing dictatorship, its consecutive economic failures, and lastly Brazil’s historical incapacity to find cultural emancipation from first-world countries, namely the U.S. The offspring of such ideological and aesthetic hybridism was odd-looking, harrowing, and singular, much like its protagonist, Coffin Joe. Revolutionary filmmaker and Brazilian intellectual Rogério Sganzerla has aptly identified Joe as a mixture of “Nietzsche with Peter Cushing, crossed with a perfect double of Dracula, and a deformed copy of Bela Lugosi transplanted into the tropics.”

Mojica was not alone in this amalgamation of film genres. During the 1960s, Brazil’s political instability and pervasive cultural censorship bolstered a revised understanding of film as political catalyst, a weapon not of compliancy and entertainment, but of action and revolution. The active politicization of cinema could be found in many of the projects being forged by an upcoming generation of socially aware filmmakers, such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s Rio 40 Graus (Rio 100 Degrees F. [1955]) and Vidas Secas (Barren Lives [1963]), Carlos Diegues’s Ganga Zumba (1963), and Glauber Rocha’s Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol (Black God, White Devil [1964])—all low-budget, independent productions that can be included in the initial phase of Cinema Novo. Buttressed by the resurgence of nationalistic pride sweeping across Latin America, this group of young filmmakers heralded the birth of a “new cinema,” whose formal starkness and cultural revolutionary nature would rip apart the veil of apathy and censorship promoted by a long-lasting fascist government. Often the films pertaining to this movement have been described as “made in natural settings with non-professional actors, popular themes, and a simple, straight-forward cinematic language,” characteristics directly inherited from the then blooming Italian Neo-Realism and French New Wave movements. The new wave of Brazilian filmmakers was further influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre’s “engagé” manifesto. In a collection of works published during the 1940s through the 1960s, the French philosopher argued that artists and intellectuals should become as actively involved in political history as soldiers and governances. Brazilian filmmakers took these leftist ideals to heart, thus refusing the sugarcoated vision of Brazil as a tourist-ready utopia symbolized by postcard images of sunny beaches and fun-loving samba.

After the military overthrow of Joao Goulart in April 1964, the scattered Cinema Movement became further united by the will to produce films “based on the talent of specific auteurs [who saw] filmmaking as a political praxis, a contribution to the struggle against neo-colonialism.” In their ardent quest to counteract the exportation of Brazil’s exotic carte-de-visite, maverick filmmakers, such as Glauber Rocha and Joaquim Pereira de Andrade, produced generically hybrid films which, tapping into Brazil’s mystical heritage, depicted a collection of fantastic characters: candomblé witches, bloodthirsty ranch-hands, and self-proclaimed saints. These anti-heroes allegorized the
poverty-stricken underbelly of Brazil’s social-political turmoil by offering an unapologetic portrait of its hunger, bareness, and violence. These also functioned as dark doppelgängers to the festive mulattas of Orfeu Negro (Black Orpheus, Brazil’s 1959 Academy Award winner for Best Foreign Film) and Carmen Miranda’s 1940s Hollywood musicals.¹³

Film scholar Shari Roberts has insightfully analyzed the tension between Brazil and the U.S. vis-à-vis Carmen Miranda’s ambiguous relationship with her home country. If on one hand, Miranda’s worldwide fame exulted national pride in Brazilian audiences, on the other, her stereotypical image of uncultured “chiquita banana” dumbed down Brazilian culture to international mass audiences. Consequently, Miranda’s exported screen persona would be criticized by Cinema Novo’s filmmakers as promoting the de-meaning notion that Brazil was a primitive nation, always depicted as the counterpoint to America’s first-world civilization.¹⁴

In sum, it is amid this turbulent socio-political context that Mojica emerged as a key figure in Brazilian guerrilla filmmaking, primarily utilizing horror’s generic conventions as a prolific instrument of social criticism and satire. However, while self-identified Cinema Novo filmmakers employed horror tropes only as a stylistic flourish in their otherwise restrained docudramas, Mojica revealed in the aesthetic excess historically associated with the horror genre; he specifically used horror imagery as a way to dissect the atrocities of Brazil’s oppressive regime and the ignorance of its numerous rural communities.

Excess is an important theme in Mojica’s work. The inordinate amounts of blood spilled, the violence committed against women, and the various close-ups of mangled bodies all represent an undeveloped Brazil, a country violently abused by the repressive fascist regime. Because of its unapologetic use of graphic violence, Mojica’s work foreshadowed Glauber Rocha’s “An Esthetic of Hunger” (1965), a political manifesto that endorsed violence as a way to defeat Brazilian lethargy as well as the artificial cliché—popularized for the international tourist’s entertainment—that Brazil could be summarized as the land of carnival and sassy mulattas. “From Cinema Novo,” Glauber Rocha declares, “it should be learned that an ethic of violence, before being primitive is revolutionary. . . . [And] only when confronted with violence does the colonizer understand, through horror, the strength of the culture he exploits.”¹⁵ In this light, Coffin Joe’s murderous spree is portrayed as an ambivalent call to arms, a cry against apathy. The intellectual’s regression into primitive savagery further denounces Mojica’s foreshadowing of Rocha’s theory: When a country is at the brink of self-destruction, excess is the only action that can produce political change.

However, film scholar Luiz Borges has suggested that Mojica’s aesthetic choices fit in more specifically with Cinema Marginal’s visceral “estética da grossura e do deboche.” Borges describes Cinema Marginal as an outgrowth of Cinema Novo’s political agenda, a radical subgenre where the impulse to revolutionize Brazil was conveyed through the use of graphic violence and black humor. In essence, both movements were searching for a unique voice
that dispelled Brazil’s exported image as a stereotypical “tropical paradise.”

The dark corners of Brazilian life—its favela and its sertão” become then the
preferred focus of the Cinema Novo’s camera-eye, an underdeveloped space
that Mojica would concurrently explore by mixing the rural (“... the rowdy
crowd in black and white, shoving their faces in the colored screen”) with the
“average grindhouse nudie flick” elements—the busty, scarcely clad beauties
reminiscent of Hammer productions; the explicitly gory and cheap-looking
special effects which reviewers quickly dismissed as distasteful.16

Mojica’s work, however, remains in a generic limbo: Aesthetically, the
film borrows from Cinema Marginal’s visceral excess; thematically, its pro-
tagonist conveys the same social criticism first tackled by Cinema Novo’s
filmmakers. In fact, the desire to shock an audience with stark images and
ham-fisted ideology was as much a keystone in Cinema Novo’s political
agenda as a pivotal characteristic of Cinema Marginal. When in the late-
1960s, Cinema Marginal came into full-blown visibility, “the universal
tendency of contemporary art [was already expressed] in the aversion to
normal aesthetic patterns, the exaltation of the anti-conventional, the ugly,
the warped, the violent, and the contrary.”17

All these themes are reinvented in the deliriously dark world of Coffin
Joe, making At Midnight’s mise-en-scène undoubtedly excessive: Costumes
are clownish and cartoonish; mannerisms theatrically exacerbated; and the
dialogue histrionically performed, especially by Joe when he faces the cam-
era, treating the screen as a pulpit and the movie audience as listeners in
his one-man rally. These elements are made most explicit in Joe’s opening
monologue. The first shots function as a literary preamble, an “in-your-
face” existential exhortation. Looking directly at the camera, Coffin Joe
muses: “What is life? It is the beginning of death. What is death? It is the end
of life! What is existence? It is the continuity of blood. What is blood? It is
the reason to exist!” Rather performative in style, Coffin Joe’s carnivalesque
persona and attire denounce not just the postmodern self-awareness of this
film, but also its mocking-serious agenda.18

While Coffin Joe’s prologue engages the viewer into a kind of lofty-theatrical
environment, the next monologue—the witch’s—completely contrasts as well
as complements this setup (see Figure 8.1). She inhabits a comically exagger-
ated crypt where all clichés abound in a tacky form: There are the plastic skull,
the odd juxtaposition of fake potions, plastic rosaries, and melted candles.

Through these clichés, the witch represents what international audiences
came to associate with the indigenous origins of Brazil: an intricate mixture
of Christian imagery, witchcraft, and native practices, such as candomblé
and voodoo. By acknowledging the one-dimensionality of Brazil’s exported
representations, Mojica criticizes national filmmakers’ readiness in depict-
ning their country as a collection of touristy trinkets: cheap, disposable, and
historical. In the end, by continuing the promulgation of these detrimental
stereotypes—embodied here by the witch’s character—filmmakers flattened
Brazil’s multicultural heritage.
Still, At Midnight remains an ambiguous film, simultaneously criticizing the adherence to stereotypical depictions of Brazil, while reinforcing them at times. Juxtaposing Coffin Joe’s serious wonderings with the witch’s superstitious monologue immediately beckons the spectator to enter inside that hybrid universe where the bizarre gravedigger is deployed concurrently as a philosopher, an atheist, a misogynist, and a murderer. On the one hand, Joe is presented as the monstrous villain who wrecks his own hometown; on the other hand, he represents the only educated character in the narrative. From this perspective, Coffin Joe can be interpreted as the Angel of Death, apocalyptically coming to nip the bud of the mob’s lethargy. As Stam and Johnson point out, in the 1960s “Brazilian filmmakers tend[ed] to politicize their discussion of film to a degree that might surprise non-Brazilians. . . . [Moreover] developmentalist ideology was, by its nature, riddled with contradictions,” which connects with Coffin Joe’s own paradoxical characterization and ultimately reinforces the hybridity of Mojica’s film, always oscillating between trashy horror and social criticism.19

By the same token, the cartoonish figure of the witch embodies the collective voice of primitive Brazilian culture—religious, fearful, reliant on the supernatural, the stunted mass that is unable to stand up and fight the forces of oppression. However, she is also characterized as the harmless, good-hearted, and ignorant people who did not know how to be any better. In her complete belief in fate, bad spirits, and fatal spells, the witch represents that which in "Towards a Common Market of Portuguese and Spanish Speaking Countries" (1977) Brazilian film director Roberto Farias would bitterly describe as what “the controllers of information look for—what is exotic and picturesque in underdeveloped countries. In a country like Brazil they expect us to make films
only about wild animals and macumba." Independent filmmakers such as Mojica aimed to disavow this defanged image of a "picturesque" Brazil. Instead, they created works that depicted a ravenous country, cannibalistic and merciless (Joe), no longer subjugated by its subservience to the tourist-ready image (the witch), eagerly exported to first-world countries.

By casting the superstitious witch and the politicized intellectual as the ushers of his film narrative, Mojica opens several interpretative paths, but he never resolves a main underlying tension: Is his movie critical of these types, or is it complicit? Although their political stance is unstated, I suggest that Joe and the witch can be read as allegories of two classes—intellectual and proletarian, urbane and rural, cultured and unschooled—whose respective insufficiencies, once combined, fostered Brazil's degradation.

Rebelling against the escapist tone of the chanchada and the cartão postal, many of Cinema Novo's filmmakers also favored quotidian subject matters and impoverished, rural settings instead of an idealized tropical backdrop or a middle-class lifestyle. This played into Mojica's decision to place his monstrous gentleman Joe in a humdrum midwestern community. Contemporary horror director Ivan Cardoso aptly described the inception of horror elements in mundane backgrounds as "insólito quotidiano," further linking such an aesthetic choice with Cinema Novo's goal to disavow cinema as a highbrow hobby for the leisurely bourgeois. By filming the abuse suffered by provincial communities, these movies invited "the common man" to achieve a political conscience through a self-reflexive process of identification. In fact, throughout the 1960s, Brazilian press recurrently praised Mojica's film for its wide-reaching legibility: Satirically relying on cultural archetypes, religious tropes, and recognizable regionalisms, *At Midnight* established "an absolute communicability with the average Brazilian spectator, circa 1966." It is important to remember that Cinema Novo filmmakers foremost encouraged such active rapport between film, filmmaker, and audience.

Surrounding Joe with an arid, agrarian landscape and small-town folks also makes the gravedigger all the more conspicuous: His unconventional clothes, ideals, and mannerisms render Joe's marginality legible, an outsider status that transforms him into a reliable critic of the turmoil of Brazilian society. Joe's eccentric individuality is pivotally established in the initial funeral scene, where Joe first wears his gentlemanly attire and is seen spatially removed from the plain mourners who surround an open grave. In this way, Coffin Joe embodies the paradoxes of fully engaging with an "esthetic of violence." Although placed in an underprivileged agrarian space where he performs the dubious services of gravedigger and social pariah, he is still depicted as a wealthy intellectual, an Old World snob really. His long nails may be read as a sign of grotesquery or as a sign of leisure; his tall hat, pipe, and black cape echo Terrence Fisher's gentlemanly *Dracula* (1958) and Christopher Lee's darkly seductive appeal in both *The Man Who Could Cheat Death* (1958) and *The Hands of Orlac* (1960).

As a matter of fact, the character of Coffin Joe functions as a sort of Trojan Horse: Appearing caricatural in fake blood and cheap props, his
diatribes hide the erudition and manicured agenda of Victorian England, the colonial potency that fostered the educated sapience of a murderer like Jack the Ripper and the self-destructive arrogance of Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein—two-faced characters abundantly popular in the horror films imported from the U.K. and the U.S. during this period. One has only to recall Hammer's first B-movies or Roger Corman’s film series based on Edgar Allen Poe's tales—starring the cruelly aristocratic Vincent Price, a batch of buxom young ladies, and some buckets of blood—to see from which melting pot of Western influences the Brazilian Coffin Joe emerged. A Brazilian revolutionary made out of imported influences, Coffin Joe is the ultimate liminal figure: He is both part and parcel of Brazil's cultural moment, and an example of the country's excessive dependence on international references.

In sum, Coffin Joe is portrayed as caught in between Western and Latin American cultures. The philosopher-gravedigger suggests a variation of the Old World flâneur, a tormented yet cultured figure out of time and out of place who aimlessly roams the primitive New World. The conflict between colonial Europe and victimized Latin America is emphasized in scenes where Joe plays opposite his friend António (Nivaldo Lima). António is the archetype of humble "Brazilianess," a farmer with simple views on God, love, and life. At last, the friction between Joe and his rural neighbors climaxes when he defiantly decides to eat lamb during Easter, something considered a cardinal sin in his pious town. Plunged in darkness, Joe devours the bloody meat, while through the window the audience sees the obedient mob going down the street in a somber procession, hence contrasting their piety with his mocking heresy (see Figure 8.2).

The suggested split screen not only isolates Coffin Joe as an outsider who refuses to participate in the bonding rituals of his community, but it also

Figure 8.2  Coffin Joe refuses to participate in the religious rites of his community in A Meia-Noite Levarei Sua Alma (1964). Fantoma.
underlines his foreignness and rebelliousness. Tellingly, this scene would become a point of contention with censors.

Joe's bloodlust for the lamb is later reenacted in his carnivorous lust for other sacrificial female characters such as Terezinha (Magda Mei) or Maria, whom he stalks and prowls as a hungry predator. Cannibalism strongly undergirds both Coffin Joe's character and 1960s Brazilian counterculture. Filmmaker Joaquim Pedro de Andrade refers to it, in his 1969 essay “Cannibalism and Self-Cannibalism,” as “an exemplary mode of consumerism adopted by underdeveloped people.” Starved by cultural “underdevelopment,” Brazil reduced “every consumer to cannibalism.”24 From this perspective, Joe personifies a bereft nation that, maddened by its unproductive circularity, comes to devour its own kind.

Such a theoretical assertion further connects cannibalism with the film's take on vampirism. In fact, this film overtly flirts with the vampire subgenre, a suggestion endorsed by the scenes where Coffin Joe plunges over Terezinha's neck only to be bitten by her, or when he licks her blood-bruised mouth after raping her. Simultaneously, these power-charged scenes also allude to larger criticism accusing Latin American cinema of only consuming and regurgitating formulae created by the first world's moneyed cinematic industry. Again, Andrade notes that “the present work relationships, as well as the relationships between people—social, political, and economical—are still basically cannibalistic.”25 In short, those who can, “eat” others through their consumption of products, or even more directly in sexual relationships, something clearly highlighted in Coffin Joe's brutally voracious consumption of Terezinha's body. That particular scene allows for multiple readings. On one hand, women are cast as the utmost example of national underdevelopment and helplessness, since the rape scene is presented as a mix of male sexual frustration and cannibalistic desire for the flesh of the conquered prey. On the other hand, the scene can be read as a typical generic ploy. Conventionally, horror films deploy sensual female characters as a site of great violence and eroticism, with their torture designed to satisfy the male viewer's own devouring pleasure.26

From this angle, Coffin Joe becomes thus a paradox, a cross between a self-reliant philosopher who refuses to be limited by Brazilian folklore culture and a self-destructive fool who still becomes corrupted by the certainty of his intrinsic superiority. For, ultimately, Joe's intellectual strong suit is marred by his antisocial hatred, as he increasingly grows similar to those he despised: the highbrow bourgeois who, ascending the ladder of power, quickly realized that his informed insight has positioned him above the common uneducated man. Lastly, Joe's greatest virtues—education, eloquence, self-confidence, and strength—are responsible for transforming him into a tyrant plagued by a monomaniacal God complex, a trait that propels his final downfall. By taking God and the Devil off of their pedestal, Coffin Joe has become a megalomaniac Nietzschean superman, both in his own head and in his own tiny, timorous town. In times of oppression, hunger, and moreover blindness, those who have an eye are kings, as the popular adage sagely warns.
Nonetheless, the people, hurled by their meager conditions, are still clever enough to see how noxious Coffin Joe truly has become: They may fear him but sometimes try to stand up to him, as solitary kamikazes. Until the grand finale where Coffin Joe lies bug-eyed and torn apart by his own ghosts, these anonymous men function as symbolic stand-ins for intermittent revolutionaries, small ripples of dissatisfaction that began blipping in the apathetic landscape of provincial Brazil.

When finally neutralized in the last minutes of the film, Coffin Joe can be read as a man destroyed by his own incapacity to pierce the web of underdevelopment and sterility that enveloped him. Meaningfully, at the end of *At Midnight*, Joe has failed to conceive his desired offspring, a metaphor for miscarriage that interrupts the generational cycle of mediocrity plaguing Brazilian culture. From this perspective, Joe’s final scene can be interpreted as an allegory to Brazil’s claustrophobic small-mindedness and cannibalistic circularity: cornered by the specters of his victims, the gravedigger is entrapped by the stagnant provincial environment, finally defeated in the town’s cemetery, the locus where he once attacked and disposed of his defenseless prey. If we accept this interpretation, then a key question arises: Is Coffin Joe finally destroyed by the resurrected ghosts of his victims, or does he fall prey to the realization that not even ghoulish murder could free him from his social shortcomings?  

As usual, Mojica’s message appears double-edged: Although the “monster” lies inert, Joe does not seem to have been defeated by external causes but by his innate prepotency which, ultimately, manifested itself in the shape of avenging ghosts. Thus, in *At Midnight*, Mojica warns his audience that too much knowledge becomes dangerous and that no man should ever fall into the misleading trap of thinking himself superior to his fellow comrades, no matter how ignorant they may seem. From this perspective, Coffin Joe can be read as a variation of Goethe’s tragic overachiever, Doctor Faust. As a matter of fact, Ivan Cardoso compares Joe to “Lucifer, the anthropophagic preacher of God. A mock-Baudelairian satanism caught between the grave and the camera, based on the grotesque authenticity of Méliès,” a description that reinforces Joe’s liminality: He is Faust, geographically trapped in a lowbrow Brazil while intellectually longing for European high art.

By deploying Coffin Joe as a victim of the circumstances surrounding an impoverished nation, Mojica derives from the legendary fall of an educated overachiever. Infected by a warped image of international urbaniy, bourgeois wealth, and biological superiority, Joe’s goals were, from birth, beyond his third-world grasp. If we think of Joe as Faust, then we can see Mojica suggesting that Brazil’s greatest enemy is not a foreign import but rather lives within Brazilian identity in the shape of deep-seated self-deprecation and superstition. Case in point, not even the enlightened Coffin Joe manages to escape his doomed national heritage: A Brazilian at heart, he dies, is buried, and must haunt forever the same small town that, in life, he desperately attempted to outgrow.
Referencing Baudelaire in comparison with Coffin Joe is also productive since the French poet propelled the poetic conception of the decadent "artist despising and assuming the designation of damned [accompanied] by some of the most recurrent themes, such as satanism, lesbianism, carnal love, the misery of the big cities,"29 a list of perverse themes commonly showcased in Baudelaire’s poetry and directly reenacted in Coffin Joe’s universe. The Faustian myth thus adds a new dimension to Coffin Joe’s, as well as to At Midnight’s, paradox. By equating the intellectual and the artist with the realm of the damned and the prohibitive, a simplistic division between hero and villain becomes highly blurred. With his sharp intelligence and rampant cruelty, Coffin Joe collapses the traditional role of senseless murderer with that of idealistic Werther, seeking the perfect woman who will bear his superior spawn, that is, a Nietzschean superman. As Cinema Novo’s filmmaker Carlos Estevez defended in his 1962 manifesto “For a Popular Revolutionary Art,” art “needs to reformulate and endow with a new anthropological meaning the notions of merit and demerit, heroism and villainy, virtue and vice, self-awareness and alienation.”30 These antitheses informed Coffin Joe’s paradoxical characterization, constantly alternating between the roles of elucidated philosopher and callous killer.

In short, because Joe so seamlessly embodied the high and the low, the foreign and the national, he had to occupy a liminal place within the narrative: Although he personified the radical desire for political action, anger, and frustration, these qualities have driven him to cannibalize his own compatriots. Transformed into a murderer, Joe can never rise above his self-serving, bourgeois needs and become the savior of an underdeveloped Brazil; his ending must be that of Faust, ultimately annihilated by his own ravenous ambition and lack of self-restraint. Coffin Joe’s descent into madness, in the end, only reconfirms Brazil’s arrestment in an impossible situation where violent retaliation led to public annihilation, but effacing apathy bred self-destruction.

From this perspective, it comes as no surprise that conservative audiences despised the unflattering mirror At Midnight held to their faces. Ironically though, being banned, chopped, and vilified by right-wing censors elevated screenings of At Midnight to the same level of spectatorial engagement as the repeatedly shunned La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces) directed by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas (finished in 1968, premiered only in 1973 due to Argentinean censorship). Due to the recurrent shutting down of venues where At Midnight was being shown, Mojica quickly assembled an underground cult that heralded the infamously persecuted auteur as a martyr of the dictatorial repression. Further, the secretive feel surrounding his film screenings requested from the spectator the same kind of active participation that was beckoned by Cinema Novo’s filmmaking. If one truly wished to see Mojica’s banned film and revel in Coffin Joe’s provocative dialogues, then one had to wholeheartedly engage in the subversive act of deceiving censorship and commit a trespassing act. Being
considered subversive in the growingly repressive context of the 1960s consequently lent Mojica the aura of a Latin American Luis Buñuel, George Romero, or Russ Meyer. As a matter of fact, *At Midnight* went on to win awards at film festivals all over the globe: the originality prize in L’Ecran Fantastique, the world press award at the III Convention du Cinéma Fantastique in 1974, and a special prize at the Sitges Festival Internacional de Cine Fantástico y de Terror in 1973.

Clearly world-wide audiences understood that the incongruent coat of moral decency found at the end of *At Midnight* did not efface the overall nihilism of the rest of the movie, a fact strengthened by the active censorship Mojica suffered throughout his decades-long career. Banned between 1964 and 1985, his oeuvre only reached the U.S. in 1993, when Something Weird Video released a subtitled VHS version of *At Midnight*. Such long-lived exile evinces the discomfort his unique filmmaking produced in a fascist regime threatened by recurrent coups d’état, intermittently occurring during the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

In the early 1990s, with the overthrow of Brazil’s military dictatorship and the boom of home entertainment facilitated by cost-effective VHSs and DVDs, Coffin Joe’s fame finally crossed the circumference of underground cult fandoms, becoming revered across the world as the original Brazilian bogeyman, and at home, as the country’s most radical embodiment of political subversion. Confirming Mojica’s status as Brazil’s most significant horror filmmaker, in 1999 two journalists—André Barcinski and Ivan Finotti—directed the tributary documentary *Maldito: O Estranho Mundo de José Mojica Marins* (*Coffin Joe: The Strange World of José Mojica Marins* [2001]), which would win the Special Jury Prize at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival.31 Lastly, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, DVD and Blu-ray worldwide releases of Mojica’s earlier work introduced behind-the-scenes footage of an aged director who now fondly reminisced about having his films so “mutilated” during the restrictive 1960s that he had to hold secret “uncut” viewings of his work in strangers’ basements, parking lots, and many other incognito and impromptu locations.32

In the end, censorship’s dogged persecution of Mojica’s work boosted his grainy B-movies and poor technical means; they became popularly praised as the mark of an auteur’s “guerrilla-filmmaking ethic.”33 After all, Mojica did create his nation’s first horror film out of thirteen measly cans of film, a rented warehouse, a nightmare turned into a plot, a couple of discarded props—fake nails, a magician’s hat—and his best Sunday tuxedo. Although difficulties in securing financing plagued Mojica’s career throughout most of the dictatorship years, to this day he never ceased to impersonate his most famous creation, *Coffin Joe*, either on-screen—in TV appearances, film cameos, and currently as a cable-TV show host—or offscreen, as a paid master of ceremonies at private parties and as an illustrious invitee at international film festivals.

Such resistant dedication to this particular character, by both director-cum-actor and worldwide horror-devotees, suggests that *Coffin Joe*’s appeal
is not only historically enduring but pervasively translatable: It speaks to both mainstream horror fans and cult connoisseurs, national comrades and international audiences. In 2011 Michael Gingold, the editor of leading horror magazine Fangoria, suggested that “part of Coffin Joe’s appeal is that he actively sets out to attack and dismember mainstream societal and religious values.”

Indeed such pointed social critique never grows old, nor ever dies out: Like Coffin Joe, it always finds a way to come back to discursive life.

NOTES

1. All translations are by the author, with original Portuguese in endnotes “caboclo, . . . um ser recalcaldo por natureza e condição, Calígula tropical, culpado e cheio de fome e culpa, um sádico pre-histórico e natural.” André Barcinski, Maldito: A Vida e o Cinema de José Mojica Marins, o Zé do Caixão (São Paulo: Editora 34, 1998), 13.


3. “um débil mental . . . Se não fugisse a minha alçada, seria o caso de sugerir sua prisão” (Barcinski, Maldito, 112).


5. “não choca, imbeciliza, para o cinema de Brasil não é uma linha pioneira, é um atraso,” Mauricio Gomes Leite, reviewer for Jornal do Brasil quoted in Barcinski, Maldito, 119.

6. “o maior filme de terror . . . desde Frankenstein. . . . José Mojica Marins é um gênio do cine-terror.” Sérgio Porto, journalist for Última Hora, quoted in Barcinski, Maldito, 120.

7. “uma oportunidade histórica. Reflete, certamente, a vida. O que narra esta acontecendo aqui fora, as nossas vistas, testemunhados por nossos ouvidos . . . . Eleição direita é golpe. Leitura de peça de teatro leva polícia a espancar estudantes. [. . . Este filme é o reflexo racional de uma realidade—a triste realidade brasileira” (Barcinski, Maldito, 119).


9. “Nietzche com Peter Cushing, passando por um sócio peralta de Drácula, cópia deformada de Bela Lugosi transportado para os trópicos” (Barcinski, Maldito, 11).


11. Sartre would visit Latin America in the early 1960s in order to meet with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. The French philosopher would describe the latter political leader as “not only an intellectual but also the most complete human being of our age . . . the era’s most perfect man.” For more information on Sartre’s impact on Latin American politics and intellectual thought, see Jean-Paul Sartre’s Les Mains sales (1948) and Les Mots (1964).

12. Johnson and Stam, Brazilian Cinema, 73.

13. For a compelling reading on the function of allegory in Brazilian Cinema Novo, see Ismail Xavier, Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and
Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).


15. Johnson and Stam, Brazilian Cinema, 74 (italics mine).


18. For more information on how Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “carnivalesque” intersected with 1960s new Latin American cinema, see Robert Stam, Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

19. Johnson and Stam, Brazilian Cinema, 82.


21. Cardoso, De Godard, 35.


26. Either way, the cannibalism Coffin Joe adopts is obviously laden with a social critique on Brazil’s self-destructive tendency not to produce and distribute its own products, but to continue relying on an enfeebling and circular dependence on imported formulas, erroneously deemed superior. As beautiful, unstable Elena will be depicted as a synecdoche for underdeveloped Cuba in Tomas Alea’s seminal Memories of Underdevelopment (1968), in Mojica’s At Midnight, it is Terezinha who represents Brazil in all its fertile potential, squandered by an ultimate weakness—she cannot put up a lasting fight against the forceful foreignness of Coffin Joe.

For more information on women’s roles in horror film, see Carol J. Clover, Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

27. Although Joe is finally destroyed in At Midnight, as any good horror monster would, he comes back to life for the 1967 sequel This Night I’ll Possess Your Body. Also, he at last becomes a father, if only forty years later. In 2008, Mojica finally secured $2 million to produce Embodiment of Evil. Both production companies involved—Gullane Filmes and Olhos de Cão Produções Cinematográficas—were Brazilian. The last part of the intended “Coffin Joe” trilogy was nationally distributed by 20th Century Fox Brazil on August 8, 2008, and released on DVD in America by the cult-oriented horror distributor Synapse Films in 2010.

28. “Luíz, o pregador antropófago de Deus. Um satanismo bufo-baudelairiano entre a campa e a câmera, na base da grotesca autenticidade à Méliès” (Cardoso, De Godard, 35).
29. . . . the decadent “artista a merecer e a assumir a qualificação de maldito [. . . acompanhado por] alguns dos temas recorrentes como satanismo, lesbianismo, amor carnal, miséria das grandes cidades” (Borges, 1960–1980, 68); Johnson and Stam, *Brazilian Cinema*, 62 (italics mine).


32. Rohter, “Cult Figure.”


34. Rohter, “Cult Figure.”