Notes for a general history of early cinema in Brazil

Bernardo Schmitt[1]

Revista do Programa de Pós-graduação em Comunicação
Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora / UFJF
e-ISSN 1981-4070

Abstract

This paper proposes a theoretical and methodological reflection on the construction of a General History of Early Cinema in Brazil, questioning the historiographical predominance of the urban regions along the Rio de Janeiro–São Paulo axis and advocating for a decentralized approach that incorporates the diverse regional experiences of cinema in its early days. The article analyzes the historiography of early cinema in Brazil, noting the recent expansion of regional microhistories studies and their theoretical and methodological impact on early cinema research, particularly addressing issues related to the periodization of the introduction of cinematography in Brazil and the possibilities for comparative studies in the field. This study proposes the use of concepts developed by geographer Milton Santos — specifically his understanding of "technique" — to guide a geographical expansion of studies on early cinema in Brazil, seeking to decentralize and bring these concepts and periods to the interior of the country, and to explore the new possibilities that this movement may generate.

Keywords

Early Cinema; cinema in the interior; technique; history of Brazillian cinema; historiography.

[1]PhD candidate in the Graduate Program in Cinema and Audiovisual Studies at Fluminense Federal University (PPGCINE - UFF). E-mail: bernardo2blue@gmail.com.

Notas para uma história geral do primeiro cinema no Brasil

Bernardo Schmitt[1]

Revista do Programa de Pós-graduação em Comunicação
Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora / UFJF
e-ISSN 1981-4070

Resumo

Este trabalho propõe uma reflexão teórico-metodológica sobre a construção de uma História Geral do Primeiro Cinema no Brasil, questionando a predominância historiográfica das regiões urbanas do eixo Rio de Janeiro–São Paulo e defendendo uma abordagem descentralizada que incorpore as múltiplas experiências regionais do cinema em seus primórdios. O artigo realiza uma análise da historiografia do primeiro cinema no país, notando a expansão recente de trabalhos de micro-histórias regionais e seu impacto teórico-metodológico nos estudos sobre o primeiro cinema, em particular discorrendo sobre as questões da periodização da introdução da cinematografia no Brasil e as possibilidades de estudos comparativos na área. O presente trabalho propõe a utilização de conceitos do geógrafo Milton Santos, em particular seu entendimento sobre "técnica" para nortear uma expansão geográfica dos estudos do primeiro cinema no Brasil, em busca de uma descentralização e interiorização dos conceitos e períodos e os novos caminhos possíveis que esse movimento pode gerar.

Palavras-chave

Primeiro Cinema; cinema nos interiores; técnica; história do cinema brasileiro; historiografia.

[1]PhD candidate in the Graduate Program in Cinema and Audiovisual Studies at Fluminense Federal University (PPGCINE - UFF). E-mail: bernardo2blue@gmail.com.

Notas para una historia general del primero cine en Brasil

Bernardo Schmitt[1]

Resumen

Este trabajo propone una reflexión teórico-metodológica sobre la construcción de una Historia General del Cine Primitivo en Brasil, cuestionando el predominio historiográfico de las regiones urbanas del eje Río de Janeiro-São Paulo y defendiendo un enfoque descentralizado que incorpore las múltiples experiencias regionales del cine en sus inicios. El artículo realiza un análisis de la historiografía del cine primitivo en el país, señalando la reciente expansión de los trabajos de microhistoria regional y su impacto teórico-metodológico en los estudios sobre el cine primitivo, abordando en particular las cuestiones de la periodización de la introducción de la cinematografía en Brasil y las posibilidades de estudios comparativos en este ámbito. El presente trabajo propone el uso de conceptos del geógrafo Milton Santos, en particular su concepción de la "técnica", para orientar una expansión geográfica de los estudios sobre el cine primitivo en Brasil, en busca de una descentralización e interiorización de los conceptos y períodos, así como de los nuevos caminos que este movimiento pueda generar.

Palabras clave

Primer Cinema; cinema en los interiores; técnica; historia del Primer Cine; historiografia.

[1]PhD candidate in the Graduate Program in Cinema and Audiovisual Studies at Fluminense Federal University (PPGCINE - UFF). E-mail: bernardo2blue@gmail.com.

LUMINA
Revista do Programa de Pós-graduação em Comunicação
Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora / UFJF
e-ISSN 1981-4070

Introdução

> "In strict terms, there is no reason to assume that São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro are not themselves regional fractions of the country."
>
> (Autran, 2010, p. 122 – our translation)

To a large extent, the canonical literature on the history of Early Cinema in Brazil has privileged the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in its approach. This focus has been observed in its historiography since the 1960s due to the concept of the "Golden Age of Brazilian Cinema". Assumingly, this is the time (1908–1912) when the domestic film production developed by Araújo surpassed foreign films in audience. Despite holding the adjective "Brazilian" in it, the golden age described by Araújo in his book *A Bela Época do Cinema Brasileiro* (1976) [The Golden Age of Brazilian Cinema] was based on his study on the city of Rio de Janeiro. The city of São Paulo plays a secondary role in his book, and the rest of the country remains largely unrepresented.

The book by Araújo was only published in 1976; however, his research had already led Gonzaga and Gomes to adopt his concept, ten years earlier. Yet, they did not use the term "golden age" in their "*70 Anos de Cinema Brasileiro*" (1966) [70 Years of Brazilian Cinema]. In the first chapter of their book, "1st – 1896 to 1912", which is period based on Araújo's concept, Gonzaga and Salles almost exclusively focus on the two major metropolises. This is so, because Pelotas (RS) was the only discussed region of the country, in a few brief paragraphs, other than the Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo metropolitan regions.

This concept's influence on the Brazilian cinema historiography was unparalleled. In the words of Paulo Emílio, in his introduction to Araújo's book:

> Over the past ten years [1966–1976], *A Bela Época do Cinema Brasileiro* has crosses every lecture, conference, book, essay, article, encyclopedia entry, film, or television show interested in the early days of cinema in Brazil, and in the birth and early development of the Brazilian cinema (Gomes, 1976, p. 11, our translation).

The concept of golden age was revisited by Moura, in his chapter: "Module 1: The Golden Age (Beginnings–1912) – Cinema in Rio de Janeiro (1912–1930)" in *História do Cinema Brasileiro* (1987) [History of Brazilian Cinema]. The book was edited by Ramos and sought to update and systematize the prevailing knowledge on the history of cinema in Brazil in a single publication. The text by Moura adopts Araújo's periodization, and 1912 is its chronological endpoint to discuss early cinema in the country. Yet, just like his predecessors, he primarily focuses on the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. However, at this time, the text features a modest expansion of its territorial scope, and he discusses, although only in a few paragraphs, film screenings and productions in other parts of the country.

This territorial broadening was limited to the Southeastern region, and was only possible after the publication of a series of new research made available from the mid-1970s onward. These studies addressed the early history of cinema in different Brazilian regions; among them, one finds those by Veniano (1983), on Belém; Pfeil (1974), on Rio Grande do Sul; Stecz and Karam (1980), on Paraná; Moreira Neto (1977), on São Luís; and Dantas (1982), on Aracaju. Further studies followed the publication of Moura's text and they were conducted on Manaus, by Costa (1996), and on Santa Catarina (1987), by Pires, Depizzolatto, and Araujo, among others.

The publication, in 1995, of Bernardet's seminal *Historiografia Clássica do Cinema Brasileiro* [Classical Historiography of Brazilian Cinema] was watershed moment for Early Cinema studies in Brazil. The book extensively criticizes the concept of golden age, as it points out its lack of clear criteria, arbitrary periodization, and unsustainability given the sources from the period. Furthermore, according to him, the prevailing focus of Brazilian film historians on a history mainly centered on fictional films production, to the detriment of studies on film production under the *cavação* system, exhibition, reception, and distribution, is counterproductive. New research emerged from the wake of Bernardet's publication, and they broadened the theoretical and methodological scope of Early Cinema studies. Some examples of these publications are Gonzaga's *Palácios e Poeiras* (1996) [Palaces and Dust] and Souza's *Imagens do Passado* (2003) [Images of the Past]. These two books move beyond film exhibition and production as they assess a wide range of cultural, economic, and social Early Cinema aspects in Southeastern Brazil.

We still witness the broadening of research on Early Cinema across different regions of Brazil, in the twenty-first century, mainly when it comes to graduate studies, which are influenced by this renewed theoretical and methodological framework. This new research include the studies by Trusz (2006), on Porto Alegre (2006); Freire (2012), on Niterói and on film distribution in Brazil (2022); Azevedo (2015), on Franca and Ribeirão Preto; Zapata (2018), on Piracicaba; Quintes (2022), on Campos dos Goytacazes; Schmitt (2024), on Santa Catarina, Brito (2024), on Salvador; and Brandão (2024), on Juiz de Fora.

These recent studies have broadened our understanding of Early Cinema in Brazil by bringing new sources and contexts into the debate. They expanded this research field on this period. However, several of these studyes exhibit what Biltereyst and Meers described as "geographical monocentrism" (Biltereyst, Meers, 2016), i.e., a microhistorical focus on a particular region that, in turn, does not provide a broader or comparative picture of the whole, besides rarely setting analytical frameworks capable of encompassing a wider geographical scope.

The growing number of such studies and the gradual filling of existing gaps led to the following questions: is it possible to move beyond this microhistorical condition? By bringing these different studies together, could we envision a historical

account comprising the whole Brazilian scene, from North to South, from the coast to the inlands? Is there a study that fulfills the aspiration expressed by Vieira, when he wrote:

> Perhaps, in the near future, we may be able to bring together, through local researchers' interest, a broad range of cinema histories capable of accounting for the country's continental scale, of encompassing villages and small, medium-sized, and large cities in the inlands and along the coast, across different regions, of mapping trajectories that also bear witness to a variety of film distribution forms and access to films [...] (Vieira, 2021, p. 7).

What possibilities would such a history offer? What knowledge could be gained by bringing all these studies together, and what new perspectives might emerge for Early Cinema studies, both in Brazil and abroad? The study we herein refer to as a General History of Early Cinema in Brazil remains, at this point, as only a prospective project. So far, we only discussed possibilities to materialize it.

Dealing with distortions

The reasons for the focus on Southeastern Brazil are clear: the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are the country's two main economic, political, and urban metropolises, and they were already so at the early 20th century. This urban development gave rise to four factors capable of explaining their privileged position in historiography:

> *1* - **Cinematographic activity**: São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro had a larger volume of activities during the herein addressed period, whether through more film productions, due to higher concentration of screenings, to the variety and distribution companies, among others;
> *2* - **Production of primary sources**: São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro generated a larger body of sources to document the cinematographic activity during the assessed period, including a larger number of journals, photographers, entrepreneurs with personal archives, memoirists, chroniclers, etc;
> *3* - **Archival preservation**: São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro have more robust archival and documentary preservation systems than the rest of the country;
> *4* - **Research**: São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro concentrate a larger number of academic programs in the film, history, communication, and social sciences fields, mainly at the graduate level, which results in the training of a larger number of researchers.

Therefore, the Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo axis accounted for more activity than other regions, produced more sources to document this activity, more effectively stored and preserved these sources, and trained a larger number of professionals to conduct research on them. This disparity inevitably led to distortions if one bears in

mind a general history of this period, since other Brazilian regions face more substantial challenges regarding research funding, archival quality, and the production of primary sources. Deficiency in even one of these factors, in a given region, can result in the distorted understanding of what actually happened back in the days and what is currently known about it.

The state of Santa Catarina, where some cities, such as Blumenau, Joinville, and Florianópolis, have robust archives, with comprehensive collections and journal holdings is an example of this distortion. On the other hand, cities like Laguna and Tubarão have smaller archives and considerably more incomplete collections. Thus, we precisely know what the first film screening in Blumenau was, or where the films screened in Florianópolis in 1909 came from; however, we do not have the same information for Laguna.

This problem poses significant impairments for research findings integration. A research method, such as the "quantitative" comparison, for example, based on the propositions by Biltereyst and Meers (2016), is based on raw figures, including the number of screenings, projections, films, box-office revenues, and movie theaters across two or more regions; therefore, it has limited applicability in our context. Gaps in the available sources, as well as the differing nature and reliability of source types available across regions, are too substantial to allow accurate conclusions emerging from this approach.

This problem also arises when one takes into consideration a "qualitative" comparison between studies, since the same factors contributing to the distortions discussed above, also affect a more holistic analysis of the study object, as they are not exclusive to the field of cinema. A researcher seeking to assess the Early Cinema in a particular "marginal" region of Brazil is expected to find a limited body of scholarship to engage to, rather than just a lack of primary sources, since the region likely lacks research in fields such as sociology, economic history, cultural history, among others. Thus, Early Cinema studies moving beyond the Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo axis are at a persistent disadvantage that still faces a greater risk of being constrained by primary sources availability, as well as by the supporting bibliography. Although it is relatively straightforward to assess cinema linked to São Paulo's cultural, artistic, political, and economic markets in 1900s, doing so in the Paraná State's inlands is considerably more challenging.

Thus, the general trend of being more understandable for research carried out in Southeastern Brazil in both quantitative and qualitative terms is, by no means, a rule. Such issue must be addressed in scholar works. This distortions in the study objects and disparities among research across the country get quite significant when one takes into account the general history of Early Cinema in Brazil, which has become a study object, in its own right.

Drawing unfair comparisons between different regions is unlikely to yield re-

liable conclusions. It is essential recognizing these distortions, remaining attentive to the vast amount of information that remains unavailable to us, and actively investigating the factors accounting for these differences by making them part of the research itself. As advocated by Bernardet, we should "always try to take an insufficiency of information as information, rather than immediately attempting to fill the gap" (2008, p. 65 – our translation).

Thus, a general history of Early Cinema seems destined to have its meta-historical dimension as one of its driving principles, namely: constantly assessing how were the several knowledge bodies it seeks to reconcile formed, as well as which conclusions can, and cannot, be drawn from this reconciliation process.

On Periodization

Thus far, we have discussed the prevalence of scholarships in Southeastern Brazil and the reasons leading to this scenario. The question following from this premise is "what did this bias represent for the Early Cinema historiography?". In other words, what were the produced knowledge forms, and what conclusions were reached, that could have emerged from a limited geographical scope (Rio–São Paulo), but that were also indiscriminately applied to the country as a whole? Yet, it is equally pertinent to ask "what new possibilities can emerge from a history that moves beyond this scope?".

The answers to all of these questions ultimately depend on the research completion. It is not yet possible to determine the full extent and all the ramifications of such a trend in historiography. Therefore, a deeper and clearer investigation remains necessary. However, in an initial inquiry, periodization is one field where this bias toward Southeastern Brazil becomes particularly evident, and in where we can identify opportunities for new windows of understanding.

Early Cinema periodization critiques are not new. Bernardet devotes one chapter of his Historiografia clássica do cinema brasileiro (2008) [Classical historiography of Brazilian cinema] to assess some periodization commonly employed in the Brazilian cinema historiography (rather than just the Early Cinema). He also questions the feasibility of a periodization type capable of being applied to Brazilian cinema as a whole:

> [...] the question thus arises as to whether a general Brazilian cinema periodization conceived as a totality that accounts for all the elements it encompasses, is possible. Is it possible to arrange, along a continuous chronological timeline, all the elements deemed necessary to form both the periodization and the "history of Brazilian cinema," and to divide this timeline into temporal segments holding an intrinsically dominant significance, as well as a significance for the several elements comprising it? (Bernardet, 1995, p. 49).

Let us investigate this question by applying it exclusively to our study object: a general history of Early Cinema in Brazil.

The traditional periodization (1896–1912) employed by Araújo (1976), Gonzaga and Gomes (1966), and Moura (1987), based on the golden age concept, is certainly inadequate. As Bernardet (2008) pointed out, it is arbitrary, politically motivated, and poorly suited to its study object. After all, 1912 is not a significant year for establishing a period boundary, whether from the film exhibition, distribution, or even production standpoint.

Souza, in his *Imagens do Passado* (2003) [images of the Past], uses the 1896–1916 timeframe to discuss Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. He starts from the omniograph exhibition in Rio de Janeiro, in 1896, which was the first public exhibition of a cinematographic projection apparatus in Brazil, and finishes with the American companies entry into the national market, due to serial films and, eventually, feature films, and with the decline of European films presence, in 1916. This is a more carefully considered periodization than the previous one, as it encompasses two sub-periods, within a broader period called "Early Cinema", namely: Traveling Cinema (1896–1907), and fixed-theater cinema dominated by European films (1907-1916).

This periodization does not necessarily apply countrywide [2]. We would have to shift the starting year to 1897 if we were to analyze Florianópolis, Salvador, or João Pessoa, if we apply the same criteria; to 1898, for Belo Horizonte; to 1899, for Aracaju; and to 1900, for Blumenau. If we were to change the criterion, we could also begin from 1895 or 1894, and take into account the earliest exhibitions of individual-viewing cinematographic devices in the country, such as Thomas Edison's kinetoscope.

The end date can also be called into question. The introduction of American companies in Rio de Janeiro in 1915–1916 had a nationwide impact, since the region was the distribution center for films destined for the rest of the country. Yet, the ways this process unfolded changed, over time: according to Brito (2024), the scarcity of European films on the market, in the city of Salvador, forced cinemas to re-screen older films. The Majestic cinema, in the city of São Luís, was "the first large and imposing cinema in the city", according to Ary Bezerra Leite (1995, p. 309). It was launched in 1917 and screened almost exclusively short Italian films throughout that year (1995, p. 309). The cinematographic prevalence of American productions in this city's market would take several more years to materialize.

This issue becomes more complicated if we take the traveling cinema (1896–1907) sub-periodization into consideration. Not only because most cities did not open their first fixed theaters in 1907 (1908 in Recife, 1909 in Florianópolis and Salvador, and so on), but also because the itinerant exhibition model did not come to an end after the creation of the fixed-theater model. It rather generally moved into the Brazilian inlands as a whole, because traveling exhibitors reduced their presence in the major cities and devoted their efforts to smaller, more rural towns. If we take Santa

Catarina State as an example, we find that itinerant exhibitors continuously operated in the Western part of the state, and in Itajaí Valley hinterlands, up to the 1940s, at least (Schmitt, 2024). These exhibitors were virtually the only means of contact with the cinema for rural audiences at a time when Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo already had dozens of "*palace*" cinemas.

These different territorially demarcated cinema temporalities are a constant feature of the Early Cinema history in Brazil. Thus, it seems impossible to elaborate a periodization that evenly apply to the entire country. Abandoning the idea of fixed periods applicable to all of Brazil and, instead, thinking in terms of continuity, "strands," in Bernardet's terms (2008), might be one possible solution. As he describes in his periodization discussion:

> [...] we should not reject the vertical chronological framework, but work horizontally with strands exhibiting different rhythms, and seek to establish associations among them, without attempting to fit them into temporal units deemed valid for all strands (Bernardet, 2008, p. 49)

In our case, we could identify some features, the strands we consider descriptive of or, at least, relevant to, the Early Cinema in Brazil, for instance: "itinerant exhibition," "film screenings combined with variety shows," "prevalence of short European films," "actuality films," "cinema of attractions" . We could also observe how these features operated, persisted, and changed across space and time.

Certainly, this is a methodological strategy requiring a strict and carefully considered selection of analytical frameworks, although it may lead to the interesting conclusion that the Early Cinema is not a national, or even global, historical period, but a mere time span during which certain features prevail. These features may still be seen at varying degrees of intensity, at other moments. Their temporal extent changes depending on the described region up to 1916, in Rio de Janeiro, and up to 1940, in Western Santa Catarina. Likewise, we could establish that the cinema only took shape as a cultural practice at a later stage in certain regions, as it followed what we would consider the "modern cinema" contours, or, in other words, places where there was not an Early Cinema period, at all.

Cinema as a Technique

Thinking about an Early Cinema history in the country's inlands, one that moves beyond the Southeastern Brazil, is a fundamental geographical question; therefore, it seems useful to draw on geographic concepts. We can understand cinema as a technology, in Santos's terms (2006), in order to help us think about the spatial distribution of cinematic attractions in their early years. In the author's own words:

> [...] the main interaction form between human beings and nature, or rather, between human beings and their environment, is mediated by technology. Technologies form a set of instrumental and social means human beings live, produce, and, at the same time, create space through (2006, p. 16).

According to Santos, space is the ensemble of systems of both objects and actions (2006). Thus, we can analyze the differences in cinematic attraction across different spaces by assessing how techniques differ in their interactions with other techniques and in their position within local systems of objects and actions.

> It is the place endowing techniques with the principle of historical reality, relativizing their use, integrating them into a way of life, removing them from their empirical abstraction, and conferring upon them historical effectiveness. Moreover, in a given place, there are no isolated techniques, such that the age effect of any one of them is always conditioned by that of the others. What exists in a given place is the simultaneous operation of several techniques, such as, agricultural, industrial, transportation, commercial, or marketing techniques. Techniques that differ based on the involved products and that are qualitatively different even for the same product, depending on their respective production forms (2006, p. 36).

Differences in cinematic attractions presence across spaces can likewise be explained by differences among techniques observed in a given environment, and their respective development states. These process include the spaces available for exhibitions; the presence of electricity, rivers, roads, or rail transportation; the press, and so forth. As a general rule, cinema takes longer to emerge and is established depending on the presence of other techniques necessary for its maintenance.

Spatial differences and variations in the techniques available in different environments had straight influence on cinema's presence and on its configuration in each region. As Azevedo (2015) and Freire (2022) pointed out, the existence of a robust railway network built to facilitate the coffee production transportation in São Paulo region is one of the reasons for the strong presence of traveling exhibitors in the state's inlands as early as the late 19th century. Brito noted that, traveling exhibitors would only become more prominent in the 1910s in Bahia's inlands because the state was considerably larger, poorer, and lacked such a developed transportation network (2024).

Likewise, by understanding cinema as a technology, we can move beyond the notion of its uniformity across space and time. Like other technologies, cinema is shaped by its environment.

In the German-settled region of Santa Catarina, for example, cinema emerged as an attraction within recreational societies: traditional entertainment spaces common in German immigration regions that provide many leisure forms, such as theater,

gymnastics, bowling, hunting and shooting, among others. These regions' members also foster a Germanic cultural and ethnic identity. These spaces were used by the first traveling exhibitors in the region, most of whom brought machinery and films imported from Germany. This practice was facilitated by the region's longstanding economic ties with Germany and by the several merchants specialized in import and export between the Santa Catarina and Hamburg ports. As Schmitt pointed out, the recreational societies "were the cradle where cinema developed [in the region]. From them, cinemas inherited many of the same values: particularly, entertainment closely connected to social communion, and grounded in cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identification" (2025, p. 22). Thus, not only temporality, the quality of films and machinery, or the nature of exhibition spaces changed across regions, but so too did the very nature of the presented entertainment, and the association between audiences and cinema.

> Places, as we have seen, redefine techniques. Each introduced object or action becomes embedded in a preexisting fabric, and its real value is found in the concrete functioning of the whole. Its presence also modifies preexisting values. The respective "temporalities" of the "industrial" and social techniques present intersects, interfere with one another, and accommodate one another. Once again, all objects and actions have their absolute (or trending) meaning modified, and acquire a relative, provisionally valid meaning, different from that of the preceding moment, and impossible elsewhere (Santos, 2006, p. 37).

These distinctive origins of cinematic attraction in Santa Catarina's inlands are specific to the pace's technical and historical conditions; they differ across each inland region in Brazil. Cinema was different in every space where it existed because the fabric of techniques, objects, and actions it emerged from had changed.

Beyond Microhistories

Let us return to the question raised earlier: how can we move beyond geographical monocentrism? We have already pointed out the difficulties concerning the comparison of data and research conducted in different Brazilian regions, given the observed extensive distortions. However, this comparative study also allows identifying trends throughout the introduction period of cinematic attractions across the national territory. These trends are obscured, or diminished, either by the focus on the Rio–São Paulo axis or by a microhistorical focus on isolated regions.

New technological tools have facilitated this work in recent years. The National Library's Digital Newspaper Archive launched in 2012 stores millions of pages from Brazilian journals in the National Library's collection. They were digitized and made freely accessible online. This new scenario has greatly facilitated research into pri-

mary sources and integrating information from different regions countrywide, which is currently accessible from anywhere.

We can highlight the specific creation of the "Traveling Exhibitors in the Early Cinema of Brazil" data for the Early Cinema in Brazil study. It is coordinated by Professor Rafael de Luna Freire, through the University Laboratory for Audiovisual Preservation at Fluminense Federal University (LUPA-UFF). It now registers more than 800 entries, and each one of them represents a traveling exhibitor's engagement in a particular location, based on original contributions, articles, Master's theses, doctoral dissertations, and books.

The database allows us to trace the routes taken by traveling exhibitors across different regions and to identify certain trends within particular areas. It also lays bare the regional disparities in the information available. The database has already recorded 168 entries for Rio de Janeiro State and 130 for São Paulo State, in comparison with only 3 entries for Sergipe State, 5 for Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba states, 7 for Piauí State, and 21 for Paraná State. A striking case of information distortion showed 132 exhibitions recorded for Santa Catarina. According to the research conducted by Schmitt (2024), which benefited from the excellent archival conditions found in several parts of Santa Catarina, this figure is higher than that recorded for São Paulo State, due to the amount of information recovered from the state's inland regions.

These discrepancies also indicated the need for a larger number of local studies and microhistorical research focused on regions beyond the Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo axis, mainly in Northern and Northeastern Brazil. Most journals from these regions, which are the primary source for Early Cinema studies in Brazil, were not digitized by the National Library; actually, they are held by local public and private institutions, or are stored in private collections. This scenario makes them dependent on the local researchers' efforts in order to be properly assessed and brought to light.

The history of Early Cinema in Brazil's inland regions remains to be written. Yet, based on research available to date, it is possible to trace inquiry lines capable of challenging the Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo axis centrality over this timeframe. If we take the time before the establishment of fixed exhibition venues in Rio de Janeiro (1896–1907), we can observe that Southeastern Brazil was not necessarily an exhibition hub for the country as a whole. The region certainly attracted the largest number of exhibitors, but they arrived in Brazil through different ports, and imported films and equipment through different regions, without passing through the federal capital. Edouard Herbert (active between 1904 and 1910) began his work in Recife State; Faure Nicolay (1897–1902), in Porto Alegre; Giuseppe Filippe (1902–1904), in São Luís; H. Kaurt (1897–1910), in Maceió; and the Imperial Japanese Kudara Company (1902–1903), in Belém.

This economic dimension is linked to the import and export patterns adopted by foreign markets, and it becomes relevant as we can observe the specificities of each

region. Ary Bezerra Leite identifies the strong presence of British trade in the Fortaleza port as one of the factors determining the cinematograph arrival in that city in the late 19th century (Leite, 1995). The same holds true for Itajaí and São Francisco do Sul ports with regard to German trade (Schmitt, 2024).

From 1907 onward, given the domestic distribution market structuring in Rio de Janeiro, the federal capital came to concentrate all the distribution and capital associated with the domestic film market in Brazil (Freire, 2022). Marc Ferrez & Filhos was the main company responsible for this development. It actively established fixed film exhibition venues and installed permanent movie theaters as its business model, to the detriment of traveling exhibitors (Freire, 2022). However, a database analysis showed that entries related to traveling exhibitions increased nationwide increased in 1908 in comparison with 1907 (from 102 to 112). As Freire (2022) pointed out, these fixed exhibition venues did not mean the end of traveling exhibitors, but rather their increasing movement into the country's inlands. Exhibitors sought new audiences in inland regions and regional capitals as they were unable to compete with movie theaters in the major cities.

Thus, from the perspective of Brazil's inland regions, the establishment of fixed film exhibition venues along the Rio de Janeiro/São Paulo axis can also be understood as a milestone in the expansion of cinematic attractions into the Brazilian inlands, and in the growing reach and penetration of traveling exhibitors throughout the country. It became possible to reconsider the milestones thus far regarded as canonical in the history of Early Cinema in Brazil, by adopting the perspective of the margins and inland regions, along with its periodization and fundamental concepts. It was also possible understanding Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, as well as their highly developed urban and transportation networks, and semi-industrialized economies, not necessarily as primary examples of the beginnings of cinema in Brazil, but as exceptions.

Final considerations

As Santos pointed out:

> There is a scientific age of technologies, the time when they are conceived in a laboratory. But this [process] may be only importance to the history of science. Alongside this scientific age, however, there is a properly historical age, the date when, in concrete history, a given technology becomes incorporated into the life of a society. Actually, it is at this very point that technology ceases to be science and becomes technology proper. It only exists when it is put to use. Without the vital breath of the society that uses it, what exists may perhaps be an object, a machine, but not technology in the proper sense. From a properly historical standpoint, it is this time that matters: it is then that the universal birth certificate of the new technology is established.

> [...] Each technology may thus have its own particular history from a global, national, or local perspective (2006, p. 36).

Early Cinema in Brazil likewise has a myriad of particular histories. Looking beyond the microhistories of the geographical monocentrism identified by Biltreyst and Meers (2016), we can construct regional histories requiring a broader territorial analysis to be properly investigated. Consider, for example, the influence of regional economic, social, and demographic factors extrapolating a single city or state in the cinema introduction at the turn of the 20th century: the economic influence of the rubber boom in the North [3]; the railway network in the inland regions of Minas Gerais, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro were made possible by coffee cultivation; and the isolated colonies of German and Japanese immigrants in the South and Southeast.

We can neither exclude nor should exclude the cinema study in the major capitals, so they should not work as a monolithic analysis center our local microhistories are always compared with. It seems more useful to understand these regions; as Autran (2020) put it: as "regional fractions of the country," each of them with its own features and specificities, just like the other regional fractions in the country. Local investigations should not necessarily adhere to a centripetal analysis, constantly refer back to the center and define themselves. Thus, they must form an identity in relation to the center through alterity. The recent expansion of local research and the digital tools described above allowed for our microhistories to engage with one another, and enabled situations in the South to enter into dialogue with those in the North and Northeast, without mediation by the Rio de janeir/São Paulo axis.

If we adhere to the traditional periodization and concepts associated with Early Cinema in Brazil, which a country overwhelmingly more rural than urban at the time, as well as to the understanding of cinema as an inherently "modern" and "urban" form of entertainment, the history of Early Cinema in Brazil will become the history of the lack of access to cinema, of entertainment as an exception, only available in major urban centers.

We can envision a history of the cinema gradual penetration into the inlands in the early 20th century by expanding our temporal and territorial scopes. This is a centrifugal process through which cinematographic technology expanded to an increasing number of localities, and this process led to its differentiation and specialization in each of these places. This is the aim of a general history of Early Cinema in Brazil: a decentralized history formed by multiple local histories.

Notes

[1] All of the herein cited researchers, except for Trusz, were affiliated with the Graduate Program in Cinema and Audiovisual Studies at Fluminense Federal University during their research. This is hardly coincidental, since the influence of the research and the supervision

of faculty members, such as João Luiz Vieira, Rafael de Luna Freire, and Talitha Ferraz, is one of the main catalysts for the renewed research methodology discussed in this study.

[2] And rightly so, since this was never Souza's intention. In the author's words, "[..] it is necessary to reconstruct the history of film exhibition in each Brazilian city, each with a different trajectory, in order to get to a more accurate understanding of the ways spectators came into contact with cinema" (Souza, 2003, p. 128).

[3] Suggestion made by Professor Rafael de Luna Freire during classes at the PPGCine-UFF.

Article submitted on 06/29/2026 and accepted on 08/27/2026.

Referências

ARAUJO, S. M.; DEPIZZOLATTI, N. V.; PIRES, J. H. N. **O Cinema em Santa Catarina.** Florianópolis: Editora da UFSC & Embrafilme, 1987.

ARAÚJO, V. P. **A Bela Época do Cinema Brasileiro.** São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1976.

AUTRAN, A. A noção de "ciclo regional" na historiografia do cinema brasileiro. **ALCEU,** v. 10, n. 20, p. 116-125 - jan./jun. 2010.

AZEVEDO, V. S. **Cinema e sociabilidade nas cidades do café:** Franca e Ribeirão Preto (1890 – 1930). Tese (Doutorado em História). Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2015.

BRANDÃO, R. **A cinematografomania afeta a Princesa de Minas:** os primórdios do cinema em Juiz de Fora (1897-1910). Tese (Doutorado em Cinema e Audiovisual) - Instituto de Arte e Comunicação Social, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Cinema e Audiovisual, Universidade Federal Fluminense. Niterói, 2024.

BERNARDET, J. C. **Historiografia clássica do cinema brasileiro:** metodologia e pedagogia. São Paulo: ANNABLUME, 1995.

BILTEREYST, D.; MEERS, P. New Cinema History and the Comparative Mode: Reflections on Comparing Historical Cinema Cultures. **Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media 11** (Summer 2016), p. 13–32. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.11.01

COSTA, S. V. **Eldorado das ilusões:** cinema & sociedade: Manaus (1897 1935). Manaus: Editora da Universidade do Amazonas, 1996.

DANTAS, V. **Assim nasceu o cinema em Aracaju.** Aracaju: cineclube do ateneu sergipense/ Clube de cinema de Sergipe, 1982.

EXIBIDORES ambulantes no início do cinema no Brasil. Coordenada por: Rafael de Luna Freire, do Laboratório Universitário de Preservação Audiovisual da Universidade

Federal Fluminense (LUPA - UFF). [S. l.], c2026. Disponível em: https://encurtador.com.br/mpZL Acesso em 25 de jun. de 2026.

FREIRE, R. L. **Cinematographo em Nictheroy:** história das salas de cinema de Niterói. Niterói: Niterói Livros, 2012.

FREIRE, R. L. **O negócio do filme:** distribuição cinematográfica no Brasil, 1907-1915. Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna, 2022.

GONZAGA, A; GOMES, P. E. S. **70 anos de cinema brasileiro.** Rio de Janeiro: Expressão e Cultura, 1966.

GONZAGA, A. **Palácios e Poeiras:** 100 anos de cinemas no Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro: Record: FUNARTE, 1996.

LEITE, A. B. **Fortaleza e a era do cinema:** pesquisa histórica (1891/1931). Fortaleza: Secretaria da Cultura, 1995.

MOREIRA, E. **Primórdios do Cinema em São Luís.** São Luís: Universidade Federal do Maranhão, 1977.

MOURA, R. Módulo I. *In:* RAMOS, Fernão (org). **História do Cinema Brasileiro.** São Paulo: Círculo do Livro, 1987.

PFEIL, A. J. **Eduardo Hirtz, o pioneiro. Filme Cultura.** Rio de Janeiro, Mar 1974, n 25. p. 31

QUINTES, T. **Atrações visuais e os primórdios do cinema em Campos dos Goytacazes.** Dissertação (Mestrado em Cinema e Audiovisual) – Instituto de Arte e Comunicação Social, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Cinema e Audiovisual, Universidade Federal Fluminense. Niterói, 2022.

SANTOS, M. **A natureza do espaço:** técnica e tempo, razão e emoção. 4 ed. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 2006.

SCHMITT, B. **O Cinematógrafo em Santa Catarina:** 1897 - 1911. Dissertação (Mestrado em Cinema e Audiovisual) - Instituto de Arte e Comunicação Social, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Cinema e Audiovisual, Universidade Federal Fluminense. Niterói, 2024.

SCHMITT, B. As telas teuto-brasileiras: Cinema nas colônias alemãs de Santa Catarina (1900 – 1938). **REBECA — Revista Brasileira de Estudos de Cinema e Audiovisual**, v 14, n. 1, 2025. Disponível em: https://doi.org/10.22475/rebeca.v14n1.1244

SOUZA, J. I. M. **Imagens do passado** - São Paulo e Rio de Janeiro nos primórdios do cinema. São Paulo, Senac, 2003

STECZ, S. S.; KARAM, E. Com Aníbal Requião nasce o cinema no Paraná. *In:* **Cinema**

brasileiro no Paraná: 8 estudos. Rio de Janeiro: MEC/EMBRAFILME/Funarte, 1980.

TRUSZ, A. D. **Entre lanternas mágicas e cinematógrafos:** as origens do espetáculo cinematográfico em Porto Alegre (1861-1908). Porto Alegre: Ecofalante, 2010.

VENIANO, P (org). **A crítica de cinema em Belém.** Belém: Secretaria do estado, da cultura e dos desportos, 1983.

VIEIRA, J. L. Prefácio. *In:* BRANDÃO, R; BRUM, A. (Org.). **Histórias de cinemas de rua em Minas Gerais.** Juiz de Fora: Editora UJFJ, 2021, p. 6-10.

ZAPATA, N. H. A. **A Noiva da Colina vai ao cinema:** história da exibição cinematográfica em Piracicaba (SP). Tese (Doutorado em Cinema e Audiovisual). Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, 2018.