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# The Social Aspects of Brazilian Cinema

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## The Dyadic Relations Between Art and Society and its Ramifications in the Retomada Movement

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Although an important trend throughout film history, especially in the developed countries, the usage of cinema as political propaganda has dissipated with time, and it is currently almost restricted to the documentary format. However, the fictional productions from underdeveloped countries can still be broadly regarded as a political statement, as a result of the unstable political and sociological aspects of third world countries. So broadly, it even has its own term. *Third Cinema*<sup>1</sup> was used by filmmaker Glauber Rocha to depict the audiovisual production in most developing countries, which continually struggling through economic and political crises, which strives for a sense of national identity and asserts a desire to battle foreign oppression through cultural expression<sup>2</sup>.

Many stages of Brazilian cinema can be traced back to a search for two interconnected forms of liberation: the search for a true national identity and the attempt to conquer a national audience. The accomplishments and failures of Brazilian film waves, as well as their narratives and aesthetics, are completely intertwined with the political movements that the country has underwent.

This correlation is in part connected to the fact that national cinema consistently relied heavily on the state's support for its existence. Such dependence exists partly due to the fact that Brazilian national cinema is almost entirely financed through state incentives, either direct or indirect. But less tangible issues of state politics towards culture have also played a special part. The most evident example is the censorship laws of the dictatorial government of Brazil from 1964 until 1985, however, as I will depict below, all Brazilian cinema's successes and failures seem to be shaped by the history of the country itself. The opposite however, has not always occurred. Brazilian cinema has only in a few rare cases been successful in effecting social and political changes, either due to the lack of political engagement, the incapacity to dialogue with the Brazilian public, or just the impossibility of reaching the public altogether in the case of the dictatorial censorship.

### **BRAZILIAN MOVEMENTS: POLITICS AND CULTURE**

Like other Latin American countries, the democratizing Brazilian state faced a military coup in the sixties. In 1964, Brazilian forces overthrew Brazilian democratic government in a military coup. The dictatorial government ruled for two decades, enforcing varying degrees of repression. Combined with a forward thinking policy of development, the moments of softer censorship led to the strange contradiction that some of the most successful productions of national cinema were released during the dictatorship era.

In relation to aesthetics, *Cinema Novo* was the most socially engaged and important cinematic movement in Brazil. Beginning prior to the coup and surviving during the first years of the dictatorship when the censorship still allowed political allegories, this movement can be placed within an international trend of film modernism - with the French Nouvelle Vague and the New American Cinema.<sup>3</sup> It is marked by a strong defense of populist values, but also by the creation of a true national

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<sup>1</sup> Term *Tercer Cine* borrowed from Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's "Hacia Un Tercer Cine".

<sup>2</sup> Rocha, Glauber. "The Tricontinental Filmmaker: That Is Called The Dawn" *Brazilian Cinema* (London, Toronto: Associated University Presses Inc., 1992.) 76-80.

<sup>3</sup> Mogadouro, Cláudia, "A ditadura militar e a censura no cinema", *NET Educação*, April, 01 2014. <http://neteducacao.com.br/noticias/home/a-ditadura-militar-e-a-censura-no-cinema>

cinematographic language. However *Cinema Novo* was indeed terminated by the subsequent stronger cultural repression, the political tensions which instigate the *coup d'etat* was the same matrix that fed the narratives of these movies.<sup>4</sup>

In relation to market, and more directly connected with the military policies, the period was also marked by the creation of the first state owned film distribution company. One of the main concerns of the dictatorship was in removing the underdevelopment status of Brazil, especially focusing in modernizing the country. These policies had implications for television and cinema development. *Embrafilmes*, for instance, was a very forward-thinking model of distribution structured and financed by the state. Operating as an independent public institution, Embrafilmes operated supporting production and commercializing national films based on the commercial potential of the projects.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence Embrafilmes was indeed very successful in enlarging the market share of Brazilian films. It was remarkable however for the legacy of political detached productions with little to no dialogue to Brazilian reality at the time.

But as paradoxical as the dictatorship investments in culture may be, it is the developments for the film industry in the redemocratization era which cause more concern. After the last military dictator in 1985, Brazil transitioned to an indirect elected president and in 1989 held its first direct elections since the coup in 1964. Ironically, it was in this moment of redemocratization that Brazilian cinema was essentially brought to extinction. Newly elected President Fernando Collor de Mello had the challenge of reconstructing Brazilian economy after the critical legacy of the dictatorship era. His government used the same strategy implemented by the military of relying on foreign financing to develop an industrial country, which ultimately increased Brazil's international debt and deepened the national economic crisis. President Collor eventually faced an impeachment process that led to him resigning from office in 1992<sup>6</sup>. But the effects in Brazilian films were already felt as the industry released only twelve national films from 1991 to 1994.

From the successful box offices of the 70s and 80s with *Embrafilmes* to the almost complete extinguishing of Brazilian production with President Collor, an important gap was opened in the national market which was successfully filled by international productions. Because of the increase in international cinema in Brazil, in 1993, the newly elected president, Itamar Franco, implemented the Audiovisual Law - the most important financial source for audiovisual production up to today - and other policies to stimulate the film industry. The main concern of the filmmakers was to regain their audience.

## 1990s: RETOMADA MOVEMENT AND ITS UNFOLDING

In order to regain the Brazilian public, many films in the 1990s embodied crowd pleasing comedic characteristics, usually the adaptations of acclaimed literature or the portrayal of public figures. However, a new generation of directors, many of them coming from the documentary tradition, conquered the Brazilian box office during the following decade with a very different approach<sup>7</sup>.

While sometimes understood as a transition period from the years of struggle to the period of stability for the national film industry, the *Retomada movement* (or *Brazilian Renaissance*) is understood by most academics as movies produced by young directors between 1995 and 2005, which embodied

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<sup>4</sup> Mogadouro, Cláudia, "A ditadura militar e a censura no cinema", *NET Educação*, April, 01 2014. <http://neteducacao.com.br/noticias/home/a-ditadura-militar-e-a-censura-no-cinema>

<sup>5</sup> Dennison, Stephanie and Lisa Shaw, *Popular Cinema in Brazil: 1930-2001* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 171-173.

<sup>6</sup> Bount, Jeb & Long, William R, "Brazil President Resigns in Wake of Impeachment", *LA Times*, December 30, 1992. Accessed on November 20, 2016. [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-12-30/news/mn-2585\\_1\\_vice-president](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-12-30/news/mn-2585_1_vice-president)

<sup>7</sup> Names as Walter Salles, Fernando Meireles, José Padilha, Eduardo Coutinho, Karim Ainouz and Jorge Furtado are among the most distinguished directors of the *Retomada*.

the esthetics of social realism and spoke to issues of social engagement and poverty. The most distinguished characteristics were shooting on real locations, incorporation of Brazilian culture and the oral tradition of its people, while maintaining the point of view of the observer.

The *Retomada* (which means literally “to take back”) is praised for successfully elevating Brazilian film's market-share from 3% in 1995 to the stable 12%-14% market-share that Brazilian cinema maintains today<sup>8</sup>. It is precisely this prestige that marks the first important aspect of these films. Never before had Brazil experienced a movement that produced films that were both critically acclaimed and box office hits. To this regard, they were the first *crossover*<sup>9</sup> productions (films which can achieve at the same time large audiences and the critics acclamation) established in terms of a collective movement. Films produced in the *Retomada* movement invoked critical messages, and therefore resonated with their audiences, provoking debate and social awareness that went beyond the dimensions of the work of art itself.

Since the post-Collor era of economic recession and lack of national pride, Brazil underwent a long journey of political and social awakening. This journey has been well documented and most likely shaped, by the national cinema. Some interesting aspects can be traced in the dyadic relationship between the society undergoing changes and the films which reflect this changing society.

Two films illustrate our understanding of this dyadic relationship with their thematic similarities and opposition in time. One, released in 1998, is among the first productions of the *Retomada*. The other is a contemporary film of 2015, directed by what can be called the second generation of directors since the national cinema rebirth. *Central do Brasil* (1998) and *Que Horas Ela Volta?* (2015) both highlight the symbol of the mother and the conflicts of generations between parents and sons, both metaphorically and figuratively. Both films tell stories deeply connected to their periods and the issues of inequality.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the narrative aspects, these films are relevant because they are examples of crossover films, which have stood out as special exceptions in terms of social and political reach and have raised countless debates among the media and society which continues today. While both films were accessible enough to reach their audiences (which was made possible by using comic relief and casting a known actress for the starring role), the narratives did so without compromising the political message and the social engagement of the artwork. The analysis of both films attempt to condense the dyadic relations between art and society during the Brazilian redemocratization period.

### **CENTRAL DO BRAZIL (Central Station, 1998)**

Directed by Walter Salles and released in 1998, *Central do Brasil* (Central Station) is a French-Brazilian co-production. The film is one of the most well-regarded among Brazilian cinematography. The film portrays its contemporary reality (even including documentary-style images), a post-Collor society, poor and illiterate, with no expectations and no hope after the decay of the “economic miracle.” We are not introduced to an epic historical account. Rather, we follow the individual tale of the mediocre Dora (played by the Brazilian star Fernanda Montenegro): a retired teacher who has to work odd jobs to make ends meet. Her work writing letters for the illiterate puts her in a special position to help her community, but Dora (as a reflection of the society) is unable to empathize because she has lost faith in collective solutions. The analogy of the film seems to be that the Brazilian people - overloaded with international cultural allusions and left with no Brazilian references - lost their sense of identity.

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<sup>8</sup> Borges, Danielle Dos Santos, “A Retomada Do Cinema Brasileiro: Análise Da Indústria Cinematográfica Nacional De 1995 a 2005”, (Master's thesis, Treball De Recerca - Universitat Autònoma De Barcelona, 2007) 11-12.

<sup>9</sup> The term *crossover* is used to define a film which can achieve at the same time large audiences and the critics acclamation.

<sup>10</sup> Nagib, Lúcia. *New Brazilian Cinema* (London, New York: I. B.Tauris & Co. Ltda., 2003), 62.

One unique aspect of *Central do Brasil* is the introduction of the *neo-feminist* values before its spread as a social movement in Brazil. Feminism of the 1990s is currently in vogue, reassessing the pragmatic sexist issues raised by previous generations such as work equality and sexual liberation, but expanding to more conceptual discussion regarding acceptance and the role of women in society. But before these discussions were widespread, in *Central Station*, Dora's path was not only to reconnect with the community, but to find herself as a woman, take leadership as master of her own destiny and accept her female traits not as weakening her but rather empowering her.

The counterpoint to the female protagonist is also a long-suffering character, Josué. Played by a non-professional actor, he is a boy without a father who loses his mother in the first sequence of the film. He is a member of and at the same time represents the lower class: a sub-human with no place to go, no means to stay and who is invisible to the masses. While searching for his father, Dora and Josué join forces in a journey that reconnects them with the Brazilian essence: a romanticized allegory which secured one of the biggest audiences of all times.

It is important to stress that joining forces is not easy for either of them. After being hurt and oppressed, both of them want to make it on their own, even at the expense of the other. This is perfect synthesis of a dissatisfied society where a sense of community has been displaced by a sense of opportunity.

The lack of an elite in the film is a symbol in itself. It implies that the upper classes and the government do not see the poor, which is why the poor have learned to accept this reality. The narrative, ending in an optimistic tone, sends a clear message that a reconnection between the Brazilian people is imminent, necessary and will happen despite the lack of support from the upper classes.

Although the film did not directly change society, the media's reaction to the film showed how the film acted as a trigger for a heated discussion about underdevelopment in the country and its systemic poverty.

The lower classes portrayed on film were unlikely to recognize themselves, due to Salles' romanticized realism. However, for those who did not have access to these images of poverty (the middle and upper classes) such images had great impact. The Brazilian ten per cent (the wealth in Brazil is divided 90% to 10% of its population and 10% to the other 90%) was astonished and ashamed of such images. The elites became aware of something they knew but did not acknowledge. And though the elites' absence from the film was a target of many critics, they are not being represented because they really are not participating in the issues portrayed by the film. The upper classes had no interest to debate or to assist in these issues of poverty. Therefore, the absence of an elite is linked to the articulations that led to the individualism and community detachment of the characters in the film.

The increased awareness of the misery of the country, is not consequence of the existence of *Central do Brasil*, but the film did contribute to the debate on the subject. This acknowledgment of society was crucial for the changes that took place in 2004. In 2003 Brazil elected a populist president, Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva. He was embraced by the people but also largely welcomed by the elites. Among all policies regarding redistribution of wealth, Lula was particularly known by the implementation of the internationally recognized *Bolsa Família*.

*Bolsa Família* is the Brazilian welfare program which successfully decreased hunger by half in Brazil by the first decade of its implementation. The pioneer initiative was originally designed during the second term of President Fernando Enrique Cardoso, from 2001 to 2004, with the intention of relieving hunger among families living below the poverty line<sup>11</sup>. It was however the populist President Lula that expanded the reach of the program, determining the new goal of eradicating hunger in the

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<sup>11</sup> Azevedo, Reinaldo, "Mas, afinal de contas, quem criou o Bolsa Família? Resposta: foi FHC! Afirmer que foi Lula é fraudar a história", *Veja*, October 15, 2014. Accessed on November 20, 2016. <http://veja.abril.com.br/blog/reinaldo/geral/mas-afinal-de-contas-quem-criou-o-bolsa-familia-resposta-foi-fhc-afirmar-que-foi-lula-e-fraudar-a-historia/>

country during his term, and renaming it *Fome Zero*. During the eight years of his two terms, Lula unified this and other benefits under the umbrella "*Bolsa Família*", which aimed at the same target group.<sup>12</sup> An example is the Bolsa Escola, which attempted to eradicate illiteracy and child work in the younger generations by offering a monetary compensation to poor families who had their children enrolled in school.

Ten years into this program, we can see an important change in terms of education. The concentration of wealth has traditionally been linked to the concentration of knowledge, and thought it is far from being dissolved, but the gap has decreased. The new generation of the lower classes is more academically educated and, as a consequence, more politically aware than ever. It is in this context that *Que Horas Ela Volta* emerges, addressing the sparked discussion of "redistribution of knowledge".

### QUE HORAS ELA VOLTA? (The Second Mother, 2015)

Released in a different context than *Central do Brasil*, the film portrays a lower-class family who has been positively impacted by the century's social changes and who's economic situation has largely improved. Val is played by the ambassador of Brazilian popular classes on TV, Regina Casé. Casé plays a middle-aged woman who has been working as a nanny/housekeeper for the same family for many years. She appears to have a good life running the house and sending money to help with her child's education.

But the arrival of her biological daughter to São Paulo, with whom Val has never developed a relationship, shakes the structure of the delicate balance between housekeeper and homeowners. The daughter Jessica, similar to Josué in *Central do Brasil*, represents the next generation. In this case, the film depicts an educated young woman with high expectations who is not content with economic security alone. Jessica exposes the inequality of the oppressive relationship between the employee (Val) and the employer (the rich housewife). Jessica mirrors the new generation of educated lower classes in their increasing awareness that money alone does not change the hierarchical status. Having fulfilled their basic needs, the people have to demand equal treatment<sup>13</sup>.

Disguised as a part-of-the-family treatment of the house worker, the film points out the elites' superficial discourse of a well-integrated society, as they refer to Val - their maid - as part of the family, while in reality, there is still an invisible wall that excludes from the living room those who *belong* in the kitchen. *Que Horas Ela Volta's* biggest triumph is the subtlety and accuracy in which it depicts the informal working relations that deprive workers of their rights, making them susceptible to abuse.

Regarding feminism, the female director, Anna Muylaert, took a radical position in using a predominantly female cast, which has been repeated throughout the Brazilian *neo feminist* movement. Along with the director and the cinematographer being women, the film is led by three female characters. The men in this film are only decorative. In the film, women do the work, dictate the rules and help other women. In short, they are self-sufficient. They continue to be strong in the face of class oppression, as they are somewhat beyond gender oppression.

Although *Que Horas Ela Volta* is a much more restricted film in terms of format due to its arthouse style, the discussion about feminism and how elites treat workers has appealed to critics and to audiences, helping the film achieve box office success beyond the expectations of a typical arthouse film. The issues generated were reverberated throughout social media, which accounts for a very

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<sup>12</sup> Azevedo, Reinaldo, "Mas, afinal de contas, quem criou o Bolsa Família? Resposta: foi FHC! Afirmar que foi Lula é fraudar a história", *Veja*, October 15, 2014. Accessed on November 20, 2016. <http://veja.abril.com.br/blog/reinaldo/geral/mas-afinal-de-contas-quem-criou-o-bolsa-familia-resposta-foi-fhc-afirmar-que-foi-lula-e-fraudar-a-historia/>

<sup>13</sup> Pires, Flavia F. and Walquiria G. L. Rego, "10 Years Of Bolsa Família Program: introducing the Dossier?" *Revisits de Ciências Sociais* 38 (April 2013): 18-19, <http://periodicos.ufpb.br/ojs/index.php/politicaetrabalho/article/view/15178/9375>

special event. *Que Horas Ela Volta* might be the first Brazilian hit during the wave of smartphones and participant media. The message travelled fast, through multiple platforms and connected to the individual experiences of the bloggers, vloggers, or the general public through social media commentaries. The shock of the film's subject matter was so intense, that we can still see its reverberations on the current political movements in Brazil.

## CONCLUSIONS: NEW SCENARIOS AND NEW POSSIBILITIES

With the current impeachment of the left-wing, female president, Dilma Rouseff, history seems to be continuing where *Que Horas Ela Volta* ended. Just as in *Central do Brasil*, Muylaert's feature also has an optimistic and somewhat romanticized outcome in which the oppressed class is finally freed from slave-like conditions. The political changes in Brazil, on the other hand, show us a different outcome.

The recent coup-like impeachment of President Rouseff was a result of corruption scandals and economic mismanagement affecting all sectors of government power, starting with the national oil-company Petrobras<sup>14</sup> and going all the way to the Supreme Court<sup>15</sup>. Neither the corruption or the crisis are new trends in Brazil, and are similar circumstances to the impeachment in the 1990s. But in a society of political awakening, conquering basic rights and fighting for the social rights of the lower classes, it is surprising to have a populist leader stealing from the population. The social expressions of the population show a very positive evolution from the detached and disillusioned society in the 90s, to politicized middle and upper classes who take to the streets to express their passions, as well as a lower class who is starting to stand up for themselves as equals. On the other hand, with the current corruption investigations of Lava Jato targeting populist leaders combined with the rise of the Conservative party, the masses are disillusioned. Unable to rely on the current government, as they are aware that the government will only take care of the elite needs, the recent scandals make it hard to believe another alternative is available.

Based on the low numbers of voter turnout (in a country where voting is mandatory) combined with the amount of null votes cast in the 2016 elections<sup>16</sup>, it seems as if politics today is losing its appeal for a large share of the population and only the radical political groups of extreme left and right are remaining engaged. With that, the new social trends in Brazil seem to be headed to a political apartheid where groups are so radically opposed that dialogue is no longer possible. The new film productions will show if Brazilian artists will reinforce this radical trend or if they will take a step back to reassess this new context in order to find ways of using art to propose different approaches to the political revolution.

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<sup>14</sup> Fuentes, Esther, "Understanding the Petrobras Scandal", *COHA*, April 7, 2016. Accessed on November 20, 2016, <http://www.coha.org/understanding-the-petrobras-scandal/>

<sup>15</sup> Bergamo, Mônica, "Além de Toffoli, outros dois ministros do STF foram investigados pelo MPF", *Folha de São Paulo*, August 25, 2016. Accessed on November 20, 2016, <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/monicabergamo/2016/08/1806648-alem-de-toffoli-outros-dois-ministros-do-stf-foram-investigados-pelo-mpf.shtml>

<sup>16</sup> Caram, Bernardo and Renan Remalho : "Abstenções, votos brancos e nulos somam 32,5% do eleitorado do país", *G1*, October 30, 2016. Accessed on November 21, 2016, <http://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2016/noticia/2016/10/abstencoes-votos-brancos-e-nulos-somam-326-do-eleitorado-do-pais.html>