

Movies and Moviemakers Under Vargas

by

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Among the many interpretations of Brazil's failure to establish a strong movie industry is the lack of government support, but the government did not always show a lack of interest in Brazilian cinema. Its cultural policies in the period between 1930 and 1945 included a state project for the development of a permanent and stable movie industry, but this path was not taken by moviemakers. With the advent of the Estado Novo, patrimonial influences and concessions campaigned for by producers, though responding to the pressures of the principal companies in Rio, tended to legitimize and strengthen a state interventionist model.

THE STATE'S PROJECT

The provisional government of 1930 seems to have had a clear concept of the function of movies and incorporated into its project of national integration and industrial development proposals that had long been discussed for the use of the movies as an auxiliary cultural and educational tool. In the 1920s and 1930s the most significant idealized images of the country were those that anticipated the construction of a "country of the future" or portrayed Brazil as a giant to be awakened. These images, along with the state's preoccupation with "nation building," contributed in good measure to the intelligentsia's defense of public instruction, educational reform, and the establishment of a "cultural base" through the university. An idea that emerged in the second half of the 1920s was the reform of society through education in the sense of "the 'creation' of citizens and the reproduction/

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modernization of the elite. . . . At issue [was] the complete reformulation of the pedagogical concepts and practices of primary, secondary, and professional education" (Martins, 1987: 73-79).

The Revolution of 1930 did not initiate educational reform, but it did extend it throughout the country. Since movies were, in the years before 1930, a very important means of communication, second only to the press, it is not surprising that there would already have been proposals for using them as an auxiliary learning tool. Jonatas Serrano, Rui Barbosa, Venerando da Graça, and Joaquim Canuto Mendes de Almeida are only some of those who advocated the use of movies in schools even before 1928, the year of the reform proposal by Fernando de Azevedo that officially included educational cinema.

In the conclusion to his book *Cinema contra Cinema*, Joaquim Canuto Mendes de Almeida (1937) emphatically said that the biggest national problem is education and points out the pedagogical advantages of motion pictures in primary, secondary, advanced, and professional education: they spark interest, stimulate curiosity, and hold the attention of students, although they are unsuitable for dealing with "abstract questions." But cinema could also be an important means of transmitting nationalism, one that during the years between 1930 and 1945 would be conspicuous in Brazilian political and economic debates. New political forces such as *tenentismo*, an emerging industrial bourgeoisie, organized labor, and the artistic movements of the 1920s, all of which saw themselves as adversaries of the oligarchies that until then had monopolized power, sought solutions to their grievances in nationalistic terms. Movies could be the conveyors of a nationalist ideology that identified a historical collectivity represented by the nation and guaranteed solidarity along ethnic, geographic, and cultural lines.

Those in power also recognized not only the pedagogical advantages of the movie industry but its possible contribution to the "development" of the nation. In a 1934 speech, Getúlio Vargas reinforced one of the characteristics of twentieth-century nationalism, which holds the state responsible for the maintenance of moral order, civic virtue, and the immanent collective conscience, by highlighting the pedagogical role of the movies in the implementation of his policies (Vargas, n.d.: 187-189):

Among the most useful educational agents available to the modern state is the cinema. An element of culture directly inspiring reason and imagination, it sharpens the qualities of observation, increases scientific resources, and knowledge . . .

Thus cinema will become a book of luminous images through which our coastal and rural populations will learn to love Brazil, and it will raise confidence in the fortunes of our fatherland. For the many who do not read it will be

the perfect pedagogical tool, the easiest and most impressive. For the educated, for those responsible for the success of our administration, it will be an admirable [teaching method].

In the same speech, Vargas also pointed out the possibilities of cinematographic technology:

The technology of the cinema corresponds to the necessities of contemporary life. Unlike yesterday's generations, forced to spend large amounts of time in the slow and detailed examination of texts, those of today, and principally those of tomorrow, will come into contact with the events of history and will follow the results of experimental research through the images of the talking screen. The chroniclers of the future will base their commentaries on the living sequences of reality, taken in the very act, the very essence of circumstances.

The speech concluded by emphasizing the role of the movies in the formation of the Brazilian nation:

Combining the cinema with radio and the rational cultivation of sports, the government will complete an articulated system of mental, moral, and hygienic education, endowing Brazil with the indispensable tools for the development of an enterprising, hardy, and virile people. And the people that comes into being in this way will be worthy of the enviable heritage it receives.

Accordingly, though in 1931 there had been only 50 schools with projectors, by 1935 this number had climbed to 482, of which 244 were public. Besides these initiatives, the Instituto Nacional de Cinema Educativo (National Institute of Educational Cinema—INCE) was created in 1937 through the efforts of Roquete Pinto. That its establishment did not simply lead to an increase in the bureaucratic structure of the state is apparent from a written report by Roquete Pinto in 1942. The document asserts that INCE had succeeded in projecting films in more than 1,000 schools and cultural institutions, organizing a film library, and producing various documentary films. By 1941, 200 films had been made and distributed not only in schools but also in workers' centers, sports clubs, and cultural associations.

Geraldo Santos Pereira reminded us that INCE benefited from the collaboration of Humberto Mauro, a moviemaker with the Cinédia and Brasil Vita Filme studios, and outlines the positive results achieved through INCE: "Besides promoting the integration of educational cinema in the country, it served as a school for directors and documentarians, screenwriters, editors, sound technicians, and investors in short subjects." But he criticized it for not having had a decisive effect on the development of measures to stimulate the Brazilian movie industry and indeed for retarding it "by giving the false

impression that the government was encouraging production when in reality it was concerned only with the educational and cultural sector” (Pereira, 1973: 293). One could also ask, however, why moviemakers did not develop the production of educational films to support their studios.

Incentives like this had existed even before the creation of INCE. Randal Johnson, corroborating the ideas of Pereira, reported that the income from a tax intended to finance educational cinema created in 1932 by Decree 21.240 was diverted from the cinema to other educational pursuits (Johnson, 1987: 53-55). This interpretation overlooks the fact that in the following year the state applied the income derived from this tax to the acquisition of films for the official library and that it was sufficient even to defray the cost of censors and pay for the publication of the *Revista Nacional de Educação*, leaving “a large surplus yet unapplied” that could have helped finance studios investing in educational films (Associação Cinematográfica dos Produtores Brasileiros [Cinematographic Association of Brazilian Producers—ACPB], 1937: 79-82).

But perhaps the best example of providing a path for the development of the industry was the requirement that an educational short subject be exhibited at every screening of a commercial movie (meaning that distribution would not be restricted to schools), defining “educational films” flexibly, according to Decree 21.240/32, as “not only films that have as their purpose the diffusion of scientific knowledge, but also those concerned in their musical or figurative composition with the development of artistic motifs, directed at revealing to the public the great aspects of nature or of culture.”

How, then, are we to understand moviemakers’ lack of interest in producing educational films, often preferring documentaries and newsreels as an alternative to the production of dramatic and feature-length films?

THE NEWSREEL TRADITION

Retracing the path taken by movie producers from the origins of the industry until 1930 makes it apparent that World War I had a profound impact. If at one time there had been a community of interest between film producers and exhibitors (very often the same individuals) that had made possible the production of 963 titles between 1908 and 1913, the introduction of marketing strategies that emphasized the so-called star system and the distribution of feature-length films through leasing caused producers/exhibitors who were also importers to associate themselves with the distributors of foreign movies. Increasingly, they came to concentrate mainly on exhibition. Until then, it had been possible to acquire film and cameras at reasonable prices, and as

motion pictures in general were short subjects, it was common to include them in showings with foreign movies.

For those Brazilian filmmakers who persisted, only one area remained free from the competition of foreign producers: short subjects dealing with local topics. These films, documentaries and newsreels predominantly consisting of political and commercial propaganda, kept the movie industry alive, making possible the production of feature-length movies. There were also films made to order, advertisements, and films extolling famous personalities, besides institutional films commissioned by the state. From the 1920s onward, it would be the nonfiction short subject that sustained the growth of the national movie industry. In São Paulo and Rio there were 12 companies and 20 new directors, some Brazilian, such as Luiz de Barros and José Medina, although access to movie theaters often depended on the kindness of theater owners.

At the end of the 1920s the advent of sound had important implications for the production and commercialization of movies. The success of such pictures as *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and the financial crisis of 1929 caused Hollywood to speed up production of talking movies. This transformation initially resulted in a crisis for foreign exhibitors, since sound required the upgrading of equipment in movie houses and this could take place only when this novelty had been adopted by most producers. For Brazilian moviemakers, talking pictures generated euphoria, for it was believed that foreign languages would impede the commercialization of foreign films and national movies would at last gain favor with the public. However, the public had soon become used to subtitles, and by 1934 there was a collapse in production. In that year, no feature-length movies were made either in São Paulo or in Rio. Only the producers of commissioned films remained active.

Nevertheless, even before the collapse, producers had begun organizing and had founded the ACPB, of which Getúlio Vargas would be named honorary president. This proximity to power should not be surprising, given that the relationship between moviemakers and the powerful dates back to the origins of the Brazilian movie industry even though it was only in the 1930s that it came to be mediated by an organizational entity. Furthermore, the sector's support for Vargas is attested by a rally promoted by moviemakers in front of the Catete Palace during the president's above-mentioned speech, where, according to Primo Carbonari, a cameraman and later newsreel producer present at the event, there were "about 600 movie cameras" from São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.¹

The ACPB at this point began to demand, among other measures, the compulsory and paid exhibition of short subjects, newsreels, cartoons, and other types of movies, and this demand was met in mid-1934 by a governmental

decree. By May 1936 the president of the association could assert (ACPB, 1937: 174-175):

Objectively we may see 600 movies with 1,800 copies; 6 feature-length movies with 36 copies—added together, this amounts to 300,000 meters of film traveling throughout Brazil.

Behind the screen, there are over 40 production companies. Five studios. Ten complete installations for sound recording. Twenty laboratories for film developing and copying. More than 100 panoramic cameras and an abundance of accessory materials for all the industry's necessities. . . .

Activity is intense. In addition to the obligatory production of more than 500 units annually with 1,500 copies, representing 250,000 meters of film to be delivered to the market, the number of features produced, which in 1935 was 5, will be at least 12 this year. This represents an increase of more than 100 percent.

Meanwhile, however, of the 1,750 existing theaters, only 471 were complying with the decree, and consequently, 75 percent of the income anticipated by movie producers was not being realized. Producers then demanded that violators be punished with fines and that authorities be appointed to impose and collect them. A bureaucracy came into being in the sector, and various legislative measures were instituted to combat fraud. Theater owners constantly found new ways of escaping control, either by showing the same copy of a movie at several movie houses or by exhibiting the films at the end of a session.

Yet the development of movie production and especially of newsreels was significant during the Estado Novo. Ademar Gonzaga's Cinédia Studios, for example, whose initial project had been to produce movies on the Hollywood model, had for a while yielded to the production of newsreels similar to those criticized in the previous decade. Relying on the energetic inspectors of the famous Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda (Department of Press and Propaganda—DIP) for the enforcement of screenings, in 1940 Cinédia exhibited more newsreels in São Paulo than the government itself. By September 1944 it had completed 426 issues of one of its newsreel journals—the *Cinédia Jornal*—besides accepting a government commission for the production of the first 127 issues of the *Cine Jornal Brasileiro*. Only at the beginning of the 1940s did the DIP dispense with Cinédia's cameramen and begin hiring moviemakers directly, some from Cinédia itself. Whereas before Cinédia had directed, developed, sound-edited, and copied, now the DIP had its own cameramen, though the technical stages in the preparation of its newsreels were handled by the studio Filmes Artísticos Nacionais, owned by

Alexandre Wulfes, which had also been one of the ten largest movie companies in 1936.

In short, a plausible explanation for the interest of moviemakers in the production of documentaries and newsreels and their lack of interest in joining forces with the educational sectors may be found in the traditional methods of this genre's production. But, on another level, what was it that made possible the confluence of interests between the state and private companies?

THE NEWSREEL AS PROPAGANDA

One must remember that until the early 1930s propaganda was not prevalent in people's everyday lives. However, with the suppression of the uprising by the Aliança Nacional Libertadora and the establishment of the authoritarian foundations of the Estado Novo, propaganda took on a fundamental role, and both radio and cinema—along with the schools, the judicial system, and the labor unions—were used as instruments for legitimizing the regime. It was at this point that Lourival Fontes transformed the Departamento de Propaganda e Difusão Cultural (Department of Propaganda and Cultural Promotion) into an entity that increasingly focused on propaganda and ignored the educational ends for which it had been established. And though instituted only in 1939, the department had already begun fulfilling its propagandist functions. Official production of the *Cine Jornal Brasileiro*, started in late 1938, promoted a charismatic image of Vargas, characterizing him as ever-present and all-knowing, and showed him inaugurating public works, touring the various states, visiting schools, and giving speeches on commemorative occasions. As we have seen, these movies had been commissioned from Cinédia, but two years later the government itself had taken up their production. It must be pointed out, however, that though the law requiring the exhibition of short subjects brought these into competition with the DIP's own productions, in the process principally benefiting large private companies, it also resulted in a law requiring the exhibition of feature films.

CONCLUSION

The rupture that took place with the coup d'état in 1937 was in large part responsible for the abandonment of the educational cinema project. Instructional movies, though one of the concerns of the Capanema ministry (1934-

1945), came to be seen as a project unrelated to the problems of private enterprise. The year 1937, the year of the creation of INCE (that is, of the incorporation of part of its programs into the new organization of the Ministry of Health and Education), seems to have been the benchmark of a new institutional arrangement of cultural policies. During the *Estado Novo*, the various incentives previously proposed for the private production of educational films were forgotten, even though Roquete Pinto, as the director of INCE, reminded Brazilian moviemakers that “the great favors they had obtained had come from the Leader of the Provisional Government, subject to a solemn clause: ‘The cinema should, increasingly, assist in the education of the people’” (ACPB, 1937: 200-201). Yet besides Humberto Mauro—who contributed to the development of the movie industry through the production of documentaries, including some of feature length, funded by indirect aid, and with Roquete Pinto produced and directed more than 200 documentaries—there were few moviemakers concerned with educational films.

At the same time, with the creation of the DIP, the industry’s close relationship to power did not diminish, and state intervention in the motion picture industry was carried out with the purpose of attending to the producers’ demands.² Besides the requirement that nationally made movies be shown, which, under Lourival Fontes of the Department of Propaganda and Cultural Promotion, was extended from short subjects to feature-length films, other agreements regarding film rentals, exemptions from import duties on virgin film, and the reduction of taxes for censorship of Brazilian movies resulted in a protectionist policy.

With the DIP, policies concerned with the movie industry were separated from education, and corporate demands were channeled to the National Council on Cinematography. As a consequence there developed, on one hand, producers who sought to gain official support and, on the other, sectors engaged in strengthening an authoritarian state. These came to mediate the conflicts and interests of the parties involved and consolidated the state as the final arbiter.

NOTES

1. Testimony before the Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito, November 19, 1963.

2. There is even a film that documents a meeting between the DIP director of the Division of Cinema and Theater and producers seeking solutions to the problems of the Brazilian movie industry (Fundação Cinemateca Brasileira, 1982: 43).

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