

Notes on [Gillo Pontecorvo's *Queimada \(Burn!\)*](#), United Artists, 1969

Leading cast members: Evariato Marquez, Marlon Brando

Set in the mid-19th century, in *Queimada* (also known by the English title *Burn!*) Marlon Brando plays a mercenary *agent provocateur*, William Walker, hired by the British admiralty but in effect working for British business interests in the sugar trade, which was a major global commodity in the 19th century. Walker comes to the fictional Portuguese colony, Queimada, in the West Indies. His mission is to foment a black slave rebellion in order to force the Portuguese out. However, once they're gone, the British intend to set up an independent republic headed by local oligarchs that will be a puppet of the British sugar barons. They plan to end their own dependent relationship with Portugal so that they can sell sugar on their own terms on the global market, and they plan to end slavery and turn the plantation workers into salaried labor.

The only thing Walker needs is someone with the leadership abilities, rebellious qualities, and the charisma whom he can manipulate into leading a revolt. He finds him in José Dolores, played by Evariato Marquez, a non-professional actor Pontecorvo discovered. They form a bond while Dolores is guided by Walker toward starting and leading a rebellion. But after the Portuguese are defeated, and he is denied a role in the new nation, Dolores realizes that he was used by Walker and the British. He is forced to give up control to the local mestizo (mixed race) political figures and the oligarchs. Dolores was faced with the classic dilemma of revolutionaries. The rebels knew how to fight, but they are completely unprepared to govern and defend their new nation from foreign enemies. As Walker reminds him, the only reason the revolution succeeded was because British navy ships were in the harbor, deterring any reaction from Portugal.

Ten years later, the British sugar barons (Royal Sugar) controlling the nominally independent republican government are once again fighting with Dolores and his rebel army. The rebels are close to victory, threatening a bloody overthrow of the republic and the plantation owners, so Walker is brought back to the island to devise a strategy for defeating the rebellion.

Queimada is one of the most radical and revolutionary films ever made by a major film studio. It deals with race, colonialism, slavery, revolution, insurgency, and counter-insurgency warfare, and the “creative destruction” required by capitalism. Much of the dialog could serve as textbook lessons in economics and the history of imperialism, and because of this aspect of the film, many people accustomed to modern Hollywood fare might find it heavily pedantic—not that that is a bad thing. The director may have wanted to *teach* the audience much more than *entertain* the audience.

The film's themes are timeless, but at the time when it appeared in 1969 it was particularly relevant. When audiences first saw this film, they were keenly aware of the obvious comparison being made to the US war in Vietnam and the global spirit of rebellion that had erupted throughout the world in the 1960s.

The film was so radical that the film studio that made it (United Artists) decided to cut short its run in cinemas and never promote the film again. The company made profits on other films and decided to take a loss on this one. The few people who saw the film during its short run in 1969 talked and wrote about it and gave it a legendary status. Marlon Brando wrote in his autobiography (*Songs my Mother Taught Me*, p. 320, chapter 46) that it was his best work and proudest accomplishment, even though he fought bitterly with the director and his co-star

during the making of the film. The film remained largely unseen and forgotten until its release on DVD in 2005, and since then it has been somewhat revived.

About the leading actors, Marlon Brando and Evaristo Marquez

Gillo Pontecorvo might have been deliberately trying to aggravate his star, Marlon Brando, by choosing a non-English speaking amateur to act alongside him in the other lead role. In his autobiography, Brando describes how he grew extremely impatient with Marquez' struggles with English and difficulty remembering lines and expressing emotions. He left the set in protest on one occasion and went back to Los Angeles for a few weeks. The clever trick Pontecorvo pulled here was to set up a tension between the actors that was the same as what it was between their characters. Brando played a professional provocateur and warrior, and Marquez played someone who was a complete amateur in the arts of political intrigue, revolution, and leadership. Since Marquez had no experience as an actor and perhaps couldn't fake his emotions, the only way for Pontecorvo to make his performance convincing was to create the necessary tension between the two actors themselves. As an experienced method actor, Brando must have known the game that was being played on him, but this didn't stop his frustration with the situation.

Marlon Brando on his work in *Queimada*:

Aside from Elia Kazan and Bernardo Bertolucci, the best director I worked with was Gillo Pontecorvo, even though we nearly killed each other. He directed me in a 1968 film that practically no one saw. Originally called *Queimada!*, it was released as *Burn!* I played an English spy, Sir William Walker, who symbolized all the evils perpetrated by the European powers on their colonies during the nineteenth century. There are a lot of parallels to Vietnam, and the movie portrayed the universal theme of the strong exploiting the weak. I think I did the best acting I've ever done in that picture, but few people came to see it.¹

Queimada: dialog from key scenes

1. 00:27:10 Slave or employee?

In order to encourage the local oligarchs to rebel against Portuguese rule, William Walker explains to them the benefits of independent, flexible economic relations that parties are free to enter or leave at any time. He suggests Queimada would have such freedom if it were not “married” to Portugal. Likewise, he suggests that slavery is no longer the best labor arrangement. He asks the men to consider which is more convenient, a whore that one can pay for only when she is needed, or a wife who must be cared for even while sick or in old age. Likewise, in a free republic it would be better to free the slaves and use wage labor on the plantations instead. After this scene, the oligarchs form an alliance with the slave rebellion and assassinate the Portuguese governor. The revolution succeeds, assisted by the fact that British ships were in port deterring any response that might come from Portugal.

William Walker (WW): Gentlemen, let me ask you a question. Now, my metaphor might seem a trifle impertinent, but I think it’s very much to the point. Which do you prefer, or should I say, which do you find more convenient? A wife or one of these mulatto girls? No, no, please don’t misunderstand. I’m speaking strictly in terms of economics. What is the cost of the product? What does the product yield? The product, in this case, being love. Purely physical love... since sentiments, obviously, play no part in economics. Quite. Now, a wife must be provided with a home, with food, with dresses, with medical attention, etcetera, etcetera. You’re obliged to keep her a whole lifetime, even when she’s grown old and perhaps a trifle unproductive. Then, of course, if you have the bad luck to survive her, you have to pay for the funeral. No, no, it’s true. Gentlemen, I know it seems amusing but actually those are the facts, aren’t they? Now, with a prostitute, on the other hand, it’s quite a different matter, isn’t it? You see there’s no need to lodge her or to feed her, certainly not to dress her or to bury her, thank God. She’s yours only when you need her. You pay her only for that service, and you pay her by the hour. Which, gentlemen, is more important and more convenient? A slave or a paid worker? Which do you find more convenient? Foreign domination with its laws, its vetoes, its taxes, its commercial monopolies, or independence—with your own government, your own laws, your own administration, and the freedom to trade with anyone you like on terms that are dictated only by the prices on the international market.

Teddy Sanchez: Not only for the freedom of trade, Mr. Walker. I believe that for many of us there are idealistic motives which are even more important. We are now a nation, a small nation, born here and forged with toil, with difficulty. It took more than three centuries. A nation, which originated from Portugal, but now is not a part of Portugal anymore, and that no longer wants to be a Portuguese colony.

Mr. Prada: That’s all quite correct, my dear Teddy. We all agree on the idealistic motives. But it’s the example of the whore that doesn’t convince me as yet, Mr. Walker. What will happen if once the Negro ceases to be a slave and, instead of wanting to be a worker, wants to be the boss?

WW: That’s exactly what will happen if we go on arguing about it. Four months ago, José Dolores was on the Sierra Madre with a few dozen men. Then he reached Sierra Trinidad with four or five hundred. Now there are thousands. Spreading through the lowlands. It is my view that if you don’t take immediate action, if you don’t weave yourselves into this revolt,

you'll be swept away. Then your ex-slaves, instead of becoming your workers, will not become your bosses, Mr. Prada, but your executioners.

WW: Now, what are my interests in the matter? And who am I? Very simply, I represent Her Britannic Majesty. A British agent, if you prefer. But actually, you know, England wants the same thing that you want—the freedom of trade and therefore an end to foreign domination in all of Latin America. But what England does not want, however, and what I think you yourselves do not want, are these revolutions carried to their extreme consequences. Men like José Dolores and Toussaint L'Ouverture are perhaps necessary to ignite a situation, but then after that, they become very dangerous, as in Haiti, for example.

Several voices in the room: Yes, you certainly have got a point there.

WW: So, gentlemen, as you can see, I think our interests coincide, at least for the moment, and they also coincide with progress and civilization. And for those who believe in it, it's important.

Mr. Prada: And you? Do you believe in it, Mr. Walker?

WW: Yes, Mr. Prada, I do.

2. 00:47:24 From fighting a revolution to governing

Immediately after winning independence from Portugal, there is a contest for power between the oligarchs and José Delores, who is backed by his rebel army. Delores stubbornly refuses to negotiate or give up power, so eventually he is forced out by economic realities and his inability to form a competent government.

WW: Who'll govern your island, José? Who'll run your industries? Who'll handle your commerce? Who'll cure the sick? Teach in your schools? This man? Or that man? Or the other? Civilization is not a simple matter, José. You cannot learn its secrets overnight. Today civilization belongs to the white man, and you must learn to use it. Without it, you cannot go forward.

José Dolores (JD): But to go where, Inglês? It is better that you, too, go away.

[Inglês (Englishman) is José's nickname for Walker.]

3. 00:59:50 A century in a decade

Ten years pass and the government of Quiemada has been unable to improve the lives of peasants, or more importantly, allow them to govern themselves. José Delores has amassed another rebel army that has fought a long insurgency by making sporadic attacks then retreating to mountain hideouts. William Walker has been contracted again as a military advisor, sanctioned by the British government and the Queimada government, and paid by Royal Sugar. He reminds his clients that the world can change very little over a century then change drastically in a short period. Such was the case in 1848. His words are similar to Lenin's famous quote: "There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen." Or one might say that "when things fall apart, like boots and hearts, they really fall apart." Gradual decay, then sudden collapse.

WW: Ten years is a long time. It can be a very long time.

Mr. Prada: Even so, it's still only 10 years.

WW: No, I only want to explain, gentlemen, that very often, between one historical period and another ten years suddenly might be enough to reveal the contradictions of a whole century. And so, often we have to realize that our judgments and our interpretations, and even our hopes may have been wrong.

4. 01:05:48 Insurgency and Counter-insurgency

William Walker explains the necessity of waging all-out war in order to defeat the insurgency. Since the insurgents rely on non-combatant villagers to supply them, the villages must be destroyed, and the surviving inhabitants must be sent to refugee camps in the lowlands. The idealistic goals of the Republic of Quiemada are no longer in sight, and the idealistic mestizo leader Teddy Sanchez is no longer needed, either. The island simply belongs to the sugar barons now, and they cannot tolerate any compromise that will appease the revolutionaries. Teddy Sanchez is overthrown and put to death.

WW: Now we must realize, gentlemen, that if we are to succeed in eliminating José Dolores, it's not because we're better than he is or that we're braver than he is. It's simply because we have more arms and more men than he has. And we must also realize that the soldier either fights to earn his pay or because his country forces him to do so. But the guerrilla, on the other hand, fights for an idea. And therefore he's able to produce 20, 30, 50 times as much. Is that clear?

Mr. Prada: No, Sir William, I don't agree.

WW: No? Well, I think it's a rather simple calculation. What does a guerrilla have to lose, except his life? Whereas you, General, have a lot to lose: Wife, children, house, career, savings, personal pleasures and private aspirations, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. That's simply the way of it. Now, according to your information, José Dolores has less than 100 men, few arms, very little ammunition, and no equipment. But you have thousands of soldiers and modern arms and equipment. And yet, in six years, you've not been able to defeat him. Why? Because their bases are here on the Sierra Madre. And on the Sierra Madre, there's no possibility of survival. There's not a tree, not a blade of grass, and the only animals are vipers and scorpions. And yet, in the last six years, it is here that the guerrillas have made their headquarters. You see, up here, on the peaks of these mountains there are a handful of small villages. Now, these people are destitute with subhuman living standards, and they haven't anything to lose, either. The guerrillas are their only hope. Now, these villagers are the roots on which the guerrillas survive. They must be cut.

5. 01:22:41 We had to destroy everything to save everything

The scenes of the final scorched earth campaign against the rebels reminded audiences of the brutal raids on Vietnamese villages, the chemical-weapons defoliation of Vietnam, and the "the apocryphal commander in the Vietnam War" who said, "We had to destroy the village in order to save the village."²

Mr. Shelton: So there are no more plantations, they're all burnt to the ground.

WW: They'll rise again.

Mr. Shelton: In 10 years, Sir William.

WW: Well, you have another 89 years to exploit them. Renewable. Doesn't your contract specify that?

Mr. Shelton: Your contract specifies that you are to defend our interests. Instead, you're destroying them.

WW: Well, that's the logic of profit, isn't it, my dear Shelton? One builds to make money. And to go on making it, or to make more, sometimes it's necessary to destroy. Yes, I think perhaps it's inevitable.

Mr. Shelton: Then why didn't you say so before?

WW: Well, why didn't I say what?

Mr. Shelton: Where is it going to end?

WW: As I told you, with the end of José Dolores.

Mr. Shelton: At this price, it's no longer profitable.

WW: It isn't you who pays, or even Royal Sugar.

Soldier: Do you remember him? There is Tin-Tin, too, one of the old ones. But there is no José Dolores.

WW: And you're sorry?

Soldier: No. I wouldn't want to find him like this.

WW: Well, you might have thought of that before.

Soldier: No. I say as long as José Dolores lives, I have work, and good pay. Is it not the same for you?

WW: No, on the contrary, I work for an overall sum.

Mr. Shelton: I must report to London.

WW: Do that, Mr. Shelton.

Mr. Shelton: I'll tell them how things are.

WW: Yes, I hope so.

Mr. Shelton: I'll have to inform them that the island has been completely burnt and José Dolores has once again broken through the encirclement.

WW: Tell them that, Mr. Shelton. And tell them also that you make me sick.

Mr. Shelton: Sir William!

WW: Do you know why this island is called Queimada? Because it was already burnt once, and do you know why? Because even then, it was the only way to conquer the resistance of the people, and after that, the Portuguese exploited the island in peace for nearly 300 years.

Mr. Shelton: Yes, but I was merely trying...

WW: You know that fire can't cross the sea because it goes out. But certain news, certain ideas travel by ships' crews. Have you any idea how many islands there are on which Royal Sugar has concessions? You should know. And have you the vaguest notion of what would happen to our employers if the example of José Dolores reached those islands?

WW: Mr. Shelton, I don't know. I'm not just quite sure what I'm doing here. Money is important, but then my salary is small compared to yours. Therefore, it's less important. I'm also not sure just why I do what I'm doing. Perhaps it's only for the pleasure of it. Or perhaps I'm unable to do anything else. Perhaps I've nothing else to do, but I do know that whenever I try to do something, I try to do it well. And to see it clearly and through to the end. Do you understand?

6. 01:28:45 Manipulations of Empire

This passage serves as a good synopsis of the story as it comes to its conclusion. Toward the end of the story Walker seems to be troubled by taking stock of what he has accomplished, but it is not clear that he truly regrets the way he has spent his life. When he is ready to depart the island, he is confident and unguarded as he walks to his ship. His assassin, posing as an obsequious porter, takes him completely by surprise.

WW: That's José Dolores... A fine specimen, isn't he? You know, it's an exemplary story. In the beginning he was nothing. A porter, a water carrier. And England makes him a revolutionary leader, and when he no longer serves her, he's put aside. And when he rebels again, more or less in the name of those same ideals which England has taught him, England decides to eliminate him. Don't you think that's a small masterpiece?

Military officer: And you're the author, Sir William.

WW: No, only the instrument.

7. 01:29:30 Revolutions yet to come

Captured and facing death, José speaks with his captors, black soldiers of the republican army.

JD: No, it is not true that fire destroys everything. A little life always remains. Yet in the end, a blade of grass. So how come the white invaders win? How come they win in the end? Someone of us will always remain. Still others will be born later. And others, too, will begin to understand. In the end, you also will understand. And the whites, in the end, will be maddened by you. Maddered than a white beast becomes when he finds he's closed in, and the mad beast will run for the last time, pursued and hunted all over the island until he falls into one of the great fires that he himself has made. And the groans from this dying beast will become our first cry of freedom. One that will be heard far, far beyond this island.

WW: Come on. Get ready. We're going back. War was unavoidable, José. Thanks to heaven that you and I remained alive. You know, it's inevitable that someone has to lose. In this

case, it was inevitably you. Otherwise, how could I have won? I see that you've lost everything, including power of speech.

8. 01:37:53 Martyrdom?

Now that José Dolores has been captured, the government has a problem. If he is put to death, he will become a martyr, in which case revolution may spread to other islands where Royal Sugar has plantations. Thus they decide to offer José Dolores a payoff and a chance to live in exile. He refuses their offer.

WW: Well, all that remains now is to settle what to do with him.

Mr. Prada: Well, let's see, we certainly can't use the garrote. It's too reminiscent of Portugal. Either we shoot him, as we did Teddy Sanchez, or we hang him as you do in England. All things considered, hanging is better. It's more solemn.

Mr. Shelton: More definite.

Mr. Prada: Right.

WW: Right. But you see the man that fights for an idea is a hero. And a hero who is killed becomes a martyr, and a martyr immediately becomes a myth. A myth is more dangerous than a man because you can't kill a myth. Don't you agree, Mr. Shelton? I mean, think of his ghost running through the Antilles. Think of the legends and the songs.

Mr. Shelton: Better songs than armies.

WW: Better silence than songs.

Mr. Prada: And that is?

WW: A hero that betrays is soon forgotten.

Mr. Prada: Well, we'll have to see if he's willing to betray.

WW: Well, now let's see, against whom did José Dolores rebel? Against Teddy Sanchez. And you, General, have eliminated Teddy Sanchez. Now that, I think, that gives you a position in common. See, there's the beginning of a rationale which I think José Dolores could make public without too much shame.

Mr. Shelton: Do you think he will do it?

WW: Would you do it in his place?

Mr. Shelton: Me? For God's sake, Sir William. I would do anything to stay alive. But, José Dolores?

WW: You can't tell what a man will do to stay alive. Until you put him to the test, you'll really never know.

Mr. Prada: Yes, as long as he leaves Queimada.

Mr. Shelton: And the Antilles, General.

Mr. Prada: And the Antilles, Mr. Shelton. Will you see to it?

WW: I am finished, General. This is your duty.

9. 01:45:35 Dying Message

JD: Inglês! Remember what you said? Civilization belongs to whites. But what civilization, and till when?

Notes

1 Marlon Brando, *Songs My Mother Taught Me* (Random House, 1995), 320.

2 Stephen L. Carter, "[Destroying a Quote's History in Order to Save It](#)," *Bloomberg*, February 10, 2018.