

## From traces to imagery: film consumption in Rio de Janeiro's Belle époque

### Dos vestígios às imagens: consumo cinematográfico na Belle époque carioca

Pedro Vinicius Asterito Laperá<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** *This article aims to discuss media consumption at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries based on sources taken from periodicals stored in Brazil's National Library. Given the heterogeneity of these sources, we chose to focus discussion on consumption in order to outline possible avenues in analysis, emphasizing a cultural history that encompasses the uses and representations that circulated through the cinematic practice. The sources were analyzed using the evidential paradigm methodology, as proposed by Carlo Ginzburg when dealing with heterogeneous sources, combined with the notion of Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood on consumption in complex societies and Roger Chartier's view on cultural history. Finally, our questions are based on the discussions initiated by Vicente de Paula Araújo and Jean Claude Bernardet on Brazil's silent film era.*

**Key-words:** *Cinematograph; Belle époque carioca; Consumption*

**Resumo** *Este artigo pretende empreender uma discussão sobre consumo midiático na virada entre os séculos XIX e XX a partir de algumas fontes presentes em alguns periódicos guardados na Biblioteca Nacional. Por conta da heterogeneidade dessas fontes, optamos por focar a discussão no consumo para traçar alguns caminhos possíveis na sua análise, com ênfase em uma história cultural que englobe os usos e as representações que circularam através da prática cinematográfica. No tratamento dessas fontes, optamos pela metodologia do paradigma indiciário, tal qual pensada por Carlo Ginzburg ao lidar com fontes heterogêneas, aliando a isso a reflexão de Mary Douglas e Baron Isherwood sobre consumo nas sociedades complexas e a de Roger Chartier sobre história cultural. Por fim,*

<sup>1</sup> Fundação Biblioteca Nacional (FBN/MinC), Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.  
E-mail: plaperá@gmail.com

*situamos nossas questões a partir das análises iniciadas por Vicente de Paula Araújo e Jean Claude Bernardet sobre o cinema brasileiro do período silencioso.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Cinematógrafo; Belle époque carioca; Consumo*

## Introduction

The 1890s are considered a period of political, economic and social transitions that affected the path of Brazilian society in the following decades. Military coups, rebellions, urban reform, the onset of mass European immigration and the consequences of the abolition of slavery were just some of the changes that altered the economy and the urban landscape at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

On a larger scale, the spread of popular press, photography and literature prompted changes in the flow of information throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in a series of economic, cultural and social practices that shaped a community of interpreters (CHARTIER, 2000) increasingly accustomed to consuming the images, events and narratives that produce meaning around the experience of modernity.

Considering this scenario in retrospect, it is impossible to ignore that it was enhanced by the invention of film, which initially centered on the scientific field and expanded rapidly through major urban centers and prompted new economic, esthetic and social experiences.

The first cinema experience on record in Brazil is the screening of French films imported by Pascoal Segreto, a major entertainment executive at the time, at a theater on Ouvidor Street, where a makeshift projector was set up (ARAÚJO, 1985). Araújo identifies factors in the delay for cinematographers to become firmly established in the urban landscape of Rio de Janeiro: the precarious power supply; tensions resulting from the urban reform undertaken by Pereira Passos; the high cost of importing the films needed for film production.

We followed the notion of Jean-Claude Bernardet (1995) that historical research on Brazilian cinema was based on collecting and interpreting sources that validate cinema production, but relegate distribution and viewing to the background. To that end, we broadened this perspective to consider the traces of film consumption found in periodicals as the foundation for redefining the relationship between the modern experience and information circulation based on images and audiovisual narratives.

Thus, the aim of this study is to present the first stage of an analysis underway since 2009 of journals stored at the National Library, in order to collect data that can be considered evidence of film consumption in Rio de Janeiro between 1896 and 1916. Given the heterogeneity of the sources and their possible interpretations, it is important to underscore that this article is an overview and will only discuss the points for which communication practices were deemed vital in redefining tastes, repertoires and social hierarchies. The goal was not to exhaust all possible avenues in interpreting these sources.

In the first stage of the analysis we selected 93 small and medium-circulation journals and collected data from a major newspaper (*Jornal do Brasil*) over three years (1908 to 1910). As a selection criterion we opted for that had been subject to little or no previous analysis. This means that sources considered “classic” to this discussion were not included, such as the writings of João do Rio, the *Gazeta de Notícias* newspaper and the magazines *Fon-fon* and *O Malho*.

In a separate text, we raised the questions that served as a basis for this analysis:

Based on the assumptions (a) that mass culture operates both by the projects (government, popular, elitist, partisan) that compete for meaning through it and the conformation that it provides different groups and individuals everyday experiences; and (b) that a relational perspective (as opposed to emphasizing the specificity of a particular media or technology) is needed to analyze mass culture, we propose the following questions: 1) at what moment did film (technical invention) become socially recognized as cinema, a mass media that creates new social, perceptive and discursive experiences?; and 2) to what extent is the relationship between technology, power and social change present in conditioning the field of possibilities and experiences of individuals and groups? (LAPERA& SOUZA, 2010, p. 389)

These questions intuitively yet directly refer to consumption, which became increasingly evident with the methodology adopted in this analysis: the evidentiary paradigm proposed by Ginzburg (2006, 2007). Evidence of cinema activity in Rio de Janeiro found in the journals

included everything from descriptions of tapes shown to cartoons referencing the cinema experience, narratives on habits at the time that reflect perceptions of technology and the act of going to the movies, and series of advertisements varying in size and format, among others. This led us to the realization that the set of sources considered are heterogeneous. Nevertheless, we believe it is possible to combine them into a presentation based on the interpretative key of consumption.

Centralizing the need for communication and dispute to produce meaning in consumption, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood opted to “restore unity by setting consumption back into the social process” (2004, p. 39) and pointed out that “consumption uses goods to make firm and stable a particular set of judgments in the fluid process of classifying persons and events. And now it is defined as a ritual activity” (2004, p. 115). The authors demonstrate the temporal dimension of this process by recognizing that “the main problem of social life is to pin down meanings so they stay still for a time” (2004, p. 112). In addition, they revisit Geertz to underscore the shared nature of consumption as a marker of social boundaries, complementing this with the consumer response: “the most general objective of the consumer can only be to construct an intelligible universe with the goods he chooses” (2004, p. 112-113).

Based on this discourse, consumption can be viewed as the individual/collective production of meaning of the modern experience previously described and film as one of the media that transform the dynamics in the production and circulation of tastes and repertoires. Douglas and Isherwood implicitly acknowledge the foundations for the formation modern consumer patterns in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, evident in the examples taken from the novels of Henry James to justify their intellectual endeavor in the preface of *The World of Goods* (2004).

In order to discern possible avenues in presenting some of the sources collected in analysis, we opted to divide this article into two sections in order to make our analysis more intelligible. The first includes the sources used in the discussion on tastes and repertoires based on film

genres and commercial disputes among cinematographers and the second focuses on the sources that supported reflection on the (de)legitimation of social hierarchies.

Before describing the sources, it is important to underscore that films produced up to 1908 are currently considered to have disappeared. Moreover, documentation on film from this period is scarce (there are files on the Ferrez family in the National Archives and Moreira Salles Institute, both in Rio de Janeiro), making the search for data in secondary sources (in our case, the journals) more urgent.

### **Between tears, fears and enchantment: film genres and commercial disputes from a consumption perspective**

In *Melodrama and Modernity* (2001), Ben Singer argues that melodrama, a genre disparaged by film critics and historians throughout history, is a reactive analysis of social reality by the spectator, that is, a response to a world of increasingly unstable positions resulting from modernity. The author also positions the genre as the result of class stratification in modern society, meaning that the low cultural status of the melodrama is the product of gradual distinction that was subsequently constructed (through a history of cinema ideas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). By contrast, melodrama developed *pari passu* with modern experience, so much so that the split between the two is highly damaging to a cultural history that seeks to outline the uses and representation practices of the social experiment that surrounds cinema consumption.

This reflection can also be extended to other modes of excess (BROOKS, 1995) present in mass culture: not only tears, but laughter, erotica and horror can also be found in this same movement of tension between being modes of expression present in modernity that simultaneously fall under a logic of containing the popular domain. Singer describes this in the case of melodrama in the same way as Carroll (1999), Bakhtin (2008) and Williams (2008) do in relation to horror, laughter and pornography, respectively.

Consider the example of the film *A greve* (The Strike) which, according to *O Cinematographo* newspaper, was shown on December 2, 1905 at São Pedro Theater. Before describing the film, it is important to mention that newspapers containing scheduled screenings and a compilation of scientific articles published in the press praising technological advances were commercial strategies created at the time to win over consumers/spectators. These were distributed free of charge to moviegoers outside specific theaters and were used as a source that registers the strategy.

Separated into five parts, it tells the story of a failed worker's strike and the murder of the owner of a factory by a woman whose husband was killed in the police crackdown. "A current social drama in 5 parts (color). RPart 1- Refusal. Arbitrated. The scene takes place in the director's office, with the worker's representatives advising the owner of their demands. However, despite his son's pleas, the owner, a proud man, refuses to listen"<sup>2</sup>. Although classified by the advertisements writer as a "social drama", it has all the components of a melodrama. The action is described using increasing pathos, depicting the two extremes of the conflict: workers demanding better wages *versus* an unyielding boss. This pathos is amplified by repression and the effect of the worker's deaths on a woman who, out of vengeance (a driver of melodramatic action par excellence), kills the boss. And the emotion comes to a head at the trial:

4 "Acquitted". From the seat of the accused, the woman begs the court for mercy on behalf of her children, who will be left destitute without her. Despite his grief and recognizing his father's unfairness, the boss's son comes forward and generously intercedes on her behalf, asking that she be returned to her children. Moved, the judges absolve her. 5. 5 "The Future". Before the Altar. Labor personified by the worker, and capitalism personified by the wealthy man, join forces to ensure well-being and prosperity in the future. The judge appears and presides over their union<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *O Cinematographo*: Rio de Janeiro, Dec 2 1905, pg. 3

<sup>3</sup> As above

To the logical outcome under the law, the drama offers the pathos of the trial and aggravating circumstances, including projecting the consequences of her extreme act onto her children (another melodramatic element). The moralistic tone of a lesson in the melodrama is ultimately explained by the outcome of the action and the metonym of between “labor” and “worker” on one side and “capital” and “wealthy man” on the other, offering viewers a conservative and legitimizing view of capitalist and patriarchal order. Moreover, it appeals to the figure of the “father” as a mediator of conflicts, essential to maintaining the male order.

This appeal is also present in *A Escrava Branca* (The White Slave), a historical melodrama whose success can be measured by the length of time it was screened in theaters (three months, rare for films of the time), the number of theaters that screened it (four) and the space occupied by its synopsis, published in full in the *Palcos e Salões* column of the *Jornal do Brasil* newspaper. This was a rare occurrence since the column was dedicated to publishing a summary of the film screenings and theater performances (plays, musicals, etc.) in Rio de Janeiro. Given the relevance of this source, we decided to reproduce it here in full:

Today the Ouidor Movie Theater will show “The White Slave”, a beautiful American film by Mustocope, Biograph&Co.

The synopsis is described in the program as follows: “Nerada, a beautiful Roman girl, was highly sought after by a multitude of admirers, among whom was Delecio, a wealthy aristocrat.

She rejected his gifts and refused his proposals, accepting the courtship of the honest and poor Alasko, whom she married.

Several years later, Alasko is destitute and his son gravely ill. The sculptor desperately tries to sell his statues and, weak from hunger, falls onto a sofa.

The courageous Nerada, destitute and desperate in her inability to provide food for her son, decides to go to the slave market and sell herself to save her husband and child.

For many years Delecio suffered terribly because he truly loved the young Nerada and has been sad and dejected since the rejection.

His entourage of slaves seemed to mock him because of it.

His aide has the idea of going to the market with the hope of procuring something new to interest him.

On entering the slave market Nerada was put up for auction and would certainly be sold to the aide and taken to the palace of her master when Alasko heard of his wife's actions.

But it was too late. She had been handed over to another in purchase, and he returned to his studio brokenhearted to be faced by another blow: the death of his son.

Helped by an old friend and neighbor, he carried the burden covered in flowers to burial.

When Nerada was presented to her master, the joy was mutual. Delecio was inclined to indifference, but when he learned of the desperate selflessness of the young girl's heart, he thought it wonderful, a voluntary sacrifice of love by the pale, pure girl and resolved to send her back to her loved ones.

Grief had stolen the sanity of the young sculptor, but the appearance of Nerada broke through the dark veil that smothered him and reason shone through<sup>4</sup>.

First, it is important to underscore that descriptions of all the characters reflect melodramatic imagination (BROOKS, 1995): the lack of ambiguity in their personalities and actions, evident in excerpts such as “Nerada (...) rejected the gifts and proposals of the nobleman [admirer]”, “honest and poor Alasko” and “Delecio was inclined to indifference, but when he learned of the deperate selflessness, (...) and resolved to send her back to her loved one”. Coupled with this are the ideas of sacrifice (Nerada's, when she sells herself as a slave to save her family; Delecio's loving sacrifice; Alasko, who witnesses the death of his son) and risk to family, the basic dramatic unit of melodrama. The inversions and chance events that interfere positively or negatively in the character's actions (Alasko's financial decline, Nerada's sale to the gentleman she had rejected, the death of the child) are melodramatic narrative elements

<sup>4</sup> *Palcos e Salões. Jornal do Brasil*: Sept 21, 1909, pg. 12. It is important to note that this was an American production prior to 1912, when Viany (1959) and Araujo (1985) identified the end of the “Belle-epoque of Brazilian cinema” and the dominance of American productions on the Brazilian domestic market.

that reflect the instability of positions in modern society (SINGER, 2000).

Finally, patriarchal order is reaffirmed and, once again, the father/gentleman is presented as the holder of power and the mediator of negative situations that befall the characters, as seen in the penultimate paragraph of the source previously cited.

Due to its migratory nature, this melodramatic imagination viewed by Brooks as a form of psychic organization of the spectator's experience (1995, p. viii-ix) migrates to the perception surrounding social events considered relevant. And the meaning around these events is contested in the public arena, producing approximations and even rebuffs by the viewer-consumer.

An example of this can be found in September 1909, in the form of a student protest at the Rio de Janeiro School of Medicine. Viewed as a potential rebellion, the government reacted violently and sent in police forces, who clashed with the students, killing five of them. The front page headlines and strong emotions resulting from the event, whose procession of students was accompanied by the public and prompted heated debate in editorials on the government's attitude (usually critical), overlapped the screening of *Os Funeraes dos acadêmicos* (Student Funerals) at the Paris Cinema.

#### Extraordinary Event!

In its mission of offering the public the latest exhilarating developments from Europe as well as all major events in the life and progress of Brazil, the Paris Cinema commissioned from Mr. Júlio Ferrez the entire processions of the STUDENT FUNERALS held here in the capital. Made exclusively for the Paris Cinema, it shows the importance of the funeral procession that accompanied the unfortunate scholars to the S. J. Batista funeral home (...)

#### Part Two

THE STUDENT FUNERALS – Film that faithfully reproduces the solemn funeral procession that accompanied the unfortunate victims of the events of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of this month. THE CONVOY OF THE MEDICAL SCHOOL; 2. The speech of the academic Mr. Armando Frazão;

3. The funeral cortege; 4. The popular movement in front of the *Passeio Público*; 5. The cortege passes through the *Glória* Garden; 6. Portrait of the victims<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that the film was commissioned (“commissions from Mr Júlio Ferrez”), indicating demand created by the consumption of facts that caused social impact. This demand can also be inferred from the desire of those who commissioned the film, as stated by the writer, to “film all major events in the life and progress of Brazil”.

In turn, the prominence given to the name of the filmmaker reflects a strategy of distinction in the commercial sphere, since the Ferrez family was already publicly recognized at the time in the field of photography and as a film distributor for Pathé, increasing the symbolic capital of the film (and the theater that screened it, since it was made exclusively for the Paris Cinema”).

Despite being classified in the “natural” genre, some melodramatic resources are depicted in the narrative. “Film that faithfully reproduces the solemn funeral procession that accompanied the unfortunate victims of the events of the 22nd of this month”. Referring to the students as “unfortunate victims” places them on the side of “good”, materially and morally affected by “evil” (implying government repression). This “good” is legitimized in the public arena by the “popular movement in front of the *Passeio Público*” that accompanied the cortege and reinforced by the photographs of the victims displayed, a means of creating identification and solidarity (in terms of class and even gender, given that the female audience was sizeable and the dead students would be projected onto the children or siblings of these viewers).

In another source, melodrama as a mechanism for producing identification and projection in viewers is even more evident. This source is an article in the magazine *Revista Moderna: magazine quinzenal ilustrado* (fortnightly illustrated magazine), a publication that circulated in Rio de Janeiro from 1897 to 1898, whose target audience was women from the

<sup>5</sup> Jornal do Brasil: 23 Sept 1909, pg. 16.

city's elite, confirming it as a magazine aimed at modern women. The article features a number of photographs of a fire in a makeshift canvas structure in Paris caused by the explosion of a film projector lamp and the victims (mostly women) around the page, as well as the following description:

On May 4 in Paris, a wooden tent-like structure in which ladies of the French aristocracy and elite were holding a fair to raise funds for religious organizations and charities caught fire, killing 146 people (...)

The fire, caused by the explosion of a projector lamp, spread to the curtains of the tent and lasted only a quarter of an hour<sup>6</sup>

Identification is amplified by the pictures of the female victims of the fire and the description of their belonging to an elite class ("ladies of the French aristocracy and elite"), their actions at the time ("were holding a fair to raise funds for religious organizations and charities"), and the emphasis placed on the size and suddenness of the catastrophe ("killing 146 people" and "lasted only a quarter of an hour"). Thus, in addition to highlighting the instability of positions in modern city, melodrama also emphasizes the dangers people are exposed to. The response is an appeal to sensationalism as a form of communication with an audience eager for references that aid in the interpretation of this social world mad unstable by modernity.

### **Strategies for legitimizing and disavowing social hierarchies in cinema consumption**

In addressing the impact of cinema technology on literary practices of the *Belle époque*, Flora Sussekind (2006) discussed the dispute over tastes and repertoires that the writers of this era struggled to legitimize or contest. The author explored the connections between the literary field, which had been gaining legitimacy in Brazil throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the presence of visual records (films, panoramas) and the press,

<sup>6</sup> O Incêndio do Bazar da Caridade. In: *Revista Moderna*. Rio de Janeiro, 15.05.1897, pg. 8.

for which many of these writers wrote and engaged in political and social struggles.

Expanding on the scope of Sussekind's research, some sources indicate that tension in the consumption of certain repertoires and, as a result, in the production of meaning, were not restricted to the literary field. We believe that the structuring of tastes, on a broader scale, was also affected by the presence of cinema in the urban landscape. *Revista Moderna* magazine (previously discussed) published a short story comparing pre- and post-cinema forms of production:

Contemporary history must be made instantly, like a modern portrait must consist of a series of Kodacks. (...)When Velásquez reproduced on the screen the expressive faces of the princes of the Royal Family of Austria and, later, Machado de Castro forged in bronze the pompous and magnificent figure of King José I, who gallantly mounted his enormous horse Alter for hundreds of years, painters and sculptors of ease and talent with that sixth sense that nourishes the brain and serves a powerful purpose, drew or colored the portraits of their models in the noble and conventional positions that history fixed them in (...)

Today history is written by reporters on scraps of paper, in the chambers of government buildings and ministries, in the corridors of parliament, on the third floor stairways, in court halls, on the stages and in the dressing rooms of theaters...(...)Art suffers substantially in the modern way. That's why today's audience demands history in museums and the equestrian statue in the beautiful square, and complains of the rapid, elusive and detailed news, the filmmakers that show them the intimate character of their lives and surprise in the series of expressions and movements (...)<sup>7</sup>

The author points out a contrast between two forms of image production, concluding that the status of the image has been lowered by the advent of cinema. The contemplative relationship of images based on the work such as those of Velásquez and Machado de Castro in a cultured society contrast with the rapid fruition in cinema and the almost instantaneous need to produce narratives that refer to certain

<sup>7</sup> *Revista Moderna*. Rio de Janeiro, Jan 15, 1898, pg. 412-413.

interpretations of the contemporary world, concluding that “art *suffers* substantially in the modern way” [emphasis added for the purposes of this study].

From a more positive perspective, the writer of the column *Palcos e Salões* in the *Jornal do Brasil* newspaper on December 1, 1909 begins his chronicle narrating the advent of cinema into the “families of workers vying for tickets, racing to buy, for 500 *reis*, a few minutes of fun and dreams”, to then say they watched the film adaptation of the novel *Resurrection* (by Leon Tolstoy) and think: “there are so many people who have not read the book. Who didn’t want to, or couldn’t or didn’t know how to read. Who go to the Odeon, the Paris, the Pathé. And revel in the intense desperation of this desolate Katyusha and praise the evangelizing and powerful work of the illustrious Russian writer”. This short excerpt explains both the dispute over tastes, since novels were a highly valued form of literature at the time and Tolstoy a prestigious international author, and the tensions between the practices of writing and the image, including valuing the latter. The fact that the narrator describes the audience as “families of workers” indicates there is a class element in this struggle for tastes. This example is complemented by others taken from the literary culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, emphasizing their connection with contemporary times. “On display at the Parisiense and the is the portrait of a great Italian poet. (...) Tasso, one of the most illustrious of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the immortal genius of Sorrento. “The Miser” is a film by Biograph. Is it based on the comedy of Molière? Or Plauto? Or on contemporary life?

In addition to tastes and repertoires, the still recent presence of cinema in the urban landscape created other types of tension, related to the very ritual of going to the movies. In the journal *Brazil Moderno*, published between 1914 and 1920, Pedro Silva narrates the misadventures of a couple on their first trip to the cinema. Using the word simple in a pun, he names the couple Mr. and Mrs. Simpleton. Immediately afterwards he describes their attitudes using visual and gestural exaggerations, and surprise when faced with a new universe:

They purchased their tickets and, to add extra shine, in first class.

They went to the waiting area and sat talking like important people, admiring the paintings adorning the walls; the people arriving, the ladies' dresses, their happy expressions and the exciting "pose" of the gentlemen.

The first section ends.

The audience rose, the Simpletons did the same, and follow the crowd of people to the screening room; at the entrance, where a mischievous fellow (because Mrs. Simpleton was rather plump and had all the characteristics of a farm girl) gave her such a squeeze, that she started and Mr. Simpleton was obliged to react, but he had disappeared.

After entering the screening room and having characterized their lack of familiarity with that universe, the ineptitude of the couple with the situation and their class status (by calling Mrs. Simpleton a "farm girl"), Silva accentuates the absurdity of their actions by narrating a disturbance that occurred during the screening: when confusing the "mischievous fellow" who had bothered Mrs. Simpleton with a character in the film, a thief who gags a child to steal from a house, the couple abruptly interrupts the session and a commotion ensues that culminates in a visit to the police station. Mr. Simpleton is indignant and jumps from his chair, sending it to the floor with a huge crash! Furious at the insult, he leaps through the opening and advances on the stage whistling furiously! His consort, Mrs. Simpleton, in turn, asks for help, shouting and protesting against the thief while the others, judging it to be a huge commotion, look for the nearest exit and the ladies swoon. (...)

The police arrive. The sheriff, a polite young man, asked Mr. Simpleton if he would recognize the perpetrator if he saw him. Mrs. Simpleton replied: I know who he is, it's the same man who tried to gag me when my husband and I were entering the screening room!

- It's true what she says sir, said Mr. Simpleton aggressively, as soon as the film was over, and the naïve and simple Mr. Simpleton and his simple other half, were taken to the 4<sup>th</sup> precinct. <sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> SILVA, Pedro. No title. In: *Brazil Moderno*. Rio de Janeiro: Apr 19, 1915, pg. 2.

In short, the dissociation between the content shown in the film and the act witnessed by the couple is a comic culmination to their inability to enjoy this modern invention, but not before reinforcing their class status (inferior) already introduced to the story by Silva.

The position of class also emerges clearly in the financial scale of the act of going to the movies. As a leisure activity for which prices fluctuated considerably (in addition to inflation, which limited the buying power of the lower classes), at times a visit to the cinema could be “pricey” for many families. This drama was condensed into a story published in the newspaper *Il Bersagliere*, owned by Pascoal Segreto, whose brother Gaetano served as editor in chief. Printed at least twice a week, the journal was distributed among Rio de Janeiro’s Italian immigrant community between 1891 and early 1910 (The National Library houses editions up to 1914). It was edited in Italian with excerpts in Portuguese, but was typically not bilingual.

In the column *Le Chiacchiere di Nasonelli* (Nasonelli’s Gossip, a pseudonym for Nalate Belli) of November 23, 1907 entitled *Le gioie del Cinematografo* (The Joys of Cinema), the author narrates the saga of a well-known Portuguese man, Mr. José Campos, who lived in the Catumbi district (in central Rio) and, in a gesture of generosity, decides to take his entire family to the cinema for the first time (most people had never been) and reacted as follows: “To cinema! He shouted in unison with the enthusiastic tribe, lifting their noses from their coffee with milk”<sup>9</sup>.

However, he had already calculated the exact cost: they walked to the theater (to save on tram tickets). In addition, three of his eight children were under eight and would get in free. During the week, conversation revolved around the expectation of the cinema visit, illustrated in the dialogue of the older daughters:

“Oh, if I were rich, I would do to every one of the thirty four cinemas in Rio every night; they’re such a beautiful invention. I love the Pathé as much as Merveille. Aunty went to the Lumière and saw *The Passion of*

<sup>9</sup> Translated from Italian by the author.

Jesus Christ and the discovery of America and it made her cry; then she was frightened by the thieves and she said the best thing were the processions of the Divine Spirit”

“Aunty is stupid”

She’s old. Only young girls like us should go to the cinema. Another time, when we turned out the lights, a gorgeous man in tails pinched me twice, and touched me here”

“Oh, how lucky!”<sup>10</sup>

The conversation of the young people demonstrates the disavowal of a historic and religious repertoire at the same time as it generationally marks its consumption. This culminates in the expectations that vanish before the failure of the long-awaited day. The Campos family went from midday to midnight visiting different theaters and watched, in the exaggerated description of Nasonelli, a hundred “cinema pictures” to the lament of Umbelina (Mr. Campos’ wife) who, starving (one of the family’s savings had been on food), watched in horror the money wasted on fun.

This character epitomizes a class *ethos* that views leisure (represented by cinema) as a waste of resources considered essential for other fundamental activities (eating). Finally, Nasonelli recounts the family’s tragic fate: “The next day, José’s home on Piraju Street become a home for the blind. I was just informed that José hanged himself. There was nothing better to do”<sup>11</sup>. The conservative conclusion is that contact with the cinema could raise false hope among the lower social classes and thus be fatal to their physical and intellectual survival.

## Final considerations

By analyzing the sources presented, we concluded that the experience of cinema consumption was fundamental in reshaping certain social and discursive practices. In considering consumption as a central category

<sup>10</sup> Translated from Italian by the author.

<sup>11</sup> Translated from Italian by the author.

in the interpretation of these sources, we noted that some commercial and narrative strategies were redefined in contact with Rio de Janeiro's audiences at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The first section of this article uses film genres, in this case melodrama, in an attempt to outline a series of experiences, whereby spectator-consumers use these genres to produce meaning about the social world. This is followed by an analysis of how a melodramatic interpretation can permeate other genres and formats – the “natural” film and the article, in the examples addressed.

The second section, in turn, centers on the different disputes underlying the construction of social hierarchies in relation to cinema consumption. Continuing on from the first section, we demonstrate the dispute over tastes and repertoires (which surpassed the issue of film genres) and, as a result, the tensions surrounding a ritual that was developing in parallel to the urban landscape – going to the movies.

Finally, we recognize that our goal of selecting highly heterogeneous sources, in terms of content and material (the newspapers and magazines from which these were taken quantitatively and qualitatively targeted different audiences), was the result of the logic of the analysis, with the minimal consistency between them only investigated broadly.

It was not our intent to exhaust their interpretive possibilities, but rather to discern possible avenues in the field of cinema history in Brazil.

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