

CONTEMPORARY DIRECTORS OF NOTE

DIRECTOR Carlos Diegues (born 1940), *Bye Bye Brasil* (1980)

DIRECTOR Hector Babenco (born 1946), *Pixote* (1981)

DIRECTOR Walter Salles (born 1956), *Behind the Sun* (2001)

# BRAZILIAN CINEMA

## Film in the Land of Black Orpheus

GLAUCO ORTOLANO & JULIE A. PORTER



Still from *Central do Brasil* (1998; Eng. *Central Station*), directed by Walter Salles

THOSE WHO STILL REMEMBER the first time they saw the film *Orfeu Negro* (1959) will probably do so with nostalgia. Based on Vinícius de Moraes's play *Orfeu da Conceição*, *Black Orpheus* captured the hearts of an entire generation with poetic images and the heart-warming music of Antonio Carlos Jobim and Luis Bonfá. *Black Orpheus* made history, confirming the adage that the history of Brazilian cinema is as rich and storied as the films themselves. After the new medium was introduced in Brazil in 1897, Brazilian filmgoers immediately embraced the opportunity to explore their culture in the movie houses that began to spring up in the cities of Brazil. The rise of film in Brazil generally corresponds to the timeline for the development of many national cinemas. The technology available then, coupled with what the moviegoing masses were ready to experience, dictated the types of films produced. Through an examination of the rich past and present of Brazilian films and their influential directors, it is possible to glimpse the future of Brazilian cinema.

The silent-film era in Brazil was not entirely without content. A few of the films made during the silent era were extremely deep and thought-provoking and are still considered to be some of the most important films of any period in Brazil-

ian cinematic history. On the lighter side, films starring Carmen Miranda began to gain popularity at this time as well, offering escapist fare for those suffering from the economic hardship plaguing Brazil and the rest of the world that followed the crash of the U.S. stock market. Offering escapism, comedy, and pure fun, this type of film, combining features of slapstick and musicals, known as *chanchada*, was the most popular genre in Brazil for many years. As popular as these movies were for the masses, it was in the aftermath of the backlash against these films that a deeper, more profound cinematic voice evolved, one that continues to resonate in the darkened theater houses of Brazil.

The period marked by truly independent, diverse filmmaking began in the 1940s. Brazilian art has always taken cues from international sources, and filmmaking is no different. The Vera Cruz Film Company did just this, using the techniques employed in the most influential film markets in the world and fusing them with the language, music, and culture of Brazil to create more hybrid works of art. Though the Vera Cruz era was not particularly long-lived, it did, however, have many artistic and commercial successes, a feat that is commendable in itself. Alberto Cavalcanti was the head of Vera Cruz from its inception until it closed in 1954. He paved the way for future



Still from *Vidas Secas* (1963; Eng. *Barren Lives*), directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos

directors and producers to challenge existing ideas about the medium of film, the tastes of the average filmgoer, and the processes by which films are made. Perhaps the most influential and widely noted of the Vera Cruz films was *O Cangaceiro* (The brigand), which in 1953 garnered critical acclaim at the most important of all film festivals, Cannes.

Though Brazilian filmmakers had not been formally tied to the ruling conventions in the dominant Hollywood studio system of the time, Hollywood films were being distributed en masse in Brazil, and as these films were being consumed by audience members, the messages being sent were also consumed. The 180-degree system of camera placement, the editing techniques designed to draw the audience into the plot and become wrapped in the narrative play, the subtle three-point lighting and soft filters employed by Hollywood melodrama directors to make Hollywood's leading ladies even more mesmerizing and irresistible—all these factors contributed to the conscious or subconscious belief that there was only one way to make and watch a movie. The rapid distribution of Hollywood films by audiences the world over placed limitations on what audiences were willing to accept.

Ironically, in prior years, technological disadvantages limited what directors could aspire to create; in the 1950s, however, the preconceptions created in the collective consciousness of the average filmgoer dictated what would succeed and what would ultimately fail. Even so, director Nelson Pereira dos Santos successfully challenged the conventions of filmmaking. In the making of *Rio 40 Graus* (1955; *Rio 40 degrees*), influenced by the Italian neorealist tradition, he went to the streets and used townspeople in his films, thus thumbing his nose at the Hollywood studio system and the subtle tactics employed to engage viewers without challenging them. *Rio 40 Graus* was a *Bicycle Thief* for Brazil, a realist vision of Brazil, her people, her problems, and her promise. This film secured the place of Nelson Pereira dos Santos in cinematic history. His influence is still

visible today in the films that are currently garnering awards and attention.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes of the Vera Cruz Company, a movement emerged promoting cinema as a mirror in which society could view a truthful picture of itself, an offshoot of the popular *cinéma vérité* (cinema-truth) movement in the Soviet Union. This movement, which became known as *cinema novo*, was defined by its leader, Glauber Rocha, as "an idea in the mind and a camera in the hands." There was no social problem that cinema novo was afraid to touch, that was not fodder for the extremely self-reflexive medium. Poverty, the problems that face a multicultural society like Brazil, natural phenomena such as the drought that plagues the *sertão* of the Northeast, violence, crime—the purveyors of cinema novo left no stone unturned. As important as the films of the cinema novo movement were at the time, they are equally important now, providing a retrospective window on the soul of Brazil. As Jytte Jensen has written, "Cinema novo created a remarkable body of work—visually stunning, emotionally exuberant, politically provocative, and uniquely Brazilian—that retains its vitality and power today. This extraordinary group of theoreticians, critics, cinematographers, producers, musicians, and filmmakers established Brazil as a global center of film activity and paved the way for future generations of Brazilian artists."<sup>\*</sup>

Perhaps the best representative of this era of Brazilian filmmaking is *O Pagador de Promessas* (The keeper of promises), directed by Anselmo Duarte and selected as best film at Cannes in 1962. Filmed painstakingly in black and white, *The Keeper of Promises* is about the unfortunate story of Zé do Burro, a naïve peasant who is forced into a catch-22 situation by a draconian Catholic priest. Zé do Burro makes the painful error of going to a Candomblé church to make a promise to Saint Barbara, who in fact was Inhamã, a saint of the African cult renamed as Saint Barbara during the time of slavery in Brazil. (Because slaves of African descent were often forced to take up Catholic practices and worship Catholic saints, in order to outsmart their masters, slaves would rename their African deities with the names of Catholic saints.) Simple-minded Zé do Burro, who cannot understand the religious syncretism of Brazil and sees no difference in making a promise in a Catholic church or at a Candomblé meeting house, ends up getting caught in a web of religious politics. Zé do Burro had made a promise in order to restore the good health of his companion of many years—an old donkey. His promise required that he carry a large cross for more than thirty miles, which was then to be placed next to the altar of a prominent Catholic cathedral in the city of Salvador.

<sup>\*</sup> Jensen is an associate curator in the Department of Film & Video at the Museum of Modern Art, which held a retrospective in 1998 that showcased the cinema novo movement and explored its legacy. See *Cinema Novo and Beyond*, ed. João Luiz Vieira (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998).

When the priest finds out that Zé do Burro had indeed made his promise during a Candomblé ceremony, he denies Zé do Burro access into the building, with the argument that a promise made in the “church of Satan” could not be kept in the “church of God.” Zé do Burro, being a man of honor, insists on paying his promise according to the agreed-upon stipulations and remains with his cross on the premises of the church until the media finally picks up the story



Still from *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (1976), directed by Bruno Barreto

and turns Zé do Burro into an instant celebrity. At the time, the film opened up a heated discussion on the question of religious syncretism in Brazil—a time when the country was still naively considered a model for racial and religious tolerance.

The breathtaking production *Vidas Secas* (1963; Barren lives), also directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, is the quintessential film from this era. Based on Graciliano Ramos’s homonymous novel, it follows a family of poor migrants exiled from their home in the Northeast because of a deadly drought. As the camera closely follows their pilgrimage, it gives the impression that the audience members actually become active participants in the journey and in the hardships the migrants must endure throughout the film. *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (1964; God and the devil in the land of the sun), directed by Glauber Rocha, is an allegorical rehashing of the mysticism of religion in the oft-fabled Northeast. *Noite Vazia* (1964; Empty night) deals with the lonely masses living in newly industrialized São Paulo. These films serve as a bridge between the Vera Cruz and tropicalist movements; even so, the cinema novo movement is always right at the surface of Brazilian films, and it would serve as an important backdrop for the influential Brazilian films of the 1990s.

*A Grande Cidade* (1966; The big city)—directed by Carlos Diegues, who has also directed other great productions such as *Bye Bye Brasil* and *Zumbi*—was the next great film to emerge from the movement. Diegues, who would eventually become known as one of the most important directors of his time, made this remarkable film about a young woman who goes to the big city in search of her fiancé and ends up having to fight for her life. This film—along with *Terra em Transe* (1967; Land in torment), directed by Glauber Rocha—made history as a passionate political statement: Rocha stated that the movie was made as “an attempt to denounce the tragic carnival of Brazilian politics.”

Two important movements occurred in tandem during the 1960s. The tropicalist movement and the *cinema marginal* movement were equally important in their influence on both the films of their time and the films to come. The tropicalist movement, a sort of return to the roots of the “anthropophagic movement” launched by Oswald de Andrade in the late 1920s, was not limited to cinema. Just as the modernist

writers had envisioned decades before, this movement’s leaders felt compelled to draw from the foreign influences inundating South America at the time into usable, viable Brazilian national products; the cinema, art, theater, and music of the time were all part of this equation. In Brazil, the association between artistic modernism and cultural autonomy is especially close, due to its newness as a modern state. Nationalism in twentieth-century Brazil was a defensive self-affirmation—as it had been in much of Latin America during the nineteenth century—against European political, economic, and cultural hegemony.

Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, the outstanding director of this movement, represented the ideals of tropicalism through his film *Macunaíma* (1969), an adaptation of the famous modernist novel by Mário de Andrade, a close friend of Oswald de Andrade, which seems to capture and portray what many believe to be the true Brazilian character. A literary classic, *Macunaíma* was written in 1928 and is about a young Indian character who lives in the Amazon jungle and goes on to live in the cities of Brazil after undergoing all kinds of racial, moral, and spiritual transformations. Like Oswald de Andrade’s theories of cultural cannibalism, which offered a powerful model for the formation of a national culture, *Macunaíma* was the literary embodiment of the concept of counterhegemonic forms of cultural nationalism.

A contemporary of this movement is the “Marginal Cinema” movement, a harbinger of the independent films that would so violently shake the foundation of the Hollywood studio system in the 1990s. “Udigrudi”—as marginal cinema was aptly deemed—was a “deliberate bastardization of the English word *underground*” and a “natural response to cinema novo,” according to Jytte Jensen. *Rio Babilônia* (1982; Babylon river), *Matou a Família e Foi ao Cinema* (1967; Killed the family and went to the movies), and *O Bandido da Luz Vermelha* (1969; The



Still from *O Quatrilho* (1995), directed by Fábio Barreto

red-light bandit) were the most influential films of the short-lived movement, which drew its strength, as many Brazilian films have, from the inherent self-reflexivity of low-budget, politically charged films. These films proved to be more important later in Brazilian cinema than they were at the time they were released.

From 1969 to 1990, most films were produced by EMBRAFILME, a government film agency created to increase the number of films produced in Brazil. This was accomplished through subsidizing the financing, production, and distribution of national films, which was important for two reasons. First, this increased the dollar amount that could be spent on each film, thus allowing directors to employ more stylized techniques including more and varied camera angles, editing techniques, and the emerging special effects that came to dominate Hollywood films. Second, the additional money helped finance wide distribution of Brazilian films in expanding world markets. The military regime in Brazil was very interested in movies with patriotic themes, as was the case with *Independência ou Morte* (1972; *Independence or death*), a mega-production by Brazilian standards about the independence movement of Brazil in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the film to benefit most from EMBRAFILME's aggressive backing, however, was *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (1976), one of the most widely released and internationally popular films in Brazilian history. Its success made an international icon out of actress Sonia Braga and director Bruno Barreto, and his success with this film would pave the way for many films to come.

However, despite rapid production rates between the 1970s and 1980s, the popularity of television and the high cost of an evening at the movies for most members of Brazil's working class made for a sharp decline in the popularity of films and film viewing. Additionally, the inundation of international—namely,

North American—films into Brazilian markets took a heavy toll on the industry. This was the phenomenon in theaters around the world, as Germany, France, Britain, and Argentina all experienced the same shunning of national films in exchange for highly stylized Hollywood fare. That situation forced many Brazilian directors to live and work outside the country, as was the case for Hector Babenco, Brazil's most prominent director of the post-cinema novo era. After directing a series of films in Brazil that gained international recognition, especially *Pixote* in 1981, he moved to the United States and directed movies such as *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985) and *Ironweed* (1987) with some of Hollywood's most celebrated actors (e.g., William Hurt, Jack Nicholson, and Meryl Streep). After a few years, tired of the extreme red tape of Hollywood studios, Babenco decided to return to Brazil and continue his accomplished career there.

Since the early 1990s, Brazil has seen some excellent film productions, which have won the hearts and imagination of viewers around the globe. Walter Salles and Fábio Barreto belong to a new generation of filmmakers who have certainly left their mark in the history of Brazilian cinema with high-quality productions. Both *Central Station* (1998) and *O Quatrilho* (1995) have been nominated for best foreign film by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. This new era of film production has become known as the renaissance of Brazilian cinema and, unlike the anti-establishment cinema novo, has produced films that run more along the lines of Hollywood productions. Salles has also recently directed another masterpiece, *Abril Despedaçado* (2001; Eng. *Behind the Sun*), based on the novel *Broken April* by Albanian writer Ismail Kadaré. The film was shot entirely in the Northeast and is sheer visual poetry from beginning to end. Perhaps the most acclaimed Brazilian film of 2002 is *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*) directed by Fernando Meirelles and released in Brazil that September. This highly imaginative film is about one of the poorest neighborhoods in Rio seen through the eyes of Buscapé, a young boy and amateur photographer who is able to find in art creation a meaning for his life amid crime and poverty.

Like most other industries in Brazil, the film industry has also recently taken a step toward further globalization. On second thought, however, perhaps this global approach has always been a reality in Brazilian cinema, at least since the times of the making of *Black Orpheus*. After all, that unforgettable film was directed by Marcel Camus, an Algerian who directed Brazilian actors and a Spanish production crew. In any case, the fact is that Brazilian cinema has become known as one of the strongest creative forces in the medium of cinematic arts, as new talents keep emerging to consolidate a very unique way of conceiving the art of film in that part of the hemisphere; the creative efforts of Brazilian filmmakers have kept the industry alive and well.



Still from *Bye Bye Brasil* (1979), directed by Carlos Diegues

What follows is a list of the top ten films for the last thirty years (with the exception of *Black Orpheus* produced in 1959) that we recommend for anyone interested in becoming acquainted with Brazilian cinema. These films are usually easily found in major video stores in the United States.

- 1959 *Black Orpheus* (special recognition)
- 1971 *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*
- 1976 *Xica da Silva*
- 1976 *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*
- 1979 *Bye Bye Brasil*
- 1981 *Pixote*
- 1983 *Gabriela*
- 1985 *Kiss of the Spider Woman*
- 1997 *Four Days in September*
- 1998 *Central Station*
- 2001 *Behind the Sun*

*Black Orpheus* is a remake of the Greek tragedy of Orpheus and Eurydice and takes place in Rio during carnival. Based on the play *Orfeu da Conceição*, written by the unforgettable poet Vinícius de Moraes, *Black Orpheus* adds the music of Antonio Carlos Jobim and Luis Bonfá to make it a true masterpiece.

*How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* is a hilarious comedy about the flashbacks of a Frenchman just before he is cannibalized by a tribe of Brazilian Indians—one of the best movies of the cinema novo era.

*Xica da Silva* is a film about a former slave who becomes the concubine of an influential Portuguese nobleman in the gold-rich regions of Minas Gerais during the seventeenth century.

*Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* is based on the famous novel by Jorge Amado that tells us the story of Flor, the widow of Vadinho, a gambler and womanizer who returns to life to claim her as

a wife after she marries a decent and well-behaved pharmacist in Salvador.

*Bye Bye Brasil*, perhaps Carlos Diegues's most celebrated film, is about the adventures of the members of a caravan of small-time artists performing in the villages of Brazil's backlands. Actress Bete Faria in one of her finest performances.

*Pixote* is Hector Babenco's best-known movie in the United States. It is the story of a young boy living in a housing compound for abandoned children who comes face to face with the stark reality that oftentimes awaits these children. It contains some very strong and violent scenes.

*Gabriela* features Sonia Braga and Marcelo Mastroiani in another film based on one of Jorge Amado's most popular novels. The story portrays a love affair between a bar owner and his beloved Gabriela, a woman who seems to know all about man's most secret passions.

*Kiss of the Spider Woman* won an Oscar (best actor) for William Hurt and international recognition for director Hector Babenco. It is the story of an inmate in one of the most infamous prison compounds of the city of São Paulo.

*Four Days in September* is based on the true story of Fernando Gabeira and a leftist guerrilla group that conspires and carries out the plan to kidnap the U.S. ambassador to Brazil during the time of the military dictatorship in Brazil.

*Central Station* is the heart-warming story of a retired school-teacher who earns extra money writing letters for the illiterate at Rio's central train station. After the mother of a young boy dies, she decides to take him back to the Northeast to find his father—a definite must-see.

*Behind the Sun* is another masterpiece by Walter Salles, who also directed *Central Station*. Based on Albanian writer Ismail Kadaré's novel *Broken April*, this film offers stunning photography and an intelligent plot that calls for reflection. **WLT**

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