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Dennison, S orcid.org/0000-0002-5699-8741 and Meleiro, A (2017) Brazil, Soft Power and Film Culture. *New Cinemas*, 14 (1). pp. 17-30. ISSN 1474-2756

https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin.14.1.17_1

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Brazil, Soft Power and Film Culture

Stephanie Dennison and Alessandra Meleiro

In late 2009 *The Economist* memorably announced Brazil's arrival on the world stage with its now infamous cover depicting Rio de Janeiro's iconic Christ Statue literally 'taking off'.¹ Its economy was buoyant and growing at a rate of 5%, and the expectation was that within the year it would have risen to the world's 7th largest economy,² while many developed nations were still grappling with recession. Its government was seen as forward-thinking and evidence of its social inclusion and equality gap-reducing initiatives was beginning to be seen. It had been confirmed as host of the 2014 World Cup, having successfully convinced Sepp Blatter and FIFA of its ability to provide the necessary infrastructure (world-class stadia and airports), and the city of Rio de Janeiro had defeated stiff competition to host the 2016 summer Olympics. Its charismatic Workers Party president, Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva, had legions of fans both in Brazil itself and beyond, and proved determined to contribute meaningfully to issues affecting the global community, such as climate control and peace in the Middle East. Support was growing steadily for Brazil's goal of securing a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. And emphasis on confident external politics was also illustrated in Brazil's leading role at this time in both the development of the BRICS grouping and of the formation of the Union of South American Nations (UNISUL). It was precisely at this time that Brazil began to be included in discussions on soft power, and within three years *Monocle* magazine was declaring that 'the sun is shining on brand Brazil' (2012). Brazilian soft power was the focus of a high-profile seminar organised by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2013,³ and, along with China, it was a major talking point in the House of Lords' Select Committee in-depth investigation into the UK's soft-power assets (House of Lords 2014). A BBC online headline in early 2010 described Brazil as 'a leading exponent of soft power':

Take a nation that is at peace with itself and with all of its 10 neighbours. Add a strong and stable economy, with a charismatic, democratically-elected leader and huge untapped oil reserves, and what do you have? Brazil. (Lustig 2010)

We could, then, describe this point, up to 2013/14, as Brazil's soft-power halcyon days.⁴ This article concentrates first on this period, and specifically the mechanisms in place to promote Brazilian film and the place of film production within Brazil's soft-power vision. It will conclude by commenting on more recent events in Brazil, and their likely effect on both the nation as soft-power powerhouse, and on film production in the country more broadly.

The Context of Filmmaking in Brazil

In the period 2001 to 2010, Brazil established itself as one of the most attractive world markets (Elstrodt 2014) and in the process the main driving force behind the Brazilian economy. As one would expect, this economically buoyant environment was favourable to the audiovisual sector. According to ANCINE (*Agência Nacional de Cinema*), the National Film Agency, the production of domestic feature films grew from 29 in 2002 to 127 in 2013 – many of them international co-productions. Aware of the importance of the audiovisual industry as a pillar of national culture, the Brazilian government has sought to promote the industry through various means. Measures include: the expansion and diversification of public investments; fiscal incentives for private investment; tax benefits for broadcasting services and importation of equipment; establishment of credit lines; purchase of institutional advertising space; and investment in channels for public television. In addition to these measures, the public sector has invested in searching out new players and activities, such as television production, film distribution and film exhibition. Emblematic of the importance given by the Brazilian government to the audiovisual sector was its inclusion in the 2012 *Plano Brasil Maior* (Plan for a Greater Brazil) – the document that outlines national policy for industry, technology, services and foreign trade (ANCINE 2012). This decision to support the audiovisual sector is indicative of the importance given to the industry as strategic to Brazilian economic development. Thus, the public sector has sought to regulate the film industry with the goal of consolidating a competitive and innovative film economy. Focusing on transforming Brazil into a major production centre of audiovisual content, Brazil's policy emphasis has been, inter alia, on building the film and audiovisual industries through the greater integration of national content into films designed for export, be that via international co-productions or participation in major international festivals, or both.

This strategy, further enhanced by the increased visibility of the country due to its hosting of 'mega-events' such as the Rio de Janeiro's hosting of the Summer Olympics in 2016 has enjoyed a degree of success, attracting, for example, foreign projections to the country.

Foreign productions filmed in Brazil have had two important impacts. First, they have brought inward investment. Second, they have increased demand for services and professional equipment. This has had a significant impact on the film economy, generating a wide range of jobs connected to the industry as well as revenue. Central to the success of the industry in this regard has been Brazil's network of Regional Film Commissions, which has increased grown in recent years. The Film Commissions provide guidance and support to the industry in the jurisdictions they represent. The successful experience of other countries in attracting international productions, such as France, South Korea, Mexico and Ireland, suggested to the heads of the Commissions that there does not necessarily have to be an incompatibility between promoting local production and attracting international productions. On the contrary, these two factors are understood by the Commissions as being complementary and helping to create a favourable environment for the development of the local audiovisual industry. For example, the Rio Film Commission was responsible for a sales deal at the American Film Market, for production services during the filming of two major North American cinema productions in Rio de Janeiro in 2010: *Fast and Furious 5* (Justin Lin, 2011), and the fourth film in the Twilight saga: *Breaking Dawn, Part 1* (Bill Condon, 2011). These films brought significant inward investment into the local film economy, helping, so the Commissions suggest, to support and build the local film production infrastructure.

That said, not everyone is happy with this development. The pressure group *Rio: Mais Cinema, Menos Cenário* (*Rio: More Films, Less Background*), made up of film producers and academics, has challenged what it sees as the Commissions' permissive approach to the use of Brazilian locations. *Rio: Mais Cinema, Menos Cenário* seeks to draw attention to the number of films (both foreign and local) that make use of the city's production services without engaging meaningfully or authentically on screen with the social and political issues affecting Rio. The context for some of the frustrations expressed by this group, which was launched at the Rio Film Festival in 2014, is the sense that Brazil has long been systematically misrepresented on foreign screens. This misrepresentation is the subject of Lúcia Murat's 2005 documentary *Olhar Estrangeiro* (*Foreign View*), which purports to debunk the myths about Brazil produced by foreign filmmakers, and which concentrates on taking to task those who insist on the link between Brazil, sex and the objectification of the female body. Its main focus is the US box-office smash hit *Blame it on Rio* (Donan, 1984), a film that has become notorious for its clichéd and very inaccurate representation of Brazil and

Rio de Janeiro in particular, with its topless bathers, monkeys on the beach, Spanish-speaking natives and voodoo wedding ceremonies. The influence of *Blame it on Rio* can be seen in the title of the infamous *Simpsons* episode ‘Blame it on Lisa’, in which the Simpson clan travel to Brazil and witness every imaginable cliché relating to the country. ‘Blame it on Lisa’ and the US/Brazilian horror film *Turistas* (*Paradise Lost* John Stockwell, 2006) both elicited ‘official’ complaints from the Brazilian Tourist Authority Embratur. Lúcia Murat, and the academic work that the documentary is based on (Tunico Amâncio’s monograph *O Brasil dos Gringos* [2000]), claim that Brazil, more than anywhere else, is a victim of misrepresentation on film screens. Thus there is a keen awareness in Brazil, both at the level of the State and within the culture industry itself, of the extent to which the nation has been a victim of negative stereotyping, a feature they arguably share with other BRICS nations. Consequently, we would do well to remember, when discussing soft power, cultural diplomacy and branding, that the issues and tensions facing emerging nations in relation to their image abroad and the motivating factors for wanting to promote, challenge, or increase the presence of that image abroad, will not be the same as the issues facing, say, the UK or Spain. Hence reputation management is quite a large part of the soft power story in Brazil where it might not be in the UK, for example.⁵

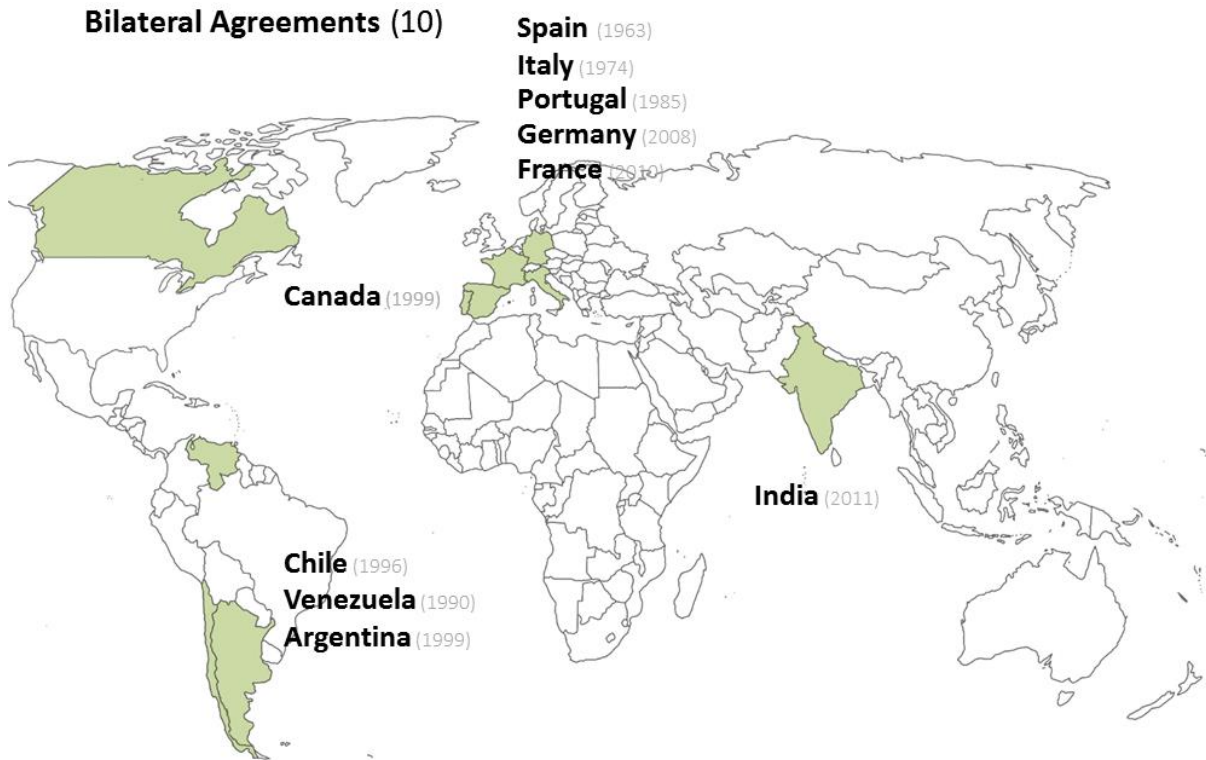
In discussing culture in the context of public diplomacy, or rather, as an instrument of foreign policy, Joseph Nye’s soft power concept draws attention to the fundamental role of legitimisation held by culture in the international actions of a country. For the Brazilian government, the leveraging of cinema as a soft power asset is undeniably a foreign policy goal. How far it has been successful in achieving this goal, however, is questionable. Since the mid-2000s, the Brazilian government has developed a series of initiatives, based around the work of three government bodies: the Foreign Office (referred to as *Itamaraty*), which, via its Audiovisual Promotion Division (*Divisão de Promoção do Audiovisual*), supports the international dissemination of Brazilian cinema within the wider context of the dissemination of national culture more generally overseas; ANCINE, the National Film Agency, the Brazilian audiovisual authority and the Brazil Cinema Programme (*Programa Cinema do Brasil*), an association made up of representatives of the sector responsible for the promotion of commercial cinema.

From an institutional viewpoint, given its nature as a statutory state body, *Itamaraty* has a key strategic role to play in the positioning of Brazil on the international stage within which

culture generally, and film in particular, plays an important role. Since the creation of the Audiovisual Promotion Division (DAV) in 2006, *Itamaraty* has contributed at the federal level to the promotion of film in a number of concrete ways. Despite budget and institutional limitations, DAV is in a unique position, due to its network of overseas stations, to identify foreign audiovisual contexts and interact with them in order to promote Brazilian content. In particular, DAV supports the exhibition of Brazilian cinema overseas, and the participation of Brazilian directors in international festivals. Since the creation of the DAV, despite a challenging climate for the placing of Brazilian product in foreign markets, Brazil has gained a strong, recognisable international presence in the audiovisual sector. And the current level of international interest in Brazil has opened new opportunities for international co-productions and the promotion of Brazilian locations for foreign films. This has also resulted in new opportunities for the private sector to seek support from public bodies. DAV, with its keen awareness of the challenges posed by globalisation, has formalised at an institutional level support from *Itamaraty* for the dissemination of Brazilian films abroad. Within the context of Brazilian cultural diplomacy, this has enabled the development of a long-term strategy for the internationalisation of Brazilian cinema.

With regard to institutional initiatives, it falls to ANCINE to further support this drive towards internationalisation, most obviously in terms of international co-productions. To this end, ANCINE has facilitated promotional mechanisms and the signing of treaties in order to stimulate international co-productions with third countries, in partnership with the Audiovisual Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Brazilian Export and Investment Promotion Agency (APEX) and the Ministry of Culture. Several initiatives have been developed, and each year it is possible to see a more marked and highly qualified presence of Brazilian productions in the international arena. This is due to the initiatives of the Brazilian Government and ANCINE on three distinct fronts: the review of multilateral and bilateral co-production agreements, and the announcement and updating of new public calls for projects requiring funding support; support for participation of national films in international film festivals; and the promotion of Brazilian cinema abroad by organising co-production meetings, and events to publicise Brazilian cinema.

Bilateral Agreements (10)



Multilateral Agreements (12) 1998



Source: OCA/ANCINE

Figures 1 and 2 above show that around half of the co-production agreements that Brazil has signed are with other Latin American countries – a total of 14 out of 33. It is also worth

noting that Brazil has production links with 80% of South American countries. This is an obvious product of geographical and cultural proximity, as well as the close economic relationships of these countries.

The importance for Brazil of the European market is a result of the country's close dialogue with the five main cinema industries in Europe. And it should be noted that the countries with ratified co-production agreements with Brazil are the hosts of the festivals with the most prestigious and important prizes in the world – including the Golden Palm, at the Cannes Festival (France), the Golden Bear, in Berlin (Germany) and the Golden Lion at Venice (Italy). The country's links with other continents are far less well established. There exists only one co-production agreement with Asia, and none with Africa or countries in Oceania. Currently, Brazil has bilateral agreements with Argentina, Germany, Canada, Chile, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, Venezuela and just one BRICS partner, India. The audiovisual co-production agreement between Brazil and India regulates the division of rights ownership and creates the necessary institutional conditions to facilitate cooperation between Brazilian and Indian producers. So far, this has resulted in just one production: the feature film *Bollywood dream: O Sonho Bollywoodiano* (*Bollywood Dream*, Seigner, 2010).⁶ Brazil also is a signatory to multilateral treaties, such as the Ibero –American Film Integration Agreement and the Agreement for the Establishment of the Common Market of Latin American Film. It is a member of RECAM, the support mechanism for audiovisual activity in Mercosur, and the Conference of Iberoamerican Film Authorities. The country also participates in the IBERMEDIA Fund, which finances co-productions from 18 countries.

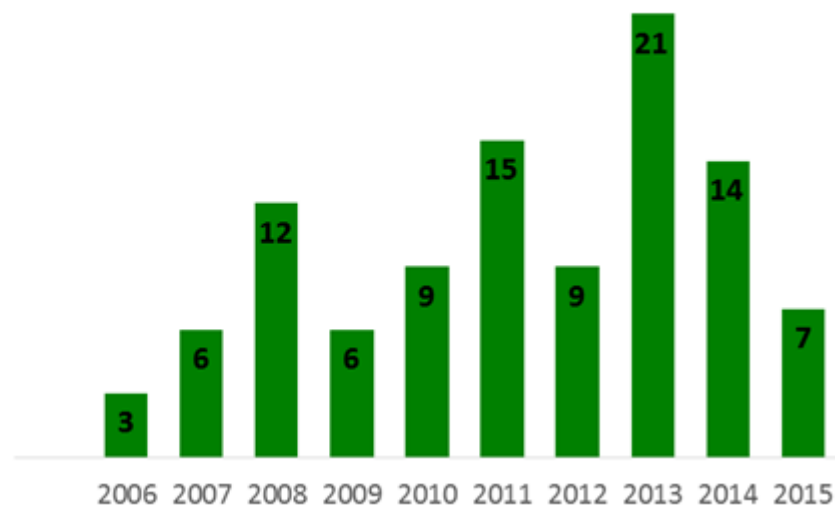
The expansion and improvement of the legal instruments for co-production outlined above has facilitated the flow of funds between different countries involved. We should also highlight the Cinema of Brazil Programme (Cinema do Brasi), in this regard, the successful partnership between the Audiovisual Industry Union of São Paulo with the Brazilian government that promotes co-productions and the distribution of Brazilian films worldwide. The Programme organises stands at the film markets of the world's largest festivals with the intention of garnering interest from sales agents and distributors for Brazilian films, and facilitating interaction between potential buyers and sellers at the market screenings. The programme has sent Brazilian delegations to the international festivals of Berlin, Cannes, Toronto, Locarno, San Sebastián and the markets of Ventana Sur (Argentina), American Film Market (USA), European Film Market (Berlin Film Festival), Marché du Film (Cannes

Festival), among others, since its activities began in 2006. *Cinema do Brasil's* primary objective is to increase the presence of the Brazilian audiovisual sector in the international market by promoting co-productions, prospecting new markets for national product distribution, enhancing the Brazilian film industry profile abroad and generating new jobs. The work already accomplished by Brazilian producers and agents aligned with the efforts of *Cinema do Brasil* have generated a significant increase in the volume of international sales and co-productions, as we can see in Figure 3 below:

102

Coproductions

77% Binationals
23% Multilaterals



In an effort to internationalise Brazilian films, *Cinema do Brasil*, in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Relations, created the Distribution Support Award (*Prêmio de Apoio à Distribuição*) in 2009. This award provides funds to foreign companies which distribute Brazilian films in their territories, with the aim of increasing both foreign interest in audiovisual content produced in Brazil and the number of Brazilian film releases in theatres on every continent. Also, *Cinema do Brasil* periodically offers courses on important topics for the audiovisual sector. For example, in partnership with the Media Business School (with headquarters in Madrid but offering courses around the world) and the Universidade Lusófona (based in Lisbon and offering courses in the Portuguese-speaking world), the *Programa Cinema do Brasil* gave the IMBS (International Markets Business School)

professionalisation courses for future Sales Agents as well as courses on co-production markets. The lecturers they invite to take part in these courses are internationally recognised authorities on these topics.

Between 2006 and 2015, 102 international co-productions were made, averaging around 11 films per year and reaching a high point in 2013 with a total of 21 feature-length films. In this period, Portugal became Brazil's main partner, with 26 co-productions. The country with the second highest level of co-production with Brazil was Argentina, with 16 feature films between 2006 and 2015. The remaining projects involved a small number of co-productions with Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Spain, France, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, Switzerland, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Some production companies specialise in international co-production. Notable examples include *Dezenove Som e Imagem*, *Gullane Filmes*, *Conspiração Filmes* and *O2 Filmes*, whose films have competed in major international festivals, such as Cannes, Venice, and Toronto. *O2 Filmes* undertakes independent projects in partnership with large international studios and TV channels and is regarded as one of the most important Brazilian production companies in the world market. Major international projects that O2 has been involved in include *Blindness* (2008), a co-production between Brazil, Canada, and Japan, directed by Fernando Meirelles, who in 2002 directed the international hit *Cidade de Deus (City of God)*. Although Brazil has an agreement with Canada but not with Japan, the production was given the three nationalities, and was consequently treated as a national film in each of the three countries.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been a high number of co-productions with strong national content, produced in the Portuguese language, and filmed in Brazil, such as *Cinema, aspirinas e urubus (Cinema, Aspirins and Vultures, Marcelo Gomes, 2005)*, co-produced with Germany. The film describes an encounter between a northeastern backlander, Ranulpho, who dreams of escaping his hard life by moving south, with a German, Johann, who had escaped war in Germany to screen propaganda films and sell aspirin for pharmaceutical company Bayer in the northeast of Brazil. Even in the case of *Blindness*, an adaptation of a novel by Nobel prize-winning Portuguese author José Saramago, telling the story of an epidemic of blindness that spreads through a modern city, resulting in social collapse and which is fundamentally cosmopolitanism in outlook, the film contains some

important Brazilian elements. Most obviously, the screen narrative is punctuated by images of the city of São Paulo. It also employed a Brazilian crew, Brazilian actors, and a Brazilian director. Both films are examples of Brazilian films that have enjoyed international critical and box-office success and that have promoted an image of Brazil abroad.

Yet despite the achievements of the industry on the international state, outlined above, for Brazil, the possibility of using cinema strategically as an instrument of foreign policy, along the lines of the theoretical model of soft power developed by Joseph Nye, still seems far off. The international reach of Brazilian cinema is currently too small to influence foreign perception of Brazil to any significant degree. In order for it to become a genuine instrument of soft power that can make a significant contribution *Itamaraty's* cultural diplomacy efforts, public policy needs to focus more on the creation of opportunities to widen the space available for Brazilian cinema overseas. This could occur via increased initiatives to encourage international co-production of films and sales of nationally produced films. The *Boutique Cinema do Brasil* initiative set up in 2012 to facilitate the development of relationships between Brazilian film producers and international sales agents in a position to sell Brazilian films abroad, indicates at least a commitment on the part of *Apex-Brasil* and ANCINE to increase the visibility of Brazilian product abroad. However, as we shall now see in our discussion of *Lula: Son of Brazil* (2009), the country would still appear to have much to learn in its approach toward film as a tool of soft power.

Man of the Year: Case Study of *Lula: Son of Brazil* (2009)

The initiatives outlined above describe a scenario in which, with varying degrees of success, an emerging nation with a strong domestic audio-visual industry but no sense of 'national film brand' on the international arena, has been working to increase its visibility. However, within this effort to increase visibility, soft power kudos is a bonus, rather than the prize in sight, which ultimately continues to be increased sales. But, returning to the key year of 2009, we find a 'lone production' that can in fact be read, at best, as a direct attempt to use the big screen to promote a particular image of the nation, and at worst, as State propaganda: Fabio Barreto's *Lula: Filho do Brasil* (*Lula: Son of Brazil*). We define this as a lone production in the sense that, as is often the case with the relationship between cinema and soft power, there is not always a direct link between film policy (and in particular support for funding) and the films that emerge as examples of soft power on screen.

The film in question is a biopic of Lula, who was then one of the world's most popular and respected presidents: the US DVD version of the film notably cites Lula's international accolades, for example being named Man of the Year in 2009 by both *El País* and *Le Figaro* newspapers, and being regarded by *Newsweek* as one of the world's most important people. What is significant is that Lula was still in office, coming to the end of his maximum two terms, and already preparing the way for his successor, the less charismatic Dilma Rousseff. The opening credits of the film tellingly boast of the fact that no municipal, state or national sources of film funding were used to produce the film, as if to deflect potential criticism of political motives behind the production. The film, which cost 17 million Brazilian reais and was at the time of its release the most expensive Brazilian film ever, was funded by a long list of sponsors from private industry, which included, as the fiercely anti-Lula *Veja* magazine (2009) did not hesitate to point out, many enterprises that had government contracts. Later in 2015, taking advantage of a screening of the film on TV, *Veja* (2015) drew attention to the fact that many of these corporate sponsors, such as the much-maligned construction giant Odebrecht, were subsequently implicated in the so-called Car Wash (Lava-jato) large-scale bribery scandal.

Furthermore, Lula and his family and party representatives filled the auditorium at the film's out-of-competition premiere at the Brasília Film Festival in 2009, and his involvement in the production was made clear by, for example, his well-documented input in the choice of music to accompany key scenes of the film. But what indisputably illustrated for many observers the official character of the film was its selection to represent Brazil in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences best foreign film category (a key soft-power forum for emerging nations, given the global reach and kudos of the Oscars). The film unsurprisingly failed to be shortlisted. The choice by Brazil's local committee struck many as unusual, given that the film is even more aesthetically and narratively limited than Fabio Barreto's *O Quatrilho* (1995), which was surprisingly shortlisted for the foreign-language Oscar in the year of its release. The national selection committee claimed that the film was the most likely of those submitted for consideration to find favour with the Academy, given the international reach of the subject matter: Lula himself.

Based on the best-selling biography of the same name (Paraná 1996), the bio-pic presents a glossy, hagiographic and conventionally told tale of an honourable, loving, hard-working North-eastern man, who unlike in the book version, is stripped of any psychological and political complexity (the film ends before Lula becomes involved in national politics. Instead

it depicts his tough childhood and his seemingly ‘accidental’ fall into political activism during the dark days of the 1960s dictatorship). Despite the director’s hype (he erroneously claimed that President Obama had requested that the US premiere take place at the White House, and that the film would be released simultaneously across South America), the film failed to have any significant impact on the international market, other than reviews in newspapers,⁷ and it failed to recoup its money in the domestic market, despite the involvement of the film arm of the mighty Globo media corporation.

Brazilian film in a time of crisis

By way of conclusion, we thought it apposite to comment on the shifts that have taken place over the course of the last three years or so, and particularly since Brazil first began to make its mark on soft power registers. With the bottom falling out of the commodities market that was ultimately sustaining Brazil’s economic boom, the country has been dragged into one of its worst recessions for decades. A significant swing in Brazilian political life to the Right was demonstrated by the reelection of Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party with the narrowest of margins in November 2015 and her subsequent removal from power in August 2016 by way of a (legally suspect) process of impeachment supported by a large sector of the public. If we add to this scenario the spectacularly crushing defeat of the Brazilian football team at home in the 2014 soccer World Cup, and the relentless criticisms of both the preparations for the summer Olympics and the containment of the Zika virus, the international media amnesty, whereby Brazil was for a brief period reported on positively, has ended⁸. In soft power terms this appears to have refocused the country on reputational damage limitation rather than any ambitious programme involving the galvanising of soft power assets, such as the hosting of international sporting events.

A very telling example of this in relation to film recently unfolded at the 2016 Cannes film festival. For the first time in many years a Brazilian film, *Aquarius*, from the director of *Neighbouring Sounds* (Kleber Mendonça Filho) was selected for the official competition. At Cannes there was some discussion of the film itself, which received rave reviews, and it made the cover of *Variety* magazine (2016), but what ultimately made the headlines was the opportunity that the film’s cast and crew took on the red carpet to draw attention to the undermining of democracy taking place in Brazil with the impeachment process. The

backlash at home from supporters of impeachment was severe, and was particularly aimed at veteran actress Sonia Braga, who as a Hollywood player in her heyday in the 1970s and 80s served as a Brazilian soft power asset through her promotion of Brazilian film culture.⁹ Sonia had no business bringing shame upon the nation, critics at home insisted (this was a widely used phrase on social media at the time), and she had no business commenting on politics, because she is based in New York. Criticisms were also voiced by the new Minister of Culture Marcelo Calero, who described the protest as ‘childish’. ‘It’s wrong’, he said in interview on national television, in a reference to the director Mendonça Filho, ‘in the name of a personal political position, to cause damage to the reputation and image of Brazil’ (Globo, 2016).¹⁰ Mendonça Filho did not hesitate to respond directly to Calero via his personal Facebook page, reminding him that *The New York Times* had listed his debut feature (*Neighbouring Sounds*) as one of the top films of 2012, while in the same post drawing attention to a report by the newspaper into corruption in Brazil’s interim government. Mendonça Filho wrote: ‘Perhaps this will make you rethink the notion of bringing shame onto Brazil’ (ZH Entretenimento, 2016)

This is interesting in the context of our discussions for a number of reasons. First of all, if we return to the reviews in the international press of the film at the time, we see high praise for the quality of the film, and no real focus on any negative features of the nation that the socially conscious story throws up: Robbie Collin, writing in *The Telegraph*, for example, headlined with ‘*Aquarius* will make you want to move to Brazil’ (2016). Together with visibility and praise for artistry, the film proved its commercial worth by being snapped up by Netflix shortly after its appearance at Cannes.

Also of interest to our discussions is the fact that, unlike *Lula, Son of Brazil*, *Aquarius* failed to be selected to represent Brazil in the Oscar foreign film competition. Even if we were to dismiss the (quite convincing) claims that the selection process was fixed,¹¹ this decision, and the choice of *Lula, Son of Brazil* in 2009, appears to demonstrate a complete lack of awareness on the part of film industry personnel who make up these selection panels of what constitutes a likely Oscar winner, and as a corollary to this, of what film can do for a nation’s soft power. Oscar-winning best foreign films tend to be those that have, or will have played on the festival circuit and have garnered prizes along the way, thus increasing their chances of playing as widely as possible in the US. They often have their own provocative back story. They usually have achieved both critical and public support. And crucially, they are more likely to challenge than endorse the socio-political status quo. As Nye (2012) has highlighted,

there is little international audience for ‘brittle propaganda’, and it is too easy to read both the selection of the decidedly average *Lula: Son of Brazil* to represent Brazil at the Oscars, and the rejection of *Aquarius*, as the kind of government intervention that potentially compromises the investment and energy put into raising the visibility of Brazilian cinema abroad, from a soft power perspective.

Suspicion that the overtly political gesture of Cannes had ruled *Aquarius* out of the Oscars running was raised when Marcos Petruccelli, a vociferous critic of Kleber Mendonça Filho and his political views, was appointed to the local selection committee. The film was then granted an 18 certificate of release in Brazil, a veritable box-office ‘kiss of death’ (it was later reduced to 16, but only after a third appeal). Suspecting foul play, two filmmakers, Anna Muylaert and Gabriel Mascaro withdrew their films (the excellent *Mãe só há uma/Don’t Call Me Son*, 2016 and *Boi Neon/Neon Bull*, 2016 respectively) from the selection in protest. The film that went on to be selected, *O pequeno segredo (Little Secret*, Shurmann, 2016), was something of a mystery to most, given that it had not been released at the time of selection.¹²

Furthermore, both *Lula: Son of Brazil* and *Aquarius* highlight the deep suspicion in which State funding of culture is held by a large part of the Brazilian population, and the extent to which the role of national cinema is broadly misunderstood. This suspicion and misunderstanding trouble the very notion of film as a potential soft-power asset in Brazil, as for many, by its very nature as a commercially unpopular¹³ and expensive art form that relies heavily on State funding for its survival, and the close association it has with left-wing politics and more recently with the Workers Party project, it is not as readily recognised as part of ‘Brand Brasil’ as, say, football, music and soap operas. This was made clear in the focus that many social media commentators placed on what they perceived to be the elitist gesture of the cast of *Aquarius* protesting while dressed in black-tie on a red carpet in Europe.¹⁴

As Joseph Nye has argued, soft power depends on ‘the existence of willing interpreters and receivers’ (2004: 11). For film festival audiences (the main focus of Brazilian strategy in relation to increasing visibility abroad), the tensions at home and how they are expressed (by the kind of protest we witnessed at Cannes, for example), may provide a curiosity that will give impetus to film exports from Brazil, which in turn may influence opinion on Brazil. Thus, despite the worse-than-gloomy outlook in relation to the economy and the dismantling of the strategic national narrative being built by the Workers Party in the 21st century until

mid-2016, we continue to believe that there is value in exploring film as a Brazilian soft power asset.

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¹ Infamous because the cover artwork was adapted (with a Christ statue spinning out of control) in 2013 with the question 'Has Brazil Blown it?' and then on another cover in 2016 Christ appears holding up an SOS sign.

² It did, and even rose in 2012 to 6th place, overtaking the UK.

³ For more information see <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/soft-power-focus-takes-us-to-brazil/>.

⁴ It is worth bearing in mind that Brazil had been establishing the groundwork for its soft-power lift-off since at least the mid-1990s, with a return to political and economic stability and the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1996-2003). Until his tacit support for the 2016 impeachment of Dilma Rouseff, which many intellectuals and foreign observers have described as a coup, Cardoso was greatly respected in diplomatic circles. The positive impact of ‘brand Brazil’ could be seen, for example, in the huge success of Selfridges’ Brazil 40 degrees event of 2004 in London and the Year of Brazil in France of 2005. And in the context of this study, it is also worth recalling the impact with international audiences of the Brazilian film *City of God* (Meirelles and Lund, 2003).

⁵ An excellent example of this is the ongoing task facing the Kazakhstan government to turn around the image of the nation in the light of the huge success of Sasha Baron Cohen’s satirical film *Borat* (2006). For a detailed study of this, see Saunders 2008.

⁶ While cultural synergies are slow to emerge on big screens, much has been made of Globo TV’s Indian-themed sumptuous soap opera *Caminho das Indias* of 2009. For more information, see Rai 2016.

⁷ The film has a particularly low rating on the *Rotten Tomatoes* film review website.

⁸ We must acknowledge a belated and short media truce once the Summer Olympics got going in August 2016.

⁹ Sonia Braga rose to stardom outside of Brasil with the international success of *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* (*Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*, Barreto 1976), followed up with *Eu te amo* (*I love you*, Barreto 1981). She went on to work in a number of US film and TV productions and received Golden Globe nominations for *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* (Babenco 1985) and *Moon over Parador* (Mazursky 1988). For a reading of Sônia’s ‘star text’, see Dennison and Shaw (2007).

¹⁰ As we go to press (November 2016), Calero has resigned from his post as Culture Minister, claiming to have been placed under pressure by a fellow government minister to take advantage of his position and interfere with a national heritage decision. The irony here is that the case in question involved a real estate issue that is uncannily similar to the one at the heart of the plot of *Aquarius*. Calero’s subsequent TV interview, in which he claimed to have been taken by surprise at the corruption within government, was greeted with derision on social media by Kleber Mendonça Filho.

¹¹ A claim vehemently denied by the Head of the selection panel, filmmaker Bruno Barreto. See Maria 2016.

¹² It is possible that *Aquarius* might still make its mark at the Oscars, with a nomination in a different category (say, best actress). There are precedents for this in Brazilian cinema: in 1998 Fernanda Montenegro was nominated in the best actress category for *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*, Salles, 1998) and *City of God* received four Oscar nominations in 2004, including best director for Fernando Meirelles.

¹³ While a small number of the over 100 national productions to be made every year achieve resounding success, with upwards of three million spectators, the vast majority of films are seen by hardly anyone, and some are never released.

¹⁴ See, for example, <http://m.oantagonista.com/posts/tapete-vermelho>.