

Cinema, *Aspirins and Vultures* takes place in the hot, dry and inhospitable landscape of Brazil's northeast hinterlands, known as the sertao. The story is set in 1942. It follows a German immigrant who is trying to escape the war. He travels from village to village, showing films to the locals and selling them a new wonder drug, aspirin. He is trying to blend into his new surroundings but despite his efforts he will always remain an outsider.

Director Marcelo Gomes didn't begin the project with preconceived notions

Pinheiro says that another reason he chose the EXR film for day scenes was that it afforded him an opportunity to work with a brighter viewfinder. That was especially important given the interactive, improvisational nature of his camerawork.

In the opening scene, a white frame slowly becomes an image of the German, driving alone in his truck. Pinheiro created this effect by gradually closing the iris while he was shooting. The images go from six stops overexposed to two stops overexposed. Pinheiro explains

For the films that the traveling salesman projects in the villages, Pinheiro and Gomes used a combination of footage they'd found, mostly Brazilian documentaries from the 1940s, and material they shot. They emulated black-and-white period films advertising Bayer Aspirin. "I used the worst zoom lens I could find," says Pinheiro. "It had almost no definition. We shot and projected these films in standard 16mm format, and used a digital intermediate process to desaturate colors and match the found footage."

Cinema, Aspirins & Vultures: a buddy film in a harsh landscape

about a visual style for the film. He wanted to work with a cinematographer with fresh ideas. He chose Mauro Pinheiro, Jr., ABC.

In search of the right visual approach, Pinheiro and Gomes shot dozens of photos and exposure tests using a still camera loaded with Eastman EXR 50D 7245 film. "We concluded that overexposure was the right direction but we wanted to retain more blacks in the images, so we tried a bleach bypass process," says Pinheiro. "Eventually, we found that day scenes looked right with two stops of overexposure combined with 70% bleach bypass. The sky and the landscape were white but the blacks and shadows were strong."

Next, the filmmakers performed more tests to see how the Super 16 to 35mm optical blow-up would affect the images. Pinheiro says that the grain that is present in the images fits in with his overall visual aesthetic.

"We wanted to approach the film almost like a documentary," he says. "I only used lights for night scenes, and only very simple lighting. The camera was always handheld, and the actors had the freedom to change their movements. Operating the camera, I had to think quickly and be ready to improvise, as though I were capturing events as they happened, without preparation."

"I think the grain in the images feeds this concept. It's the kind of grain you might see in a documentary, where you had to push because you had no light. It gives the film a fresher, more urgent feeling. Martha Reis at Megacolor Lab in Brazil was extremely important in helping us find the right way to process this film."

that this is a visual metaphor for the German's inability to completely shed his foreignness and blend into his new surroundings.

One of the hitchhikers the German picks up is a local who is in many ways his opposite. The local man wants to escape the sertao and make it to the big city. The film becomes a buddy story about interaction between these two characters.

The light in the night scenes is mostly motivated by the headlights on the German's truck and a lantern they carry. Pinheiro and Gomes wanted to show the surrounding darkness forcing the two to interact. Night scenes were usually recorded on Kodak VISION2 500T 7218 film.

Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures won the Cinema Prize of the French National Education System at the Cannes International Film Festival, and has earned praise from audiences and critics. ■

(Editor's note: ABC stands for Association of Brazilian Cinematographers.)

Below: DP Mauro Pinheiro, Jr., ABC preparing to shoot a scene for *Cinema, Aspirins & Vultures*.

