

Cinema as a Cultural Bridge Between Brazil and India?

A Comparative Approach Based on Personal Experience

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The following pages aim to explore the cultural relationship between India and Brazil, focusing on cinema, particularly on the cinematic productions that have shaped their media landscape in the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. The question underlying these reflections is whether it is possible to establish a cultural bridge between the two countries by drawing upon their cinematic productions. As with other artistic expressions, cinema is, for me, a universal language and provides a very productive space to interrelate two distant geopolitical and geocultural entities such as India and Brazil.

India and Brazil are both members of the so-called BRICS, an association of five emerging economies founded in 2005 that also includes Russia, China and South Africa, and which, according to international economic reports, distinguish themselves by their fast-growing economies and significant influence on regional and global affairs. At the same time, these five countries are all very heterogeneous, with considerable cultural and political differences and little in common outside the economic sphere, making a comparison of, for example, cultural matters more complicated. However, India and Brazil are the two with the most similar socio-historical development, both sharing a history of European colonization and of struggles for independence. They also share a history of immigration, migration, exiles and diasporas; moreover, both countries are also characterized by a deeply unequal social system. Although India has many more centuries of cultural, political and economic history than Brazil, both struggle between tradition and modernity, the local and the global, and for a legitimate place in the shaping of the new world order. But when it comes to cinema, however, Brazil and India seem absolutely different at first glance. The purpose of the following reflections is to try to answer to some questions that recur frequently in the context of my

work: Are Brazilian and Indian cinemas really that different? Is it possible to establish a bridge between them? In a century in which the BRICS can make an unprecedented difference in the shifting of global power asymmetries, can cinema become a bridge that connects these two countries in a productive sense? In order to explore some possible answers, it's important to understand certain peculiarities of the audiovisual industries of both countries from the 20th century to the present day.

A Brief History of Brazilian Cinema

From its beginnings in 1898 until the end of the 1920s, the Brazilian cinema industry thrived as a home-grown enterprise, with the distribution and exhibition capital in the hands of Brazilians, not Hollywood studios. Brazilian filmmaker Eduardo Escorel reminds us that since that time, Brazilian cinema has endured a series of “cycles”, an “eternal beginning, with positive expectations and frustrations, meaning that crises seem to be a definitive aspect of our ‘undeveloped character’” (2005: 14).

From the end of the 1920s onward, Brazilian cinema became dominated by Hollywood, and its national market share has remained below 20% even to the present day. According to Jean-Claude Bernardet, it is not possible to understand anything about Brazilian cinema without analyzing the massive penetration of the Hollywood industry in the country (1979: 11). Only in the 1930s did some feeble protection laws begin to be discussed, but always in an attempt to protect the sphere of production, never the distribution or exhibition sectors. A few great filmmakers managed to emerge, such as Mário Peixoto, the author of *Limite* (1930), a film whose narrative style impressed the world.

As cultural magazines began to flourish in the country in the 1930s, many of them began a campaign in favor of national cinema. The magazine *Cinearte*, for example, was the mentor of Cinédia, one of the first attempts to build an industry production system for Brazilian cinema. But the first real strong attempt to industrialize national cinema arose in Rio de Janeiro in the 1940s, with Atlântida Studios. According to Paulo Emilio Sales Gomes (1996: 73), the initiative annoyed critics and intellectuals, because the studio used a formula based on popular comedies and parodies of Hollywood epics, with radio stars such as Oscarito, Mesquitinha,

Grande Otelo, Ankito, Zé Trindade, Derci Gonçalves and Violeta Ferraz. History has been very cruel to the Atlântida legacy and only now, in the 21st century, has its contribution to increasing the Brazilian market share been broadly recognized. In fact, this success in the 1940s only ended because of the financial constraints brought about by World War II. After the war, Hollywood became even more powerful and dominant in Brazil, using lobbyists in the Brazilian Congress to ensure a ready market for their films.

During the 1950s, another important attempt emerged in São Paulo at the instigation of intellectuals such as Franco Zampari and Francisco Matarazzo. This was the Vera Cruz Studios, a huge expense in which the two Italian immigrants built professional studios, imported accomplished technicians from Europe and North America and tried to apply the Studio System from Hollywood in Brazil, with vast productions based on well-known stars and lots of money, distancing themselves from the popular cheap comedies coming out of Rio. However, this venture ended in failure, since the distribution and exhibition system were in the hands of international conglomerates and the productions from Vera Cruz simply couldn't compete with Hollywood films that arrived in Brazil as established successes from the US. The end result was that the initiative managed to produce a number of good films that were seen only by limited audiences, leaving large debts and forcing the Studios to close their doors at the turn of the next decade.

Tired of too many industrialization attempts, Brazil in the 1960s placed its bets on Art Cinema, a decade marked by the Cinema Novo movement. Organized by intellectuals from various spheres of the arts and inspired by Italian Neorealism and the French Nouvelle Vague, Cinema Novo was very original in its goal: to discuss, through cinema, the roots of the undeveloped situation of the country, based on four pillars: Culture (its dependence on and influence by Europe and North America), Economy (never independent, always depending on the world's economic health), Politics (colonized by Portugal, based on the exploitation of natural resources, beset by corruption, inequality and externally-imposed development ideas and plans) and Religion (a source of oppression, ignorance and blindness among the people).

According to Ismail Xavier (2001: 30-31), Brazilian culture in the 1960s lost its innocence in the face of consumer society and mobilized its own market to try to "radicalize ideas", bringing a new kind of under-

standing of traditions and questioning the “national issues”, prompting deep discussions in all areas. The result in cinema was films that looked within the country, no longer to the Atlantic Ocean, trying to uncover the reasons for Brazil’s lack of development and progress. Glauber Rocha’s films conquered the world and its festivals, such as Berlin and Cannes. Ismail Xavier mentions that films like *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (1964) and *Terra em Transe* (1967) were the products of intellectuals who were discussing deep and dangerous themes under the dictatorship that was arising in Brazil (Xavier 2001: 18-19).

The movement established Brazilian cinema in the world but was still unable to raise a significant national market share. On the contrary, it pushed the numbers down, since the films focused on serious and complex issues, with no place for entertainment for the masses. Also, there was a complete lack of connection with the ever more powerful industry of television. As a result, the public started turning to television, not cinema, in pursuit of diversion. Under a violent dictatorship supported by the US government, the cinema industry was weakened and silenced until the end of the 1970s and 1980s, when Brazilian cinema finally got its magical decade, in terms of market share.

With the creation of Embrafilme (Brazilian State Film Association) in 1969, production incentives rose, lots of money flowed in and the national cinema achieved market shares up to 20 % for the very first time in history. Films such as *Dona Flor e Seus Dois Maridos* (1976) attracted more than 10 million spectators, a record for the country. Again, the most successful films were comedies or based on television products, such as the *Trapalhões* movies, which remain among the 10 top box-office hits of all time. But this did not mean a partnership with Brazilian television, one of the most powerful television industries on the planet.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the first president elected after dictatorship, Fernando Collor de Mello, closed the Ministry of Culture and opened the doors to imports without protecting any national industry. As a result, Brazilian cinema market shares fell to 0 % in 1992. But the president was removed by popular demand and a few years later, stronger cinema laws were implemented, creating the best scenario for production ever. At the turn of the century, Brazil was producing over 70 films per year, although market share remained around 15 % (Hollywood and European cinema taking the rest). Very important nominations and prizes occurred during this period, such as the Oscar nominations for best film

in foreign language and best actress for *Central Station* (1998), which won Best Film and Actress in Berlin in 1999. Not to mention four nominations for *City of God* (2002) and a prize in Berlin for *Elite Squad* (2007). In other words, Brazilian cinema has now become very internationalized, with diverse productions (art-house films, entertainment and comedies), a closer relation with television, and increasing attention both inside and outside the country.

Of course many problems remain unresolved, particularly distribution (in the hands of Hollywood) and exhibition (a lack of incentives, e.g., for its digitalization process). Not to mention television, which is still not obliged by law to contribute to cinema production, in contrast to France, Germany, Canada and other countries, either in terms of screening the films or contributing in taxes converted to cinema production. However, Brazilian cinema has now reached a point that we can probably say that its success is no longer just part of another cycle.

A Brief, and Different, History of Indian Cinema

India, on the other hand, has a very different history. First, it's important to mention that cinema in India is much more complicated than in Brazil, mainly because India has dozens of official languages, rather than a single one that unifies the country. Also, and partly because of this, there are different regional cinema production areas, which means that if a film is successful in the Kolkata area, it will only then be translated into other languages to be screened in the rest of the country. In other words, India has a vast, very diverse, plural and rich cinema industry, with different regional offerings as well.

But let's focus on an area with one of the largest cinema industries in the world: Mumbai, with its Bollywood industry. The reason to focus specifically on Bollywood is to try to understand how a country with as many economic, social and political inequalities as India has been able to develop a self-sustainable film industry, when this is not even close to happening in Brazil, where almost all films depend on government funding to be produced.

This is not the case in Bollywood. According to one of the foremost Bollywood specialists, Derek Bose (2006: 41), the self-sustainable system

arose at the beginning of the 20th century, when rich families needed to launder dirty money (e.g. from corruption) and invested in moviemaking. Movies were cheap and were produced rapidly. Moreover, they were distributed and screened by local families, with absolutely no help from the government. With tickets costing only pennies, the result was rooms crowded with up to three thousand people, generating a snowball effect bringing more families into the market, using the money obtained from the previous film to produce the next one, as a perfectly sustainable industry. This is how Bollywood became part of an industry that, together with other local Indian film industries, produces over one thousand films per year, more than twice as many as Hollywood. But why was this possible in India and not in Brazil?

First, one should take the economic facts into consideration. In a country with more than 1.2 billion people, it's not difficult to charge only a few cents per ticket, making a visit to the cinema sometimes cheaper than a bottle of water. Most importantly, according to Derek Bose (2006: 38), during most of the 20th century, cinema had practically no direct competitor as entertainment in the whole of India. It's important to remember that the country had only one TV station until the 1990s (Brazil had more than 10 from the 1960s onwards, not to mention paid TV), and that was a state channel, without very good entertainment programs. In addition, India was never part of the international circuit of shows, concerts and festivals and, finally, the country never had an independent music industry (which was very strong in Brazil until the 2000s), but rather one much too dependent on the cinema industry to promote itself separately. As a result, cinema was the only entertainment for the vast majority of people. And a cheap one, at that.

Thus, if in Brazil the maximum amount of tickets sold annually is no more than 300 million (from all films being screened) in a very good year, in India, they are accustomed to selling more than 3 billion tickets per year internally, not to mention further revenues from countries including England (with its Indian community), Russia, Pakistan, Indonesia and some African countries. Although in Brazil cinema regulation came much earlier, in India cinema was only officially considered an industry in the year 2000. This helped the industry avoid greater losses due to piracy, maintaining good numbers in terms of market share.

But how can it be that in India, Hollywood almost never exceeds a market share of 15 %, while in Brazil it's the opposite: Hollywood always

enjoys a market share of more than 80%? Most likely this is for cultural reasons. Although India was a colony of England from the 19th century and until almost the middle of the 20th century, it's a country with a culture and society of more than two thousand years of tradition. Even England was not able to impose western culture – nor even its language – since English is not that widely spoken in India. On the other hand, Brazil has experienced more than 500 years of direct and close European and North American influences, first from the Portuguese, then Great Britain and now from the United States. Being nearer to these countries, and having suffered a massacre of its indigenous community, Brazil has always used European habits and culture as both a mirror and model, which means also consuming their products (e.g. films). In other words, this is a very different case from India. Even with globalization, western culture was not able to diminish the power of local culture in India, which means that Indian cinema remains powerful because Indians like to see themselves on screen. Even if most production companies rewrite Hollywood scripts – which is the usual case in Bollywood – they want to see the films with local actors, in their own language, feeding the local entertainment industry like nowhere else on the planet.

That brings us to another curious subject, which is TV Globo. TV Globo is the biggest TV network in Brazil, and one of the largest on the planet. Created through TimeLife investments during the dictatorship in the 1960s, TV Globo is now an empire of television, radio, magazines, newspapers and licensed products that directly influences the political, social and cultural destiny of Brazil. TV Globo's soap operas are sold to dozens of countries around the world, often becoming the top programs watched during prime time. In 2009, TV Globo produced and broadcast a soap opera by Gloria Perez called *Caminhos das Índias* ("India's Routes"), which was a huge success and won for TV Globo, for the first time, the award for best soap opera in the 37th Emmy Awards.

But beyond this huge success there was almost a complete lack of knowledge about India and its culture in Brazil, just as there is probably little knowledge of Brazil in India. The writers of the soap opera chose to avoid unnecessary complexities and focus instead of entertaining the masses, by reinforcing stereotypes and avoiding any deep or serious social issues. The main stereotype represented is the connection with music. As in Bollywood movies, every episode contained singing and dancing, which provided great material for Brazilian humor programs to laugh at, since

the singing and dancing looked fake and not really Indian. Nonetheless, this was a huge popular success, since Brazil is also very connected with music – although it would be quite a stereotype to show Brazilians dancing samba in every chapter of an Indian soap opera, for example. Another stereotype employed was the theme of impossible love and the rigid enforcement of the caste system in Indian society. This provided the main focus of the plot, although we pretty much know that, in the 21st century, the issue of castes is no longer that fundamental in Indian society, especially with the greater influence of education, technology and international cultures. Finally, *Caminho das Índias* avoided touching upon serious social problems, such as the number of miserable people living on the streets without food and water, the inefficiency of state bureaucracy, not to mention delicate relations with neighbors like Pakistan. Why? Because those issues do not provide easy entertainment and could create unnecessary polemics among viewers. And isn't this the same reason that Bollywood avoids these issues? Like a Bollywood film, *Caminho das Índias* was marketed throughout the world, creating an Indian fuss in Brazil (with increased sales of Indian clothes, yoga, meditation and even tourism) but reinforcing the ignorance of a country that is far more interesting than the stereotypes it exports.

Of course, the Indian movie industry is not perfect. First, according to local experts, it is experiencing an eternal 'narrative crisis', especially in Bollywood, where the same formulas are repeated over and over again, in almost every film. Basically, the formula consists of a 150-minute film with music and dancing every 10 minutes – which do not necessarily relate to the plot – and a narrative based on a man and a woman who fall in love but can't be together because of a villain or enemy families. With the help of a funny friend, the hero will finally conquer the love of his life. Another major difference from Brazil – which makes Brazilian cinema more diverse and more internationally recognized – is the fact that India suffers from serious government censorship, which prohibits local films from provoking or talking about polemical issues regarding India's relations with other countries (such as Pakistan), not to mention a prohibition against explicit sexuality (no sex, no kisses, never) and social issues (such as pointing out the social disparities maintained by a corrupt and inept government). This is all changing in India, but not as fast as could be expected in a BRICS country.

Brazilian and Indian Cinema: a Comparative Approach

After this brief look at the realities of both cinemas, let's try to answer the previous questions. Is it possible for cinema to become a bridge between two countries that, although both BRICS, are very different, culturally speaking, and barely know each other beyond superficial stereotypes? The answer is simple: yes, and it's becoming more and more necessary every day. In order to create other flows of cultural communication – no longer merely North to South – it's crucial that both federal governments implement policies to bring both cinema markets and cultures closer together. If India's and Brazil's political, social and economic realities are very much alike, their cultures are absolutely different; but it is the culture that provides a reflection of all other areas, suggesting ways to implement important changes in society and elsewhere.

If India has a strong cinema industry, it has a lot to teach the Brazilians about cheap and rapid production systems, not to mention incredible special effects, sound systems and international film commerce. If Brazil is strong in terms of creative narrative, it can help Indians explore their own incredible and complex culture and reveal other views of their nation, new ways to reflect and provoke surprise in the viewers.

Festivals of Brazilian films in India and vice-versa could trigger a much broader relationship between the two countries, perhaps improving the quality of the Indian movie industry in terms of narrative (to help them enter and win festivals all over the world) and, for Brazil, diminishing Hollywood's market share by bringing entertainment from other countries, and even exporting Brazilian movies to a vast Asian market with Indian help.

This will only be possible with mutual assistance between federal governments and local private companies. If North America and Europe are already saturated markets, then let's explore the cultural and economic richness to be found within a Brazil-India connection, integrating other ways of thinking about development, new ideas for social and economic progress and, most importantly, a new market combination promoting cultural influences with less of the North-South configuration and more of a multidirectional flow. I have no doubt that this would not only help both countries to resolve many of their problems, by opening them to a non-European perspective, but would also trigger other flows of commu-

nication through different global regions, e.g. between Latin America and Africa, which have so much in common, or between Asia and Africa.

It is not an easy challenge, and definitely not a short-term goal. But cinema could be an effective and practical starting point. The Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu once remarked that cinema is such a great invention because it can be understood by everyone, no matter their age, culture or education. It uses universal codes that can easily supersede a specific language or culture. In noting this, Ozu was saddened at how poor cinema becomes if it follows only one narrative system (i.e. the classic narrative of Hollywood). If filmmakers allow themselves to use many different languages and styles in cinema (as in art films), they are enriching a tool that has a universal appeal. If not, they are promoting a one-way version of thinking, one way of entertainment and worse, one way of proposing solutions for human problems. A cinematic bridge between Brazil and India is the very first step in encouraging a truly new global order in the 21st century.

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