

# ***Rio, 40 Graus, Rio, Zona Norte:* presentation of the field of Brazilian cinema**

## ***Rio, 40 Graus, Rio, Zona Norte: apresentação do campo do cinema brasileiro***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article intends to present a discussion about *Rio, 40 Graus* (1955) and *Rio, Zona Norte* (1957), both films directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos. We will analyze how it was possible to bring the public a debate conducted in the field of Brazilian cinema about the difficulties faced by domestic producers and on images of the Brazilian people that movies should convey, from an unusual fact in how *Rio, 40 Graus* was received: the censorship of the police chief Menezes Cortes. We will also examine how some agents connected to the field of cinema – which had been in formation since the late 1940s – had been considered by the public as intellectuals able to portray the Brazilian reality in their works.

**Keywords:** Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Brazilian cinema, *Rio, 40 Graus*, *Rio, Zona Norte*

### **RESUMO**

Este artigo pretende apresentar uma discussão em torno dos filmes *Rio, 40 Graus* (1955) e *Rio, Zona Norte* (1957), ambos dirigidos por Nelson Pereira dos Santos. Analisaremos como, a partir de um fato inusitado na recepção de *Rio, 40 Graus* – a censura do então chefe de polícia Menezes Cortes – foi possível trazer ao público o debate empreendido no campo do cinema brasileiro sobre as dificuldades enfrentadas pelos produtores nacionais e sobre as imagens do povo brasileiro que os filmes deveriam veicular. Ainda, avaliaremos como alguns agentes ligados ao campo do cinema – que se encontrava em formação desde o fim dos anos 1940 – foram sendo considerados publicamente como intelectuais aptos a retratar a realidade brasileira em suas obras.

**Palavras-chave:** Nelson Pereira dos Santos, cinema brasileiro, *Rio, 40 Graus*, *Rio, Zona Norte*

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SIXTY YEARS AFTER the production of *Rio, 40 Graus*, it is impossible not to recognize that the film directed by Nelson Pereira dos Santos became a landmark in the political and aesthetical debate about Brazilian cinema. In retrospect, it forms with *Rio, Zona Norte* the first period of Santos' long cinematographic career and also an important reference for the filmmakers of the following generation.

One of the main points of *Rio, 40 Graus*, which evoked much debate when it was released, is the presentation of an imagery of the *cariocas*<sup>1</sup>. Metonymically, they represent Brazilian people as a whole in the film. The same procedure is used in *Rio, Zona Norte*. Mainly grounded on the paradigm of the Italian neorealism, the films directed by Santos chose outward locations representing urban landscapes (favelas, Maracanã stadium, the Central do Brasil train station) and its characters were picked among the popular segments of the people (the boy who sells peanuts, the *sambista*<sup>2</sup>).

At the same time, many conferences related to Brazilian cinema happened in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro between the late 1940s and the release of *Rio, Zona Norte* (1957). In those conferences, the problems faced by many filmmakers were exposed, such as absence of inducement for production, lack of a protected market for Brazilian movies (which could help finance other movies in the future), audience resistance towards national films. Furthermore, some measures to stimulate Brazilian cinematographic production were mentioned in these occasions.

In light of this situation, we need to understand how Brazilian cinema was in the process of becoming a field. Between the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, the contestation of the postulate that cinema was merely an economic activity was gaining force and the critics of this vision started to claim that cinema was indeed a cultural domain. This movement began with the crisis of the industrial model represented by Atlântida and Cinédia in Rio de Janeiro and Vera Cruz and other minor cinematographic companies in São Paulo.

In addition to these conferences on cinema, some important processes concerning the constitution of the cinema field should be highlighted: a) an increasing organization of the groups related to filmmaking, in order to ask for State protection; b) the gradual public recognition (via mass media) of some agents in this field – namely filmmakers – as intellectuals (especially the filmmakers were considered as such).

This article aims to explore the connections between the demands made by the intellectuals of the cinema field and the public debate during the exhibition of *Rio, 40 Graus* and, to a lesser degree, of *Rio, Zona Norte*. More precisely, we intend to analyze how the controversy over the prohibition of *Rio, 40 Graus*

1. The term *cariocas* is used to designate people who were born in the city of Rio de Janeiro

2. A musician who performs samba, a Brazilian rhythm.

by Menezes Cortes (the police chief) and its consequences allowed the debate about cinema to expand beyond its field in order to build a public image of Brazilian films and directors.

Bourdieu made a point about the constitution of *habitus* of an artistic and intellectual field, i.e., of “a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices” (2004: 158), in which the agents take for granted the social world built/structured by themselves. Thus, the role of symbolic struggle happens in two levels (Ibid.: 161-162): the objective one, in which individuals and groups articulate themselves to maintain or transform the practices and the subjective level, by means of changing the categories of perception of social reality.

According to Bourdieu, the activities of the agents/intellectuals to maintain or change the social world operate mainly from the transformation of perceptual categories of this world (i.e., a change in the *habitus*) or, in his words, “to change the world, one has to change the ways of making the world” (Ibid.: 166). And for this to occur agents need symbolic capital, which gives them a place of authority/recognition and, as a consequence, the maintenance or the transformation will be perceived as legitimate.

Thus, we present the questions that will guide this article: a) how the images of the Brazilian people were presented to the public in *Rio, 40 Graus* and *Rio, Zona Norte?*; b) how the debate on Brazilian cinema – which had already been articulated in previous years – was presented through the reception of these films?; and, most importantly, c) how this debate about the films was used to make public the cinema field and its agents as intellectuals? We will use as traces of this debate some news in the press and interviews given by Nelson Pereira dos Santos at that time or even later.

### **DILEMMAS ON PEOPLE’S IMAGE: THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCES OF *RIO, 40 GRAUS* AND *RIO, ZONA NORTE***

After being an assistant in some movies – such as *O Saci* (by Rodolfo Nanni) and *Agulha no palheiro* (by Alex Viany) –, Nelson Pereira dos Santos created a screenplay and ventured further the cinematographic production and direction. According to Salem (1987: 86) and Machado (1987: 48-49), after receiving negative answers by some producers and thinking of the project’s financial feasibility, he decided to adopt a cooperative system, in which the film crew would be paid with shares of the film box office. The same was applied for services such as film laboratory and equipment.

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An unexpected event was added to the difficulties faced by this production (technical difficulties in filming out of studios, a very low budget) and significantly changed the course of its critical reception. After being approved by the censorship, the film was banned by Colonel Menezes Cortes, chief of the federal department of public safety. Since this ban, the director and some intellectuals in favor of its release engaged in a debate for months in Rio newspapers<sup>3</sup>.

3. Also in newspapers of other states, but to a lesser extent.

*Rio, 40 Graus* begins with full shots of Rio de Janeiro, showing its beaches, the Central do Brasil train station and Maracanã stadium, for example. This great imagery stroll along Rio postcards ends zooming in on a hill slum as it merges into an unpaved street typical of Rio's favelas. From the very beginning, the spectator is situated in an ambiance characterized as popular by a narration technique taken from Italian neorealism, and thanks to that the spectator can connect the sequence to its classic founder, *Roma, Città Aperta* (1945) by Roberto Rossellini.

Gradually, the main characters are presented: five Afro-Brazilian boys who sell peanuts and live in the slum, focusing on Jorge, a boy who needs to take care of his sick mother. The film presents its drama showing his mother lying in bed while he collects his supplies before leaving for work. A dramatic soundtrack accompanies their dialogue, in which the mother asks her son to bring her some medicine. The exposure of social dramas focusing on situations that involve the family is an aspect very connected to melodrama (Brooks, 1995). Therefore, Jorge becomes the character symbolizing the people as well as being one of the main sources of the spectator's identification.

This connection with neorealism and the will of portraying the people and their relation with the city played a fundamental role in the debate that followed the film's ban by Menezes Cortes. On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1955, the newspaper *Tribuna da Imprensa* announced that Cortes censored *Rio, 40 Graus* because he considered it improper, since it "presents delinquents, drug addicts and bandits, whose behavior is praised" (apud Gubernikoff, 1985: 215). Furthermore, it uses "bad words that go against the good manners of the people and the due regards for the citizens of a friendly foreign country". Cortes also underlined that the goal of the film was "to exploit situations in order to demoralize institutions".

According to the article, Cortes referred to the character Valdomiro (played by Jece Valadão and represented as a *malandro* – a sort of charming rascal who dislikes working), to the father who appears drunk during the introduction of his daughter's fiancé, to *Seu Nagib*, an Arab immigrant depicted as an explorer of the slum's inhabitants and, finally, to the Portuguese street fair

vendor assaulted by Valdomiro. About this last one, the director resorted to an anti-Portuguese popular imaginary<sup>4</sup> in the scene of the fight of Valdomiro against the Portuguese marketer, after he offended Valdomiro's ex-girlfriend Alice. The climax of the fight is preceded by offenses as *galego*, employed in a pejorative way against the Portuguese people, and finished with a capoeira strike that knocks down the marketer and his stand.

The *malandro* began to acquire legitimacy when samba became prominent in the popular music repertoire used to conquer the working masses during the government of President Getúlio Vargas. Present in many samba lyrics, the *malandro* is found in the loopholes of social structure, and this fact allows him to flow among different social classes and, in consequence, to have access to more means in order to ascend socially.

As Antonio Candido identified in *Dialética da Malandragem* (1993)<sup>5</sup>, the *malandro* channels contradictory feelings of admiration and fear, because he has a fluid ethic in his interactions and also the power of changing negatively the social status of those in contact with him. Although the author has detected the character of the *pícaro* in some literary works of the nineteenth century as the basis for the *malandro*, we can assign that, ethnically, the *malandro* is related to *mestizaje*<sup>6</sup> and to the Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage (through samba). These were elected by influential intellectuals during the Vargas Era as forms of spreading the ideal of racial democracy, and this trend continued in the next decades. The gap between the film, the director's speech and Cortes' speech occurs when the first two affirm explicitly an admiration that was denied and demonized by the police chief's analysis.

The news published by *Revista da Semana* on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1955, written by Hynenny Gomes Ferreira, entitled *Tempo quente no Rio (não é política) 40 graus à sombra* [How weather in Rio (it's not politics) 40 degrees in the shade]<sup>7</sup>, analyzes the arguments of both sides of the conflict. Before exposing Cortes's speech, the news presents it with the subtitle *O filme do Coronel* [Colonel's film]. And it continues:

– Everything in the film is false – started Cortes –, beginning with the title *Rio, 40 Graus* [Rio, 40 degrees Celsius]. If we ever reached this temperature here, it was certainly an exception. The movie is a sequence of aspects of the misery in Rio de Janeiro. It presents only negative points, without a single positive one. It is not realistic. [...] The *malandro* is a character distorted from reality and acclaimed, the father is a drunkard, the boys who sell peanuts are victims of the extortion from the *malandros*. [...] The technique of the film is so perfect in its goal of destroying that the only boy who really deserves our compassion, who is correct and

4. Strengthened by the end of the monarchy, since Brazilian Republicans linked it to the Portuguese heritage. See Carvalho (1990).

5. This Text was first published in *Revista do Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros*, n. 8, São Paulo, p. 67-89, 1970.

6. Here, *mestizaje* refers to the concept used by Gilberto Freyre in his analysis of race relations in Brazil in *Casa Grande e Senzala* and *Sobrados e Mocambos*, which impacted both academia and the cultural production of the following decades and was present in the debates on representation of people in Brazilian films of the 1940s and 1950s.

7. "It's not politics" in round brackets refers to another controversy, over President Juscelino Kubitschek taking office.

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stays away from the *malandro* way of life, dies hit by a car! The ban does not have a political aspect. The film was made for destroying, for undermining society.

Accentuated by preposterous arguments, it is evident that the nuisance for the colonel results from the type of image of the *carioca* people conveyed by the film. In exposing his displeasure regarding the “sequence of aspects of the misery in Rio de Janeiro”, Menezes Cortes points out that a possible identification of Rio’s citizens with the *malandro* must be rejected, combining it with an alleged devaluation of family and work. And he perceives the fate of this character as the fulfillment of the director’s supposedly bad intentions, the accidental death of the boy as a metaphor for the director’s covert desire to “undermine society”<sup>8</sup>, underlined by the film.

Before the sequence of Jorge’s death, the narrative had already exposed the backstage intrigues of soccer<sup>9</sup> to oppose it to the reaction of the masses during a match. Jorge is shown begging for money in front of the stadium, when boys from a rival gang start to chase him. The scene cuts to some shots of the fans in Maracanã watching the match, with insertion of close-ups of some euphoric supporters. In a sound overlay, the euphoria of the radio broadcast passes into the scene in which Jorge is hidden behind a wall and is discovered by the other boys who chase him. During the escape, he tries to get up on a streetcar, but he is hit by a car. The scream of despair of a witness is continued by the scream of the masses in the stadium after a goal. Cut to supporters celebrating the victory. Switched plans show the exit of the fans and players, journalists interview some of the latter. Cut to the camera approaching Jorge’s body laid on the floor beside a candle and a dramatic soundtrack in opposition to the fans’ enthusiasm.

In this sequence, two ideas concerning the people are portrayed: alienation<sup>10</sup> and sacrifice. The character elected as the symbol of sacrifice is the object of the tragedy that helps expose both the exploitation that people face and the mass control strategies that, according to the film, could be identified with soccer and, to a lesser degree, with religion (whose presence is symbolized by the candle beside the boy’s body).

The continuity of these emotions from the soccer match to Jorge’s death – presented through image and sound – encompasses the spectator in a *pathos* that intends to expose compassion for these people, at the same time it denounces the alienation of its practices, what could be related to Eisenstein’s (2002) intellectual editing. This position regarding people – qualifying their culture as plural, of ethnically integrated elements, but alienated and needing the (leftwing) intellectual’s mediation to develop itself – would unfold in the

8. For curiosity, it is interesting to quote a report on juvenile offenders in the October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1955 edition of *Diário Carioca*, with the following headline on the cover: “The fact that Mr. Police Chief wants to deny”. It included several photos of street children (all black and some with their faces altered by drug use).

9. This discussion was resumed by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade in *Garrincha, a alegria do povo* (1965) and by Maurice Capovilla in *Subterrâneos do futebol* (1965).

10. Intellectuals linked to Brazilian cinema had a fairly close conception of alienation to that one made by Adorno and Horkheimer (1985) in relation to the culture industry, according to which subjects lost sight of the aspect of production and overvalued fruition

cinema field in the sixties, mainly from the contact between the critics and aspiring filmmakers and some sectors of the political left, as Centro Popular de Cultura (CPC).

The last sequence of *Rio, 40 Graus* makes the idea of alienation explicit in order to present the people. In parallel, it is a prelude for Santos's next movie *Rio, Zona Norte*. It focuses on a rehearsal in a *escola de samba*<sup>11</sup> named Unidos do Cabuçu. It closes in on dancers' feet, musicians playing percussion and acoustic guitars and then a *sambista*<sup>12</sup> singing the lyrics: "A voice was heard from North to South/ freedom is what black people wanted/ In 1888 Princess Isabel signed the 'Golden Law'/ and slavery in Brazil was over"<sup>13</sup>, and the people in the rehearsal continue the song. Therefore, ethnic and racial integration is brought to the performance by the samba lyrics, which emphasize the conflicts as a source of appraisal of past struggle for freedom.

This idea of people's integration is highlighted when a group from another *escola de samba*, Portela, comes to the rehearsal of Unidos do Cabuçu. And the exploitation to which these people are submitted appears again in a dialogue between *Seu Nagib* and a member of the *escola de samba*, when the first threatens to shut off the electricity during the rehearsal in case a debt would not be paid. The attempt of getting the money for the payment reveals that the exploitation is mainly constructed within differences of social classes.

In parallel editing, a very tense Valdomiro arrives at the rehearsal with the intention to confront his ex-girlfriend Alice and her fiancé. However, he is surprised by Alberto: they are old friends. The beginning of a conflict is substituted by Valdomiro's pleasure on seeing him. "With Alberto it's ok, we handled tough things together. He's a really nice dude", and Alberto replies: "And you, Miro, if you hadn't been there, I wouldn't have endured the forty days of the strike". When the film stages the meeting between the *malandro* – who embodies the idea of *mestizaje* – and a young Afro-Brazilian fiancé, it underlines again racial integration, motivated by belonging to the same social class, which is exposed by the common experience of a strike. And the ethnical counterpart of this union is represented by Zé Ketí's samba lyrics, especially the one sang by Alice at the end of the film:

*I am samba*

The voice of the slum is me, yes sir

I want to show the world my value

*I am the king of terreiros*<sup>14</sup>

I am samba

11. A place where people go to practice dancing and playing samba, preparing for Carnaval parades, in which different *escolas de samba* compete against each other, as in a championship. There are different leagues to which *escolas de samba* may be up or downgraded. They are usually located in poor areas of Brazilian big cities.

12. A samba musician.

13. The original lyrics are: "Uma voz de Norte ao Sul se ouvia/ liberdade era o que o negro queria/ Em mil oitocentos e oitenta e oito a Princesa Isabel a lei Áurea assinou/ e a escravidão no Brasil acabou"

14. Places where Afro-Brazilian cults occur.

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15. Original lyrics: “*Eu sou o samba/ A voz do morro sou eu mesmo sim senhor/ Quero mostrar ao mundo que tenho valor/ Eu sou o rei dos terreiros/ Eu sou o samba/ Sou natural aqui do Rio de Janeiro/ Sou eu quem levo a alegria/ para milhões de corações brasileiros*”

I am from Rio de Janeiro  
I am the one who brings joy  
to millions of Brazilian hearts<sup>15</sup>

At this point, the Afro-Brazilian traditions are considered integrated to the imagined national community (Anderson, 1989), since they intend to conquer “millions of Brazilian hearts”.

These ideas would be developed in Santos’s next movie, *Rio, Zona Norte*. Shot in the beginning of 1957 in Morro da Providência, a well-known slum behind Central do Brasil. The narrative of the film is structured by a big flashback of the life of Espírito da Luz Soares, a *sambista* played by Grande Othelo, who appears in the first sequence of the film dying on the rails of Central do Brasil. About Othelo’s performance, the director said in an interview published in *Diário da Noite* on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1957:

*Rio, Zona Norte* is also a film by Grande Othelo. His creation of the songwriter Espírito da Luz Soares, main character in the story, made him my partner in the process of filming. Without his understanding of the conception of this deeply human character, the film would be worth nothing. Othelo knew how to give the indispensable and necessary motives to the drama of a man who suffers and, at the same time, is the expression of his people’s joy.

The film is guided by the relationship between the *sambista* and the appropriation of his creation by the cultural industry, which had been consolidating its role towards the masses in Brazil. It is worth noting that the creation of Espírito was conceived within a repertoire of the Afro-Brazilian culture that had recently been legitimized by the Estado Novo (Vargas’ dictatorial period) since the late 1930s in order to use the popular music in the conquest of the masses, and inserted in the paradigm of racial democracy defended by that same regime (Vianna, 1999).

In *Rio, Zona Norte*, the insertion of Espírito in the cultural industry fails and his relation with radio agents is portrayed as a theft of his songs. The exploitation of the subaltern classes by the elite (represented by the characters Maurício, an ambitious radio producer – played by Jeca Valadão –, and Moacir, a musician not as gifted as Espírito – played by Paulo Goulart) is shown, but its ethnical nature is not emphasized: Espírito is built as a character whose fate is poverty and the exploitation suffered by him was metonymical of that suffered by Brazilian people, shown through the logic of class struggle coherent with the director’s Marxist formation (Machado, 1987).



The meeting of Espírito, Maurício and Moacir explicits the hierarchy among them. Moacir goes with his wife to the rehearsal of the *escola de samba* in which Espírito plays and whistles to draw his attention, and Espírito walks in his direction. After a brief conversation that serves to introduce them, Espírito sings one of his compositions. The film focuses the action through the point of view of Moacir – who is slightly drunk – and of his wife, visibly bored. Meanwhile, Maurício admires the singing from a distance. In the end, Moacir offers to help Espírito and goes away. Maurício approaches him at the end and says: “Espírito, go to the radio tomorrow, I have something really nice for you”.

The metonymical relation between the musician and the people is not a coincidence, recovering this point from the first film, which has a similar linkage between the Afro-Brazilian boy who sells peanuts and the idea of people. This idea was reused to deal with the (inadequate) use of popular culture elements by cultural industry and, according to the narrative, the people’s alienation in face of oppression. The *malandro* represented in *Rio, 40 Graus* also appears in *Rio, Zona Norte*. But in the latter he is shown as a character serving the purposes of the cultural industry, establishing a counterpoint with the admiration for him built in the previous film.

Another similarity to Santos’s previous film is the idea of the sacrifice that people endure. Following the metonymical relation between Espírito and the people, two portrayals of deaths remind us of Jorge’s death in the precedent film: those of Espírito and his son. The narrative inserts the latter after Espírito repeatedly tried to take his son out of criminal life. Espírito is approached in his house by the boys of his son’s gang, who want to charge a debt. He is assaulted and robbed by them. In a redemption gesture, his son shows up to save him and is punished with death. The *pathos* of the sequence is expanded by a dramatic soundtrack that follows Espírito’s astonishment in front of his son’s body. This death is portrayed as a consequence of the criminality to which young people of the carioca slums are submitted<sup>16</sup>.

The specter of death surrounds the whole narrative of the film, since this is a big flashback started by the fatal fall of Espírito from a train. From the ambulance next to the railway line until his death, several takes focusing on the hospital, doctors and nurses are inserted. Moacir receives a phone call and learns that Espírito might be buried as an indigent. A take shows him speaking on the phone and a voice-over reveals: “you are the only person who can give the necessary information. We found only your name and address”. The intellectual indigence – represented by the theft of the authorship of his

16. Indeed, this was precisely one of the elements that bothered Menezes Cortes the most in the debate on *Rio, 40 Graus*.

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sambas and therefore his status as creator – is increased by the possibility of social indigence.

The end of *Rio, Zona Norte* portrays Espírito's death. The camera alternates his point of view – with the image of Moacir – and the close-ups of his dying face. His death is confirmed by the gesture of the nurse, who rolls his body in a sheet. Moacir and another of Espírito's friends walk in silence through the hallway. The silence is interrupted only in the street with a question by Moacir: "Did you know Espírito's sambas?". The answer is an invitation: "If you want, we can go up to the slum. Many people knew his sambas". Thus, death redeems Espírito and finally gives to him the artist status denied to him in life.

Espírito's artistic path is connected to the musical performances, in which the idea of racial integration was underlined, still continuing the argument of *Rio, 40 Graus*. In the first rehearsal of the *escola de samba* shown in the film, Espírito sings:

17. Original lyrics: "Mexi com ela, mas ela/ nem me deu bola/ e me mandou pra escola/ pra mim aprender o bê-á-bá/ eu respondi para ela/ morena vem me ensinar/ morena, morena chega pra cá/ vem, morena, vem/ Vem me ensinar/ o verbo amar"

18. *Morena* might refer to a brunette woman, but in this case it refers to a mixed-race woman of African and European ancestry. The term is frequently used in a complimentary manner with sexual undertones.

I hit on her, but she  
didn't even care  
and told me to go to school  
to learn the ABC  
I replied  
*morena*, come and teach me  
*morena*, come over here  
come, *morena*, come  
Come teach me  
the verb to love<sup>17</sup>

The character of *morena*<sup>18</sup> is an invocation of mestizaje and of a pattern of female beauty already present in the work of some artists from the 1920s and 1930s – for instance, in the paintings of Di Cavalcanti and in the poems of Oswald de Andrade. It also comprises an erotic rhetoric that embraces interracial love.

These lyrics are performed on the radio, but without Espírito's due credits. In a party at a friend's house, Espírito listens by chance to the music sung by a *sambista* called Alaor, who Maurício had introduced him to. However, he is surprised when he hears the credits: "And in *Vozes Novas do Brasil* we featured Alaor da Costa singing his song written with Maurício Silva, the samba *Mexi com ela* [I hit on her]". A close-up of a clearly disappointed Espírito is shown. A guest reacts telling Espírito to go to the radio to have it out with Maurício. In the end, all the guests sing Espírito's samba, in a gesture of recognition.

Indirectly and even recovering the point of alienation (from the singing in the party), the narrative exposes once more the relationship between Afro-Brazilian popular culture and cultural industry, featuring it as an illegitimate appropriation of the samba's authorship.

Nevertheless, *Rio, Zona Norte* also operates the same selection that its narrative denounces and constructs its relationship toward popular culture in a very similar way. As pointed out by Machado (1987: 195) and recognized by the director some years later, the religions practiced and diffused through popular culture would have no space in his first creations. Once again, the Marxist formation of the director marks his narrative construction. On the occasion of the release of *O Amuleto de Ogum*, the director talked about his intellectual approach when he remembered the shooting of *Rio, 40 Graus* and, in a certain way, of his following film:

I spent one year living with the slum inhabitants. I saw ceremonies, I saw offerings, I knew when it was the *dia das almas* [day of the souls], but I really did not know, because I thought that was not part of reality. The reality for me was outlined at other levels. I was looking for social relations. I see that my position was biased and part of an oppressive scheme of other religious forms, which began with the first settler in Brazil (apud Salem, 1987: 290).

The fact that the director had favored samba at the expense of “religious forms” is part of the paradigm of thinking race relations as conveyed by Estado Novo and continued in the 1950s. Zé Keti's lyrics are interpolated with the action of the film and represent the legitimacy of the official appropriation of Afro-Brazilian culture<sup>19</sup>, while the silence in regard to popular religiosity, even if we recognize the film's identification with Marxist thought, meets the religious repression of the Vargas Era.

The representation of people portrayed in *Rio, 40 Graus* had an impact on developments of the debate started by its unexpected prohibition by Menezes Cortes. In turn, this debate was essential to present the agenda of the Brazilian cinema field – which was in formation – to the audiences, and found repercussions even in the reception of the following Santos's film.

## DISPUTES AND STRUGGLES WITHIN THE BRAZILIAN CINEMA FIELD IN THE 1950S

When Bourdieu (2007: 133) formulates the theory of social fields, he develops a triple critique toward Marxism: the essentialist dimension of its

19. We may remember the example set by Hermano Vianna (1999) of racist demonstrations against Pixinguinha's orchestra, with its eight Afro-Brazilian musicians in the late 1910s

20. Extract translated freely by the author.

thought that obscures the level of social relations; the reductionism/the attention to the economic field in spite of the others; the erasure of symbolic struggles involved in the processes of social structuring. In short, we could say that the author considers the social space as “constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active in the social universe under consideration, that is, able to confer force or power on their possessor in that universe” (Bourdieu, 2007: 133-134).

Recognizing that categories are “product of the incorporation of objective structures of the social space [to the perception of the social world]”<sup>20</sup> (Ibid.: 141), Bourdieu adds that a representative work by the agents is necessary “to impose their own vision of the world or the vision of their own position in this world, that is, their social identity” (ibid.: 139), which is the mark of the presence of power relationships that shape the social world and, for consequence, the perceptual categories around these. We need to verify how the intellectuals who were somehow related to Brazilian cinema shaped that work of representation during the debate about *Rio, 40 Graus*.

After the sudden censorship, the artists organized themselves quickly and the actors of the film went to some newsrooms to make known that a private session of the film would take place in ABI (Brazilian Press Association), since the prohibition was only valid for public sessions. According to Salem, “around one thousand people were invited, such as journalists, writers (as the poet Manuel Bandeira), painters (as Jenne Augusto), movie and theatre artists (Eliane Lage, Oscarito, Anselmo Duarte, Eugenio Kusnet) and filmmakers” (1987: 117), also mentioning the presence of Alex Viany, José Carlos Burle and Jorge Amado. Gubernikoff (1985: 42) added some names, such as Fada Santoro, Abdias do Nascimento, Bill Farney, Carlos Manga e Fernando de Barros. In this occasion, Alex Viany evaluated the film and condemned its prohibition, in an article published in *Ultima Hora*, on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1955:

It is a work of admirable realism, full of dignity, focusing on social problems Brazilian cinema cannot avoid if it intends to be art and to be Brazilian. As a Brazilian and a man of cinema, I consider the attitude of Mr. Police Chief very dangerous. The film points to a path that many have tried to tread – the path of popular Brazilian cinema, concerned with real people and places.

We may note that the Brazilian cinema field began to gain notoriety with the publicity surrounding the controversy. That notoriety can be exemplified by the support of intellectuals from other areas and the possibility of publicizing the discussions about the content of the Brazilian film that were already held

in cinema conferences, briefly mentioned in this passage (“focusing on social problems Brazilian cinema cannot avoid, if it intends to be art and to be Brazilian”). And another point that would begin molding the *habitus* of that field is in Viany’s speech: the constant threat that Brazilian cinema must deal with.

On the next day, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1955, the article “O caso de ‘Rio, 40 Graus’” [The case of *Rio, 40 Graus*], by Jorge Amado, was published in the newspaper *Imprensa Popular*. The author defends the removal of the film’s ban and condemns Cortes’ attitude:

The prohibition imposed by the Police chief has the pretext that the film shows “bandits” (these so-called “bandits” are probably the peanut sellers, slum inhabitants, soccer players, workers, Members of the *Escolas de Samba*, as these are the heroes of the film) and presents no moral conclusions. The illegality of this ban is clear and the alleged reason presented for it is hateful. If this ban is sustained, our filmmakers cannot show the people in their films anymore, they are prohibited from creating on people’s lives, their sufferings, their joys, their hopes, their strength, which resists their tragic reality, our filmmakers should be reduced to “chic” places, to the houses of the elite, and the eye of the camera should be limited to large cars, the millionaires, the champagne lords and coffee-society ladies.

In addition to being a literary reference constantly quoted in the communications of Nelson Pereira dos Santos during Brazilian cinema conferences, Amado’s article has the same tone as the discourse articulated by Nelson and Alex Viany, of showing Brazilian people in the films. He underlines who would be the “bandits” bothering Cortes and sustains that the function of Brazilian cinema is “creating on people’s lives, their sufferings, their joys, their hopes, their strength, which resists tragic reality”. In a previous sentence, Amado pointed which character would be the symbol of the people: “the spectator cannot forget the *little black boy who sold peanuts* with ‘his business’, which is his only property, his greatest affection, object of all the love from this little city orphan” [emphasis added]. Ironically, he recognizes the same character as Cortes did, with whom the spectator would identify him/herself.

Throughout the article, Amado compares the effort of the filmmakers to that of the intellectuals who tried to accomplish a “Brazilian creation” in other fields (literary, theatrical, academic). For this, he considers these filmmakers as “men of culture” and asserts that the persecution of the movie was indeed an effort to suppress Brazilian cinema, in line with Viany’s thoughts. Thus, the writer highlights the main fuel of the controversy surrounding *Rio, 40 Graus*:

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the film would be the catalyst of an intellectual barricade against the coup d'état that was being prepared against Juscelino Kubitschek. In his words:

The prohibition of “Rio, 40 Graus” is only a timid beginning of the plans of the enemies of freedom and culture. [...] Brazilian intellectuals – writers, artists, filmmakers and theater people, scientists, lawyers – are getting together in defense of the threatened national culture and its great and free blossoming. [...] We either defeat with our protest the Estado Novo verdict that prohibits “Rio, 40 Graus”, or corroborate for a near future of a world where writers can no longer write, painters cannot paint, filmmakers cannot film, musicians cannot compose. We are not facing threats anymore, we are facing a violent offensive against our culture and against our creators.

Amado sees in the prohibition of the film the accomplishment of the threats made by rightwing nationalists, who intended to get into power by force, and identifies Cortes with the arbitrary acts of Estado Novo. He also places cinema in the panorama of national artistic creation and grants the movie an authority that grew as the debate went on. He closes the article with a call to intellectuals and a judgment of the film:

“Rio, 40 Graus” needs to be exhibited. Because it is a good film, a work of talent and sensitivity, honest, Brazilian, patriotic, and because its prohibition is the beginning of a full-blown effort by putschists against culture, against the Brazilian intelligence, against the creators of culture. The struggle against the coup is a struggle of all Brazilian people, and as a consequence a struggle of the intellectual class. But it is a double struggle for the intellectuals because the coup means the end of free creation and critical possibilities.

It is necessary that all Brazilian intellectuals unite to demand the release of “Rio, 40 Degrees” in order to defeat those who wish to silence the voice of intellectuals, i.e., the legitimate voice of Brazilian people.

Finally, Amado emphasizes the function of Brazilian intellectuals as “the legitimate voice of Brazilian people” and their duty to struggle against the coup<sup>21</sup>, and the film is one of their expressions. This perception would be present in the debate and a dominant one, to the point of many newspaper covers and headlines stating that the movie is a pillar in the struggle against the coup.

In short, we could underline four aspects of Amado’s article that were fundamental to the discussion about the film. The first of them is the possibility of – following this controversy – publicizing the conceptions regarding

21. For example, there is a cover of *Imprensa Popular* on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1955, that was published with the headline: “The defense of *Rio, 40 Graus* is a symbol of the fight against the coup”.

Brazilian films, which had already been in debate during cinema conferences, although they were restricted to them. The battle for months in newspaper covers (some of them mass media) made public the ideas of Nelson Pereira – and, by extension, those of Viany – about the way Brazilian people should be represented in films.

The author also links the diffusion of national content through Brazilian films – from the relation between intellectuals and popular culture – to the economic occupation of Brazilian film market. We may remember that the main accusations against Cortes were focused on the political repression with putschist intentions and, not less important, the harm to Brazilian cinema in allying his perspective to the interests of American distributors and exhibitors. Although Amado only mentions “producers”, the tone of the criticism is also directed to them.

The third aspect refers to the identification between the initiative of the filmmaker and those accomplished by intellectuals belonging to socially and academically established fields. When Amado acknowledges the cinematographic creation as something to be defended, he compares it to other artistic creations, which would be fundamental to the recognition of the cinema field and of its agents as intellectuals.

By inserting the cinema in the struggle against the coup, Amado highlights one more point that would be used in the future by the intellectuals from cinema: the political dimension of cinematographic creation, also defended on cinema conferences. It would be a central point in the debate about cinema during the following decade, mostly after the coup of 1964, which brought about serious consequences to this field.

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1955, through an article published in *Correio Radical*, the public came to know about a lawsuit by the director against the prohibition of the film. His lawyers Evandro Lins e Silva and Victor Nunes Leal – notorious jurists – validated the point of view that Cortes’ actions – prohibition of the film and canceling of its exhibition in ABI – were unconstitutional<sup>22</sup>.

In parallel, several film screenings were scheduled with the clear purpose of mobilizing the political class to engage in the debate. On October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1955, a session was held in the Senate, as the newspaper *Diário Carioca* published the following day<sup>23</sup>, for an audience constituted of senators and intellectuals. With the title “Os senadores viram e louvam ‘Rio, 40 Graus’” [Senators watched and praise *Rio, 40 Graus*], several statements in favor of the film are mentioned. In the tribune, Senator Paulo Fernandes calls for the reverse of the film’s ban. Senator Novais Filho manifests his opinion on its contents: “the film focuses on different aspects of real life in Rio de Janeiro, some of which are interesting

22. According to the transcription made by Gubernikoff (1985: 54-56, v. 2).

23. According to Salem, Pompeu de Souza, owner of *Diário Carioca*, was one of the main articulators pro release of *Rio, 40 Graus*.

and curious. The final part, with popular music and a beautiful presentation of the city, deserves special attention”. Another Senator, Rui Carneiro, also made statements about the movie: “the film, in its tremendous reality, only focuses on aspects of Rio’s crude life. It is an interesting film and, in my point of view, not subversive”. Thus, he refutes the main accusation made by Cortes to the film, and he is supported by colleague Senator Dominic Velasco: “Some labeled the film as communist, but anyone who watches it without prejudice will dismiss the accusation. It has a deeply human sense. It is true in its criticism, although there is, in some of it, a bit of exaggeration”.

Another session had been held for politicians two days before, in a location close to the City Council for the councilmen and intellectuals invited, according to another article in the October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1955 *Diário Carioca*. The headline was “Vereadores viram ‘Rio, 40 Graus’, só um não gostou” [City councilmen watched *Rio, 40 Graus*, only one did not like it], mentioning Indalecio Iglesias’s attitude, the only one to support the ban of the film and Cortes’ attitude. It also mentions the statement of the other councilors, who supported the film. In a dubious position, Pedro Faria argued that “every Brazilian should watch *Rio, 40 Graus*, which is a great lesson of social science” and opposed its exhibition abroad, “as this would reveal to foreigners a negative side of the Federal District”. Waldemar Viana also opposed the ban of the film, returning the accusation to the Police Chief, “advis[ing] him to arrest the thieves and robbers infesting the city and going unpunished for every sort of crime, instead of wasting time with this film”. As a result, we noted that the support of the political class has resulted in an important element for the film’s authority and its depiction of life in the city and, also, in the legal dispute, which would only be resolved on December 31<sup>st</sup> of that year, when the Federal Court decided to remove the ban.

These moments of approach to the political class were essential in the search for the State support for film production that, according to Anita Simis (2008), had been happening in the works since the 1930s and became stronger in the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in the creation of State funding bodies Instituto Nacional do Cinema (INC) and Empresa Brasileira de Filmes (Embrafilme) in 1966 and 1969, respectively. Continuing Simis’s thought, they were the highlights of cinema conferences and had the opportunity of being largely widespread by those public discussions.

One of these moments is presented in a cover of *Imprensa Popular* on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1955 (the same edition in which Amado’s article was published) – “Em defesa de ‘Rio, 40 Graus’: mobilização dos intelectuais contra o desmando policial” [In defense of *Rio, 40 Graus*: mobilization of intellectuals against po-



lice excess], published right after the suspension of the private session in ABI, in which, alongside the protests of the intellectuals, it is reported that

Mr. Abguar Bastos stressed that such facts cannot pass without an energetic objection of the Congress, and the Minister of Justice is obliged to go public to provide explanation and derogate this arbitrary measure. In this sense, the São Paulo representative forwarded to the Congress Board an information request addressed to Mr. Prado Kelly.

Among the press analyzed, the magazine *Revista da Semana* put itself clearly in favor of *Rio, 40 Graus'* exhibition when it started to collect statements of intellectuals in favor of the film and by publishing that "technically, it is a wonderful movie. No one has ever done anything like this in Brazilian cinema, and it seems very hard to be overcome, unless the young Nelson Pereira dos Santos, its director, intends to do it" (October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1955).

Nevertheless, the most unusual aspect of this article lies in the interview with the director. Refusing to discuss Cortes' arguments, for considering the discussion already notorious, Nelson preferred to bring the public the terms of the discussion on the content of Brazilian films and the domestic film market, a rare opportunity to go beyond cinema conferences.

We reproduce his speech in full:

I believe that the defense of the internal market through taxation of foreign films and State funding for the film industry are both preliminary and simultaneous measurements required for the progress of Brazilian cinema.

Men of cinema in successive meetings and conferences have pointed out these solutions and even managed to include them in the bill of creation of Instituto Nacional de Cinema. It will now demand more struggle and decision from all producers, technicians and artists for this Institute to become a reality, so that it transforms itself from words on a sheet of paper and congressmen's speeches into a living organism towards the development of Brazilian cinema.

But besides institutes and protectionist laws, it is filmmakers, screenwriters and directors who hold the responsibility, the high and worthy responsibility of identifying this cinema with the national culture, making the industry grow, consolidating it; this is not a task only for politicians and film producers. It takes the active participation of filmmakers, who can print human and universal content into movies and portray in their work the life and traditions of our people. The eminently national cinema is a condition for its artistic and commercial success for national film industries.

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24. A sort of musical comedy of low technical quality.

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The duty of filmmakers is therefore to put Brazilian cinema on the path, the large, new path of investigating the themes of our culture, our history and the lush life of our people.

Almost a summary of Santos' speeches in the conferences, he used the classic distinction between infra and superstructure (which is coherent with his Marxist formation) to state that it is necessary to integrate the economic and cultural dimensions of the cinema field, once more with the intention of validating his vision for Brazilian people's images. It is also possible to consider that these images configure a tension point that occasionally occurred in the relationship between intellectuals in the cinema field and the authorities/institutions, and the negotiation about the incorporation of filmmaking to the State apparatus has necessarily crossed (as in the case analyzed) the contrasting ideas about people.

Unlike *Rio, 40 Graus*, Santos' second film, although clearly presented as a continuation of the first and part of a trilogy (unfinished as he abandoned the project of *Rio, Zona Sul*), has not reached the prominence of the first one, which was largely boosted by the controversy with Colonel Cortes.

In addition, *Rio, Zona Norte* was poorly received by critics at the time, who appointed it as artistically inferior to the first. Hilda Machado offers us a clue about their discomfort: the negotiation with the genre of *chanchada*<sup>24</sup> or, in Machado's words, "*Rio, Zona Norte* plays with the tradition of *chanchada* (afterall, it is a film with Grande Othelo and Angela Maria), but does not intend to be *chanchada*" (1987: 125). In an interview to Machado, the director recalled, alluding to the debate on *Rio, 40 Graus*: "The intellectual, ideologically restricted, cinephile vision was this: to greet me as the guy who was making cinema against *chanchada*. This type of reductionism is terrible. [...] And *Cinema Novo* was somewhat an heir to this" (Machado, 1987: 125).

One indication of this legacy can be found in the criticism of Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, published in the literary supplement of the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1958. The author begins recognizing the bad critical reception of the film: "Nobody hid the deep disappointment caused by *Rio, Zona Norte*. The first film of its director – *Rio, 40 Graus* – had provoked justified hopes". According to Gomes, this is the main problem of the film:

The action in *Rio, Zona Norte*, concentrated on a main line, and the demand for dramatic continuity that results from it allowed flaws to the point of ruining the film. Putting aside the technical failures of sound and photography, the most evident weakness of the film relies on the *excessive faith of Nelson Pereira dos Santos in the artistic virtuality of the materials to be shot*. [emphasis added]

Besides, he addresses a double accusation against the film: sloppiness with the artistic creation and with the recording of the city. “This effort of recreation was minimal in *Rio, Zona Norte*, but, having been exercised, the film equally lost, in extra-artistic domain, the automatic recording of aspects of Rio’s life”. And even when the critic praised the film, he highlighted a sequence in which Espírito goes out of the bathroom and cradles his son, alongside his wife, ignoring the numerous musical sequences in the film.

In turn, Ely Azeredo, from the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil*, did not see the sambas as the film’s main problem, but rather the fact that

Nelson [is] often a chaotic narrator, without control over the rhythm and the visual communication of the story. He withholds from the spectator data important to any kind of creation and vital to someone who identifies himself as a neorealist. He makes mistakes that any novice would avoid without any trouble. (Gubernikoff 1985: 231)

Yet he recognizes the central role of Grande Othelo in the production and his importance to Brazilian cinema: “on the map of uncertainties and disappointments in Brazilian cinema, Grande Othelo is a rare and comforting reality. What would the film be without the great black artist?” (Ibid.). Thus, the role of the musician and actor presented by the film and the ethnic aspect of Espírito’s artistic creation were recognized by critics.

Around twenty years later, the filmmaker David Neves would recognize the failure in *Rio, Zona Norte*’s critical evaluation in an article published in the magazine *Filme e Cultura*<sup>25</sup> (in the issue of February 1978), in the moment that another film by Nelson Pereira was being screening (*Tenda dos Milagres*, which broached directly the racial issue in Brazilian society). Limiting himself a little bit to the polarization that Nelson emphasized in his speech about his relationship with *chanchadas* (in principle, in opposition to them), Neves describes the experience of the film:

The shooting in the slums, on the street, in the railway, replaced with the advantage of verisimilitude the artificial studios of *chanchadas* and new actors recruited from the debut film (Junior Vargas, Haroldo Oliveira, Washington Fernandes) and brought an air of reality that was missing in our cinema (Neves, 1978: 91).

Noticing in the film aspects of the Cinema Novo movement from the 1960s – in which he had participated and was publicly recognized as a member –, Neves elects a central idea to describe it: that the director had combined political and cinematic achievements of Italian neorealism with the analysis of the

25. Publication issued by Embrafilme from 1967 to 1988 and reissued by SAV-Minc (Department of Audiovisual of the Ministry of Culture) since 2010.

Brazilian reality. Stating that “the tone of *Rio, Zona Norte*, however, is the lightness. As a protest because of the outsider condition of the *sambista*, swallowed up by radio stations, television broadcasters or record labels, it is a paradoxical case of vehemence by tenderness” (Neves, 1978: 92), Neves points out how the film selected certain aspects of popular culture, also revealing that Nelson, writing the screenplay, was inspired by the life of the composer Zé Keti, his friend and main collaborator on the soundtrack. The main point raised by Neves in his article is precisely this selection operated by an intellectual work (in this case, the filmmaker’s) before such a vast and complex area as popular culture.

He concludes his remarks by regretting the bad reception of the film at the time of its release, remembering the considerations of Paulo Emilio quoted before. According to Neves, “I am sure the unpreparedness to identify a Brazilian film with its own and definitive aesthetic data was to blame for much of the opinions about the movies from such an arduous phase of establishing a film industry among us” (Ibid. : 105).


## CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, we have focused on a fundamental moment for the constitution of the Brazilian cinema field. The necessity of representing characters and elements of popular culture in Brazilian films – emphatically defended by Nelson Pereira dos Santos in Brazilian cinema conferences – had the opportunity to be shown to the audiences when the two first films of the director were released.

We also verified how an incidental aspect in the history of *Rio, 40 Graus* – the unexpected censorship by the Police Chief of Distrito Federal – changed the course of its reception, allowing the debate on the Brazilian cinema field to spread over to the audiences, by being published in mass newspapers and magazines. Thus, it became possible to present the demands of the field – mainly the growth of Brazilian cinema production – and to recognize its agents as intellectuals.

We need to emphasize that Nelson Pereira occupied a central role in the circulation of ideas on filmmaking in Brazil not only for directing these films, but also for achieving, in his interviews, a transmission of his vision of which elements of Brazilian people should be represented in national films and which measures should be adopted in order to stimulate cinema in Brazil.

It should be highlighted that the public recognition of other intellectuals (such as Jorge Amado) and of the political class members also contributed to the symbolic capital of the director before the public and other intellectuals

from the field, which was confirmed by the subsequent election of *Rio, 40 Graus* as a tenet of Brazilian cinema and by the critical review of *Rio, Zona Norte*. 

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Paper received on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014 and accepted on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015.

