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Cinema at World's Fairs: Historical and Cultural Practices

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This article addresses the historical and cultural practices that involve the cinema in the transatlantic space. As a case study, we examine the participation of cinema in universal exhibitions, and, in particular, the International Exhibition of the Centenary of Independence of Brazil, held in 1922 and 1923 in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

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The study of films, due to their transnational circulations, can decisively contribute to the knowledge about cultural practices that connect different continental contexts. In this perspective, there are different mediation vectors that can be analyzed and mapped: the distribution of films and their esthetic and cultural impact; the reciprocal influence of texts and theories; the institutional exchanges and the agents involved in this process; and, finally, sociability and consumption environments, among other topics. [1]

Among such topics, I will focus on the role of cinema in the world's fairs, with emphasis on the Independence Centenary International Exposition (1922-1923) held in Rio de Janeiro. I believe many of the vectors mentioned above coexist in such environments.

World's Fairs: a visual experience

The main purpose of these world's fairs was, since their inception in London 1851, to celebrate the capitalism represented by the scientific advancement and its new machines. Culture had a privileged space of "civilizational" affirmation, a trait that was used to differentiate the USA and the European countries from those in their areas of influence, such as colonies and protectorates throughout Latin America, Africa, and Asia. It is a moment of imperialist expansion, and also of clash between the main capitalist countries for the global hegemony. In a symbolic viewpoint, the disposition and the different pavilions in the areas reserved for the world's fairs already displayed this conflict. One of the best known "architectural disputes" occurred in the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la vie moderne* (1937) in Paris. This event was dedicated to "peace"; however, two pavilions were placed right in front of each other: on one side, the Soviet Union, and, on the other, the Nazi Germany's pavilion designed by Albert Speer. After seeing the Soviet Union's model and knowing its location, Hitler's architect designed a fortress to contain what he saw as an assault. The war was imminent.



The Nazi pavilion at left, and the USSR's pavilion at right. In the background, the Eiffel Tower.

Source: Pinterest

It was in this perspective of conflict, quest for supremacy, and affirmation of national cultural values that cinema was introduced in the world's fairs. The then new medium, an invention of the late 19th century, was a part of the spectacle idealized to be visually consumed by citizens of the big cities, fostering the discourse praising modernity and technology.

One of the first fairs to give a prominent role to cinema was the *Exposition Universelle* (1900) in Paris, in which the perspectives mentioned above were already put into practice. The United States, for instance, organized in their pavilions film sessions to depict positive features of their society. France, by its turn, intended to reaffirm its pioneering in cinema promoting public exhibits in Paris. This early dispute for the paternity of the invention also reveals that there was a dispute since the beginning of the century for the cultural supremacy in this field. One of the moments in which this claim acquired clear nationalistic contours was during the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, in Paris 1925. In this event, France's primacy was affirmed. According to the authors of the exposition's official report, Fernand David and Paul Léon: 'cinema is a French discovery'. [2] As the short movies did not differ characteristically from the North American production, the alternative was also "architectural" in consonance with the exposition's display. With the aid of the organizing committee, a giant projector was installed by the Lumière Brothers. In a round screen of 18 meters in height and 21 meters in length, approximately 150 short films were presented in more than 300 sessions for an estimated audience of one million and four hundred people. [3]

In this fair there was also the presence of foreign cinematographers, such as James White, from the Edison Company, which made around 16 films. Most of these films were short with one or two minutes at most, in general panoramas and *tracking shots*, with the aim of depicting the fair and, at the same time, emulating

to the viewer the feeling of being in the event. Therefore, the interest expressed by the camera movements resides "not only in the landscape seen, but also in the apparatus that can reproduce it with such precision." [4] By setting the camera in an elevator, as seen in the short movies that "conduct" us to the top of the Eiffel Tower, or turning it 180 grades around its axis, an illusion of movement is created. The images projected can be seen as an expression of the viewpoint of a passenger in that mode of transport or someone in the situation evoked.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.loc.gov/item/00694299

"Scene from the elevator ascending Eiffel Tower", Edison Company, 1900

Source: Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division

VIDEO

View online: https://www.loc.gov/item/00694196/

"Esplanade Invalides", Edison Company, 1900

Source: Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division

There was the search for the feeling of "being there" and of physically emulating the body and the sight, a very common procedure in early cinema. In *Panorama of the Paris Exposition, from the Seine* (Edison Company, 1900), the camera is attached to the prow of a boat moving through the Seine, showing the different pavilions to the audience from the point of view of a crew member. From this same fair, there is also the record of the experience of walking through the "moving boardwalk," one of the big attractions of this fair. This record is in the film *Panorama from the Moving Boardwalk* (Edison, 1900) and consists of a long tracking shot from the boardwalk, depicting the passersby going up and down the moving walkway with the background of Paris and the constructions made for the event.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.loc.gov/item/00694271/

Panorama from the moving boardwalk, Thomas A. Edison, Inc, 1900, 1:46

Source: Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division

VIDEO

View online: https://www.loc.gov/item/00694272/

Panorama of Paris Exposition, from the Seine, Thomas A. Edison, Inc, 1900, 3:07

Source: Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division

Beyond the momentary pleasure that these films could provoke in the audience, there is clearly the invitation through the images to the fruition of the spectacle for those without resources to travel. The contact with the production of the Edison Company would allow the audience to "visit" the exposition at some extent. On the other hand, the films could supplement guide books, such as "Harper's Guide to Paris and the Exposition of 1900," made for North Americans interested in visiting Paris. [5]

Cinema and nation branding

Such transatlantic exchanges between the cinema and the world's fairs have in 1915 their most famous encounter. *Cabiria* (1914), directed by Giovanni Pastrone, was imported in 1914 for the North American market, being at the time compared by the critics with *The Birth of a Nation* (David Griffith, 1915) because it is also the work of historical reconstruction of monumental character, feature film with many investments in sets and costumes. The impact of this Italian historical film on Griffith was huge, as is well-known. At the same time, the director visited the *Panama-Pacific International Exposition* (San Francisco, 1915). From this exposition and the *Panama-California Exposition*, which occurred in San Diego between 1915 and 1916, cinema definitely integrated the *world's fairs* and its culture. It was used in different stands, intended by the organizing committees to be an element to promote the events and contribute to the consolidation of the symbolic repertoire used in each exposition. In an interview conceded at the time, Griffith manifested his enchantment and expressed his wish to perpetuate the grandiosity of the exposition with "a film drama that will mark another forward leap as great as that of *The Birth of a Nation*". [6]

According to Mirian Hansen, the exposition also encouraged the director "to take advantage of the vogue of Orientalism" and "spurred Griffith's ambitions for the Babylonian set — in terms of sheer size, grandiosity, and feasibility — far beyond the scope of any films, including *Cabiria*." [7]

Griffith, thus, reexamined the project that would follow *The Birth of a Nation*. He decided then to widen the scope of his next work, giving it a monumental feature, a blockbuster of historical character, which was manifested in huge scenarios and luxurious costumes, vast number of extras and epic dimension of the events depicted. The ambition was materialized esthetically by the then new resource of telling four stories united by the theme of incomprehension in a movie that became known as *Intolerance* (1916). [8] Griffith's intention with his epic was to proportionate the audience an experience that was more embracing, rapturous, and sensational than the great world's fairs.

Therefore, it is significant the convergence of this environment of celebration and the cinema-spectacle. By consolidating itself as a mass medium, cinema became more and more a "showcase" in which the nation projects, for itself and the others, its national virtues to be celebrated in a world marked by imperialism. It was the manifest desire of countries with a structured film industry to turn some films into the expression of national pride, due to the gathering of economic power, technical advancement, artistic talent, and administrative competence as expressed in the works of Griffith, Pastrone, and others. In the first decades of the 20th century, more than nowadays, technical and discursive competence (in terms of specific cinematic narrative procedures domain) meant national progress and superiority in a competition that was transferred to the new art from the world's fairs of the 19th century. As the national pavilions, with machines of the newest technologies, the new great visual spectacle supported by high technology was projected into the screens. Thus, cinema assumed the dimension of a monument, some sort of national allegory even more important than the human experience depicted.

In this sense, the dynamics of cinematic participation of each country in the world's fairs reproduces the hegemonic disputes mentioned earlier in this text. In this context, countries such as Brazil, which did not have a developed film industry and had its market dominated by foreign films, participated marginally in these events.

Cinema in the Brazilian Independence Centenary International Exposition

The situation does not change in fairs promoted by countries outside that small group. I will analyze then the presence of cinema in the Independence Centenary International Exposition held in Brazil, between 1922 and 1923, in Rio de Janeiro. This festivity represented the retaking of the world's fairs, being the first after World War I. It counted with the participation of Argentina, Belgium, Chile, Denmark, United States, France, Great Britain, Netherlands, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and Czechoslovakia.

For the United States, the event was strategic for its external policy in the region, in which cinema held a prominent role. According to Thais Sant'Ana: "the North American congress sent one million dollars for the Brazilian celebration; the highest investment made by the United States in a fair until then. [9] The responsible for the North American exposition, David Collier, made the inauguration speech of the North American pavilion in one of the most valuable places: the movie theater [10] . An excerpt of his speech reproduced by the newspapers of the time highlights the relation between cultural diplomacy and the already consolidated medium:

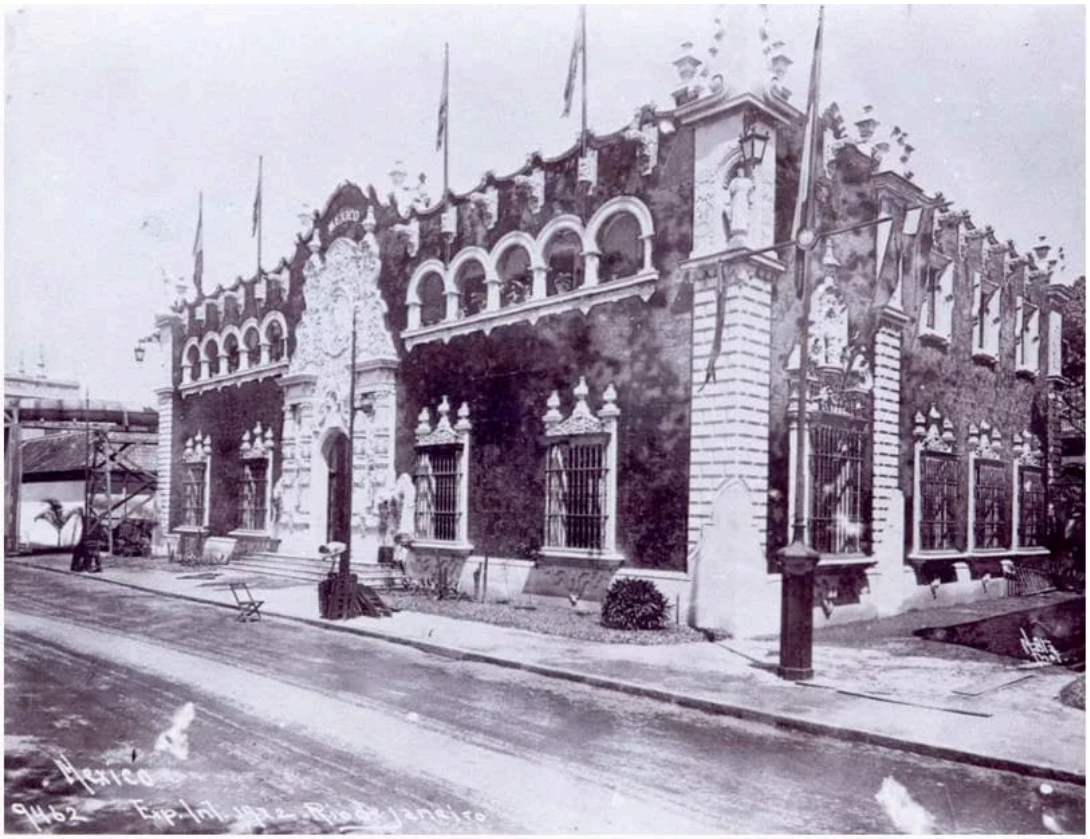
> *"In this pavilion inaugurated today we will exhibit the magic of the modern sciences with the cinematic screen to those who find themselves interested in knowing the many phases of our government's activity, our great industries, and our national business."* [18]

From the organization and structural point of view, the Independence Centenary Exposition had a clear relation with the worldwide tendency here highlighted. The major Carlos Sampaio highlights in one of the inaugural speeches given in September 1922 that the aim of the exposition was to "show to the civilized world that our progress is real, that our culture is not inferior to that of other countries." [11] The new data regarding cinema was the expressive support of the Brazilian government to the production of documentaries. Import tax exemption for the negatives of the exposition's films indicates that the government was aware of the disparities between the national and the foreign film industries. Having in mind the precariousness of the Brazilian cinema at the time and the lack of consolidated producers, the country did not have fiction films to support the discourse of pretended grandiosity and modernity. Only the documentaries remained, many of institutional character, covering with an official mark these images.

The support was not without a counterpart. The organizing committee demanded that the cinematographers filmed themes already chosen, many times an itinerary to depict several stages of the production of some agricultural commodity, such as coffee, which was strategic in the country's economy. Each film, before being exhibited, was appreciated by the organizing committee, which checked its quality, associated to distinctness and clarity in the presentation of the theme. This control also indicates the lack of cohesion and autonomy in the sector. It was suspected, above all, that Brazilian cinematographers could not express in images the grandeur exposed in the huge pavilions and the products that filled the sections of each palace. At the same time, a film like *No país das Amazonas* (1922), directed by Silvino Santos, without such control and attention, presented the potentiality not of an idealized Brazil, but of a cinema that could have contributed more for the culture of the time if it had have some continuity, as occurred in France and some other countries.

Another characteristic of this exposition, which probably occurred in other fairs of regional character, was the strong presence of Latin American countries, especially Mexico and Argentina. It was an important moment to create new diplomatic ties and establish new leadership parameters in each country of the continent.

Mexico and Brazil, in that period, "reapproximated diplomatically after a decade of divergences, elevating the respective legations to the status of embassies." [12] To lead the delegation sent to Rio de Janeiro, the Mexican president Álvaro Obregón (1920-1924) indicated José Vasconcelos [13] and the General Manuel Pérez Treviño. According to Carlos Alberto Barbosa, important Mexican intellectuals were part of this entourage, such as Carlos Pellicer, Julio Torri, and Pedro Henríquez Ureña, which emphasizes the importance the Mexican government gave to the event. The Mexican pavilion, built in a colonial baroque style and decorated with murals, [14] had musical concerts, photographs of Guillermo Kahlo, Frida Kahlo's father, and film exhibitions of which there is little data.



Pavilhão do México na Exposição Internacional de 1922

> The Mexican Pavilion in the Independence Centenary International Exposition of 1922
> **Source:** Historias e monumentos

However, regarding Argentina's film exhibition, there is some more data. The Argentinian commission brought to Brazil dozens of documentaries to be exhibited in their movie theater, "which will please its visitors very much by the taste in which it was decorated." [15]

Probably these films were exhibited in other pavilions also. In a practice that tells much about the place occupied by cinema in the international relations, Collier, in homage in the United States pavilion in honor of the Argentinian independence, "is preparing a magnificent program that will have the exhibition of different films about Argentina." [16]

The documentaries were of institutional character produced many times with the goal of accompanying the exposition, a visual catalogue of the products presented or an official catalogue of the policies adopted [17]. Such films had few possibilities of breaking the hegemony of the North American cinema or introducing new cinematic relations based on the images produced by each country.

It is curious, then, that *The Three Musketeers* (1921), directed by Fred Niblo and starred by Douglas Fairbanks, was chosen as the first exhibit in the United States pavilion. This fictional film does not present any educative goal, except depicting the eternal fight between good and evil, as proclaimed the cinematic producers to the sectors of a society already preoccupied with the effect cinema would have in individuals' moral development. It also was different from the documentaries that were presented along the stands of the pavilions, which were related to industry or work. It seems that the presence of such a film already reflects the vocation of these movies to play the role of representants of the modernity pretended by the society that produced it.

In the power zones that constituted the world's fairs, the conflicts were presented in many forms, being cinema one of their fronts. In a transatlantic perspective, this was a rich experience to comprehend the possible exchanges and influences, always marked by economic and esthetic disputes.

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NOTES

1. Text originally published in: Eduardo Morettin, "O Cinema em Perspectiva Transatlântica: Práticas Históricas e Culturais nas Exposições Universais," *Revista USP* 123 (2019): 85-103.
2. Eduardo Morettin, "A Cultura Cinematográfica nas Exposições Universais: Modernidade e Tradição na Paris de 1925," *Galáxia* 30 (2015): 48-59.
3. Eduardo Morettin, "As Exposições Universais e o Cinema: História e Cultura," *Revista Brasileira de História* 31, no. 61 (2011): 231-249.
4. Flávia Cesarino Costa, *O primeiro cinema: espetáculo, narração, domesticação* (São Paulo: Scritta, 1995), 157.
5. Erkki Huhtano, "(Un)walking at the Fair: About Mobile Visualities at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900". *Journal of Visual Culture* 12, no. 1 (2013): 61-88.
6. Robert R. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 231.
7. Miriam Hansen, *Babel & Babylon. Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 237.
8. Ismail Xavier, "De monumentos e alegorias políticas: a Babilônia de Griffith e a dos Taviani," *Estudos de Cinema* 2 (1999): 125-152.
9. Thais Sant'Ana, "A Exposição Internacional do Centenário da Independência: Modernidade e Política no Rio de Janeiro do início dos anos 1920" (mestrado thesis, Universidade estadual de Campinas, 2008), 104.
10. Besides the room inside the pavilion, an open-air movie theater was built. Eduardo Morettin, "O cinema e a Exposição Internacional do Centenário da Independência do Brasil," *Artcultura: Revista de História, Cultura e Arte* 8, no. 13 (2006): 194.
11. Sant'Ana, "A Exposição," 101.
12. Carlos Alberto Sampaio Barbosa, "Entre o Pavilhão Mexicano e o Cine Azteca: Cultura Visual e Formação de Identidade no Brasil e México na Primeira Metade do Século XX," *Dimensões*, no. 29 (2012): 266.
13. According to Barbosa, "Vasconcelos performs conferences, travels through the country and has the opportunity to take notes for his book *La raza cósmica,* published in 1925." Barbosa, "Entre o Pavilhão," 268.
14. Sant'Ana affirms that the pavilion "repeated the form of the Mexican Secretariat of Public Education then under construction." The author analyzes the different architectural projects of each pavilion. Sant'Ana, "A Exposição," 86.
15. "As comemorações do Centenário. O pavilhão da Argentina," *Jornal do Brasil*, December 24, 1922, 7.
16. "Exposição Internacional," *Jornal do Brasil*, May 19, 1923, 8.
17. As it seems to be the case of the film exhibited in the section of Lands and Colonization of the Argentinian pavilion that, along with "statistical charts, photographs, maps, models", shows "the reception of the immigrants and their distribution" ("O Centenário", 1922, 2).
18. "O Centenário," *Jornal do Comércio*, Rio de Janeiro, December 13, 1922, 3.