
Some Light Camera Action at Cinema Brazil

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A fresh breeze is blowing through the Brazilian cinema sector. Although films have been made in the country for a hundred years, domestic production has been so small and so difficult that the sector's survival was often in doubt.

But recently, films such as Fernando Meirelles' "Cidade de Deus," of 2003, which was nominated for a total of five Oscars, brought international recognition to the fledgling Brazilian film industry and a reversal of fortune is underway.

"Cidade de Deus" was nominated for the Best Foreign Film award in 2003, and four more Oscars in 2004, among them the very prestigious awards for Best Film and Best Director. Although the film did not win any Oscars, it certainly caught everyone's attention.

Cinema began in Brazil around 1896 when European immigrants arrived with film projectors in their luggage. Some European films were shown at entertainment centers in Rio de Janeiro at that time.

But it was only in 1907, with the arrival of electricity in the city, that local production could really begin. It began immediately with *Os Estranguladores* (The Stranglers), a 40-minute independent production of 1907 by Antônio Leal, based on a true story of a crime committed in Rio.

The first production company was formed in 1931, called Cinédia. Its most famous production was "Alô. Alô Carnaval," a popular success of 1936.

For two decades hundreds of films, most of them light farce and slapstick known as *chanchadas* were churned out at Cinédia

In 1949, Brazil got a modern production company, Vera Cruz, that was to be the country's version of Hollywood. Vera Cruz turned out 17 films before going bankrupt in 1954.

There had always been independent film productions in Brazil, but with the demise of Vera Cruz, they took on new life in the late 1950s with the appearance of a movement known as the Cinema Novo (New Cinema).

What happened was that a new reading of Brazilian reality came to the forefront. Films began to spotlight the struggle for survival in the arid backlands of Brazil.

"Vidas Secas," by Nelson Pereira dos Santos, and "Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol," by Glauber Rocha, both in 1963, were a form of protest against the lack of commitment by authorities in dealing with the problems of drought in Brazil's poorest and most backward regions and its human consequences.

In the 1970s, the Cinema Novo was overtaken by market forces and a wave of lightly erotic films, dealing with sexuality in Brazilian form and content, dominated the scene.

The films, known as "porno-chancada," which could be translated as "slapstick pornography," were little more than fun and entertainment.

In 1980, a serious film discussed a serious subject: torture in Brazil. The film was "Pra Frente Brasil," (directed by Roberto Farias) which was released as the military government began to loosen its grip on the country.

After the Fall

The military government also loosened restrictions on imports of foreign films in the 1980s and that turned out to be a particularly harsh blow to the industry.

The numbers tell the story: in the first half of 1980, a total of 154 foreign films were shown in Brazil, while only 42 films were being made domestically.

The problem was that the public clearly preferred the foreign product, flocking to see them in numbers three times bigger than audiences at Brazilian films. As a result, domestic production turned to almost exclusively films for children.

In 1993, the Ministry of Culture rolled out an incentive program and began awarding prizes (Programa Banespa de Incentivo à Indústria Cinematográfica e do Prêmio Resgate Cinema Brasileiro).

With assistance in financing production and commercialization, the cameras started rolling. In 1994 a big box office success was a historical film, "Carlota Joaquina, Princesa do Brasil," directed by Carla Camurati.

That was followed by a string of hits, not only in Brazil, but at the Oscar ceremony when, during the four-year period, 1995 to 1998, Brazil had no less than three finalists for Best Foreign Film: "O Quatrilho" (1995), directed by Fábio Barreto; "Que É Isso Companheiro?" (1997), directed by Bruno Barreto; and "Central do Brasil" (1998), directed by Walter Salles.

In 1998, the female lead in "Central do Brasil," Fernanda Montenegro, one of the country's most famous actresses, was nominated by the Hollywood Academy of Motion Pictures for Best Actress, as well.

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