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The Lazzaro family and their intermedial crafts and trades in early Brazilian cinema

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The Lazzaro Troupe, which performed stage shows from the 1900s to the early 1910s in Rio de Janeiro and other cities, was directed by Salvatore Lazzaro and had among other attractions his daughters Griselda and Brazilia Lazzaro. In their occasional film activities, they accomplished neither remarkable commercial success nor enduring careers. Investigating such activities, however, allows us to analyse how different crafts and commercial strategies intertwined in early Brazilian cinema across intermedial networks, thereby providing ways for entertainment professionals to create artistic expressions and to make a living.

Considering there was no Brazilian film industry then, it is important to study crafts and trades in light of the unstable local market. Professionals dedicating themselves regularly and exclusively to film activities were exception; for most, like the Lazzaro family, cinema was only one among several artistic and commercial activities. Just as important as studying examples of continuity is investigating professionals not exclusively dedicated to cinema, to understand when and under which conditions film activities were part of their careers.

Between 1910 and 1911, when film-related activities were a promising field yet to be fully explored, Salvatore Lazzaro ventured into the film business, working as an exhibitor and director, while also patenting an invention for projecting advertisement films. What attracted the modest stage impresario to film activities? The first permanent venues for film projection were opened in Rio in 1907 and in the following years the circuit would enjoy rapid expansion. By 1911, a hundred film exhibition venues had opened in the city, although many were not exclusively dedicated to film screenings, offering mixed stage and screen programmes. The exhibition boom also stimulated the production of local films, many of them produced by the exhibitors themselves. The production of dozens of films and the favourable reception by the public led this period, approximately between 1908 and 1911, to be called the *Bela Época* of Brazilian cinema. While the appropriateness of such concepts as *Bela Época* and Golden Age has been

questioned by Brazilian film historians in recent decades, one cannot fail to recognize the boost in exhibition and local production in Rio at that time.

It is within this artistic and economically attractive panorama, in which stage and screen shows were closely related, that the film activities of the Lazzaro family can be best understood. Salvatore Lazzaro, his wife Anna and their eight-month-old daughter (probably Griselda) were registered in 1888 at the immigration office in the city of São Paulo, where they settled¹. Lazzaro ran bars and lowbrow variety venues in São Paulo throughout the 1890s and early 1900s. Between 1908 and 1909, the Lazzaro Troupe toured cities in the South and Southeast of the country delivering a variety show that included dramatic and comic plays as well as musical performances. Having settled in Rio, they worked from September 1909 to February 1910 as part of the mixed stage and screen programme at the Moulin Rouge, a popular entertainment park opened at the turn of the century, where patrons could enjoy not only theatrical shows but also other attractions such as a skating rink, merry-go-round and target shooting.



Fig. 1: Moulin Rouge

Almanak Laemmert Administrativo Mercantil e Industrial, 1908, p.1042
Hemeroteca Digital – Biblioteca Nacional

At the Moulin Rouge, one of the many venues run by Paschoal Segreto, a pioneer in exhibiting and producing films in Brazil, the Lazzaro Troupe performed on stage while Griselda Lazzaro conducted the musical accompaniment to both films and live shows. We can speculate that with the work at Moulin Rouge, and business contacts it might have brought, a new professional field beckoned Salvatore Lazzaro: the film business. In mid-1910, just a few months after the end of their season at the Moulin Rouge, the

company S. Lazzaro & C. was running the Helios Cinema in Niterói, Rio's neighbouring city across the Guanabara Bay. Newspaper advertisements for the venue rarely mentioned which films were to be screened, while the stage programme was always detailed, which may indicate difficulties affording attractive film programmes but also suggests that the Helios Cinema's main function was as a venue for the Lazzaro Troupe. Along with other artists, the sisters Brazilia and Virginia Lazzaro performed in the stage variety programmes, which included singing numbers and short comedies. Griselda conducted what was advertised as the "orchestra", a term that at the time was also used to refer to small musical ensembles, which might have been the case at the Helios Cinema.

Promoted as specially built for film screenings, the Helios Cinema was an open-air venue. It probably had a wood-frame storefront that hid an open areaⁱⁱ. In July 1910, near the end of its time running the Helios Cinema, S. Lazzaro & C. opened the Cinema Elite in Rio (240 seats)ⁱⁱⁱ. No advertisements were found in local newspapers, except for one published in a theatre magazine that mentions the stage attraction by name, yet covers the screen programme merely with the term "interesting films"^{iv}. A couple of other mentions are found in the press, referring to the stage programme and highlighting Brazilia Lazzaro's performances, which suggests that, both at the Helios and Elite cinemas, the feature was the stage shows.

The Helios and the Elite cinemas were part of the expansion of *cinemas-teatros* in the early 1910s, largely stimulated by reduced municipal taxes, both in Rio and Niteroi, for mixed stage and screen venues. As Rafael de Luna Freire observes, it was less expensive to run a *cinema-teatro* than a theatre, which also explains why even some venues dedicated exclusively to stage shows were called "cinemas"^v.

According to Alice Gonzaga, setting up an exhibition venue at that time did not require a large investment, especially if the building was located in less valued spots. Moreover, there were no legal requirements regarding comfort, hygiene or safety to be met^{vi}. At the Elite, it is not clear whether Lazzaro was responsible for turning the facilities into an exhibition venue, but this may have been the case, given that there is no record of any other cinema having previously been located there. Based on Gonzaga's remarks, we can speculate that it would not have cost Lazzaro much to equip the Cinema Elite, on Avenida Marechal Floriano in a more popular area in downtown Rio, although not far from the main exhibition venues^{vii}.

A glimpse of the precarious security and working conditions in cinemas at the time is given by the 1912 newspaper coverage of the fire that destroyed the Cinema

Brasileiro, located in the same facilities used by the Elite until the previous year. The fire started at the projection booth and spread rapidly throughout the building, including the apartment upstairs where a dentist and his family lived. While the building and even the family's furniture were insured, the cinema was not. One newspaper reports that insurance companies no longer accepted contracts with cinemas, due to the great and constant risk they ran^{viii}. Two people died in the fire: the dentist and the projectionist, Antonio Campos. According to the press, Campos was sleeping when the fire started^{ix}. Working in an office during the day, the projectionist usually fell asleep in the booth, leaving the work to be done by his poorly remunerated 12-year-old assistant. In most exhibition venues of the time in Rio, not only were working conditions precarious and potentially dangerous but also security measures were often disregarded. In fact, there were no official regulations to enforce security at exhibition venues, in which not even fire extinguishers were required. In the face of this alarming situation, newspapers attacked what they called *cinemas-arapucas* (cinema traps), which put the lives of patrons in danger^x.



Fig. 2: Fire at the Cinema Brasileiro (formerly the Cinema Elite)
A Noite, 9 December 1912, p. 2. Hemeroteca Digital – Biblioteca Nacional

Without necessarily requiring large investments and still lacking public regulations, the exhibition business would unlikely have been a difficult market for Salvatore Lazzaro to enter. His experience at Moulin Rouge and as a film exhibitor may

also have provided the technical knowledge concerning film projecting that enabled him to devise an invention that combined publicity and film projection, which he called *Cinematographo Anunciador Ambulante* (roughly translatable as Mobile Advertising Cinematograph), for which he applied for a patent in 1910. He details his invention in a three-page document, accompanied by drawings^{x1}. It consists of a projecting device (magic lantern or film projector) mounted in the rear of a vehicle, “with animal or mechanical traction driven by explosive, steam or electricity”. Rolled on a cylinder, the ads were to be lit up and projected on the sides and rear of the vehicle. Although the invention was patented, there is no evidence that it was ever commercially produced.

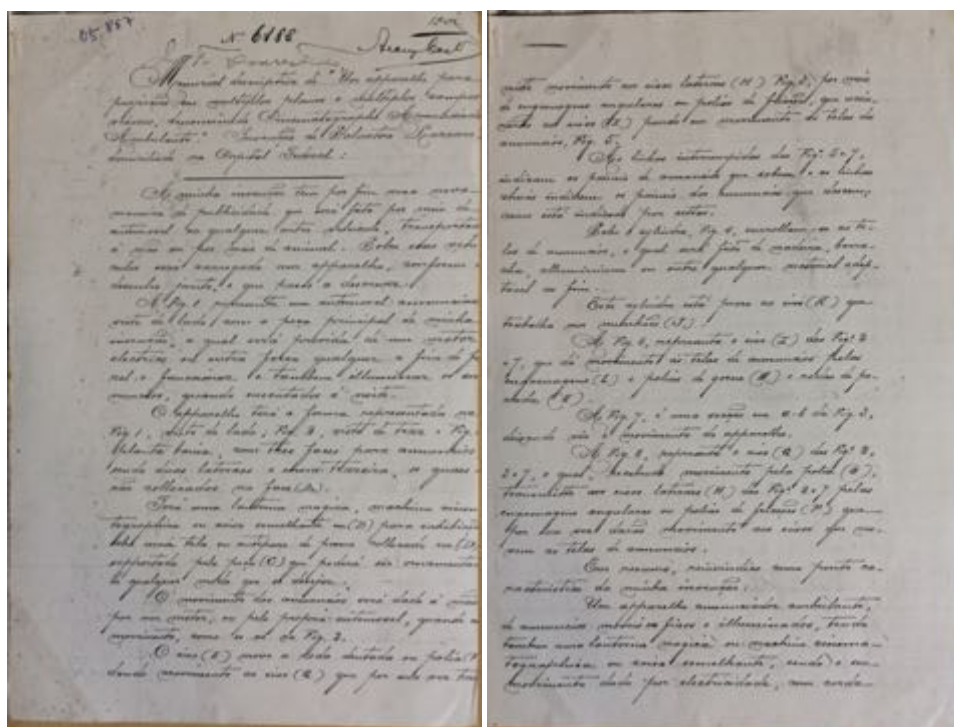


Fig. 3: Patent application for the *Cinematographo Anunciador Ambulante*, p.1-2
Acervo Cinemateca Brasileira

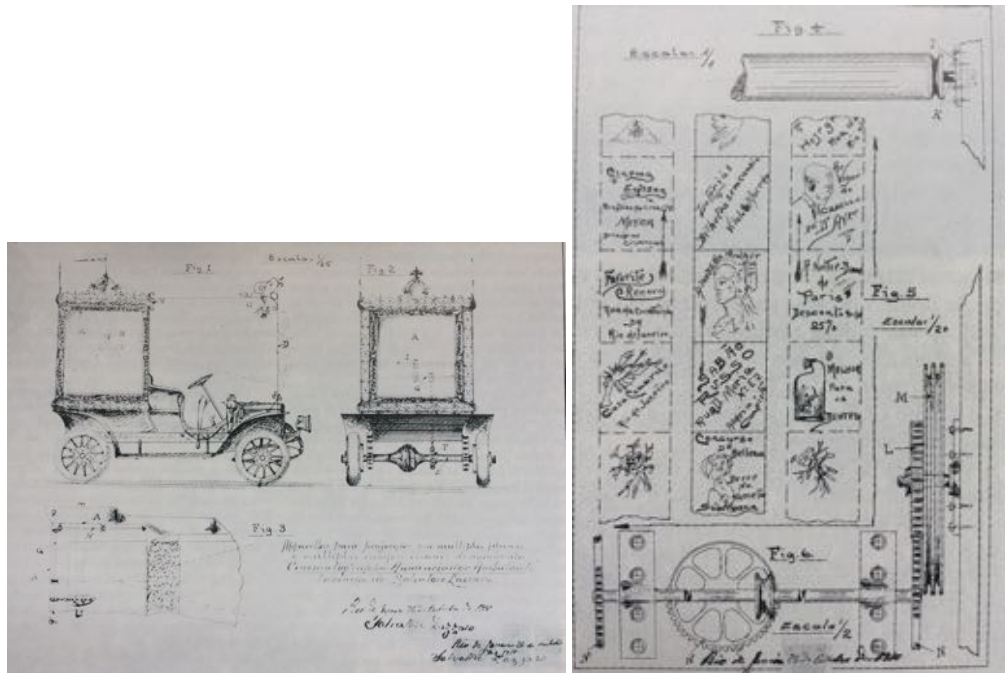


Fig. 3-4: *Cinematographo Anunciador Ambulante*, drawings
 Gonzaga, Alice. *Palácios e poeiras: 100 anos de cinemas no Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Ministério da Cultura/Funarte/Record, 1996, p. 95

The invention could hardly be considered “a new way of advertising”, as Lazzaro claims in the document. Others had applied for patents for similar devices before, combining projection and advertisement, such as Francisco Bech (1904), Emilio Guimarães (1907) and Artur Machado Lucas (1908)^{xii}. In the collection of patent records from 1873 to 1910, held at Arquivo Nacional, the number of inventions related somehow to exhibition practices increased from 1907 on, in tandem with the expansion of permanent exhibition venues and the growing dissemination of the new moving image technology. Three inventions combining moving image and phonograph were the subjects of applications by Francisco E. de Faria Carneiro (1908), Artur Machado Lucas (1908) and José Júlio Pereira Viana (1910)^{xiii}.

From the very early 1900s, with the screenings run by travelling exhibitor Édouard Hervet, audiences in Rio had become familiar with *cinema falante* (talking films), through synchronization of films and discs^{xiv}. By 1908, however, and for the following couple of years, the most successful “sound films” were the *filmes cantantes* (sung films), which featured music performed live by singers positioned behind the screen. Being a stage man and a film exhibitor, albeit modest, Salvatore Lazzaro did not miss the chance to work with *filmes cantantes*.

While still running the Elite Cinema, where he would remain until May 1911, Lazzaro produced *Il Guarany*, adapting to the screen the most famous Brazilian opera, composed by Carlos Gomes and premiered in 1870 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, which is based on the 1857 celebrated José de Alencar novel, *O Guarani*. With this production, the Lazzaro company reached larger and more prestigious venues. *Il Guarany* premiered on 19 April 1911 at the Teatro São Pedro de Alcântara, where it was presented for two weeks until 1 May, except for one day, 25 April, when the show was moved to Cinema Chantecler. Both those *cinemas-teatros* were run by Francisco Serrador, the film producer and exhibitor who, after establishing a successful career in São Paulo and beginning to expand his chain of theatres to Rio, was on the verge of becoming a major force in the Brazilian film exhibition business.

According to *Gazeta de Notícias*, Lazzaro & C. hired the orchestra and the chorus, signed expensive contracts with opera singers, some of them from Buenos Aires, and had them rehearsing for months to ensure that the screening of the film corresponded exactly to the execution of the score^{xv}. Although the newspaper is probably reproducing promotional material, there is no doubt that *Il Guarany* was an expensive production, perhaps not by Serrador's standards, but certainly for less affluent businessmen such as Salvatore Lazzaro. Considering that Serrador was regularly producing *filmes cantantes* from 1909, both in São Paulo and in Rio at the Chantecler and the Teatro São Pedro de Alcântara^{xvi}, one can also speculate that he might have invested in *Il Guarany*, in either the film, the live show or both.

The hybrid stage and screen format of *Il Guarany* allowed for two different casts: one for the film, the other for the live performances. In the film, Griselda Lazzaro plays Ceci, the female protagonist. During the screenings, however, soprano Laura Malta performed the part, joined by four other lyric singers and a 30-member chorus, all accompanied by an orchestra with 30 musicians^{xvii}. Adapted to fit a two-hour programme, the film was an abridged version of the opera. Cuts were made to the score and the number of characters, reduced from nine to six. The only remaining film still suggests the scenes were shot on a stage or on a stage-like setting, with painted backdrops.



Fig. 5: Griselda Lazzaro in *Il Guarany* (Salvatore Lazzaro, 1911)
Gonzaga, Adhemar; Gomes, Paulo Emílio Salles. *70 anos de cinema brasileiro*. Rio de Janeiro:
Expressão e Cultura, 1966, p. 26

As with the European *films d'art*, in *Il Guarany* and in *filmes cantantes* in general, artistic correspondence with the stage was not disguised but reinforced. Lazzaro & C. marketed the programme as an entirely new entertainment genre in town, the *Cinema-lírico* (Lyric-cinema), in which the most remarkable operas by celebrated composers would be reproduced perfectly on screen, attracting audiences from all classes given the affordable ticket prices^{xviii}. Borrowing Rick Altman's observation on the nickelodeon period in the US, between 1906-1912, we can say that both *filmes cantantes* and *Cinema-lírico* – while combining film, music, theatre and opera – are the kind of terminology which, “loin de souligner la particularité de ce phénomène nouveau”, “met tour à tour en avant chacune des caractéristiques que le ‘cinéma’ partage avec les autres formes représentationnelles de l'époque”^{xix}. Given the hybrid format of *filmes cantantes* as well as the mixed stage and screen programmes in the *cinemas-teatros*, it is not uncommon for today's researchers examining newspaper columns and advertisements to have a difficult time distinguishing films from live shows.

After presenting *Il Guarany* in Rio, Lazzaro & C. and his *Companhia Lírico-Cinematográfica* (Lyrical-Cinematographic Company) were booked at the Teatro

Variedades, in São Paulo. Although the company had announced new productions, among them the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*^{xx}, it is more likely that, apart from *Il Guarany*, all the attractions presented at Variedades were either live shows or *cantantes* with films produced by the Rio-based Cinema Rio Branco company, such as *Paz e amor*, *A viúva alegre*, *A Geisha*, *Sonho de valsa* and *O Conde de Luxemburgo*^{xxi}. According to an advertisement, *Cavalleria Rusticana* would be performed “outside the cinematograph”^{xxii}. In other words, it was not a film – or so it seems.

Research findings to date indicate that Salvatore Lazzaro withdrew from the film business after the August 1911 programmes presented at Variedades. What were the reasons that led Lazzaro to leave the film business? Apart from any personal reasons unknown to us, it is likely that his film activities and future plans were affected not only by the decline in the production of *films cantantes* in 1911, but also by the 1912 crisis in the film business. According to William Condé, the crisis was largely caused by increases in import tariffs on both film prints and film stocks, fivefold and tenfold, respectively^{xxiii}. The 1912 crisis, Condé adds, “led to the closing of several cinemas and the almost total paralysis of film production in Rio de Janeiro, since this production was carried out basically by the exhibition venues themselves”^{xxiv}.

Lazzaro’s daughters Griselda and Brazilia would occasionally work again in film related activities. Griselda conducted the all-woman orchestra that performed in the lobby of the Cinema Central when it was inaugurated in November 1919; she also composed the music of “Carlito & Chico Boia” (1920), a comic stage play starring the characters Charlie and “Fatty” Arbuckle, in which the two Hollywood comedians escape from the screen into the streets of Rio^{xxv}. After *Il Guarany*, Griselda took part in one more film, *Uma transformista original* (*An Original Transformist*, 1915), produced and directed by Paulo Benedetti in Barbacena, a town in Minas Gerais state, and starring Brazilia Lazzaro, who plays several quite different roles^{xxvi}, probably inspired by Italian *trasformista* Leopoldo Fregoli. One of the attractions of this five-part film operetta was the “Cinemetraphonia”, Benedetti’s invention to synchronise film and musical accompaniment through music scores and guides printed on the image^{xxvii}.



Fig. 6: Brazilia Lazzaro in *Uma transformista original* (Paulo Benedetti, 1915)
O Malho, Year XV, n.701, 19 February 1916, p.24. Hemeroteca Digital – Biblioteca Nacional

Strongly grounded in intermedial connections, the expansion of film production and film exhibition practices in early Brazilian cinema engendered an artistically and commercially attractive field for entertainment professionals such as the Lazzaro family. Those professionals, many of them immigrants and their descendants, with their intermedial resourcefulness, were pivotal in the development of crafts and trades of the “Brazilian cinema”, a concept which was then still in the process of being formed.

ⁱ Museu da Imigração do Estado de São Paulo. Acervo Digital, accessed 10 September 2020, <http://www.inci.org.br/acervodigital/>. *Correio Paulistano*, 18 July 1890, p. 2.

ⁱⁱ Freire, Rafael de Luna. *Cinematographo em Nictheroy*: história das salas de cinema de Niterói. Niterói: Niterói Livros; Rio de Janeiro: INEPAC, 2012, p. 54.

ⁱⁱⁱ *A Notícia*, 26-27 July 1910, p. 3.

^{iv} *A Estação Theatral*, n. 35, 18 February 1911 p. 4.

^v Freire, *Cinematographo em Nictheroy*, p. 68.

^{vi} Gonzaga, Alice. *Palácios e poeiras*: 100 anos de cinemas no Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro: Ministério da Cultura/Funarte/Record, 1996, p. 88.

^{vii} Gonzaga, *Palácios e poeiras*, p. 283.

^{viii} *A Imprensa*, 10 December 1912, p. 4.

^{ix} *A Época*, 11 December 1912, p. 2.

^x *A Noite*, 11 December 1912, p. 1.

^{xi} A copy of this document, from which some pages with the drawings are missing, is available at Cinemateca Brasileira, in São Paulo, see “Coleção de memoriais descritivos acompanhando pedidos de privilégios e patentes de invenções relacionadas com o meio cinematográfico. Fornecida por José Inácio de Melo Souza a partir de pesquisa no Arquivo Nacional”. The original document is held at Arquivo Nacional, in Rio de Janeiro. Two drawings are reproduced in Gonzaga, *Palácios e poeiras*, p. 95.

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- ^{xii} Arquivo Nacional – Coleção Privilégios Industriais (PI) – Inventário Analítico – Conteúdo por Notação, p. 722, 924, 1606. Accessed 3 October 2020, http://www.arquivonacional.gov.br/images/conteudo/servicos_ao_cidadao/instrumentos-de-pesquisa/pdf/Privilgios-Industriais--Contedo-abril-13.pdf
- ^{xiii} Arquivo Nacional – Coleção Privilégios Industriais (PI), pp. 1228, 1599.
- ^{xiv} Souza, José Inácio de Melo. “Os primórdios do cinema no Brasil”, in *Nova história do cinema brasileiro*, ed. Fernão Pessoa Ramos; Sheila Schvarzman. São Paulo: Edições Sesc, 2018, v.1, p. 40.
- ^{xv} *Gazeta de Notícias*, 19 April 1911, p.5, quoted in Araújo, Vicente de Paula. *A Bela Época do cinema brasileiro*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1976, p. 363.
- ^{xvi} Souza, José Inácio de. *Imagens do passado: São Paulo e Rio de Janeiro nos primórdios do cinema*. São Paulo: Editora Senac, 2004, p. 271.
- ^{xvii} *Jornal do Commercio*, 20 April 1911, p. 18; *Correio da Manhã*, 27 April 1911, p. 10.
- ^{xviii} *Correio da Manhã*, 20 April 1911, p. 3.
- ^{xix} Altman, Rick. “Penser l’histoire du cinéma autrement: un modèle de crise”. *Vingtième Siècle*, n. 46, April-June 1995, p. 65.
- ^{xx} Araújo, *A Bela Época do cinema brasileiro*, p. 363.
- ^{xxi} *Correio Paulistano*, 22 August 1911, p. 9.
- ^{xxii} *Correio Paulistano*, 25 August 1911, p. 7.
- ^{xxiii} Condé, William Nunes. *Marc Ferrez & Filhos: Comércio, distribuição e exibição nos primórdios do cinema brasileiro (1905-1912)*. Master’s thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2012, pp. 55-57.
- ^{xxiv} Condé, *Marc Ferrez & Filhos*, p. 56.
- ^{xxv} Araújo, Luciana Corrêa de. “All-Woman Orchestras in Rio de Janeiro (1910-1920)”. Paper presented at the 10th Women and the Silent Screen Conference. Amsterdam, 25-29 May 2019.
- ^{xxvi} Gomes, Paulo Augusto. *Pioneiros do cinema em Minas Gerais*. Belo Horizonte: Crisálida Livraria e Editora, 2008.
- ^{xxvii} *O Pharol*, 23 May 1913, p. 1.