

Crafts and techniques of early cinema in the 1900s Rio de Janeiro between the theater, the newspaper and the screen

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Early cinema established an intrinsic relationship with the culture of its time, soon appropriating the structure and staging of theater, opera and circus, for example. While analyzing the early cinema in France with regard to the sound sphere, Martin Barnier (2010) proposes to look at this art with a wide view, to cast the eyes on the soundscape that happens around this cinema. Thus, the researcher goes back in time. He analyzes the shadow theater and the magic lantern shows that took place in France in the 18th and 19th centuries, noting similarities in the way they were organized, in the order the pieces were presented and in the spaces in which they were exhibited.

Barnier (2008) study allows us to foresee how the historiography of the first cinema apprehends it today. As it is a hybrid art performed at the intersection of other arts and cultural manifestations, the study of early cinema obliges us to a transdisciplinary analysis. The line of continuity that exists between popular shows, found by the researcher in the French context, applies equally to Brazil. So that, the Brazilian scholar Jean-Claude Bernardet suggests that the researcher chooses more restricted temporal cuts and undertake vertical analysis on his object of study, trying to make these relationships emerge.

This analytical effort allows us to perceive, for example, that although proximity is found between the different national contexts; both the exploitation and the development of cinema obey local characteristics. My presentation will deal with the appropriations and adaptations of foreign crafts and techniques made by the cinema

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produced in a marginal country like Brazil from 1907 to 1910. I will focus on the Brazilian capital of that time, Rio de Janeiro, as the city eagerly appropriated the latest foreign news, adhering to the modernity captained mainly by Paris.

It is fundamental that we consider the national specificities. While an important portion of the films shot in Europe and the United States has stood the test of time, the same was not true in Brazil, a country without archival tradition and a historical disregard for its cultural institutions; as proved by the current situation of the Cinemateca Brasileira (that is already well known by the international community).

As the empirical analysis of the film object is complicated, since very few films shot in this period in Brazil have survived the time, we need to write the history of our cinema based on the analysis of other sources, such as journalistic publications and manuscripts that belonged to people involved in the craft. It is this exercise that I intend to perform here from now on.

The years 1907 to 1910 are turning points in Brazil with regard to cinema. Rio de Janeiro is reformed according to the French capital. I mean reform in a broad sense, because what was accomplished in the city was literally a *changement de façade*. This is clear in “Avenida Central. 8 de março de 1903 – 15 de novembro de 1906”, a collection of photographs taken by Marc Ferrez, which presents the façades of all the buildings erected at the place that was the center of that renovation (Ferrez, s.d.). Haussmannian to the core, the Avenida Central, or Central Avenue sought to extinguish the habits of the Portuguese colonizers from the appearance, erasing the alleys of the imperial Rio in favor of a linear layout, a tropical mimic of the French architect’s gesture.

A key journalist and novelist in the Rio of the period is João do Rio. Commenting on the destruction of the city’s old market which occurred in 1908, he notes:

Overnight [Rio] understood that it was necessary to be just like Buenos Aires, which is the shattering effort of being Paris, and houses collapsed, and churches were broken into pieces, and streets disappeared, and barriers were set up to the sea. The city according to civilization emerged from these remains, as the cinematographic reflex of the man from other cities appeared from head to toe to the Carioca (João do Rio, 1908, p. 5).

The Brazilian historian Flora Süssekind (1987) is wise when considering that João do Rio characters were, as she says, “absolutely costumes”, in other words, merely appearance. Although we read João do Rio’s complaints, he was consubstantial to that

city that seemed to carry on a mutation similar to the ones portrayed on stage: fast, bright and ephemeral.

In 1907, the Avenida Central would receive a series of cinematographic venues, almost all located on its odd side, starting at number 100 – practically next to each other. The buildings belonged to half a dozen of the city’s wealthy families, so they were not originally built in order to accommodate these facilities. However, those façades alluding to the architectural styles of the most varied parts of the globe – as images shows us, Paris was not the only source of influence – seemed to fit like a glove to the worlds made of cardboard and ink portrayed by so many films.

The “Cinematograph Chic”, for example, was installed in a building that had a wide Renaissance dome. While the “Cinematograph Paradise in Rio”, which was installed in a building of Moorish architecture, seemed to emerge from the scene of a *féerie* similar to the well know Brazilian filmed review “Peace and Love”, filmed in Rio in 1910, whose painted scenarios were absolutely faithful to the new outlines of the city center.

A stroll through these blocks of Avenida Central resembles a visit to a movie studio. It is no coincidence, therefore, when the city’s journalistic chronicle starts to encourage going to the cinema as a way of populating that fiction of a cosmopolitan city that seemed a certain film recently shown at the opening of a venue called “International Pavilion”, which was entitled “Travel around the world from Buenos Aires to Japan” (Gazeta, 1907, p. 8). A trip back and forth from fiction to reality was what was proposed, when the enjoyment of cinema was connected to the fruition of that fictional city.

Cinema spreads massively in the city thanks in some extend, to the action of the Ferrez family (whose patriarch is the author of the photographs mentioned above), that starts distributing Pathé films in the city. The mundane chronicler Figueiredo Pimentel turns it into a fashion habit, to which the elite should adhere. It is necessary to highlight the *mise-en-scène* of civility that Figueiredo Pimentel seeks to impose backed by cinema. In texts he published daily in the press, he tried to assume the role of a *pseudo* cinematographic director from the beginning of 1908, directing the gestures of his readers, as they would be the future characters of the films shot in the city.

Pimentel gives the following suggestions to the people who would attend to the “Carriage Parade” (that would take place on the elegant “Botafogo beach”), in order to be filmed²:

Today is the day devoted to the ‘Carriage Parade’: Yesterday afternoon the number of carriages and automobiles rented was already extraordinary. We again insist that families appear early. At 5 o’clock sharp the operators of Cinematograph Rio Branco and Cinema-Palace will start shooting. It is also necessary to recommend coachmen and *chauffeurs* a moderate speed. It is also convenient that people on foot walk instead of sitting, that they stroll along the entire length of the Bar. Only then the films will come out splendid (Pimentel, 1908, p. 1).

Only two days later, the “Great Cinematograph Rio Branco” publicizes the film in the newspaper, emphasizing that it “clearly shows the most important families of Rio’s elite” (Gazeta, 1908, p. 6). The conception of these films seemed to bend to an idea that would later be systematized in an English booklet called “How to run a picture theater” (1912), which suggested to producers, exhibitors and venue owners strategies aimed at taking full advantage of the “irresistible attraction the camera has for all sorts and conditions of people” (p. 121). The volume suggests that social events be filmed to enhance public interest, and details the framing and decoupage that would bring as many people as possible to the venues. “Make exposures of a few feet each upon various scenes at different distances, and use the punching device usually fitted to cameras to mark the different exposures. Test them by developing, and if in order, go ahead.” (How to run, 1912, p. 122).

The technique is used for commercial purposes, both in London and in Brazil. Political and social contexts, however, determine different uses of the technique. In Rio, the recently abolished slavery had put on the streets a series of people that were systematically silenced and erased in order to impose an ideal of foreign modernity. Therefore, the goal was to capture the white bourgeoisie and the modernized streets, erasing the African American people, as well as the poor and the beggars. When analyzing a slightly older film that survived time, regarding the funeral of the Baron of Rio Branco, which took place in 1912, Eduardo Morettin (2016) highlights the choice of the high wide shot, according to which the crowds offers themselves as extras for the staging of the modern city, and the so-called “unsuitable” subjects are deleted. These people appear briefly when the camera goes down to the street.

² The great amount of photographs of Rio’s elite published in the city’s illustrated magazines demonstrate that both the static image and the moving image encompass the same objective of imposing an ideal of civility that takes Paris as the ultimate model.

This effort is also perceived in the analysis of other of our films from the period that remain, which is called “Circuit of S. Gonçalo”, and was shot in 1909. I want to thank my colleague Nina Giacomo for drawing my attention to the film, about which she has recently developed a masters at the University of São Paulo. I intend to relate the film to a written document concerning it that I found in Rio’s Arquivo Nacional, and finally to compare it with “Circuit de Dieppe”, shot by Pathé in 1907.

The film presents, at its very beginning, a wide set of panoramic shots of the stands, at different distances. The general public is filmed through a full shot, and the noble grandstand, through multiple medium shots. The ostensible presence of the elite is much more striking in the Brazilian film than in the French one, in which the stands appears only in a full shot. Marc Ferrez justifies it in a letter he sends to a commercial representative of his.

there was a car race yesterday and as you can imagine, nothing can be taken out of interest with only three operators, on roads full of dust and cars at great speed. We did the job in contract with Cinema Odeon, which on its side made an advertising contract with the agents of the winning cars. [...] No interest could come of it, except for those who watched the race and want their portrait on the stands (Ferrez, FF-FMF – 2.0.1.14).

The fact that Marc Ferrez minimizes the interest of the film, considering it above all as a decoy to sell tickets to the wealth people that were shot, helps us to understand the overwhelming presence of these images in the film. However, in addition to what he says, the film interests me because of the detailing of its decoupage and the possibility to analyzing it in confrontation with the remaining film image. This film is a model example of how structures from foreign countries were appropriate and shaped to Brazilian needs.

Comparing it to “Circuit de Dieppe”, we can observe the Brazilian film’s effort to mimic foreign shots, despite the indigence of the geographic space where the race took place – the countryside of Rio, since the event was banned in the capital. In both films we observe the effort to ensure continuity by registering the entries and exits of the characters in the picture, which is a structure that is dear to the early cinema chase films. However, as we can see, the French film conceals the camera, while in “Circuito de S. Gonçalo” the operators mentioned by Marc Ferrez are found in several sequences.

I argue that this presence is less of a lapse than a legitimate intention to include the film device in the frame. We know that the camera becomes a character in the early cinema. That the public was equally interested in the prodigies they had before their eyes and the device that invented them. We notice this presence in one of the few images that we

have left regarding the Brazilian “filmed songs” (which were similar to Gaumont’s phonoscenes, if not for the fact that the music was sung live, and not reproduced by records).

The popular baritone Cataldi sings the *Barcarole* from Offenbach’s “Hoffman’s Tales” on the sand of the deserted Copacabana beach. What we have left as a record of this film is not a photogram but a photograph witnessing its *mise-en-scene*. The operator is in the middle of the photo, surrounded by the singer on the left and the violinist on the right. On the far right, an observer checks the progress of the work. The man with the moving camera is probably Júlio Ferrez, Marc’s son, and, from a typed diary he left us, we infer the man on the far right is the conductor Costa Júnior. Júlio Ferrez filmed dozens of “singing films” for “Cinema Rio Branco”, in which Costa Júnior, which was an experienced musician from the city’s popular theater, acted as an orchestra director. Costa Júnior becomes Júlio Ferrez’s right-hand man in the endeavor of the “singing film” that screened the theatrical genres preferred by Rio’s public, as for example the operetta and the year review, in which there is a rupture with the fourth wall – and then, the direct address to audience and, in the case cinema, to the film device. The public in Rio cheered with artistic works that broke with narrative diegesis, hence their fascination with the appearance of the film device. Other companies besides Marc Ferrez’s began to dedicate themselves to these genres. These productions were primarily shot in studio. Although we lack images of this film, we have some details worthy of note from another production of the period, which is the version of the cinematographic operetta “The Merry Widow” shot by Julio Ferrez in 1909, released as a Brazilian version of the French *film d’art*. In addition to these images published in the press, we have a precious written record of its footage, also authored by Julio Ferrez:

One could no longer dream of doing this outdoors, nor in a theater. § On Invalid street there was the glass studio of Mr. Labanca [...]. § I took advantage of this very vast photographic studio to be able to move a troupe of operetta. The close-ups for the main artists were not yet known. Just the same, we limited the action space with chalk on the floor, forcing the stars to sing ahead. § The fact is that I did it in spite of a thousand difficulties that I encountered daily, not only in terms of cinema but also in what regards music. §. § “My camera was one of the first produced by Pathé, it shot only 60 meters.”. § “it was necessary to finish the singing in advance in relation to the film. § The synchronous motor was not known or applied. We filmed by hand. § Maestro Costa Júnior helped me a lot because once he knew photography he understood my difficulties and, according to him, I arranged that the film ended in a steady beat. By doing so I got a film longer than a thousand meters that achieved an unexpected success (Ferrez, FF-JF – 2.0.2).

Julio Ferrez text's highlights some key issues for us concerning the crafts and techniques of the early cinema in Rio. His statement regarding the impossibility of shooting films like this outdoors reminds us both of the control that one expected to have of the subjects captured by the camera, and of the differences between the French and Brazilian *film d'art*. When Pierre Decourcelle systematizes the genesis of artistic films, in a text published in Rio in 1910, he highlights the adaptation of theatrical works and what he calls "the unavoidable collaboration of nature" (Decourcelle, 1910, p. 2), which offered scenarios impossible to reproduce even by great artists. Therefore, he highlights the preponderance in these productions of the landscapes of nature over the painted scenarios. In contrast, Julio Ferrez's "Merry Widow" used exclusively painted scenarios made by Chrispin do Amaral, who was one of the greatest theatrical designers of the city.

This *mise-en-scene* brings out to cinema the theatrical dimension of "Merry Widow". This dimension is also felt by a common staging strategy of the comic-music theater of the time: the placement of the solo singer in the proscenium, just before the audience. Julio Ferrez's statement that the close-up was unknown to Brazil by then is not supported by the facts. Although detailed reflections related to what would be called classical cutting began to be published in Rio's press around 1915, Biograph films were already advertised in Rio de Janeiro in 1909, and exhibited in the "Cinema Parisiense"³. Therefore, we find in Ferrez an inclination towards French cinematographic aesthetics. Starting with the camera that shot the film – considering the photo of the shooting of the *Barcarole*, it was probably the Pathé Motion Picture Camera n. 1, from 1905.

This case study demonstrates that, although the French art film was the great reference of our "Merry Widow" – as France was the great cultural reference of Brazil –, the appropriation of French techniques bent to our local specificities. In this sense, the impressive artisanal effort to make a thousand-meter film from the junction of small film clips is highlighted, especially in what concern the singing film, in which the time

³ For example, the film "Peregrinação de Pepita" ("Pepita's Pilgrimage", in free translation). I quote the summary of the story below (according to the newspaper), hoping that some Dormitorian is able to identify the film: "Great *film d'art* from Biograph. Sentimental. Accompanied by a chosen orchestra conducted by the skillful Professor Luiz de Souza. § This 500 meters cinematographic production unique in Rio de Janeiro constitutes an unusual work, for its artistic whole and for the attributes of superiority that are highly patent in it. § Along with the sentimental conception, rich live locations stand out, permeated by the grandeur of the scene. The photographic clarity helps to exalt it. Finally we have a correct interpretation by the expert artists who complete this rich and superb work, which honors the American Biograph. We surrender ourselves to the wise appreciation of the distinguished public." (Gazeta, 1909, p. 8).

of the music needed to adjust to the time of the film stripe. A fundamental element in this equation, which determines the uniqueness of the Brazilian product, is the live presence not only of the orchestra but of the operetta singers, which gave an undeniably theatrical characteristic to the film and to the moviegoing. Contrary to what Decourcelle proposed, in Rio the art film was willingly theater.

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Careta

Fon-Fon

Gazeta de Notícias

Filmography

Barão do Rio Branco – A nação em luto – Os funeraes

Barcarola (Julio Ferrez, 1908)

Circuit de Dieppe (Pathé, 1907)

Circuito de São Gonçalo (Alberto Botelho; Marc Ferrez & Filhos, 1909)

Os Guaranis (Antonio Leal, 1908)

Paz e Amor (Alberto Botelho, 1910)

Viúva Alegre (Julio Ferrez, 1909)