

*Carmo, Hit the Road* (2008)

Written and directed by Mirlo Pasta

Produced by A Contraluz Films

Distributed by First Run Features

<http://www.firstrunfeatures.com/>

99 minutes

Within recent years interest in Border Studies has extended beyond academia into the realm of popular culture. Such disparate films as *Sin Nombre* (2009), *Machete* (2010), and *Babel* (2006) have used the geographical setting of a border region in order to explore the ways in which borders, both physical and metaphorical, establish and enforce personal identity. The best of these films can help us to better understand the limits placed upon individuals in how they are allowed to define themselves; the borders here become potential zones of transgression against restrictive social identities. Taking place along Brazil's borders with Paraguay and Bolivia, *Carmo, Hit the Road* appears interested in exploring the relationship

between geopolitical borders and identity, but shallow characterization and an extremely uneven tone prevent the film from successfully carrying out this exploration.

The film begins with Carmo (played by Mariana Loureiro) searching for a way to escape her border town as well as the restrictions placed upon her as a woman in society. Meanwhile her love interest, the paraplegic smuggler Marco (played by Fele Martínez), is hauling cheap electronics across the border into Brazil. After saving Carmo from an assailant at a local bar and subsequently rebuffing her sexual advances, the two are forced to team up in order to fence his merchandise. When Carmo takes him to his designated rendezvous point, and is robbed of his merchandise, the two begin a wild chase along the Brazilian border to recover his goods so that they can both escape the border town. In some ways the film's narrative provides a fascinating exploration of the ways in which individuals can become marginalized, with the geopolitical border regions of Brazil functioning as a zone of potential liberation.

Indeed, much of the film suggests that director Mirlo Pasta is concerned with the ways in which individuals might escape the identities forced upon them by the metaphorical borders established and enforced by societal norms. Every character is given a label via text superimposed on a stylized still-frame of the character, often during his or her introductory scene. As one example, the text introducing Marco, defined by his disability for much of the film, labels him as "Shot three times by his ex-wife." In other words, the text reinforces the fact that society reads Marco's disability as his primary identity. Other characters are variously labeled as "Amateur Magician," "Chicken Thief," and "The Boss of it all." This stylistic technique sets up an interesting means of exploring the ways in which physical borders establish and interact with the societal boundaries of how individuals are allowed to be defined. The film also plays with the border setting through its use of language; the characters speak in a mixture of Spanish, Portuguese, and a hybrid of the two commonly referred to as *Portuñol*. This blending of languages helps to establish the ways in which borders and identities within the film are transgressed by the characters.

Underdeveloped characters ultimately weaken what could have been a fascinating study of geopolitical and identity-based borders. The

secondary characters never rise above one-dimensional stock types. Amparo de Jesús (played by Seu Jorge) never becomes more than a stereotypical (and deeply problematic) portrayal of the male homosexual as a sex-obsessed threat to heteromascularity; in one inexplicable scene he even goes so far as to attempt to rape Marco. Amaparo's partner, Diamantino dos Anjos (played by Marcio Garcia) is little more than a caricature of a bumbling criminal. From their female crime boss (who may also moonlight as Carmo's guardian angel) to Carmo's mother, the secondary characters can be identified by one or two stock traits.

Both protagonists suffer from this same lack of depth. Loureiro turns in a truly manic performance as Carmo, channeling all of the eccentricity of a 1930's screwball comedy heroine but with none of the charm. Indeed, much of the film's tonal inconsistency results from her frenzied perspective. In many ways the camera can be understood as showing the story through her chaotic point of view; extremely rapid cutting between shots and extensive use of a shaky, handheld camera give a sense of perpetual hyper motion which can best be understood as viewing the world through the eyes of the high-strung female protagonist. This hyperactivity pushes Carmo's character into cliché and thus fails to earn the closing declaration of feminine independence that Pasta wishes to grant her. Her character rings false and thus so too does her final declaration of independence, which could have otherwise served as a powerful closing statement to this border study.

Martínez's turn as Marco is perhaps the most interesting performance of the film, but poor writing holds him back. Marco is quiet and caring towards Carmo one moment, inexplicably violent towards her the next. At some points he emits stoic masculinity, à la Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night*, at others he engages in cold brutality (in one scene even committing murder). Pasta, who also serves as screenwriter, seems uncertain of who Marco is. Is he a stoic rogue with a heart of gold, or is he a cold-hearted criminal? While this uncertainty could be read as complexity, the one-dimensionality of the rest of the characters suggests a simple lack of tonal consistency.

This failure to clearly articulate the characters is problematic for a film that is ostensibly concerned with empowering its characters to create their own identity free from the borders of

nationality and gender. The final shot of the film, a still frame of Carmo's face labeled "Woman, Human Being," suggests that Pasta believes that by breaking free of the physical border region of Brazil his protagonist has also escaped the metaphorical borders placed upon her as a woman by her society; freed from these borders, she is allowed to embrace her own identity as woman. Yet the film never earns this moment; far from breaking free of the societal boundaries placed upon her, Carmo is represented as little more than a wild woman who needs a man to tame her. When the film reveals that she is pregnant it becomes clear that Marcos is being positioned as the dominating hand needed to "save" her. While she escapes the geographic confines of her border town in southwestern Brazil, she becomes confined within the same socially enforced borders of womanhood the film purports to resist: submission to patriarchal authority and motherhood.

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