

# Between Moralities and Visualities: Cinema and Religion During Primeira República<sup>a</sup>

## *Entre Moralidades e Visualidades: Cinema e Religião na Primeira República*

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### ABSTRACT

Focusing on the consumption of religious movies during the Holy Week, this article analyzes the relation between cinema, visual culture, and religious practices in Primeira República in Rio de Janeiro and Recife. Our goal is to examine the ways spectators, film exhibitors, and the Church negotiated a common sense related to religious practices. In the treatment of the sources, the indicative paradigm proposed by Carlo Ginzburg was used since, as a method of textual criticism, it is more adequate in the analysis of sources that do not represent discursive units. We conclude with the verification of some negotiation strategies by the exhibitors, such as the broadcasting of sacred movies on some days of the holiday.

**Keywords:** Cinema, visual culture, Church, Rio de Janeiro, Recife

### RESUMO

Tendo como foco o consumo de filmes sacros durante a Semana Santa, este artigo analisa alguns aspectos da relação entre cinema, cultura visual e práticas religiosas durante a Primeira República, no Rio de Janeiro e no Recife. Nosso objetivo é averiguar como os espectadores, os exibidores cinematográficos e a Igreja negociavam um senso comum ligado às práticas religiosas. No tratamento das fontes, utilizou-se o paradigma indiciário, proposto por Carlo Ginzburg. Sendo um método de crítica textual, este mostrou-se adequado na análise de fontes que não representam unidades discursivas. Concluímos com a verificação de algumas estratégias de negociação por parte dos exibidores, tal como a veiculação de filmes sacros em alguns dias do feriado.

**Palavras-chave:** Cinema, cultura visual, Igreja, Rio de Janeiro, Recife

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# A

THE FIRST DECADES of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a deep transformation in Brazilian cities, mainly in infrastructure and population. In the case of Rio de Janeiro, the reform undertaken by Pereira Passos remodeled the Federal Capital, expelling the lower classes from its noble areas and redefining many cultural practices at a time known as *Belle Époque carioca*, clearly in line with European standards of consumption (Needell, 1993).

In turn, there were also several changes in the urban structure of Recife to meet the needs of a modernization imposed by local elites who sought to consolidate their own interests (Moreira, 1994). The city expanded its commercial activity and its social exclusion to the point that it would culminate in a demographic redistribution of classes across urban space (Bernardes, 1996).

In these highly hierarchical scenarios, cinematographers<sup>1</sup> began their activities and set the use of free time by various social groups, showing themselves as relevant spaces for sociability and as propagators of new or even known repertoires to the public, but gained new approaches.

In Rio de Janeiro, the Parisiense Movie Theatre was the first cinematograph opened on Avenida Central, in August 1907; in Recife, Pathé Movie Theatre opened on Rua Barão da Victória in July 1909. In these cities, movie theaters appeared in a reasonable amount and in a short period (Araújo, 1985; Saraiva, 2013). They helped to insert spectators into symbolic networks which disseminated the modern ideal, in addition to acting as legitimizers of the image of Rio de Janeiro as a showcase city for the Brazilian nation (Kessel, 2001) and of Recife as a regional center of cultural consumption<sup>2</sup> (Arrais, 1998).

In parallel, the Catholic Church, an institution officially linked to the Brazilian State until the end of the Empire, found itself disconnected from it in one of the first acts at the beginning republican regime. Edict 119 (1890) officially marked the separation between State and Church in Brazil. Hence, the institution needed to remodel its structure and adapt to the new political and social moment (Aquino, 2012), but it did not do so without showing reservations about some consumption habits related to modernity.

This article intends to address some connections between cinematographic consumption and religious practices in Rio de Janeiro and in Recife during Primeira República<sup>3</sup>, more precisely in some changes linked to visual culture from this relation. We start from the definition of consumption by Douglas and Isherwood (2004), who highlight its ritual aspect in the delimitation of social boundaries and in the distribution of goods among different groups,

<sup>1</sup> We will use the term cinematograph to designate both the image projection technology and the film exhibition space, as it was used by the sources collected for the preparation of this article.

<sup>2</sup> We recognize that the projection of films already took place in the decade prior to the inauguration of the cinematographs, as attested by Araújo (1985) and Silva (2018), in other spaces such as theaters, bars, and cafe-concerts. We only highlight the role of movie theaters in the reconfiguration of urban spaces during Primeira República. On films related to the life of Christ in this period, see Vadico (2006).

<sup>3</sup> In Portuguese, the term Primeira República refers to the period of Brazilian history between 1889 and 1930, marked by a deep social, economical and political instability. We chose to keep this term due to its own historical meaning, which cannot be found in English.

in a process that “uses goods to make firm and visible a particular set of judgments in the fluid processes of classifying people and events” (p. 115). We incorporated Miller’s (1987) criticism to this definition of consumption since consumption does not operate in power vacuums but it is immersed in networks of commercial relations and between States and institutions<sup>4</sup>.

Admitting the impossibility of exhausting the theme within the limits of an article, our focus will be on the analysis of some sources published by Rio de Janeiro and Recife presses which approached cinema attendance during the Holy Week. We will also situate the readers in relation to the profile of some newspapers, the formats disseminated by them and their materiality.

Sticking to the definition of sacred film as a genre which portrayed important aspects for the Christian faith in the First Cinema (Costa, 2005, pp. 55-57), our initial question is: in what ways did the spectators, cinema owners, distribution companies, and the Church negotiate in the consumption of sacred films? Trying to keep ourselves in the delicate balance mentioned of neither essentializing nor historically limiting spectators to the extreme (Foster, 1988, p. XI), we argue that cinematographic consumption in the period was situated within the horizon qualified as pragmatic secularity by de Aquino (2012)<sup>5</sup>.

The author defines pragmatic secularity in relation to the State during Primeira República as “characterized by the recognition of the legal personality of the Religious Confessions which, among other reasons, would accommodate a good part of the social tensions inherent to the prelude of the republican regime in Brazil” (Aquino, 2012, p. 152), differentiating it from French and American anti-religious secularities.

We expand the author’s argument to emphasize that this pragmatic secularity also encompassed other social groups, such as entrepreneurs in the entertainment industry and a considerable part of the audience at the cinemas and readers of the periodicals which circulated in the cities covered. This conciliation between the mundane and the religious domains went beyond the borders of State actions, permeating the daily lives of the dwellers of large cities and configuring a structure of feeling (Williams, 1979) important in the dissemination of a common sense of the period. The Church was also vigilant against these quick social changes, tensioning and negotiating through the dissemination of these repertoires displayed by cinematographs.

We need to make a brief consideration about the evidential paradigm, a method developed by Ginzburg (2007) and used in the treatment of these sources. On another occasion (Lapera & Souza, 2010), we argued

<sup>4</sup>Some visual culture theorists (Mirzoeff, 2006; Mitchell, 2002) defend the focus of the studies in this field on consumption and spectators, although they do not define well what they call consumption in their analyses.

<sup>5</sup>It is important to point out that the projection of sacred films was not limited to the Holy Week or other Christian religious holidays, with only a greater concentration on these dates.



that the heterogeneity of the collected sources and their fragmentary disposition led us to adopt the evidential paradigm since

the existence of a deep connection that explains superficial phenomena is reinforced at the very moment when it is asserted that direct knowledge of such a connection is not possible. If reality is opaque, there are privileged areas – signs, indications – that make it possible to decode them. (Ginzburg, 2007, p. 177)

Some information contained in these sources can be seen as signs of this *opaque reality* to which we are allowed access – even if precarious.

We also express our concern with “mapping the field of past experiences in which the massive consumption of images occurred” (Lapera & Souza, 2010, pp. 389-390) and, as it is a method of textual criticism (Ginzburg, 2007), the evidential paradigm proved to be adequate in the treatment of apocryphal sources that do not necessarily represent discursive units, but fragments.

Finally, we consider that Rio de Janeiro and Recife were going through strongly hierarchical reurbanization processes at the time and experienced, at very close moments, the dissemination of cinematographs and the normalization of the act of going to the cinema. Due to these structuring processes, we believe that many of the questions raised by the chroniclers in the periodicals of the two cities are similar, especially in situations of conflict between spectators and local exhibitors and in the affirmation of cinematographic ritual practices, such as the sources collected for our article.

Moreover, this type of analysis is possible because these cities represented important centers of cultural activities and, in a way, many chroniclers<sup>6</sup> from Recife pointed to Rio de Janeiro as an important source of comparison, certainly one of the answers to the fact that the then Federal Capital was trying to consolidate itself as a civilizational reference in South America from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century onward (Benchimol, 1992).

<sup>6</sup>In the chronicle “Esparsos...” Ademar Tavares (1909) compares Rua Nova (Barão da Victoria) with Rua do Ouvidor, in Rio de Janeiro because these streets had cinematographs.

### “É CRISTO EM ESPECTÁCULO”: CINEMATOGRAFIC CONSUMPTION IN RIO DE JANEIRO AND RECIFE OF PRIMEIRA REPÚBLICA

First, let us consider, in Figure 1, the photo published on the cover of the newspaper *A Época* on 4.21.1916 (“Como os Tempos Mudam!”, 1916) and the headlines which illustrate it:

**Figure 1**

 News from the newspaper *A Época*


Note. Reprinted from *A Época*, 1916. In public domain.

Occupying the right corner of the newspaper cover, the images operate in an antithetical way by pointing out the expressive presence of the public in front of the Odeon cinema and the void at the door of a church in Rio de Janeiro, which is neither mentioned in the subtitle nor in the body of the article.

Throughout it, the anonymous author regrets the loss of audience by the churches on the Holy Week holiday and condemns the exchange for cinematographs: “The houses which show Passion tapes do not have the capacity for the mass of competitors to their seats. What is certain is that this displacement of the faithful results in some churches becoming almost deserted”<sup>7</sup> (“Como os Tempos Mudam!”, 1916, p. 1). Continuing his argument, the author ascribes the preference for films to a change in the public’s sensibility:

<sup>7</sup> It is important to emphasize that we have chosen to keep the original spelling of the sources throughout the original version of this article in Portuguese. In the English version, we preferred to update their writing to make reading easier.



It is just that times change, and with them our customs. A few years ago, who would go to a theater just today?

There was less expansion in religious feelings. Much less. There was no noise, either at home or on the street; any work was prohibited; the only reading allowed was that of the sacred books...

In this way, it was natural that the churches were small as they were indeed, to contain all the believers; but nowadays... that fasting is no longer observed and the cult of the divinity has lost all of its ascetic character, it is not surprising that Catholic temples suffer from the profane competition of cinematographs. (“Como os Tempos Mudam!”, 1916, p. 1)

Focusing on the relation between text and images, it is possible to deduce that the latter have the function of reiteration and synthesis of the idea defended in the article, occupying a key place in the visual economy of the newspaper – the cover, used to draw the attention of passersby to its content. Along with the title and subtitles, they help to include readers with a lower literacy level in the consumption of the newspaper, as the summary of the argument becomes more accessible, without the need for a detailed reading of the text<sup>8</sup>.

In the article, the author highlights a significant change in the public’s sensitivity. First accepting restraint and religious asceticism, churchgoers and (now) spectators would start to seek an expansion of the sensorial universe, as of the act of watching a projection. Although relevant, it is not only about a change in the visuality regime (Mitchell, 2002) of the sacred theme but also the incorporation of sonorities<sup>9</sup> and of the tactile in the reaffirmation of religious feelings<sup>10</sup>.

We found other articles published by the Rio de Janeiro press of the period about Catholic believers going to the cinema during the Holy Week, which varied in tone and approach to the issue. Together, they reveal that to be a topic considered important by the editors of some newspapers. In the period covered, we remind the reader that newspapers were a medium endowed with a strong cultural legitimacy for broadcasting debates on the public scene and many of their chroniclers were intellectuals who used the medium to assert their position in these debates and expand their dialogue with the reading public. (Sevcenko, 1983; Sússekind, 2006).

In turn, the newspapers used in our article were founded at the end of the Empire and throughout Primeira República. In general, they portrayed the point of view of the elites and the middle classes which were beginning to gain a voice in the public scene, albeit with some limitations.

At this point, it is important to stress Ginzburg’s (2007, pp. 158-161) consideration of textual criticism, taking into account only the material dimension of the text and dissociating it from the entire sensitive universe which generated it.

<sup>8</sup> De Luca and Martins (2006, pp. 42-43) attest that the inclusion of photographs in newspapers occurred late due to its high costs and the legal uncertainty related to copyright of the images.

<sup>9</sup> In cinematographers’ advertisements, it is possible to find references to conductors and orchestras as a form of commercial dispute, which is extensively explored in the case of sacred films exhibited during the Holy Week.

<sup>10</sup> In her thesis, Carolina Azevedo di Giacomo (2019, p. 92) recovers the experiment with travel simulators in Rio de Janeiro. One of them describes in detail a trip to the Holy Land.

Affiliating ourselves with the method proposed by him, we perceive the texts published by the press as vestiges of material practices related to the act of going to the movies and to the feelings of religiosity addressed in these sources.

Another apocryphal chronicle, published by the newspaper *A Imprensa* on 4.13.1909, pointed out the importance of the religious holiday for the profit of cinematographs and the disadvantage in the competition of the churches against them: “In churches, only tearful sermons, when they are eloquent, can impress as much as the long films of the great cinematographers” (“Films”, 1909, p. 2). Again, there is the enhancement of the expansion of the senses provided by going to the cinema.

The chronicle also reports a change on the part of the films in narrating the Passion of Christ, which, from a picturesque and even slightly spicy tone in a version seen by the author on other occasion<sup>11</sup>, began to adopt a more solemn tone: “The dramas were serious. So serious that they made colossal competition for the churches!” (“Films”, 1909, p. 2), which reveals an adaptation of the cinematographic market based on a previous demand by the public, respecting the religious sentiment propagated by common sense at the time. Even though these films are of foreign origin, the exhibition in Rio de Janeiro can be seen as an indication that carioca spectators were in agreement with this feeling, in connection with audiences from other places.

At the end of the text, the author recounts the visit of a well-known industrialist to the cinema with his wife and daughter and reproduces his statement: “– What a horror, my dear! You know I don’t have very good eyes. Because the girls forced me today to watch more than twenty films in several houses... Consequence: my eyes are full of *films*! How horrible!” (“Films”, 1909, p. 2). It is interesting to observe the author’s irony toward the consumption of films in relation to the attention mechanism required by them. Crary (2013) highlighted the saturation of this attention on two levels: in the time dedicated to work and in the presence of new means of producing images. In the latter case, this refers to the moments of leisure of different social groups and, in this way, the author of the article describes a phenomenon to which the concerns of intellectuals such as Jean-Martin Charcot, William James, and Gustav Fechner were dedicated in an immediately earlier historical moment, recovered by Crary (2013, pp. 33-105).

In relation to sacred films, this saturation of attention operates as a moral punishment formulated by the author of the article, in the sense of showing a decline of religious feeling in the churchgoers who went to the cinematographs. Still, we can understand it as an exposure to a danger in the contact with these technologies by the spectators, in relation to an ideal of purity of Catholic religious beliefs (Douglas, 1976).

<sup>11</sup>We assume male authorship due to the comment on the actress who played Maria in the film: “In the most solemn moments, she would look at the audience and make a few motions of the eyes so suggestively Parisian... The girl was devilish and she was definitely dating some operator from the Pathé house!” (“Films”, 1909, p. 2).



This moral condemnation was also present in an apocryphal and untitled chronicle published in *Gazeta de Notícias* on 3.25.1910. It begins with an allusion to two main routes in Rio de Janeiro after the reform undertaken by Pereira Passos, which had several leisure spaces reserved for the middle and upper classes: “Yesterday, Holy Thursday. Until noon, the eucharistic solemnity made Avenida Central and Rua do Ouvidor two avenues of communication for the enormous concurrence of the churches” (*Gazeta de Notícias*, 1910, p. 2).

Subsequently, it describes the crowd in black clothes which occupied the newly renovated area of the city, a narrative resource which refers to visuality, a way of competing with photography and cinema in their sensorial appeal to readers: “Exceptionally, once in a while, a colorful ‘toilette’ scintillated sinfully in a prettiness full of daring. Moreover, in outing dresses, black dresses throbbed, black ‘toilettes’ colleting in a ‘frou-frou’ of bruised silks” (*Gazeta de Notícias*, 1910, p. 2).

At this point, there is a reference to the presence of women in the urban space of Rio de Janeiro, presented as avid viewers of cinematographs and, simultaneously, endowed with a strong religious feeling and inserted in a very restrictive project regarding the gender roles fulfilled by women, as responsible for a public image of respectability and restraint in relation to the bourgeois nuclear family, a fundamental institution to the republican project in Brazil (Caulfield, 2000, pp. 85-87).

Finally, the chronicle indicates the main change concerning religious iconography, that is, the exploration of the theme of the Passion of Christ by cinematographers:

But modernism wanted to invade religion as well. Cinematographers revived, in the reconstituting magic of their colored tapes, all the tragedy of immense love, unfolded under the most beautiful sky in the East, in the most beautiful land of Palestine, watered by the blood of the purest of men and the most loving of Gods. The operator’s handle revived, in the eyes of faith, in the midst of the most absolute respect, the drama of salvation which, if it had no other merit, it would have been enough to be the first story which moved us and made us cry, when we had understood, told by our mother... (*Gazeta de Notícias*, 1910, p. 2)

A foundational narrative of the Christian faith transmitted secularly in the private universe through the interaction between family members and strengthened by the bourgeois ideal of a nuclear family (Gay, 2002) was updated by the commercialization of sacred films and the physical effort of film designers to show these films to an audience increasingly interested in them. It is important



to note the stylistic resource of alluding to the figure of the designer as a way of familiarizing the public with details of the very act of going to the cinema, emphasizing its conventional aspect.

The chronicle ends with a double accusation: “And so, calmly, unctuously, after killing the theater, the cinematographer wants to compete with the houses of prayer” (Gazeta de Notícias, 1910, p. 2). In addition to attributing responsibility for the theater’s financial crisis to the cinematographer, it also relates this crisis to the lower influx of audiences to churches, explicitly condemning cinema owners and believers who exchanged religious ritual for cinematographic ones.

In turn, the text “Semana Santa: As Igrejas Cheias, os Cinemas Repletos” (1914) – published on the cover of the 10.4.1914 edition of the newspaper *A Noite* – addresses similar points from the previous articles, but in an overtly more positive tone. Even recognizing the loss of audience on the part of the churches, it defended the commercial use of the date by cinematographs, stating that they are “the great days for cinemas; there are poor companies that even wait for Holy Week to use the sacred films to compensate for possible losses during the year” (p. 1). It also highlights there were traveling exhibitions in rural areas during the commemorative date.

The article narrates in detail the competition between film factories to conquer the public. As the theme is the same every year, it was pointed out that they “have appealed to the most expensive and varied expedients to get the best work, which most pleases the audience” (“Semana Santa”, 1914, p. 1). Further, it says that one of these films had been filmed in the “Holy Land,” but it had not been successful for that reason: “Here in Rio, at least, despite the formidable announcement made of it, its success was not so more auspicious. If it paid its expenses, it was the best” (“Semana Santa”, 1914, p. 1).

Then, the text directly poses the question of whether or not going to the cinema has reduced church attendance, and answers it in a dubious way. At the same time that it does not directly recognize the link between the facts, it demands from cinematograph owners an effort to reduce the difference between their audience and that of the churches.

At last, the article mentions some strategies on the part of the churches in the competition against cinematographs, such as the life-size presentation of the Lord’s Supper, engravings with images of the Passion of Christ, and a work of ornamentation and lighting in the decoration for the special date. This emphasis on the commercial dimension of the exhibition of sacred films meets the expectations of the newspaper readership, which, according to Carvalho (2012, p. 43), was also made up of subjects belonging to the middle sectors. The editors of the newspaper openly tried to include them in its consumption,



assuming some of their points of view in the analysis of the political and social life of the period.

<sup>12</sup>Pseudonym of journalist and writer Paulo Barreto (1881-1921).

<sup>13</sup>On cinema and literature in the work of João do Rio, see Gomes (2010).

<sup>14</sup>This chronicle has already been analyzed by Araújo (1985, pp. 292-293) and by Vadico (2006, pp. 97-98).

Written by João do Rio<sup>12</sup>, a writer known for his fascination with cinema<sup>13</sup>, the chronicle “The Film Revolution” (Barreto, 1909)<sup>14</sup>, published in the *Gazeta de Notícias* on 10.4.1909, is the one that most openly defends cinematographs, and it can be read as an engagement in the expansion of the senses in the act of going to the cinema.

Throughout the chronicle, we see the narration of this multisensory dimension present in cinematographs, which occupies a key position in the text. Qualifying cinematographs as the “new temples,” João do Rio considers that “religious crises bring crises of sensuality” (Barreto, 1909, p. 1), to present the spectacle provided by the crowd present at the cinemas and which assembles at its entrances: “there was a sweaty and feverish crowd up to the middle of the street fighting to get in and slowly advancing against a wave of happy people that came out” (Barreto, 1909, p. 1). However, not without first pointing out what attracted that crowd: “the cinematographer has just made the great revolution.... *It is Christ in show* [emphasis added]” (Barreto, 1909, p. 1).

It is possible to connect the author’s narration to the logic of the hierarchization of urban space and its spectacularization in wealthy areas in Rio de Janeiro. In line with a civilizing principle articulated by the nascent republican State in its relation with citizens and in service of the interests of dominant groups (Benchimol, 1992, p. 205), the visuality narrated in the articles is permeated by a model of a city in which some citizens are on the public stage to appreciate the city novelties and transformations and, at the same time, to be seen in it.

Going to the cinemas on the occasion of the Holy Week thus proves to be a special opportunity in the process of converting economic capital into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2006) by some of these subjects – the case of the industrialist’s family in the article published in *A Imprensa* – but also signals some potential for subversion of this republican order represented by the urban reform of the Federal Capital. João do Rio’s chronicle, it shows the presence of pickpockets and narrates of the kleptomaniac women who “cut bags and skirts,” taking advantage of the confusion caused by the crowd.

In his conclusion, João do Rio is assertive in the defense of cinematographs:

And is it an evil for religion? No. It is good. In church, the spectacle is always the same: sad in appearance but forcing people to think, to work their brains to be touched. Three and a half parts of the visitors are not touched, but rather indulge themselves in a ride of sensual excitement. In the cinematograph, the crowd immediately feels attached to the visible fact, the crowd sees the agony, the crowd suffers tremendous

injustice and cries, and shivers, and gets better. Suggestion elevates it. Better than visiting twenty churches without faith, among people without faith too, is to attend one of these sessions, naively a believer. One comes out reborn with the example, one comes out with kindness – that lyrical feeling which decays – much more increased. This week the cinematographers did a much greater work for the church than Father Maria did with his lectures.

Of course, the cinematograph can and is used not only for the development of scientific knowledge, for the expansion of serious notions, but also to excite laughter and depravation. But the “film” lovers themselves, those great wordless educators, may not remember that in the winning crisis of movie-entrepreneurs serving the city thirst for real illusion, the cinematograph, a simple application of electricity, industry, science for useful disclosures, eager servant of the Faith, came to make in their indifference, the flame of Belief brighter, the Religion more ardent, a little better – at least for the moment – the men to whom the gods have always done well... (Barreto, 1909, p. 1)

Conceiving the cinematograph from a supposed neutrality of its technology, the author considers that it can amplify sensations in the act of showing sacred films and, in this way, act directly in the expansion of religious feelings. His emphasis on sensations such as seeing agony, crying, and shivering are evidence of a visual culture which incorporates and potentiates them in the face of religious ritual, portrayed as monotonous, uninteresting and, at its limit, even disruptive toward churchgoers.

João do Rio’s chronicle also condemns the greed of cinematograph owners, placing them in what Sevckenko (1983, pp. 25-40) called “aggressive cosmopolitanism,” that is, an urban environment marked by fierce competition, by social climbers, by the use of private relationships to obtain advantages from the State, and by a strong social hierarchy in terms of class, race, and gender.

This hierarchization also appears elsewhere in João do Rio’s article. When reporting the maximum capacity of cinematographs on Avenida Central and his journey to other cinemas in the region, the author considers, in a mixture of resignation and bitterness, that “we managed to get into one which was of a low standard, and that was because the mass forced us to” (Barreto, 1909, p. 1). That is a vestige of this hierarchy, which involved the appreciation of entertainment places frequented by different social groups.

Analyzing the advertisements broadcast by cinematographers between 1908 and 1917 in the newspapers *Gazeta de Notícias* and *O Paiz*, we noticed that the exhibition of sacred films was massively concentrated on Thursday and



Friday of the Holy Week, whereas on Saturday and Sunday, the programs put aside those sacred films.

In 1908, we found four advertisements which displayed sacred films on Thursday and on Friday of the Holy Week, whereas on Saturday and on Sunday that number dropped to just one. The number grew and peaked at eight advertisements on Thursday and on Friday in 1913 and just one on subsequent days. By 1916, possibly because of the sharp drop in the film trade brought on by World War I, that number had declined to two on Thursday and on Friday and none in the following days<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>15</sup>We stick to the numbers without mentioning which movies and movie theaters due to the limits imposed on our article.

We found a source which deals with the competition between theater and cinema, in which there is a mention of the fact that cinematographers were pioneers in showing sacred films and these “suffered the direct competition of the so-called performances by sessions and then some three years ago, the theater also competed with cinema and the Church, during the Holy Week and in the All Soul’s Day, representing the so-called sacred plays” (“A Semana Santa nos Theatros,” 1915, p. 1). This information is confirmed by analyzing the advertisements in the newspapers. From 1913 onward, there was a gradual increase in the advertisement of sacred plays by theater companies during the Holy Week.

In addition to contradicting the idea defended by part of the historiography that cinema would have been a mere compiler of theatrical themes and genres, in a clearly evolutionary logic, this source presents a specialization of the *carioca* entertainment market. Finally, it points out that “no less than six sacred pieces will we have during the holy days” (“A Semana Santa nos Theatros”, 1915, p. 1), which is an indication that the demand of the *carioca* public for these products has increased over the years. In practice, this represented an even greater competition with the churches.

It is also interesting to indicate the analysis of the advertisements broadcast by cinematographers in the newspapers from 1908 onward. Occupying another important place in the visual economy of the newspaper than the cover – the back, insofar as the advertisements could be consulted without the readers being obliged to open the newspaper –, these advertisements were very succinct between 1908 and approximately 1911-1912, with the name and location of the cinematograph in addition to the title of the films exhibited on the day and a brief description of their content.

However, as the competition between them advanced, the ads also became more sophisticated, increasing considerably in size and content. Initially just a few-centimeter space on the back of newspapers, some film companies and some cinematographers started to buy more space<sup>16</sup> to broadcast their programming.

<sup>16</sup>In some cases, a third of the page, occasionally half and even a full page.

As an example, we found the following advertisement published in the 9.4.1914 edition of *Gazeta de Notícias* (Figure 2):

Figure 2  
Page of *Gazeta de Notícias* about the movie *Paschoa Rubra*

Note. From *Gazeta de Notícias*, 1914. In public domain.

As a symptom of the sophistication of competition in the entertainment market, the ad features a montage composed of four photos and additional four separate photos, occupying an entire page. As an investment by an exhibitor



or a movie company (distributor), the purchase of this space is an indication of a more than desired, even anticipated, profitability by those who explored the cinematographic trade.

Due to the theme and the holiday, there is an exploration of the image of Christ in the advertisement, in a horizon very close to the republican project of approaching a classic religious iconography, conveying it to well-known figures – such as Tiradentes and Frei Caneca –, in search of a symbolic legitimacy for the nascent regime (Carvalho, 1990, pp. 55-73). Although the advertisement does not mention these figures valued in the republican project, it is difficult to disregard that they were part of the visual culture of the analyzed period, especially related to the theme of the crucifixion, which also referred to the corporal suffering imposed on Tiradentes and Frei Caneca (Carvalho, 1990, pp. 64-67).

Observing the connection between the described project and the performance of subjects such as cinematograph owners helps us to perceive the expansion of the horizon of pragmatic secularity (Aquino, 2012) beyond the limits of State action, in which there is a reaffirmation of a common sense linked to religious practices and the image of Christ affiliated with values such as sacrifice and redemption. In its limit, this was also in line with the pretensions of the Catholic Church to air its beliefs in a setting in which it had recently lost its official status.

In parallel, in Recife, the first cinematographs were set up on Rua Barão da Victória, in the district of Santo Antônio, a region of commercial importance (Arrais, 1998, p. 25). In a short time, changes were already noticed in the urban space in which these concert halls were located, according to Arrais (1998, p. 51), with the advent of nighttime exhibitions, streetcar schedules were reported by the press, as well as other types of transport to ensure greater comfort and safety at the end of the sessions.

About the Recife press, in which we collected the sources for our research, the newspapers *Diário de Pernambuco*, *A Província*, and *Jornal do Recife* were created in the imperial period and, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were already the best sellers in the city. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we highlight the *Diário de Pernambuco*, *A Província*, and *O Pequeno Jornal*. Their editorial lines were closely linked to the political position of their editors/owners, which denotes an often-personal approach (Nascimento, 1966).

Film consumption in Recife was not unnoticed by the Church, an institution of political and social relevance in the city (Arrais, 1998, p. 139). It sought to observe and insert itself in this new type of modern entertainment, even before exhibition halls: in the period of itinerancy of projections, its members already frequented this place. As we can see below:

**Bellisimos** – Yesterday, the hall on Rua da Imperatriz was small to contain twice the large number of families which went there to watch the paintings of the Passion of Christ, which are of a very beautiful effect. The martyrdoms are reproduced in such a way to touch the religious sentiments of the people, who are sometimes touched and, at others, feel joy for the belief they hold. There is a lot of truth in capturing the scenes, with some very clear photographs. Still today, and upon request, they will be reproduced at 7 o'clock, 7 3/4 and 8 1/2. Satisfying the owner of the Cinematograph, we make this notice not only to the families but also to the clergy, who have attended all the places in which they have been exhibited to the paintings (“Bellisimos”, 1900, p. 2).

It is noticed that, in an improvised space on Rua Imperatriz, an elite region (Arrais, 1998, p. 25), a sacred film about the Passion of Christ was exhibited and, according to the article, it had a significant audience. As the film approached a well-known story, the narrative would be well used by the exhibitors as it was easily understood by the public.

This positive reception was observed by the (Catholic) church, which, through delegates, attended the exhibitions, as another report informs a few days later: “and even members of the clergy have attended [the sessions]” (“Bellisimos”, 1900, p. 2). This is important information, as the clergy viewed the cinematograph with distrust, as it was a *mundane* device (Marques & Amaral, 2013, p. 292).

Nevertheless, this new space of sociability and entertainment could serve the church in establishing a visual culture of practices and representations as part of a religious iconography. From a certain point, already with several cinematographs, we noticed a frequency of sacred films nearby, during and after the Holy Week feasts.

Helvetica – As advertised, this establishment held carnival shows, with good public and complete order every day. Today, for the beginning of Lent, the great sacred film of 1500 meters in length will be shown, divided into 40 frames and an apotheose <The Childhood, Passion, and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ>, this film was ordered to be colored expressly for this house and it has an admirable clarity. (“Diversões”, 1911, p. 2)

As described in *Jornal Pequeno*, the article highlights a supposed exclusive coloring for Helvetica for the beginning of the Lent period. We observed that the exhibitors set up a specific repertoire to attract the public during the Holy Week, with films which represented stories of sacred content.



From 1911 on, during the Holy Week period, this repertoire intensified in cinematographs in Recife. In an advertisement, the “Inauguration of shows appropriate for the Holy Week. The grandiose full-color film will be performed expressly by Pathé Frères for this establishment” (Theatro-Cinema Helvetica, 1911, p. 2).

However, at certain times, not only the films and who produced them were described. Some robberies were reported, such as that of a merchant coming from the countryside for the Holy Week festivities. This one was followed by a man who, being cordial, invited him to go to the cinema and took advantage of the innocence which the merchant felt after seeing the films and robbed him. Nonetheless, the victim managed to call the police, who arrested the thief (“Mais um Conto do Vigário”, 1911, p. 2). It is interesting to see how, from this case, we can infer the presence of an audience coming from the interior of the state during the religious feasts, corroborating the fact that Recife is a cultural center in the region.

While observing the pages of newspapers, especially at certain times of the year, such as the days anteceding and preparing for the Holy Week, one can see, on the same page and in several copies, a relation of parallelism between informative columns about the schedule of the festivities – what would be celebrated in each church, temple or even open-air processions – and the cinematographers’ ads<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup>This correlation between the arrangement of texts referring to the church and cinematographs was observed from 1910 onward.

Especially during the sacred festivities, these arrangements were repeated in different periodicals, mainly the newspaper *A Província*, in 1910 and 1913, for consecutive days, and some of them are highlighted on the front page. In another newspaper, *Jornal Pequeno*, this also occurred. As an example, the column “Semana Santa Actos do Dia de Hoje” (1915) quoted: “as the holy week began today, in almost all the temples in the capital and in the countryside, the acts of Lent began” (p. 4). Next to it, the column “Theatros e Cinemas” (1915) described what would be shown in each cinematograph (p. 4).

Another important point is the size of some programs in the newspapers. Bringing the film *A Vida do Martyr de Golgotha* (Maître, 2013), which would be displayed in cinemas on Holy Thursday and on Good Friday, the advertisement in *Jornal do Recife* (“A Vida do Martyr do Golgotha”, 1914) describes the details of the plot and informs the expenses of the production of the film, with clothes and scenarios, and even includes small pictures drawn with the phases of Christ’s life (Figure 3). We can verify that the programs of these exhibition houses were linked to films distributed by Companhia Cinematográfica Brasileira and used repertoires from other regions of the country (Butcher, 2019, p. 170).



Figure 3

*Companhia Cinematographica Brasileira's advertisement for the movie A Vida do Martyr de Golgotha*



Note. From *Jornal do Recife*, 1914. In public domain.

To attract the reader, the phrase “great cinematographic event” was highlighted, in addition to “solemn presentation of the magnificent sacred film,” as well as an update of a previous film: “film completely enlarged and unmistakable with the previous VIDA DE CRISTO (in 5 parts) of ‘Pathé Frères,’ also from an old edition of more than six years ago” (“A Vida do Martyr do Golgotha”, 1914, p. 5). It indicates that there was a renewal of film repertoires, inspired by European productions. That is, the relationship between newspapers, exhibitors, and sacred subjects, even if observed in the filmic theme, converged in different visual experiences, which can be understood as the “result of processes of production of meaning in cultural contexts” (Knauss, 2006, p. 113).

In turn, on 4.9.1914, in the program published in *Diário de Pernambuco*, the sessions of Polytheama (1914) were dedicated to the Church, and the advertisement informed that the sacred film would be a “last copy, imported by the capitalist J.R. Staff. This film of ours is the true one adopted in the Catholic Religion” (p. 6). We can observe the name of J.R. Staff, an important exhibitor from Rio de Janeiro and representative of the Companhia Cinematográfica Brasileira (CCB) in the northern region of the country, incorporating to our argument the fact that several of these sacred films shown in Recife came mainly from Rio de Janeiro (Butcher, 2019, p. 170).



At Theatro S. Izabel (1914), discursive artificers were used to attract spectators, such as “the great and wonderful cinematographer, the most important in South America” (p. 6), probably because of its history as the main theater in Recife in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but its prestige began to decline at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Arrais, 1998, p. 23). By showing possibly the same sacred film as the Polytheama, it sought to bring new elements to its exhibition, one of these resources being “the orchestra will play excerpts specially rehearsed for this film” (p. 6).

At Helvetica (1914), this sound resource is also present, informing that “the orchestra will perform a beautiful original sacred score with 40 numbers of music by conductor Verdi de Carvalho. On the occasion of the miracle of Santa Veronica, it will be sung by the lyric singer CLARETTA: AVE Maria, by Gounod” (p. 6). Thus, not only does the use of different repertoires to attract the public become evident but it also provides us with indications of an exclusive visual and sound structure for sacred films screened in Recife.

Finally, on that same page of *Diário de Pernambuco*, Theatro Moderno (1914) announces that “today and tomorrow: we will exhibit for the second time in this Capital the sacred film which pleased our costumers: *A Vida do Martyr Golgotha*” (p. 6), the same film which had been shown in several cinematographs in other years. Thus, we noticed that the speeches uttered in the newspapers, through advertisements, used a specific language through words such as *exclusivity*, *programs never displayed*, among others, to influence a competition for space in the cinematographic market, profitable for exhibitors and newspapers.

From 1916 onward, we noticed a decrease in sacred films advertised in the newspapers during the Holy Week<sup>18</sup>. The sharp drop in film imports during the First World War may have caused a forced change in programming during this period, as was also the case in Rio de Janeiro. In 1920, this configuration was reproduced again; in a column entitled “As Tradições que Não Morrem – Impressões da Semana Santa” (1920), in *Jornal Pequeno*, the strength that the tradition of the Catholic faith has in Recife is described since “what was seen in the churches where the solemnities of the Holy Week were celebrated is worth a strong affirmation that the religious tradition of the Pernambuco family remains alive,” with “the attendance at various temples extraordinary, in all classes” (p. 3). It still reinforces the emptiness of the city, on Thursday and on Friday because of the gathering of families. Yet, this emptiness in the streets was modified at night, because “on the night of those days, cinemas were at the forefront, showing the magnificent film of Christ’s life and sacrifice” (p. 3) in a process very similar to what happened in Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>18</sup>Between 1909 and 1920, in *Jornal do Recife*, we noticed that the exhibition of sacred films was concentrated on Thursday and on Friday of the Holy Week, more frequently in 1911, 1913, and 1914, but on Saturday and on Sunday, we do not find views at the same rate.

This interrelation between the space of the church and the cinematograph created a regime of visibility (Mitchell, 2002) which, in turn, replaced the orality of the masses during the day, with readings of sacred texts and sacred chants, to a visibility of the moving images, that is, a selective perception (Sérvio, 2014) provided by the context in which such practices were inserted by cinematographers.

In addition to some reactions on the part of the Church, already presented, others were also published by the press at the time. In the edition of 5.29.1912, *A Noite* reproduced with comments an article from *Ossertavore Romano* – a newspaper edited by the institution in the Vatican – about cinematographic projections in churches in the news “O Cinema Conquista a Igreja” (1912). Emphasizing the cinematograph as one more possible source of income for the Church, the rules imposed on the realization of these projections were enumerated: separation between the genders at the moment they occurred; prohibition of a totally dark ambiance such as in movie theaters; choice of films restricted to those with moral and religious themes approved by the institution which, therefore, must be previously approved by the local bishop; and, finally, the priest was responsible for the supervision of the sessions to monitor the behavior of the believers.

Thus, that piece of news underlines that these are guidelines to be disseminated by the Church, which was quite concerned with the rapport between the genders, with the dissemination of content which was against its precepts, especially those consumed by its believers and also, using a moral reservation in regards to the habit of going to the movies, as we have already analyzed on other occasions (Lapera, 2019, 2020). Even with guidelines applied to the institution as a whole, it is possible to infer that these norms echoed in the Brazilian republican project for the nuclear family and for the division of gender roles (Caulfield, 2000; Esteves, 1989).

The newspaper *Brizas do Campo: Órgão do Christianismo Interdenominacional*<sup>19</sup>, whose editorship was focused on religious themes, also addressed the same phenomenon in its column “Cinema na Igreja” (1912), published in the edition of 7.14.1912: “According to the latest news of Rome, Pope Pius X has just allowed the operation of cinematographers inside the churches. Throughout the Catholic world, this act of the Pope caused a surprise ... beautiful and useful conquest of science” (p. 4) and, also, “a useful invention – unquestionably – and it is impossible to deny that its effectiveness can be great as means of moral and religious education” (p. 4).

In turn, some conflicts between the cinematograph and the church in Recife were reported by the press, such as the case of a cinematograph ironically

<sup>19</sup>Although this newspaper was edited in Campos dos Goitacazes, we decided to highlight this source as it brings complementary information about the reaction of the Catholic Church to the cinematographic sessions.



called *Cinema Alegre*. Located in the São José neighborhood, it would be attended only by men and managed by a small society composed of two men and one woman (“O Caso do Cinema Alegre”, 1915, p. 3). The latter would become the main target of the press after having her name publicized, for having opened this space for exhibitions of adult content. Despite obtaining the necessary licenses for its opening, the exhibitions in this cinema were suspended by court order. This episode allowed us to infer some evidence about the role of the Church in Recife, especially from its influence on the middle classes of this city, based on the text written by Father Heliodoro Pires.

Since this priest was an important figure in the Catholic circle of Recife, a collaborator of the Instituto Arqueológico Histórico e Geográfico de Pernambuco (IAHGP) and a professor at several colleges, he was responsible, at the 2º Congresso Católico de Pernambuco (“2º Congresso Catholico de Pernambuco”, 1914), for preparing an essay on the fight against pornography entitled “A National Scourge” (1914)<sup>20</sup>. A few months after the publication of this material, he wrote a letter entitled “O Meu Protesto Vehemente e um Grito da Alma Católica” (Pires, 1915), published in *A Província*, in which he reports the existence of a cinematograph for “cheerful” or “free” films<sup>21</sup>. According to him, “pornographic cinemas are the most terrible, most furious, most terrifyingly disastrous agent of social dissolution, the breakdown of race, and the nervousness of characters” (Pires, 1915, p. 1).

The priest’s letter enunciates several points on which he considers to be the role of public authorities in maintaining moral order and projecting data which he judges “authentic and unmistakable” (Pires, 1915, p. 1) against this deviation from a city which “believes to be civilized” (Pires, 1915, p. 1). Along these lines, he highlights a liberal civilizing project ongoing in Brazil through the construction of a social imaginary but he takes some care not to harm individual values, in favor of a strong and sovereign nation, when he states that:

The state could not allow individual freedom, when it results in collective, social, national damage. The state could not give freedom to crime, to the apotheosis of evil. Exposing a pornographic screen, promoting debauchery, is certainly a crime. Faith, race, traditions, nobility of feeling, character, the future of the country, national greatness – are above all. (Pires, 1915, p. 1)

When requesting control mechanisms on the part of competent authorities, we observe the defense for a censorship which could provide a moral order, a discursive basis cited in several moments of his text. The appeal for morality is addressed to the “Mothers of the Pernambuco family,” so that

<sup>20</sup>We could not find this text. According to a note in the newspaper *A Província* (“Um Flagelo Nacional”, 1914, p. 1) around 200 copies were printed. It had 22 pages and would be written by Philon, the pseudonym of Father Heliodoro Pires and published at the II Congresso Católico de Pernambuco, in 1914 (“Um Flagelo Nacional”, 1914, p. 1).

<sup>21</sup>According to Lopera (2019), the terms cheerful and free are euphemisms for pornography in this period.

they “do not hide your indignation of wounded lionesses!” (Pires, 1915, p. 1), that they take care of their children so that they do not see such obscene scenes on screens, as this will affect them when they become men and future husbands. For the author, “cinema will encourage infidelity and mockery and when the father is disgraced, a type without any moral elevation, for whom the laws of marriage are worthless, the family has already begun to disintegrate! Doubt it, if it is possible!” (Pires, 1915, p. 1).

For the priest, the fact that men attended the cinematography did not make sense, because “if the cinema is for men, our young men and women, aged 13 and 14, could claim the right to be included in this category. And no one under heaven will tell them which they are not men” (Pires, 1915, p. 1). Questioning the police supervision of young people, the author of the letter attests cinema as a place for learning lust and depravation since these young people will not “be sufficiently prepared, physically nor psychically, to resist these terrifying suggestions, to these low, filthy, raw scenes, to these exciting nudities, to this deadly intoxication?!” (Pires, 1915, p. 1).

Therefore, the priest’s request to the women to stop the advance of the destruction of an ideal of the Brazilian family would be linked to the many associations created to fulfill “a role of social cementing, of conservation of the ideological unity of the social classes, specifically the elite” (Marques & Amaral, 2013, p. 299). Thus, the concepts and precepts established by the Catholic Church on morality and sexual honor could be ensured.

In the letter, the author describes protective laws against pornography in several countries as a way of showing that “civilized” countries are taking measures to prevent the exhibition circuit from becoming a school of immorality. In the end, he concludes the letter by thanking the press and writers who “find themselves so noble and beautifully united in this campaign against this national scourge: pornography” (Pires, 1915, p. 1). While looking for a thread about this cinematograph, we found several texts in newspapers in Recife between January and April 1915, with criticisms based on municipal and state laws, as well as prerogatives to establish the conservation of the social order, based on Catholic precepts, which would serve to close this cinematograph.

According to Ginzburg and Poni (1989, p. 172) serial data can be found, with which it is possible to reconstruct the intertwining of different conjunctures. Thus, through dispersed and fragmentary testimonies, we can observe a social fabric in which the name of Father Heliodoro, as well as the mentions to the *cheerful* cinematographer by figures from the middle sectors, such as Olympio Galvão and Mário Sette, are distinguished by means of a thread crossing and intertwining in a system of negotiations between the church



and these social sectors, for the maintenance of a moral order. Therefore, as Lopera (2019) points out, “the political, administrative, judicial and police persecution against pornography was on the agenda of the creators, and the keepers of order in Primeira República” (p. 14).

Comparing the two cities, it is possible to affirm that, both in Rio de Janeiro and Recife, the public portrayed by the observers who were privileged participants in our analysis (journalists, writers, writers of advertisements) is heterogeneous in its composition, in its expectation of the cinema and presence on the public stage.

Even so, some considerations are possible regarding this audience. The presence of subjects in the countryside and in rural areas exploring cinematograph technology and using it in religious practices linked to Catholicism is something noteworthy. Moreover, in both cities, some subjects related to the upper and middle classes seem to explore a visibility in the public scene during the Holy Week.

The owners of cinematographs were also active subjects in this negotiation around pragmatic secularism (Aquino, 2012). Although we have seen projections of sacred films throughout the years in a diffuse way, the exhibition is concentrated throughout the period close to Holy Week and other festivities linked to the Church.

Furthermore, the strategy of the exhibitors in Rio de Janeiro and Recife to put sacred films on the schedule mainly on Thursday and Friday of the Holy Week can be seen as a vestige of the negotiation operated between exhibitors and the Catholic Church, so that the former were not targets of such severe campaigns by an institution which, although no longer official, still held a strong accumulated political and social capital (Bourdieu, 2006). On the other hand, it seems that the Church was also not interested in turning ostensibly against a medium which was attracting attention and gaining popularity among its believers.

In the case of Recife, the sacred films shown in the city came from foreign producers who, through branches established throughout the country, especially those which existed in Rio de Janeiro, disembarked at the port, proceeding to the exhibition places with strategies to attract the public, linking the repertoires to the Holy Week festivities.

It is also possible to highlight a greater specialization of the entertainment market in Rio de Janeiro compared to Recife in terms of the commercial exploitation of sacred films during the Holy Week. Not only were more cinematographs found in Rio de Janeiro but initiatives by the Church and other media (such as the theater) to compete with them (the lighting and ornamentation of the churches reported in one source and the phenomenon of sacred plays alluded to in another). Within this logic of competition, the relation

of competition between cinematographs and the Church was more evident in the case of Rio de Janeiro than in Recife, with, in the latter case, a greater peaceful coexistence between them.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Even though some sources were consulted regarding some transgressions against the limits of Catholic religious morality, we did not find in any text the request for closing cinemas during the Holy Week or other religious holidays or for the punishing the owners for exploiting sacred films, which indicates that the institution tried to negotiate with these new repertoires and with these subjects who occupied the public scene.

Regarding the sources, it should be noted that we found a great asymmetry in the number of journals available in the physical and digital collections of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional (Brazil). In the database of the institution, there are 614 periodicals in the physical collection, microfilmed and/or in digital format edited in the city of Rio de Janeiro between 1900 and 1919, whereas only 47 were edited in Recife in the same period. We took as a basis the collection of Biblioteca Nacional because of its legal mission to receive periodicals published in Brazil. Although there are collections such as those of Fundação Joaquim Nabuco and Arquivo Público do Estado de Pernambuco, we do not believe that this gap will be filled.

This fact implied a quantitative and qualitative difference in the sources collected between the cities and, therefore, in the weight of these sources for our analysis. About Rio de Janeiro, articles and chronicles were found in greater quantity and, thus, the advertisements were in the background, whereas, in the case of Recife, these advertisements, together with some fait divers, ended up playing a central role in our approach.

Finally, we emphasize that, due to the quarantine related to COVID-19, we did not have the opportunity to continue our search for sources in the public collections, since they are closed. In this way, we selected sources which we had already collected alongside others available online. ■

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