

# HOW THE MACHINE WORKS: BRAZIL'S NEW BLACK CINEMA SERIES

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Three young Black students at the University of São Paulo, in *Quantos era pra tâ?*

This circuit typically works like this. It is built on a truth that's a game of the snake eating its own tail. The gallery is going to represent that artist who is evaluated, or endorsed, in a certain way, by a critic who says, "This guy is great, he is breaking some things, he is bringing us some novelty." And then the critic speaks, the gallery takes the guy and markets him. Except that the critic is only going to speak about whomever the gallery itself adopts and brings on board.

**Thus does Almir Almas**, a professor at the University of São Paulo (USP), explain the workings of the art world in a scene from Vinícius Silva's 2018 film *Quantos eram pra*

*tâ?* (*How Many of Us Were to Be Here?*). This idea of hegemonic artistic circuits as closed spaces that feed back into themselves is fundamental to the discussion of Vinícius Silva's film—and it is one of the key points for thinking about the new windows of circulation for black cinema in Brazil.

Silva's short fiction film is centered in the experiences of three young Black students at the USP, a university traditionally frequented by the white elite of São Paulo. In Heitor Augusto's discussion of the film, he employs the expression "Film-GIF" to explain how Silva uses in a powerful way the assembly of different daily moments of young Black people around the university, intended not to enclose a cohesive unit but rather to create autonomous sequences around the subject.<sup>1</sup> That is, these autonomous sequences work in a manner related to the use of GIF images on social networks: short videos of key images that speak for themselves. These autonomous sequences swing

between racist microaggressions (some direct, others subtle) within a white environment—informed by epistemologies and discourses that fail to account for historically racialized experiences—and moments of fun and affection between friends who affirm their presence in this space, despite the violence, through conversations in the bar, lying around on the lawn, and lip-syncing “Bitch Better Have My Money” by Rihanna.

This speech by Almas in Silva’s film is mentioned here for the connection it traces between this snake eating its own tail, artistic circuits (galleries and museums), spaces of knowledge production (like universities), and exhibition circuits for cinema (film series and festivals). Although each of these fields has its own particularities, what they have in common is their perpetuation of a closed game, retrofeeding the canon, Eurocentric epistemologies, and narcissistic whiteness pacts. This essay thus focuses on the articulations of new black film series and festivals that have emerged as a countercurrent to those hegemonic circuits: Mostra de Cinema Negro Brasileiro (Paraná), Mostra EGBÉ de Cinema Negro (Sergipe), and Negritude Infinita (Ceará)—all initiatives situated outside the more traditional axes of national cinema.

### Self-Inventions out of Black Absences

The absence of any reference to black films in the Federal University of Sergipe (UFS) audiovisual curriculum inspired the creation of the EGBÉ festival in 2016, as alumna Luciana Oliveira recounts.<sup>2</sup> Oliveira relates how she began the research that resulted in her dissertation, “Self-Representation of Black Woman Filmmakers in National Contemporary Short Films” (2018), only to find a lack of access to films being made by Black filmmakers and deciding “it was fundamental to create [the Mostra EGBÉ de Cinema Negro] film series so that...all the audiences from here could see the these films.”

In 2017 in the state of Ceará, the Negritude Infinita festival was created by Clebson Oscar, Darwin Marinho, Leon Reis, and Lilian do Rosário. This showcase, too, addressed the difficulty of gaining access to films made by Black filmmakers as well as a desire to boost the production of black films locally (a fact also emphasized by the creators of EGBÉ with regard to the state of Sergipe.) For Leon Reis, “there was a whole history of what had never arrived in Fortaleza [a city in northeastern Brazil] that we wanted to talk about.”<sup>3</sup> Also in common to all the festival organizers was a questioning of how film was being taught—and an attempt to transform the curricular tracks



Members of the Negritude Infinita curatorial team, from left to right: Leon Reis, Luly Pinheiro, Lilian do Rosário, and Darwin Marinho. Photo courtesy of Carol Sousa.

of the Escola Pública de Audiovisual da Vila das Artes (Public School for the Audiovisual in the Arts Village), where the four founders of the festival were studying.

“Where are the films? Where are the professors? Where are those directors that we don’t have access to?”<sup>4</sup> Bea Gerolin’s queries how studying film as a Black woman at the State University of Paraná (UNESPAR, Universidade Estadual do Paraná) once more reinforced the dynamic of questioning the educational curriculum. An inconvenience was transformed into a motivation for research and action, as developed by these Black students themselves through the proposal for the “Brazilian Black Cinema” series as conceived by Andrei Carvalho, Bea Gerolin, and Kariny Martins, and staged in 2018–19 in Curitiba.

Abdias Nascimento’s definition of black art in 1976 comes closest to the purpose of these initiatives: in its intrinsically libertarian character for Black people, it conjoins “reflection and action/action and reflection—at every level and instant of human existence.”<sup>5</sup> So, beyond the creation of events, it is crucial to understand these collectives’ motivations, their forms of organization and financing, and their curatorial choices. Or rather, to explore how action and reflection regarding curatorial processes as well as the educational and exhibition circuits have simultaneously invented and executed proposals for the education of audiences and the development of perspectives that strengthen the Black Brazilian Cinema.

### Festivals and Film Series as Cognitive Plantations and *Aquilombamentos*<sup>6</sup>

In the last five years, the presence of films by Black directors within the independent exhibition circuits of Brazilian

cinema has grown noticeably. And research indicates that in the big Brazilian film festivals of 2017, less than 11 percent of the curatorial staff were Black people (a proportion significantly less than the 54 percent of the Brazilian population that has self-identified as Black).<sup>7</sup> There is still, therefore, a discrepancy between the desire for greater racial equality expressed by the hegemonic festivals and a concrete practice of incorporating Black presences in positions of power.

And what would be the importance of the black curations consolidated in these circuits? Hélio Menezes usefully says, “Exhibitions spell out histories, translate narratives . . . re-creating discourses out of what they expose, as well as of what they conceal,” with effects that far outlast the time in which they take place; exhibitions and museums (and film series) then consolidate themselves as “powerful sources in the establishment of names, works, and characteristic styles of a certain type of production in the art market.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the significant inequality of class, race, and gender in Brazil’s curatorial spaces (the plastic arts and film) perpetuates the way that the artistic circuit feeds back on itself. With oppressively white curatorial teams, which discourses, styles, names are created and reinforced—and which are concealed and forgotten?

Jota Mombaça broadens the question to consider how the hegemonic artistic circuits expropriate black subjectivities in a process he terms a “cognitive plantation”:

The objectification and the sale of the black body as part of the Plantation economy seems to be in some fashion a force that inscribes itself, in a more or less brutal manner, in the ways in which, in the context of the survival of slavery, the culture and symbolic black forms of production are consumed and appropriated.<sup>9</sup>

Following Mombaça, it is clear that the “cognitive plantation” commodifies black and anticolonial perspectives within the circuits of oppressively white knowledge production and art circulation, as exercised in positions of power (curatorial, critical, financial).

If the movements of self-criticism and the revision of the criteria of hegemonic circuits witnessed in the last few years in Brazil are important, it is also necessary to acknowledge that these film series and festivals have appreciated in value as a result of this commodification of black creations. This marks a transition that Mombaça describes as moving from “a system of total captivity to one of fractal captivity,” a fractality that takes place in a diagram of broad (and collective) blackness that brings “the concomitance of our death and our success.”<sup>10</sup>

The artistic circuit capable of celebrating Black creators is, at the same time, exhibiting films that reinforce the symbolic and/or physical death of black lives. An event that had great critical repercussions occurred at the fiftieth Brasília Festival of Brazilian Cinema (Festival de Brasília do Cinema Brasileiro), when *Vazante* (Daniela Thomas, 2017) and *Café com canela* (*Coffee with Cinnamon*, Ary Rosa and Glenda Nicácio, 2017) were selected and exhibited in the same competitive film series for feature-length films, starkly demonstrating the distance from obliteration to Black healing. While *Vazante*’s narrative reinforces a plastic, stereotyped, and dehumanizing view of black subjectivities in slavery in Brazil, *Café com canela*’s narrative reflects on death and mourning as markers of black Brazilian experiences in order to propose images of black healing and affection.

A landmark point in the evolution of the Brazilian film screening and festival circuit had been the creation in 2007 by the filmmaker, producer, and actor Zózimo Bulbul of the Centro Afro Carioca de Cinema (Afro-Carioca Center for Cinema) and the establishment there of Encontros de Cinema Negro Brasil-África (Meetings on Black Brazil-Africa Cinema).<sup>11</sup> More than a film-exhibition event, the Encontros de Cinema Negro Zózimo Bulbul was born with the aim of being “a place of international interaction for film professionals, a true bridge between Africa and diaspora, and above all, an educational space (with seminars and minicourses, master classes occurring in parallel with the screenings).”<sup>12</sup> Bulbul defined the Centro Afro Carioca de Cinema as a “*quilombo* of cinema,” a function that Janaína Oliveira, currently one of the Encontro’s curators, continues to uphold. Today, Bulbul’s legacy seems well protected, as series and festivals of black cinema in every Brazilian region have proliferated.

### Engaged and Infinite: Black Cinema in Film Series

What Zózimo Bulbul’s vision set in motion with the annual meetings of Black filmmakers from various places in the world has an intrinsic connection to the idea of “engaged cinema” that Matheus Araujo dos Santos has proposed, drawing on Denise Ferreira da Silva’s philosophy. According to dos Santos:

Engaged Cinema comes out of a positioning in which each image is profoundly associated with those of the past, the present, and also those to come; profoundly associated with the world and everything that constitutes it.<sup>13</sup>



Documentary filmmaker Everlane Moraes teaching a masterclass at EGBÉ Sergipe Festival of Black Cinema in 2019.

Photo courtesy of Sidjonathas Araújo.

This proposition gestures toward curatorial possibilities that, on the one hand, do not ignore the tensions between race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, but on the other hand do not shut themselves up in a regime of representation and representativity that profits from the “cognitive plantations” of Black artists’ creations.

It was “the absence of discussion about black cinema in Sergipe” that in 2016 provoked the Cineclube Candeieiro and the Cacimba de Cinema e Vídeo to present the first edition of EGBÉ—Sergipe Festival of Black Cinema—in the hope of connecting these films with their intended audiences. This cinematographic community is marked by the idea of filmmakers, curators, and Black publics getting together, with direct inspiration from Zózimo Bulbul’s *quilombo*. As Luciana Oliveira, the curator and creator of EGBÉ, explains, converting the name of its founder into a phenomenon: “We are going to make a show of black cinema here because it is a beautiful thing when the meeting happens, when Zózimo happens.”

For Luciana Oliveira, showcasing film in this way plays an important role in strengthening the circuit in Sergipe

and stimulating local production of black cinema—an urgent task given that Sergipe “has a very serious funding problem.” The absence of institutional resources is something that makes film production in Sergipe scarce and marked the show’s creation from the get-go. Oliveira explains that “people never have real financing, never have a public grant to finance the show. People always make do with what they have in their wallets.” Her solution was to create fund-raising strategies for alternative resources: virtual crowdfunding, merchandise sold at the shows (mugs, shirts, bags, purses), and espresso sold by the leaders of sessions during breaks, even organizing a market of Black entrepreneurs.

Oliveira identifies a strengthening over the past five years of EGBÉ and black cinema in general and an impact on the Sergipe cinema circuit. From this point of view, she also highlights the festival’s importance for its leaders—all students at UFS: “They are doing cinema, but there is no access, there is no discussion about black cinema within the university. So the EGBÉ kind of fulfills this role to transmit this information, to create this path for them.”

In the case of *Negritude Infinita*, the dissatisfaction with the circuits of education and exhibition resulted in a political process: the occupation of one of the school's buildings (Vila das Artes) by the students and an intense search for Black professors who could be invited to join the school staff for short-duration courses. For Clebson Oscar, "it was also very strategic to bring some people to Vila because it was going to shake up the structure of the school and the city and the circuit." This strategy sought to open up new paths for Black students to take when faced with a game of circulation and education in cinema that only feeds back into itself in a closed loop.

It seemed important also to think of a name for the film series, an impetus derived from the desire to flee essentialist classifications that can be pervasive in black cinema. Leon Reis explains:

We are trying to speak about something that will never be finished, that is never going to end through the actual images of every curation that we do. We are not creating an idea of national or regional identity. We are proposing a nonidentity.

From this antiessentialist principle, the curatorial process has transformed itself in the two years between the first and second editions. The first festival's central idea was to exhibit black films that were not reaching the Ceará exhibition circuit; by the second, Oscar realized that this initial question had been diluted. In his evaluation, "Not only did this panorama of what was being produced change between 2017 and 2019, but there was also a change in what was being formulated as theory, as practice, as thought in the circuit itself."

Curation accordingly shifted from direct solicitation to an application process carried out by Darwin Marinho, Leon Reis, Lilian do Rosário, and Luly Pinheiro. Reis reports that "the sessions were emerging as the discussion was taking shape. . . . We started off discussing aesthetics, why one should chose a particular film and not another, and while we were on that topic, we started discussing where the film was made and for whom and in what region of the country."

Another significant change between the two festival editions lay in financing. The first edition had minimal resources and a public Vila das Artes grant for financing cine clubs; the second had a public grant from the cultural center Dragão do Mar. The transformation signaled an expansion of the initial project's structure: more films, more guests, and a slightly more defined team. The financing institution also slipped in a lesson on learning how to

negotiate. For Oscar, this is a complex matter: "We need to understand the negotiations in all possible instances so we can see things through . . . whether it is producing a film series or making a film." In the end, the idea for him is to "understand how the machine works and to permeate some of the structures, and perhaps . . . turn the game around a little."

Turning the game around a little is exactly what happened in Curitiba when Bea Gerolin, Kariny Martins, and Andrei Carvalho met at the university and joined forces in action and reflection. Gerolin had tried earlier to get a regional grant for a black film series, but it was not approved. The new attempt, now collective, emerged out of Martins's early student research into the history of Blacks in Brazilian cinema and Gerolin's research into the representation of Black women in contemporary Brazilian film. For Gerolin, this process of research was a mix of "being animated by a certain indignation at not seeing this also in the college," joy at coming across "a lot of material as a result of my research," and the realization of "discovering things on my own, because no one was showing them." These conflicted feelings came into play for the collective construction of the event; that is how, in July 2018 in Curitiba, the first edition of the Mostra de Cinema Negro Brasileiro took place.

In addition to the films discovered in their academic research, the Manifesto do Dogma Feijoada influenced their initial curatorial directions.<sup>14</sup> Gerolin explains that "there needed to be films directed by Black people, with Black protagonists, that might privilege common histories." Beyond these requirements, there was a proposal to escape the stereotypes of black representation by bringing films into the curating arena that could showcase positive and affirmative representations of black experiences and to create through these "films of affirmation" other possibilities of black spectatoriality.

By the second edition, the process of curation had matured. Intense research into black films that were shown in the largest Brazilian festivals in 2018–19 propelled other curatorial shake-ups. The critical point was, above all, the dominant association of "black cinema [with] an aesthetic of violence." Martins explains that this motivated them to "try and bring in other films, to think [about] this aesthetic through other eyes. Shaking things up by thinking: Where are peoples' affections? Where are their loves? These films exist. Only they are not being shown. So we are going to show those films." Another transformation between the two editions was a greater presence of Black people in the audiences,

which bolstered processes of identification and shared spectatorship.

As for the 2020 edition, the expectation is that it will take place in person in December—if cinemas can be safely opened, given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the first time, the festival has institutional financing: the Africa 20 (a grant for funds) and a statement of official sponsorship by the city of Curitiba. Reporting on its financial status as of summer, Andrei Carvalho added yet another piece of good news, this time for Cartografia Filmes, the production company launched by the three founders: approval for financing its first fiction short, to be directed by Bea Gerolin.

### Action and Reflection/Reflection and Action

The approval of the Gerolin project underlines the other reality that marks the trajectories of these creators of all three film series: their simultaneous presence on many professional fronts and fields. Apart from being festival organizers, João Brasil, Luciana Oliveira, Clebson Oscar, Leon Reis, Andrei Carvalho, Bea Gerolin, and Kariny Martins are active as “cineclubists,” directors, postgraduate researchers, editors, screenwriters, art directors, producers, curators, and script supervisors (to mention only some of their activities). There is obviously a financial issue involved in this accumulation of functions. Ultimately, how to make a living in cinema (without an inheritance) is a real challenge for all the professionals in the field in Brazil. But there is also a need to be multifunctional in confronting and creating dissonances within the hegemonic circuit of art-culture-cinema in Brazil. This strategy of infiltrating various stages of this closed circuit of the arts has proved important in breaking dominant exclusionary patterns or, at the very least, causing some “indigestion” in this system of autophagia.

Citing the definition of contemporary black art provided by Abdias Nascimento—the actor, poet, writer, dramatist, plastic artist, professor, and militant of black movements—is more than a conceptual question: it is a proposition aimed at the epistemological dislocation and historical reconstruction of the Brazilian cultural circuit. To document the challenges this generation of Black professionals has faced has required recording the processes through which film festivals are created. More than criticisms directed at the teaching institutions cited, these common experiences enacted in local contexts so different from one another has a goal: to pose a major structural question

regarding the circuits of education and exhibition of cinema in Brazil.

“How many of us were supposed to be here?” The provocative question that dominates the film by Vinícius Silva must still be asked in discussions about Black presences in cinema spaces in Brazil. This reflection on the formation processes of nascent exhibition networks of black cinema, and the tracing of its structural transformational power, offer one strategy of recognition: may these traces preserve this uneasiness and evoke new strategies for the future.

### Notes

1. Heitor Augusto, “Quantos eram pra tá?, um filme-gif,” *Urso de Lata*, October 13, 2019, <https://ursodelata.com/2019/10/13/quantos-eram-pra-ta-um-filme-gif/>.
2. Luciana Oliveira and João Brasil (the creators of EGBÉ), videoconference interview with the author, June 9, 2020. This interview is the source of all quoted remarks by Luciana Oliveira and João Brasil that appear in this essay.
3. Clebson Oscar and Leon Reis, videoconference interview with the author, June 3, 2020. This interview is the source of all quoted remarks by Clebson Oscar and Leon Reis that appear in this essay.
4. Andrei Carvalho, Bea Gerolin, and Kariny Martins (the organizers of Mostra de Cinema Negro Brasileiro), videoconference interview with the author, June 4, 2020. This interview is the source of all quoted remarks by Andrei Carvalho, Bea Gerolin, and Kariny Martins that appear in this essay.
5. Abdias Nascimento, *O genocídio do negro brasileiro: Processo de um racismo mascarado* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Paz e Terra, 1978), 180.
6. By the word *aquilombamento* we mean—in the words of historian and Brazilian Black feminist Beatriz Nascimento—“an aggregation, a sense of community, of fight.” Everlane Moraes, Janaína Oliveira, Kênia Freitas, and Tatiana Carvalho Costa, “Towards a Quilombo Cinema: An Afro-Brazilian Feminist Roundtable,” *Another Gaze*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.anothergaze.com/towards-quilombo-cinema-afro-brazilian-roundtable/>.
7. Cleissa Regina Martins, “Raça e gênero na curadoria e no júri de cinema,” *Boletim GEMAA*, no. 5 (2018). *Boletim GEMAA* is published by the Grupo de Estudos Multidisciplinar da Ação Afirmativa (GEMAA, Multidisciplinary Group for the Study of Affirmative Action), State University of Rio de Janeiro.
8. Hélio Menezes, “Exposições e críticos de arte afro-brasileira: Um conceito em disputa,” in *Histórias afro-atlânticas*, ed. Adriano Pedrosa, Amanda Carneiro, and André Mesquita, vol. 2, *Antologia* (São Paulo: Instituto Tomie Ohtake and MASP, 2018), 579.
9. Jota Mombaça, *A plantação cognitiva* (São Paulo: MASP Afterall, 2020), 5–6, <https://masp.org.br/uploads/temp/temp-QYyCoFPJZW0J7Xs8Dgp6.pdf>.
10. Mombaça, *A plantação cognitiva*, 6.

11. After Bulbul's passing in 2013, the event was rebaptized and is now called Encontro de Cinema Negro Zózimo Bulbul: Brasil, África, Caribe e Outras Diásporas (Zózimo Bulbul Black Film Festival). The trajectory of Zózimo Bulbul is central to any understanding of Black Brazilian cinema. For more in-depth readings, see Noel dos Santos Carvalho, "O produtor e o cineasta Zózimo Bulbul: O inventor do cinema negro brasileiro," *Revista Crioula*, no. 12 (November 2012); and Janaína Oliveira, "Os encontros de cinema negro Zózimo Bulbul: Brasil África e Caribe e a consolidação do cinema negro brasileiro," in *Cinema negro*, ed. Roberto Borges and Samuel Oliveira (Rio de Janeiro: Editora do Sesc, 2020), as well as Oliveira's essay in this dossier.
12. See Oliveira, "Os encontros de cinema negro Zózimo Bulbul."
13. Matheus Araujo dos Santos, "Atravessando abismos em direção a um Cinema Implicado: negritude, imagem e desordem," *Logos* 27 no. 1 (June 2020): 20. [www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/index.php/logos/article/viewFile/51522/33927](http://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/index.php/logos/article/viewFile/51522/33927). See also Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
14. Debated during the eleventh São Paulo International Short Film Festival in 2000, the Manifesto Dogma Feijoada emerged as a result of formal and informal meetings and articulations between Black filmmakers based primarily in São Paulo—particularly Ari Candido, Billy Castilho, Daniel Santiago, Jeferson De, Lilian Solá Santiago, Luiz Paulo Lima, Noel Carvalho, and Rogério de Moura. The seven "commandments" of their manifesto came in the wake of discussions held by Dogma 95, the Danish movement led by filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. See Ana Siqueira, Bruno Hilário, Glaura Cardoso Vale, Heitor Augusto and Matheus Pereira, "Manifesto Dogma Feijoada," in the catalog *Festival Internacional de Curtas de Belo Horizonte* (Belo Horizonte: Fundação Clóvis Salgado, 2018), 171.