

On the brink of censorship

All internationally awarded Brazilian art movies discussed the deep roots of the country's social injustice, until Bolsonaro's far-right administration put an end to the cycle

Franthiesco Ballerini

Since the first short film was made by Italian immigrant Afonso Segretto in Guanabara's Bay, in Rio de Janeiro of 1898, Brazilian art cinema rarely lost the chance to put on screen the country's most terrifying problem: social injustice. But it was in the last 30 years that the theme gave Brazilian cinema its most important international awards. However, the election of the first far-right president since the 1984's country's redemocratization, Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022), put an end to one of the richest, prolific and internationally applauded eras of Brazilian cinema. Is it a definitive end? How responsible was the disastrous Bolsonaro's administration in the interruption of the process of international recognition of Brazilian art cinema? Is there any hope of rescuing this cycle with a new administration in 2023? The answers are not simple, but here are a few clues to get them.

A brief history of social injustice on Brazilian art film

There were two major cycles of Brazilian art cinema that got important attention by international festivals and audience: the New Cinema movement (1960-1972) and the period that began after the Retomada (Portuguese for Resumption, the return of the national production) of 1995. But even before these moments, Brazilian art cinema were able to put a very creative light on the subject of social injustice in memorable productions.

In the same Rio de Janeiro where Brazilian cinema was born, one of the first internationally known movies was 'Limite' (Portuguese for 'Border'), released in 1931 and directed by poet Mário Peixoto. The film got the admiration of filmmakers like Orson Welles, Sergei Eisenstein and Georges Sadoul with its experimental techniques, inspired by surrealism in the way it conducts the editing and the cinematography, signed by famous photographer Edgar Brazil. And it's in his images that the first artistic approach to social injustice can be seen, by the ruined landscape of Rio de Janeiro,

representing the collapse of an economic system decades before the growth of the favelas and before Rio was replaced by Brasília, in 1960, as the capital of the country.

With the first Brazilian dictatorship period taking place, known as Estado Novo (New State), from 1937 to 1945, patriotic films, celebrating the country's glorious past, and also anticommunism propaganda, took place in movie theaters. Along with that, popular comedies, known as Chanchadas, were the very first time Brazilian movie industry could compete with Hollywood movies in the preference of the audiences in movie theaters. With simple and, sometimes, superficial scripts, those comedies were able to criticize Brazilian social injustice without being censored. 'Nem Sansão, Nem Dalila' (Portuguese for 'Neither Samson nor Delilah'), from 1954, starring Oscarito, Brazilian comedy superstar, makes fun of the president and former dictator, Getúlio Vargas, and his decisions of centralizing food supply in a Rio suffering from severe supply rationing. 'Minervina vem aí' (Portuguese for 'Minervina is coming'), from 1959, brings another comedy superstar, Dercy Gonçalves, as a bumpkin housekeeper working for a rich lady of Copacabana neighborhood, whose jokes explicit the standardization of the enormous social inequality already dominating Brazilian big cities.

Social injustice was the background of the first internationally acclaimed Brazilian film. 'The Bandit' (1953), directed by Lima Barreto, won the International Prize for Adventure Film and Special Mention for actor Gabriel Migliori in Cannes Film Festival in 1953. The story is about Captain Galdino, the bandit who terrorizes poor villages in the dry jungles of the northeast region of Brazil, known as 'sertão', looting and killing with his armed gang. It was the biggest commercial success of Vera Cruz, the Brazilian attempt to establish a studio system like Hollywood. Abroad, it was the first time outside audiences could see the misery and abandonment of large regions of Brazil.

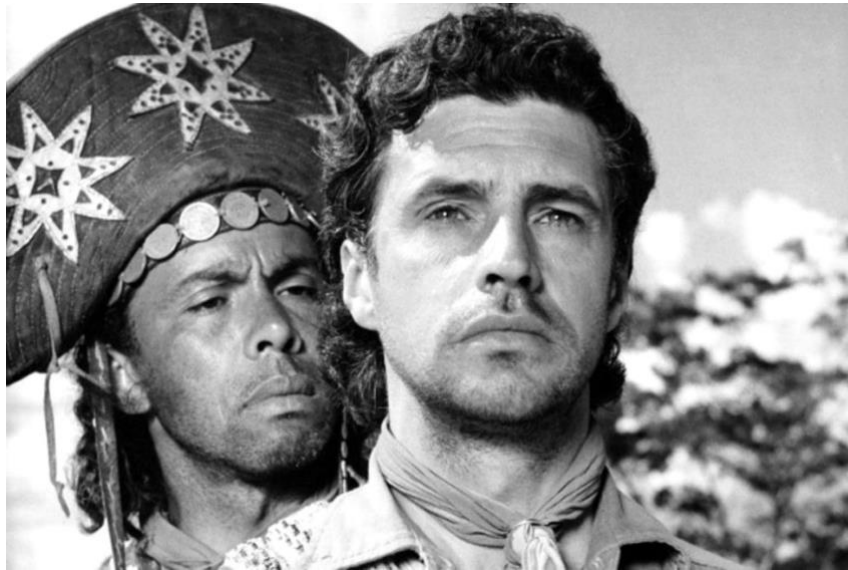


Image 1: 'The Bandit' (1953). Credit: Columbia Pictures

The same 'sertão' is where Eurídice escapes, the protagonist of 'Black Orpheus' (1959), directed by French filmmaker Marcel Camus, winner of the Best Foreign Film in the Academy Awards and Palm d'Or at Cannes Film Festival. But this time, the poverty background are the Rio's favelas, which began to expand back then. After the 'The Bandit' and 'Black Orpheus', it was clear that social injustice not only was be the most important theme in Brazilian art cinema, but also the one with most potential to attract international attention and awards.

And right before the birth the New Cinema Movement, Brazil wins a Palm d'Or at Cannes Film Festival with 'The Given Word' (1962), directed by Anselmo Duarte. With a much more commercial narrative, the movie's social inequality background comes in the mixture of ignorance, naivety and faith, when Zé do Burro (Leonardo Villar), a small landowner, promises to carry a cross all the way from the 'sertão' to Salvador, capital of Bahia estate, if the Candomblé orisha, lansan, heals his best friend, a donkey. Poor and ignorant, Zé do Burro is manipulated by the Roman Catholic Church and the newspaper journalists, calling him communist because of the promise to give away his land, ending in tragic ways.

The first and successful attempt at censorship

Brazilian New Cinema Movement (1960-1972) happened at the same time as French Nouvelle Vague and is the most important cinema movement of Latin America, studied in major universities around the world – American filmmaker Martin Scorsese

is a declared fan of Glauber Rocha's movies, saying that they influenced his career. What made the New Cinema Movement important and unique was the mission of movie critics and new filmmakers like Glauber Rocha, Cacá Diegues, Arnaldo Jabor, Roberto Santos, Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, Leon Hirszman and others to use cinema as a tool to discuss the roots of Brazilian underdevelopment situation, the base that explain the country's long social injustice. Most of the movement's movies discussed the theme under five roots that, according to them, sustains the underdevelopment situation. 1 - Politics: the corruption system that feeds inequality. 2 - Economy: all based on exporting commodities since the Portuguese invasion of 1500 and its colonization that lasted until 1822. 3 - Social: a slave society based on maintaining the privileges for white rich southern people in opposite of the very few indigenous that survived the colonization massacres and the now free slaves that have almost no political voice and economic power. 4 - Religion: mainly Roman Catholic, with its perverse alliance with the white elite along centuries, responsible for the annihilation of black and indigenous cultures. 5 - Culture: the anthropophagic Brazilian culture that swallows everything that comes from outside, never valuing its own internal culture, unless it's applauded in the North (Europe, the US).

Although the military coup that took place in 1964 established a dictatorship that lasted until 1984, the most inventive films were launched until 1968, when AI5 (Ato Institucional 5, Portuguese for Institutional Act 5) was established, excluding all social liberties and censoring the media and the arts.

Before AI5, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, the most experienced filmmaker in the beginning of the New Movement Cinema and known as the "Brazilian neorealist" director, launched 'Vidas Secas' (1963, Portuguese for 'Dry Lives'), based on the homonymous novel of the famous Brazilian writer Graciliano Ramos. The film was nominated for Palme d'Or and won the OCIC Award at Cannes Film Festival. The incredibly beautiful black & white cinematography illustrates the story of a family of migrants and their dog in the quest of survival in 'sertão', one of the driest and poorest regions of Brazil, while facing the brutality of the rich land owners.

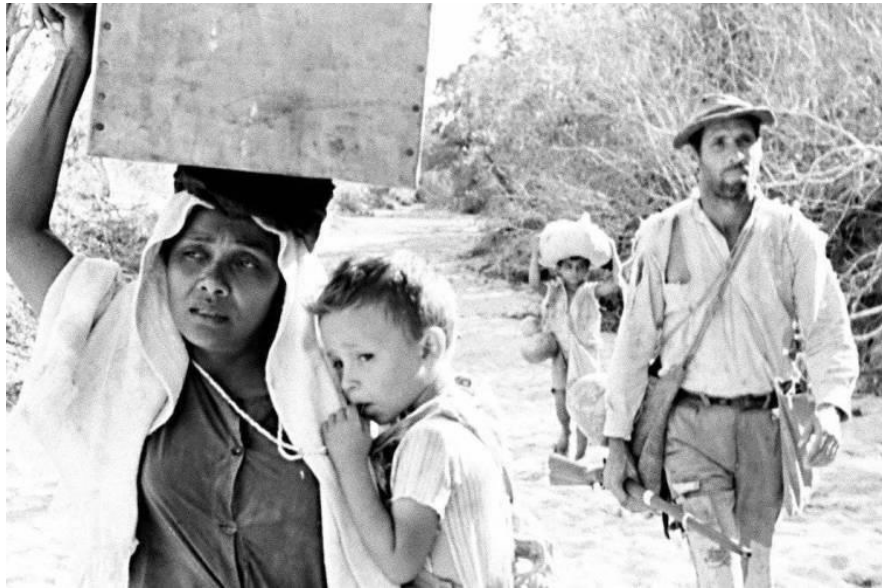


Image 2: 'Vidas Secas' (1963). Credit: Distr. de Filmes Sino Ltda.

Glauber Rocha, New Movement Cinema's most famous director, won the Grand Prix of Locarno International Film Festival with his 'Entranced Earth' (1967), the story of the Republic of Eldorado (the imaginary but very real Brazil) and its cruel alliances among conservative political leaders, Roman Catholic church, aristocrats and journalists that sustains social injustice. Glauber was elected Best Director at Cannes Film Festival in 1969 with his 'Antonio das Mortes', the story of a group of impoverished peasant mystics gathered in Brazilian sertão joined in veneration of Saint George and seeking revenge for the death of Lampião, a cangaceiro (bandit) martyr. The movie brings acid critic in characters like the corrupt police chief and the land owner colonel running the destiny of poor and ignorant population.

The Institutional Act 5 was a fatal blow in Brazilian art cinema and its attempt to reflect and discuss the country's social injustice roots. After 1968, filmmakers sought international asylum and the movie industry slowly began to focus on commercial films based on famous television programs or literary adaptation of great Brazilian writers. Of course, there were exceptions, like Rogério Sganzerla's 'The Red Light Bandit' (1968), which creatively circumvented the censorship by criticizing social injustice under the story of a famous real bandit of São Paulo who used peculiar techniques to rape and kill his victims. But none of the movies made under the censorship period were able to get the same international acclaim as of during in the first years of the New Movement Cinema. And that situation lasted until the end of the 1980's, when a second blow strangled art cinema once and for all.

The second attempt at censorship: the liberal president

Before 1989, no one have ever heard about Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil. However, he was the one who won the first democratic election after the long period of dictatorship. Young and handsome, he beat Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on the pools with the help of major media conglomerates like TV Globo, which years later publicly admitted to have edited the last presidential debate in favor of Collor.

The new president happily implemented a neoliberal administration in 1990, based on the ideology of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher of laissez-faire, tax cut and supply-side economics. The government caught the base industry off guard and most of clothing and shoe industries went bankrupt years later. As for culture, Collor implemented the same neoliberal ideology. He thought that art cinema, plays, exhibition and literature should freely compete with international products. As a result, he decided to close the Ministry of Culture. And for the first time in decades, Brazilian movie industry collapsed, since it depended on federal funds and incentives to compete with Hollywood productions in movie theaters, like in most countries around the globe. Zero films were made during the first years of the 1990's. Luckily, Fernando Collor resigned in 1992 to avoid impeachment due to corruption accusations. And slowly, with the reinstatement of the Ministry of Culture by president Itamar Franco and important acts like Rouanet Law, who provided monetary funds for use in art and culture based on the deduction of a portion of income tax, Brazilian art cinema started to reborn.

The Retomada (Resumption) of Brazilian movie industry

As a direct result of federal administration that created laws to bring back the movie industry, Brazilian cinema recovered the international attention for the second time in history, with movies that captivated audiences and awards all over the world with stories that went deep into the countries social injustice systems.

Walter Salles' 'Central Station' (1998), nominated for Best Actress (Fernanda Montenegro) and Best Foreign Film in the Academy Awards and winner of Golden Berlin Bear in Berlin International Film Festival, is a heart touching road movie about a poor and lonely woman who decides to take and abandoned boy to his parents in the 'sertão', after his mother dies run over by a bus in downtown Rio. With a 10 minutes standing ovation in Berlin Festival, the movie was also a commercial hit in Brazil, reoxygenating movie theaters with art films that also have great public appeal.



Image 3: 'Central Station' (1998). Credit: VideoFilmes

The birth of Rio's favelas and the extreme social inequalities were the background of 'City of God', Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund movie nominated for four Oscars (Best Director, Best Writing in Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography and Best Film Editing). A huge commercial success and with 74 victories in movie festivals, the film deepened a trend to discuss social injustice in urban centers, mixing the New Cinema Movement aesthetics with a more commercial narrative that had enormous impact in the industry.

'The Elite Squad' (2007), directed by José Padilha and winner of the Golden Bear at Berlin Film Festival, discussed the contemporary dramas of Rio's favelas, based on facts and narrated by BOPE (Special Police Operations Battalion of Rio de Janeiro Military Police) Captain Roberto Nascimento (played by Wagner Moura), who explains the illegals liaisons between drug lords and Rio's military police force.

'Bacurau' (2019) and 'The Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão' (2019) were the last Brazilian art movies that got a significant international appeal and awards. 'Bacurau' was directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles and winner of the Jury Prize of Cannes Film Festival. The movie reshapes New Movement Cinema aesthetics with a more commercial narrative, revolving around a homonymous fictional impoverished rural settlement in Brazilian sertão, where strange events happen after the death of an elderly woman. Behind the adventurous narrative, the directors criticize the social disparity between the northeast and the southeast of Brazil, the corruption schemes of politicians, buying votes from poor people and the violence of foreigners against local people. Directed by Karim Aïnouz, 'The Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão' won the Un Certain Regard Award in Cannes Film Festival by discussing

social injustice around the invisibility of two sisters and their struggle against the repression and bigotry of Rio de Janeiro patriarchal 1950's.



Image 4: 'Bacurau' (2019). Credit: Vitrine Filmes

Those movies not only contributed to make Brazilian art cinema recognized for a second period of time in international audiences, but also boosted internal movie industry, which lived a prolific period from 1995 to 2018, with over 100 films released per year and an increase of market share participation to almost 25% in some years. As an indirect result, film colleges and production companies proliferated in the country. According to Motion Picture Association of Latin America (MPA-AL), Brazilian movie industry injected R\$ 19 billion in the economy per year, with an annual billing of R\$ 42,8 billion, generating 110 thousand direct jobs and over 120 thousand indirect jobs (Gazeta do Povo, 2014).

Of course, art movies are the smaller percentage of those numbers, but they are the ones that project Brazilian cinema overseas and generates rich discussions in public schools, universities, in the media and, as a consequence, in general society. But for this cycle to keep turning, censorship must never take place again. Unfortunately, censorship may come different shapes. Not in dictatorship governments nor neoliberal administration. But within ideologies.

Bolsonaro's era: ideology-based censorship

Jair Bolsonaro was not unknown as Fernando Collor before he was elected president. People knew him as the deputy who, during 27 years in Congress, approved only 2 projects, mostly because of the lack of quality of all the proposals. Elected

president in 2018 after an economic crisis that began in 2013 and led to the coup and impeachment of the first female president of the country, Dilma Rousseff, Jair Bolsonaro began his administration, in 2019, by dismantling the cultural area, eliminating the Ministry of Culture and blocking funds and project approvals of Ancine, the cinema national agency.

All his acts in the cultural area are direct reflects of the ideologies that made him win the election and become the first far-right president since the redemocratization of the 1980's. Internationally famous for his misogynist, homophobic and racist declarations, Bolsonaro's ideologies are based on the defense of the traditional (male-female) family, patriotism, conservatism, anticommunism, economic liberalism, Christian faith, fiercely opposing abortion, environmental regulations, immigration, drug liberalization and same-sex marriage.

Bolsonaro's ideologies never produced any major cultural hit, like movies, telenovelas or singers, although his 2019-2022 administration gave strong support for the second most powerful TV station of Brazil, TV Record, owned by Edir Macedo, evangelical bishop and founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, for which he became defendant for gang and laundering 2011. But instead, Bolsonaro was incredibly successful in asphyxiating movie industry and, as a consequence, art films that originally discussed national social injustices.

With budget cuts and ideological nominations for federal agencies, newspapers like French 'Le Monde' called it the worst crisis in Brazilian cinema (CartaCapital, 2020). Ancine, Cinema's National Agency, suffered from budget cuts of 43%, "paralyzed" with over 4 thousand projects of movies and TV series waiting for funding. Those cuts were not related to lack of money, but to oppose funding projects not aligned with Bolsonaro's ideologies, like LGBTQIA+ movies, called by his staff "pornographic movies". In January 2020, the Special Secretary of Culture, Roberto Alvim, was fired after appearing to quote a speech by German Nazi Joseph Goebbels in a government-sanctioned video.

The nature of the ideological censorship in Brazilian art cinema

Censorship came in different ways and formats during Brazilian art cinema history. Two long dictatorships and an unsuccessful neoliberal government damaged the enormous potential of filmmakers and artists to reflect on urgent matters like Brazilian social injustice, which manifests in the form of racism, violence against women and the

LGBTQIA+ community and the never-ending lack of significant investments in public education.

Bolsonaro succeeded with his ideological censorship in art cinema. The clear result of his achievement can be seen in his last two years of his administration. In 2021-2022, Brazilian art cinema didn't win any major award in international festivals like Cannes, Berlin, Venice, the Oscars, Sundance etc. And there were no exceptions. Aly Muritiba's 'Private Desert' (2021) won the People's Choice Award at Venice Film Festival with a story about an exemplar policeman who gets fired and fall in love by a mysterious Sara on the internet, only to find out, later, that she's a transvestite. His movie won Venice in 2021, but the project was funded in 2018, before Bolsonaro's administration, and was shot in 2019. It took two years to be released due to Covid-19 pandemic and the new political and economical scenario. When his film was released, Muritiba openly criticized the lack of planning and money for Brazilian movies on the run for major nominations like the Oscars.

Although international awards are just the tip of the iceberg of the movie industry, they also reflect the state of art, the cultural effervescence, the rich dynamics between filmmakers, movie critics, international and national audiences. Eduardo Scorel, movie editor from the New Cinema Movement, once said that "what historians call 'cycles' is nothing more than the time break, generally short, between great expectations and crisis that punctuate Brazilian movie history. It's an eternal start that lived positive expectations, later frustrated, in the 1970's, and that are still, once again, facing a terminal illness" (Scorel, 2005, p. 14). What he meant is that the absence of a lasting national project to support commercial and art cinema shortens the memory of Brazilian cinema history itself, not only because we are always trying to win back the audience, that has long been married to Hollywood movies in their daily habits, but also because art cinema is unable to project its quality to a broader, national and international audience without interruptions caused by different types of federal censorships.

The consequences of the ideological censorship established in Jair Bolsonaro's government will be long felt in movie industry, even if former president Lula wins the 2022 presidential elections in November, as election polls indicates. This is because the nature of the movie industry is all based on long-term projects, especially when it depends on public funds and incentives to compete with major productions like Hollywood's. It's common to hear from filmmakers that they have been working on

their films – from the argument to the distribution – for 10 years, a long-term dedication that necessarily needs, in parallel, federal long-term programs to support it.

But the most devastating consequence of the ideological censorship of Bolsonaro's era is the loss of confidence and support of Brazilian spectators, worsened by Covid-19 pandemic and the closing of numerous movie theaters around the country. According to polls, around 30% of the population supports Bolsonaro, who already referred to Rouanet Law – the most important national tool to promote the movie industry – as a “disgrace” that co-opted famous people and the artistic class into the “socialism that matters” (Exame, 2019). It's not difficult to find Brazilians from small to big cities saying, today, that there are no national movies on theaters and what's left are bad quality, favela or erotic productions not suitable for “families”. That social thought was common in the 1980's, at the end of the military dictatorship and federal abandonment in promoting art and commercial cinema. It took years – more precisely, from the Resumption of 1995 to 2002 – to change that mentality and bring large audiences to appreciate national cinema on movie theaters.

The nature of the ideological censorship in Brazilian art cinema by Bolsonaro is different from what has been seen during the military dictatorship. It's a constant bombing of fake news, impact phrases and lies that take place in traditional media and social media. And even if serious newspapers and magazines discredit them, the discredit itself keep them circulating and gathering support of part of the population, as if the adage “repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth”, often attributed to the Nazi Joseph Goebbels, works. The consequences can affect generations, dismantle all the cinema colleges and productions companies that were created after 1995, creating an inhospitable environment for commercial movies to reconquest larger audiences and art movies to freely and creatively reflect our most urgent social problems.

It's time to stop this cycle of lies, before the “illusion of truth” becomes a sad and irreversible reality for Brazilian art cinema.

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Note imagery

Image 1: ‘The Bandit’ (1953). Credit: Columbia Pictures

Image 2: ‘Vidas Secas’ (1963). Credit: Distr. de Filmes Sino Ltda.

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Image 4: ‘Bacurau’ (2019). Credit: Vitrine Filmes

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