

## The historical reception: texts about Brazilian Cinema Novo in Portugal\*

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### ABSTRACT

This work analyzes the presence of Brazilian Cinema Novo in Portugal, during the 1960s and 1970s, from the review of texts published in magazines and newspapers. Here, those texts are seen as traces of historical reception of films, important for dissemination of the Cinema Novo movement and even legitimacy on Portuguese territory. The analysis of these texts has shown that the excellent reception from the press to Cinema Novo shaped the program of the Portuguese movie criticism that support the ideals of a political and aesthetics avant-garde cinema.

**Keywords:** Reception, Cinema Novo, Portuguese Press

### INITIAL THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Janet Staiger's *historic studies of media reception* (1992; 2000) were a great advancement in the field of audiovisual works reception. Since her most influential work, *Interpreting Films* (1992), Staiger avoids sticking to the text and favors a historic explanation of the *fact* of interpreting a text. Questioning strictly immanentistic analyses she posits that the differences between interpretations are historically-based in a way that variations in interpretive processes cannot be detached from social, political, and economical configurations. From this point of view, Staiger avoids old binary discussions between *correct* and *incorrect* interpretations, conferring relevance to the context without falling into simplistic relativisms.

Interpretive strategies are not arbitrary, neither motivated by specific material contexts. They should not, in addition, be restricted to the text – for too long seen as a sacred shrine of signification – as if reception occurred in a historical void. Thus,

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Staiger characterizes the reading experience as the interpretive process historically conformed.

Staiger (2000) seeks the answer for a research problem that exceeds audiovisual texts: how can we grasp the receptive experience of works from other times? The German reception aesthetics school would answer with the notion of horizon of expectation (Jauss, 1979), but the fundamental feature of Staiger's historic research (2000) is the use of file material. Drawing upon various types of documents, she is able to imprint strength to the investigation supported by evidence of receptive marks. These are critical reviews, assorted journalistic texts, specialized magazines, bulletins, readers' letters and even gossip columns, seen as sources and vestiges of a place for the experience of reception.

Supported by Staiger's methodology, we believe that analyzing acts of reading inscribed and registered in documents is not only necessary, but crucial to what we call reception study of audiovisual works.

Here we posit that a more attentive look to critical texts helps us understand the dynamics of certain responses in other historic contexts and enlightens the process of reading and interpreting films, and cinematographic schools and movements. In addition, this way of operating with texts clarifies the meanings attributed to certain films and movements in very specific periods and social circumstances.

The way the Portuguese press, mainly the cinematographic press, interacted with texts and contexts to build meanings on Brazilian cinema of the 1960s was fundamental to define the image this cinematography had in Portugal. Texts, critical reviews, editorials, dossiers, *vestiges*, as preferred by Staiger, are revealing of a meeting between Portuguese spectators (the critical as the primary spectator) and the Brazilian films exhibited forty years ago.

## **THE RECEPTION OF *CINEMA NOVO* IN PORTUGAL**

Between the 1960s and the 1970s, there was, in Portugal, a favorable historic configuration to receive Brazilian cinematography. In spite of Salazar's regime and the censorship imposed on some works, Portuguese cinema criticism received the propositions by Brazilian *Cinema Novo* with enthusiasm. Even with the inner division in Portuguese criticism – on the one hand, the militant criticism, a politicized school

influenced by clear Marxist tendencies, mainly gathered around the magazine *Seara Nova*; on the other hand, the school of criticism that emphasized the films' formal aspects, following the guidelines proposed by the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which could be found in magazines such as *O Tempo e o Modo* and *Jornal de Letras*. The *Cinema Novo* seemed to comprehend both sides of the coin, since this movement advocated for a change both political and aesthetic in scope.

In the then existing atmosphere, receptivity to new cinematographic views were part of the zeitgeist moving the dominant discourse in cinema, mainly European. After the Italian Neo-Realism and French *Nouvelle Vague*,<sup>1</sup> it was the third world cinema that interested specialized publications. According to Ismail Xavier:

In cinematographic high modernism, say 1960-70s, any proposition of an alternative cinema brought a horizon of changes both in cinema and society (and it was not necessary to link experiments or vanguards to socialism), since protesting and looking for what is different was creating a new institutional space for cinema discussion (2003:145).

In Lisbon, Portuguese new cinema claimed for changes, for a cinema that valued its roots through formal research on experimentations in the cinematic language. The form was cinema's matter. On the other hand, ideological issues always appeared at intellectual discussions, mainly due to the context lived by Portuguese society. This twofold valuing of style and political protest was extremely receptive to Brazilian cinema.

Institutional conventions on Portuguese cinema press favored an attentive coverage of cinema in general and Brazilian cinema in particular, whereas newspapers, due to institutional limitations, were no longer a proper space for articles and dossiers on varied cinematographic movements around the world. Therefore, magazines provided a more permissive space to a kind of informative and argumentative discourse on cinematographic views highlighted at the time, which also occurred in France (Figueirôa, 2004: 58-81). In the case of Brazilian cinema in Portugal, the generalist texts of magazines as *Plateia*, *Celulóide* e *Seara Nova* are to be considered. The

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<sup>1</sup> More on the subject in Alexandre Figueirôa's intriguing *Cinema Novo: a onda do jovem cinema e sua recepção na França*. São Paulo: Papyrus, 2004. The author posits that the European historic context, in particular the French, was decisive for the prestige of Cinema Novo around the world.

*Celulóide* magazine gave special room to Brazilian cinema of the sixties, seventies and eighties, having among its regular collaborators the critics Carlos Vieira e Adhemar Carvalhaes. In spite of their being Brazilian, their texts had an educational dimension, often promoting Brazilian cinema for the magazine's readers.

In 1964, Jaime Rodrigues Teixeira wrote an article called *Uma abordagem crítica do cinema novo brasileiro* (A critical approach to Brazilian Cinema Novo) which, on the one hand, provides a good account of external and internal conditioning factors to the movement; but, on the other, did not clarify many of its main features, probably due to the movement's still inchoate aesthetics. Portuguese readers and critics nevertheless got in touch with the new Brazilian cinematographic experience, although *Vidas Secas* by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, one of the movement's most representative works, would only be displayed in 1966 at the III Festival Internacional de Arte Cinematográfica de Lisboa (Lisbon International Festival of Cinematographic Art) and would enter the commercial circuit only one year after.

Texts of generalization in these magazines did not follow a pattern. Each critic and reviewer would use different criteria, but these discourses generally aggregated information and opinion. In June 1966, Fernando Duarte, in his editorial for *Celulóide*, claimed for a Portuguese-Brazilian *Cinema Novo*. With a persuasive sentence right in the beginning, "*Cinema Novo* is a universal phenomenon" (Duarte, 1966: 1-2) not only does the text welcome Brazilian *Cinema Novo* as it also asks for an association between this movement and Portuguese *Cinema Novo*: "In Portugal and Brazil, a Portuguese-spoken New Cinema speaks a universal language, and it will surely succeed." (Duarte, 1966: 2). Comparing Paulo Rocha's *Verdes Anos*, Fernando Lopes's *Belarmino*, Faria de Almeida's *Catembe* and António de Macedo's *Domingo à Tarde* with Glauber Rocha's *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, Ruy Guerra's *Os Fuzis*, or Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Vidas Secas*, the editorial advocates for a Portuguese-Brazilian *Cinema Novo*, urging distributors to screen Portuguese movies in Brazil and Brazilian movies in Portugal. The identification and acceptance of Brazilian cinematography by the magazine reveal the good image that the Brazilian cinema had in the Portuguese in the period, as well as the obvious promotion of the movement of *Cinema Novo*.

With a column dedicated to Brazilian cinema that stretched to the eighties, *Celulóide* provided a panorama of cinemas considered as peripheral to the Hollywood epicenter. The magazine, through the organization of its discourse and themes, drew the attention of its readers to these revolutionary cinemas, in the political and aesthetic vanguard whose affinity to the new Portuguese cinematography was to be expected. These generalist essays were strongly marked by the context that surrounded them whether in the intellectual agitation of the reflection on the need of a new type of cinema, or in the conception that this new cinema could encourage a critical awareness in society. Portuguese critics often considered *Cinema Novo* as a political cinema par excellence, which agreed with the view of ideological resistance of the criticism whose politicization of its account was part of the European historical map. The situation of poverty and human exploitation in North-Eastern Brazil, a theme associated with *Cinema Novo* (*Vidas Secas*, *Os Fuzis*, *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*) were paradigmatic for the deconstruction of the elitist, bourgeois and urban view of North-American movies.

Brazilian films, not only of this period but also those of today, are largely exhibited in festivals or retrospectives promoted by institutions associated to arts and cinema. The critic Francisco Perestrello expresses, in the *Celulóide* magazine, his discontentment with the weak presence of Brazilian cinema in Portuguese commercial circuit:

There is, then, the need of divulging Portuguese and Brazilian cinemas, those of our language, not by forcing or obliging its projection – since it would benefit both good and bad movies – but mainly by promoting it through grounded initiatives that are maintained over time, able to spawn sound publicity, attracting the public's attention and focusing their interest (Perestrello, 1974: 13).

Data of our research show that, in the sixties, only two Brazilian movies reached the commercial circuit in Lisbon. However, this excitement already exalted a cinematography which, although with few movies in Portuguese territory, had conquered its *citizenship in cinema's republic*, in the words of Ismail Xavier and had already left a mark in national and foreign festivals. Moreover, this mark was good,

mainly that of Cinema Novo and Glauber Rocha, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, and Ruy Guerra. There is the idea that only Cinema Novo stood for Brazilian cinema.

The fact must be added that this *art cinema* circuit is very effective in establishing a dialogue with the culture of festivals and expositions in universities and special projection rooms. Particularly in the case of Cinema Novo, the channels of promotion were primarily those which included movie enthusiasts, opinion makers, and a loyal public which could legitimate cultural movements. The 1<sup>st</sup> *Festival do Cinema Brasileiro em Portugal* (Festival of Brazilian Cinema in Portugal), as the 1<sup>st</sup> *Retrospectiva do Cinema Brasileiro* (Retrospective of Brazilian Cinema) and the 1<sup>st</sup> *Semana do Cinema Brasileiro* (Brazilian Cinema Week), acted as dissemination and legitimating channels for Brazilian cinema, which, despite a set of problems, exposed, often first hand, films already famous in Brazil but unknown to Portuguese movie fans.

In the first festival in Lisbon (in the Império and Estúdio projection rooms) from 17 to 24 March 1971, the repercussion was widely covered by the press, spawning numerous critical evaluations on the event, sponsored by the Brazilian Embassy in Lisbon. With rooms teeming with watchers, the critics saw two weaknesses in it: its disorganization in the projection schedule and the absence of significant works linked to Brazilian Cinema Novo. The critic Afonso Cautela showed this dissatisfaction in the *Diário Popular*:

In a piece published in the last number of *O Século Ilustrado*, Fernando Gil wrote that from the program of the *Festival de Lisboa*, only two movies, *Os Herdeiros* and *Macunaíma*, could be placed within Brazilian Cinema Novo, to which he added, in a second line, *Fome de Amor*, *Os Deuses e os Mortos*, *Vida provisória* and *Memória de Helena* (Cautela, 1971: 3).

The absence of important films linked to the movement and, above all, to Glauber Rocha, was indeed a motive for protest in the festival. On the other hand, even in face of this absence, the presence of unseen Brazilian movies in Portuguese territory helped for a greater disclosure of Cinema Novo. In *Diário do Lisboa*, the reviewer Oliveira Pinto published seven articles, all in March 1971, on themes related to the Festival, but overall on Cinema Novo, followed by interviews with the moviemakers who took part in the movement. On his turn, Carlos Pina expressed that

beyond social-political reality of a heterogeneous country, this first Festival of Brazilian cinema may open a variety of paths. The vision of a sui generis Brazil (that most Portuguese citizens do not have) may be replaced with the perception of something very strong already produced by this same Brazil or (what is most important) with what it still has to give us (Pina, 1971: 8).

One year after the 1<sup>st</sup> Festival, another event marked the presence and promotion of Brazilian cinema in Lisbon. It was the 1<sup>st</sup> Retrospectiva do Cinema Brasileiro, occurred in March 8-22 1972 at the Cinemateca Nacional (Palácio Foz) organized as well by the Brazilian Embassy. And the 1<sup>st</sup> Festival, this retrospective had a great public:

Yesterday something occurred that many people would judge impossible. The first morning hours, many hundreds of persons, mainly young, formed lines that filled the sidewalks of Palácio Foz, expecting for tickets to watch an amazing movie called *Macunaíma* (Pina, 1972: 8).

And, contrarily to what happened last year, for the first time a Glauber Rocha movie was exhibited in Portugal, *Antônio das Mortes (O dragão da maldade contra o santo guerreiro*, title in Brazil), which effectively contributed for a greater discussion on Cinema novo. In 1973 another Semana do Cinema Brasileiro took place (10-14 December 1973), but the attempt to maintain the event in the cultural scenery did not succeed in the following years.

In addition to the festivals, the dossiers, a common practice in some magazines, also exposed these new cinematographies. In 1965, the *Seara Nova*<sup>2</sup> publishes *Descoberta dos Cinemas da Fome*, wherein Brazilian Cinema Novo is seen as a true revolution, comparable only to Italian Neo-Realism. The text stresses the character of social commitment and authenticity of the movement which tries to protect national roots and reflect on the *cinema of hunger*, in a clear allusion to the manifesto signed by Glauber Rocha. In spite of a certain lack of knowledge in data presented (such as calling Ruy Guerra a black director and affirming that in Brazil there is no racial prejudice), Michel Capdenac showed his defense of a contemporary cinema, of aesthetic and politic

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<sup>2</sup> *Seara Nova*. n° 1437, July 1964: 216-217. The text seems to be the translation of French critic Michel Capdenac, here considered for its disclosure and good reception of Cinema Novo in Portugal.

vanguard, which provided a contrast to the artistic decline of more developed cinematographies, a cinema of hunger.

Capdenac's talk signals a trend in European cinema criticism, particularly the French, to *discover* and support cinematographies from the third world, in a period in which French critics saw the *Nouvelle Vague* as an already declining movement (Figueirôa, 2004). The text also shows sympathy toward the militant trend in cinema that will have its peak in the seventies, in tune with the editorial character of the Marxist-oriented *Seara Nova*.

The popular *Plateia* also welcomed Brazilian cinema, mainly in the seventies. The magazine reserved a space to Brazilian cinema in Portugal and Glauber Rocha's passage through Lisbon,<sup>3</sup> attracted by the April 25, was registered by it, exhibiting a manuscript note by Rocha with a message to Portuguese cinema fans:

Portuguese filmmakers should overcome the divisions established in 50 years of Fascism and reach economic and political unity, which is the fundamental revolutionary factor. The great master of Portuguese cinema is Manuel de Oliveira. And the young authors will be guided by his light. In Portugal, the Cinema Novo of the 1970s will have its birth (*Plateia*, 1974: 24).

The critics' support to Rocha was visible with the exhibition of his movie *Terra em Transe*, released after portuguese censorship. It is doubtless that after the Carnation Revolution, the journals were open to more politicized cinemas and *Plateia* published many dossiers. In one in particular,<sup>4</sup> the magazine reserved 13 pages to Brazilian cinema and, in spite of showing new tendencies, such as the comedy of manners and the marginal cinema, they are always confronted with Cinema Novo. Teresa Barros Pinto, in the article *Uma personalidade ímpar do cinema brasileiro*, acknowledges not only political, but also aesthetical dimensions visible in the works of Glauber Rocha.

Reducing Rocha's movie to an exclusively political reading of Brazilian reality would mean to ignore all the wealth and imagination of his cinema and certainly twist the true dimension of his thought and cinematographic practice (Pinto, 1975: 62).

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<sup>3</sup> By that time, Glauber Rocha took part in the collective movie *As armas e o povo* with a group of Portuguese filmmakers such as Fonseca e Costa, Eduardo Geda, João César Monteiro, Luís Galvão Telles, António-Pedro Vasconcelos and others.

<sup>4</sup> *Plateia*. n° 748, June 3 1975.



Cinema novo pleased both the militant and the formalist critic, the *Positif* and the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Seara Nova* and *Plateia*. And its reception could not be better in Portugal.

Interviews with Brazilian filmmakers complemented this Picture of openness and receptivity to Cinema Novo. Inserted generally in the movies' premiere, they worked as a pathway for introducing (for critics and public alike) not only the film being exhibited, but the whole work of the interviewee. The filmmakers themselves, through interviews and other contacts with the critics, spread the ideals of Cinema Novo. Glauber Rocha was certainly the most influential due to his manifesto *A Estética da Fome*.<sup>5</sup> Rocha was frequently interviewed by French and Italian movie magazines to disclose his *cinema of hunger* and at least one of them was translated and published in Portugal by the critic A. Roma Torres in the collection *Cinema, Arte e Ideologia* in 1975.<sup>6</sup>

Filmmakers and their projects were in tune with the authors' policy of showing formal unity and thematic aggregates of their works. For Eduardo Geda:

Once the critics aim to reveal and value the filmmaker's personal discourse, it is not strange that most specialized and generalist magazines used as much space for interviews and biofilmographies as that dedicated to film analysis. If the interview has a secondary role to criticism, it is precisely because it allows the reviewer to decipher the author's intentions in their origin, thus securing their own opinions" (Geda, 1987: 143).

In other words, the critic, in using the interview, grants his discourse more authority.

Other means of communication, as anthologies, also helped in divulging and valuing Cinema Novo in Portugal. One of them<sup>7</sup> presents the translation of a text by Glauber Rocha published in the *Cahiers du Cinéma in 1968* named *O Cinema*

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<sup>5</sup> Thesis presented during the discussions on Cinema Novo at the retrospective in Resenha do Cinema Latino-Americano em Genoa in January 1965.

<sup>6</sup> This interview was named *Estética da fome e cinema de arte*, translated from Rocha's interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, n. 214, July and August 1969 and republished in Portugal by Roma Torres (1975: 242-255).

<sup>7</sup> *Cadernos de Cinema: Novo Cinema, Cinema Novo*. Lisboa: D. Quixote, 1968: 75-86.

*Tricontinental*. The text defends the cinema produced in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and tries to explain, with its baroque style, what is Cinema Novo as a cinema whose aesthetics is more linked to ideology than technique. The anthology also brings the article *A Batalha do Cinema Novo* by Louis Marcorelles, the famous writer for the *Cahiers du Cinéma* who was the leading voice in promoting and defending Cinema Novo in France.<sup>8</sup> Marcorelles draws the critics' attention to the new cinema springing in Brazil, Canada, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Greece and other countries. These cinemas shared a *ridiculous budget*, politic ambitions, contexts of their own outside Hollywood, a baffling style, a formal disorder that should not be despised by more traditional critics. It is interesting to notice how these publications, vouched for by the prestige its writers, and conferred authority to the information on these cinematographies. This authority was not seldom supported by Portuguese intellectuals such as Eduardo Lourenço, author of *O Cinema Novo e a mitologia brasileira*,<sup>9</sup> an essay written for the *Semana do Cinema Brasileiro* in Nice, 1967.

In this essay, Lourenço affirms that this new cinema has a deep character of *honesty* and:

is marked above all by this tone of intimate communion with the matter treated, be it the backwoods or urban reality, sons of a critical authenticity and a seriousness compared to which realizations of other kind and reach seem suspect. It is clear that the secret of this seriousness lies in the ideological attitude and the profound criticism to which these young filmmakers have submitted the previous Brazilian cinema as an alienating element for the Brazilian view of Brazil (Lourenço, 1987: 81).

Even if he reaffirms the critical-ideological attitude of the movement, Lourenço also points to a diversity “at the decisive aesthetic level, that of form through which the unique elements are revealed” (Lourenço, 1987: 83). This original profile of formal and thematic composition and the creation of a language combined with the lack of financial resources met the wishes of the cinema criticism at the time.

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<sup>8</sup> More on the importance of Louis Marcorelles for the disclosure of Cinema Novo in France in Alexandre Figueirôa's book *Cinema Novo: a onda do jovem cinema e sua recepção na França*. São Paulo: Papirus, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Republished in Portuguese in the catalog of the cycle of Brazilian cinema, occurred at the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, in 1987.

**FINAL REMARKS**

We should still highlight how this contextual horizon in Portuguese society was favorable to the good reception of Brazilian Cinema Novo. Specialized magazines became a place for consecration and prestige for this new movement in cinema, mainly due to the identification of aesthetic and politic ideas, transfigured in a free criticism sometimes engaged, sometimes formalist, but always with the same aversion to the popular-commercial cinema. The cinematographic press after April 25 was open to new cinematographies and played a considerable role in the acceptance and promotion of art and experimental cinema. It should be remember also that it was in the fifties and sixties that the critics stressed the artistic character of cinema, seen earlier by most viewers as simple distraction. Even if its influence on the commercial circuit of a movie has been small, the value of these texts was due mainly to the information and diffusion of an until then unknown cinema.

The instauration of a *modern cinema* put down the criterion of classical continuity revealing its commitment to the official language and the linear narrative logic. This instant of rupture in the history of cinema nurtured the debates among critics who generally welcomed the burgeoning of new cinemas, which incorporated, at least for a certain period of time, this modern line of invention.

In the sixties and seventies, the historic-social context in Portugal was undergoing a change of paradigms and it was up to the young filmmakers to propose something to dissipate the disenchantment that many critics had in relation to the end of national cinemas and the rapid growth of commercial cinema. The cinema press as an instrument of information and consecration backed the need for novelty, and new cinematographies with daring propositions were welcome. Indeed, there was no difficulty in seeing how Cinema Novo movies proposed aesthetic and politic transformations and their images reaffirmed the exposition of a hard and unfair reality. It was in this production context that the Portuguese criticism was grounded, often in the depiction of Brazilian social reality based on the movies' contents and always privileging the narrative element.

In the international plane, the circumstances were also favorable with the importance that the French criticism (from *Cahiers du Cinéma* to *Positif*) bestowed new

cinemas and the increasingly brutal attack against the marketable Hollywood cinema, along with the growing politicization of European intellectuals' discourse at the time, who say art cinema as a concrete possibility for a social revolution.

It is finally important to add that this multilayered context that made the horizon of expectation of Portuguese criticism and its good reception to Brazilian movies was fundamental for understanding the image of Brazilian cinema in Portugal at the time—an image that will certainly affect all its history in Portugal up to this day.

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