

The Intellectual and Political Context of Brazilian *Cinema Novo*

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In the midst of the Cold War, a great many national cinemas — the majority of them in the shadow of the Hollywood industry — rebelled against the American aesthetic and economic model that was hindering the emergence of their own. In the countries of the socialist bloc, filmmakers rejected the dogma of socialist realism imposed in the Stalinist era and rediscovered the dynamism of 1920s Avant-gardes as well as Italian neorealism.

In Brazil, a former colony of Portugal, *Cinema Novo* was the name given to the equivalent movement. It emerged in the beginning of the 1960s during the presidency of Juscelino Kubitschek — known for his development policies and the construction of the new capital, Brasília. *Cinema Novo* defended the idea of a truly Brazilian cinema: decolonized, free from Hollywood's influences and from the imposition of (national or international) film industries. Inspired by similar European movements, the young Brazilian filmmakers — the *cinemanovistas* — fought for the freedom to create their own cinema, with their own aesthetics, telling their own stories, with their own resources, even if that meant producing 'poor' and 'ugly' films, as some critics would say.

Today recognized as Brazil's most important cinematic movement, *Cinema Novo* was also responsible for introducing Brazilian cinematography in the history of world cinema, in the context of new wave movements.

However, in order to achieve this status, future *cinemanovistas* had to walk a long path to see their dream of cultural decolonization legitimized both inside and outside Brazil. At that time, North American studios dominated the Brazilian film industry, especially with regard to distribution. The majority of the films screened in Brazilian theatres came from United States, and very few were national productions. Moreover, at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, there were no formal film schools in Brazil and very little equipment was available for those who wanted to stay out of the studios system. Young filmmakers therefore had to learn alone, accepting the risks of shooting with old cameras, no lighting equipment, no dollies, no cranes, no *Nagras*. Their only help

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came from cine-club sessions and classes organized by art museums or churches, where the filmmakers were exposed to new techniques and trends.

After the release of *Rio, 40 Graus* (1955), directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos — a low-budget production with neorealist traits, shot in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro with non-professional actors (including favela residents) — those future filmmakers began to believe that it was possible to produce quality films outside the film industry. More importantly, they also recognized the need to unite and organize as a movement, in order to declare their independence from the national and international film industries.

A first step was, of course, to make cinema: good films, or at least, those capable of being legitimized as such by the Brazilian *intelligentsia* in the beginning of the 1960s. Soon, the aspiring *cinemanovistas* realized that the best strategy to reach intellectuals from Brazil was to have their movement first legitimized by the Europeans, since the Brazilian cultural elite was still very much ‘colonized’ — as stressed by the critic Paulo Emilio Sales Gomes in the article ‘Uma situação colonial?’, in 1960.² In this way, the Old Continent would be able to raise global awareness that Brazil was capable of producing its own films.

How did this happen? Which steps did the *cinemanovistas* take in order to have their movement legitimized by the ‘first world’ *intelligentsia*, and subsequently by the Brazilian one, in very early 1960s? How did they organize, and who helped them?

Even though nowadays there is a plentitude of research and books on *Cinema Novo*, facilitating the work of scholars interested in its films and its filmmakers, there are still some doubts, questions and conflicting information regarding the formation of this cinematic movement, its films and its chronological boundaries.

In almost all the literature about the history of Brazilian cinema to date, two short films are identified as the precursors of *Cinema Novo*: *Aruanda* (1960), directed by Linduarte Noronha, and *Arraial do Cabo* (1959), directed by Mario Carneiro and Paulo Cezar Saraceni. Some texts also cite *Couro de Gato* (1961) and/or two other short films, directed by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade: *O Poeta do Castelo* (1959) and *O Mestre de Apipucos* (1959). However, entering into the detail of the period when *Cinema Novo* was being generated, one realizes that there is a great amount of information still missing in this puzzle.

How did an ethnographical film such as *Arraial do Cabo* — produced with very low budget from the National Museum, directed by two amateurs — manage to travel around Europe, participating and earning prizes in some of its most important festivals? And what about the trajectory of *Aruanda*, a film produced with very little equipment by amateurs from a poor State of the Northeast of Brazil, with apparently no tradition on filmmaking? How did this documentary become the model, the reference for new Brazilian cinema, as stated by the critic

² Paulo Emilio Sales Gomes, ‘Uma situação colonial?’, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 19 November 1960, p. 5.

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Jean-Claude Bernardet in a 1961 article in *O Estado de S. Paulo*,³ one of the most important newspapers of the country? And, finally, why did Glauber Rocha, one of the main ‘actors’ of the future *Cinema Novo*, wait for the return of *Arraial do Cabo* to Brazil in order to finally launch the movement?⁴

The hypothesis defended in this thesis is that at the very beginning of the 1960s, thanks to actions that were half planned and half driven by the courage and willpower of some filmmakers and critics, there were two major circuits of Brazilian short films, within and outside the country. Together these enabled the construction of the discourses that enabled the legitimation of *Cinema Novo*. These two parallel and simultaneous movements were born at the same time but moved apart, each following its own path until they finally met in 1961, at the São Paulo Art Biennial. On that occasion they united under the name of *Cinema Novo*.

In order to prove this hypothesis, the thesis employs a traceability approach and methodology as an attempt to follow all the steps taken by *Aruanda* and *Arraial do Cabo* (1959), from their pre-production in late 1950s until their exhibition in the São Paulo Art Biennial in 1961. However, given that history cannot be understood as isolated in time and disconnected from what comes before and after, this study will move back and forward historically where necessary, focusing on the period of 1959-1961 — which here is labelled *Cinema Novo*’s ‘pregnant moment’, as a metaphor of Lessing’s concept. I also analyse the circulation of the three films by Andrade mentioned above, though they are not the main focus of this research project.

³ Jean-Claude Bernardet, ‘Dois documentários’, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 12 August 1961, p. 5.

⁴ Glauber Rocha, ‘Documentários: Arraial do Cabo e Aruanda’, *Jornal do Brasil*, 6 August 1961, p. 4.