

Mapping out contemporary Brazilian film: Reaching new audiences

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Abstract:

In this industry reflection I draw on my professional interest in Brazilian film production and distribution and my archival research of Brazilian films exhibited in the UK between 1995 and 2019 in order to reflect on the factors which help such productions travel and the challenges which they face. During the last twenty-five years, following the so-called renaissance of Brazilian cinema, there has been a constant increase in the number of films shown in Brazilian cinemas but, to achieve financial sustainability, filmmakers had to look abroad as well. While the search for financing and partners in other countries should allow the creation of works that possess storytelling appeal and more inviting identities to circulate internationally, the majority of Brazilian films released on UK screens rely on stereotypical depictions, well-known authors and/or powerful international distribution companies. Brazilian national institutions, such as Ancine, and international festivals, such as BFI London Film Festival (LFF), have helped increase visibility for Brazilian productions abroad but more could be done to foster new directorial voices, release strategies and co-production partnerships.

Keywords: Brazilian cinema; international distribution; co-production; audiences; national film policy

My scholarly research into film production and distribution is informed, to a large extent, by my practice as a feature film producer in Brazil. I am a founding partner of Caraduá Productions, where I act as executive producer and assistant director. The company is best known for films which focus on social issues and lived experiences, including the poetic short documentary *Arquitetura e o Ballet da Rua* [*Architecture and the Street Ballet*] (Nina Tedesco, 2015), which reflects on the role of architecture on urban experiences, neighbourhood life

and pedestrian presence. So, my interest is not just in the way films come to be but also the issues which they reflect, their impact in social terms and their circulation within different national and international communities. With this in mind, in this short piece I reflect on how Brazilian film has developed and travelled since 1995, particularly focusing on its distribution in the UK. This industry research intervention draws on my own archival investigations and aims to inform further policy changes in promoting sustainable film production and meaningful cultural exchange. But before I do this, a bit of context is needed.

During the last twenty-five years, following the so-called renaissance of Brazilian cinema in the mid-1990s, there has been a constant increase in the number of films shown in Brazilian cinemas (See Fig 1.).

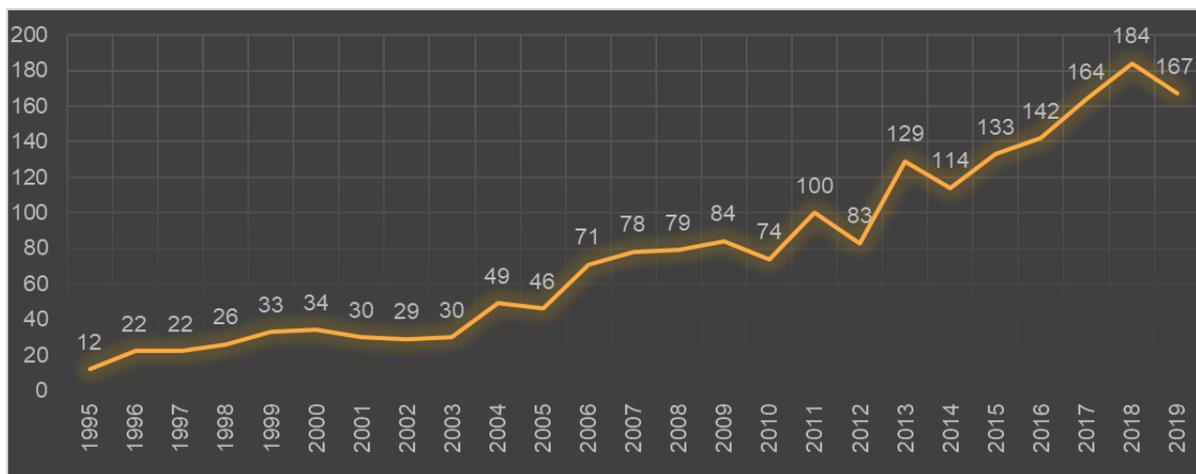


Fig 1. Number of domestic film releases in Brazil (1995-2019). Source: the Brazilian federal agency Ancine/Brazilian Cinema and Audiovisual Observatory.

This was prompted by a new Audiovisual Law, ratified in 1993, which stimulated production and a process of democratic consolidation, following years of political instability, dictatorship and corruption (See: Nagib 2003). However, when looking at the box office performance of domestic titles, it becomes apparent that Brazilian films only attract between 19% (or 25.7 million viewers in 2010) and 13.7% (or 24 million viewers in 2019) of the annual cinema attendance. In addition, like in most other territories, there is a concentration of revenues in a few big-budget (often Hollywood-produced) titles, which benefit from an extensive promotion and longer theatrical runs. For example, 10% of the feature films released in 2019 collected nearly 90% of the total Brazilian box office (Box Office Mojo 2022). This presents issues when considering the long-term development and sustainability of the local film industry. To counter the challenges of reaching an audience, Brazilian filmmakers have been searching for ways to diversify their activities. This has included an increasingly diversified organisation of their financing plans and a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship that is established between their work and the multiple exhibition windows that will host it. There is a growth in the search for new sources of financing (through co-

productions) and for international opportunities for distribution. In theory, the search for financing and partners in other countries should allow the creation of a work that possesses storytelling appeal and more inviting identities to circulate internationally. However, looking at which films were co-produced with a European partner and/or distributed in the UK shows that the topics and directors represented are still relatively restricted. Successfully exported Brazilian productions and co-productions tend to focus on experiences of economic deprivation and perpetuate stereotypes about criminal activity in the country. A small number of directors who manage to attract festival and commercial attention tend to come to represent Brazilian national cinema. In addition, films which perform well in a market like the UK are often in English, distributed by established international companies and considered of festival importance. Understanding which Brazilian films travel and how they perform abroad is essential for revising and enhancing legislation which can not only help the local industry grow and reach new markets but also preserve cultural differences and promote diversity in local (co-)productions.

It is easiest to understand Brazilian economic film history as organised in cycles. Recent legislation and new initiatives often focus on short-term interventions, starting and eventually ending without further appropriate programs or regulations for the field. Continuity in state intervention, however, proves a priority. For instance, during the most successful and stable period for domestic film production, distribution and exhibition (1969-1990), the sector was dominated by the state-owned Embrafilme. The company was the leading Brazilian film distributor until the early 1990s, with 20–30 % of the annual market share of box office revenues and, in its heyday, helped promote cinema attendance for domestic productions. The election of President Fernando Collor saw Embrafilme close down based on the argument that it had achieved bad financial results but a 1988 article in *Screen International* lists the top 10 domestic films released in Brazil in 1987 and all of them were distributed precisely by Embrafilme (“Brazil Market Profile”, p. 22). The most popular among these titles was *Trapalhões no auto da compadecida* [*Trapalhões at the rogues trial*] (Roberto Farias, 1987) which attracted 2.4 million viewers. The second most popular, *Eu* [*Me, Myself and I*] (Walter Hugo Khouri, 1987), had an audience of 1.9 million. The former was in the top three most popular films that year, following Hollywood blockbusters *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986) with 3 million admissions and *Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987) with 2.5 million tickets sold. *Me, myself and I*, was fifth after *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (Brian Gibson, 1986) with 2.1 million admissions. This testifies not only that Collor likely made the decision to close Embrafilme based on ideological principles (he discontinued all funding for the arts the following year) but also that success in the domestic box office alone might not be enough to secure the sustained growth of the local film industry in modern times.

The situation changed once more with the creation of a new institution in charge of the regulation of the sector, Ancine (the National Cinema Agency), in the early 2000s. Its new policies (securing federal funding for domestic productions) saw an increase in the number of both productions and production companies. In 2019 184 films were released in Brazilian

cinemas. This also led to increased participation of Brazilian films in festivals, professional residencies and film markets, as well as a general growth in international co-productions.¹ Film legislation ensured that new Brazilian films are visible not just in cinemas but across all screens. As a result of Law 12.485/2012, which introduced screen quota, cable TV channels began programming more hours of Brazilian independent productions. Similarly, large international Video-On-Demand companies, operating on the country's territory, also started investing in the production of original Brazilian content. In other words, these new policies strengthened the domestic market and prepared the ground for further expanding the reach of Brazilian cinema to other countries. In the following paragraphs, I outline and analyse this international expansion, in particular relation to the UK and the Brazilian films destined for its screens.

Finding which films were in commercial circulation in the UK during the last twenty years necessitated triangulating between different sources, including the BFI *Statistical Yearbook*, the database of the Film Distributors' Association, the British Board Film Classification database and the BFI's Research and Statistics Unit records. The main conceptual challenge encountered was how to classify a given film as Brazilian. In the summaries of the *Statistical Yearbook* reports, for example, Brazilian films were frequently grouped with productions from other poorly represented countries in the general category 'other', due to their relatively minor economic impact. Often films were featured in reports by the language spoken but the widespread use of Portuguese did not guarantee that the production was indeed from Brazil and, furthermore, a number of Brazilian co-productions were in English (a point to which I come back shortly). In addition, films such as the documentary *Favela Rising* (Matt Mochary/Jeff Zimbalist, 2005), which focuses on a former drug trafficker from Rio de Janeiro who establishes the grassroots movement AfroReggae, would not be classified as Brazilian by the Brazilian regulatory agencies. For the purposes of accessing public funds and tax reliefs and fulfilling quota requirements, Brazilian films are defined according to the production company involved or, in the case of an international co-production, with respect to the minimum proportions of each producer's share of the work in question. In addition, the composition of the technical team also has an influence. It is essential to pay attention to whether the director, artists and/or technicians are native Brazilians, residents in Brazil for at least three years or naturalised Brazilians. This, of course, raises the question of what really constitutes national cinema and how we can build useful categories to define cultural production in terms of its relationality.

Still, after data cleaning and validation, it was discovered that out of around 100 Brazilian titles which had applied for classification to distribute in the UK, 55 had been identified by the BFI as released in theatres but only 41 of them had CPB (Certificado De Produto Brasileiro or

¹ When listing co-production partners here, I go by the official data provided by Ancine and the BFI. I am aware that this does not always coincide with what is listed on other sources, for instance IMDb, which might use slightly different systems for collecting data and defining what forms part of co-production contributions.

Brazilian Product Certificate) registration with Ancine (See: Appendix 2). With that definition in mind, an average of 1.70 Brazilian films were shown in UK cinema theatres annually between the years 1995 to 2018, as can be noticed in Fig 2.

The increase in Brazilian film circulation in the UK coincided with the growth of the domestic industry in the early 2000s, triggered by the abovementioned public policy interventions and regulatory frameworks. It is essential to highlight the peak of releases in the year 2008. The five films which found UK screens were: *Tropa de Elite* [*Elite Squad*], by José Padilha; *Linha de Passe*, co-directed by Walter Salles; *O banheiro do Papa* [*The Pope's Toilet*], by Enrique Fernández and César Charlone; *Cidade dos homens* [*City of Men*], by Paulo Morelli; and *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* [*Blindness*], by Fernando Meireles.²

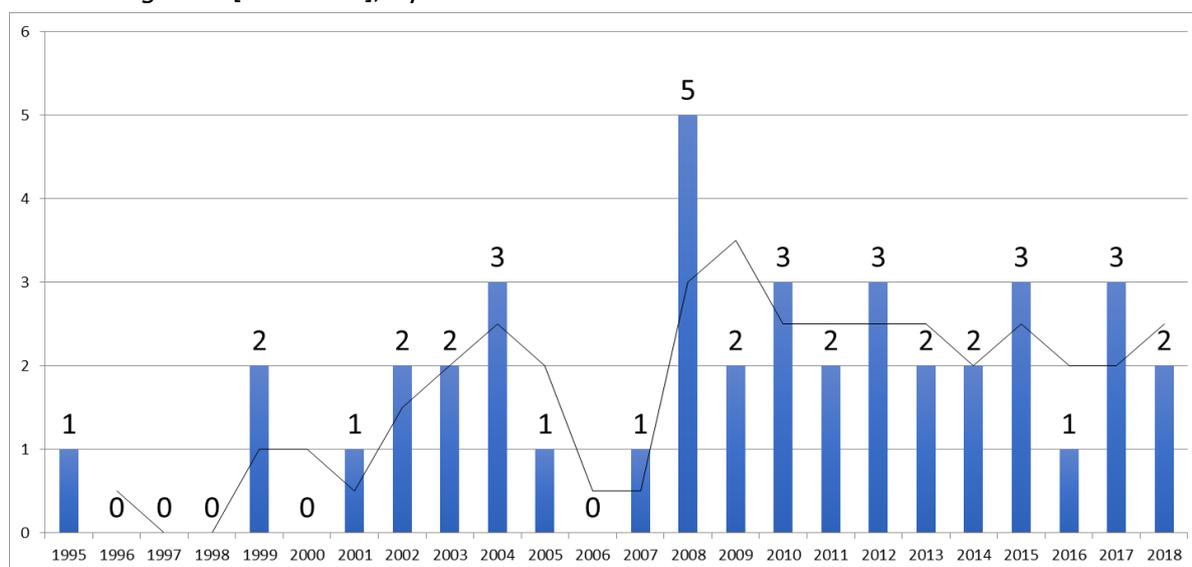


Fig 2. Distribution of Brazilian commercial film releases in the UK (1995-2018). Source: BFI Research and Statistics Unit.

Interestingly, all of these titles focus on the hardships of living in the region, with poverty and crime becoming the main topics of narrative concern. More on this, shortly. The films were similar not only in terms of subject matter but also the last three titles were all produced by O2 Filmes, the independent production house behind Meireles' international debut film, *Cidade de Deus* [*City of God*] (2002).

In addition, Brazilian films also found their way on festival screens. Importantly, festival events create an environment that (depending on the film's performance) stimulates the desire of sales agents and distributors to launch these works on the commercial circuit. The awards and selection of a particular work by a jury transfer to the film an essential symbolic value and help launch its promotional campaign and commercial run. Being selected by A-list festivals at Cannes, Berlin, or Venice, for example, proves an essential tool for enhancing the visibility of a cinematic work, acting as a seal of quality and approval. Paradoxically, success

² Please note that I use the UK commercial release dates for the titles mentioned in this article (even if some of the films had festival screenings prior to their commercial distribution). Refer to Appendix 2 for the full details.

at international festivals influences domestic distribution as well or, as producer Sara Silveira (2014) argues: "premiering [films] abroad is a way for them to be taken into consideration so that I can seduce national distributors". Festival releases do not initially generate box office income, and such screenings do not help recover the investment made in productions. The key to success resides in the qualification of the work and how much good criticism it can bring about, that is, when it spontaneously generates marketing buzz, at no cost.

To understand the role of festivals in distributing Brazilian cinema in the UK, it is useful to look at one of the largest events – the BFI London Film Festival (LFF). Cross-referencing the information on commercial distribution with data from the London Film Festival archives illustrates the different routes taken by different Brazilian films. In compiling the research, I benefited from access to the festival’s digital catalogue, covering the editions between 2015 and 2018, and physical catalogues in the BFI library, covering the period since 1956 when the Festival started.³ According to these records, until 2019, 102 Brazilian films (both feature and short), or 1.8 films per year, were screened at the Festival.

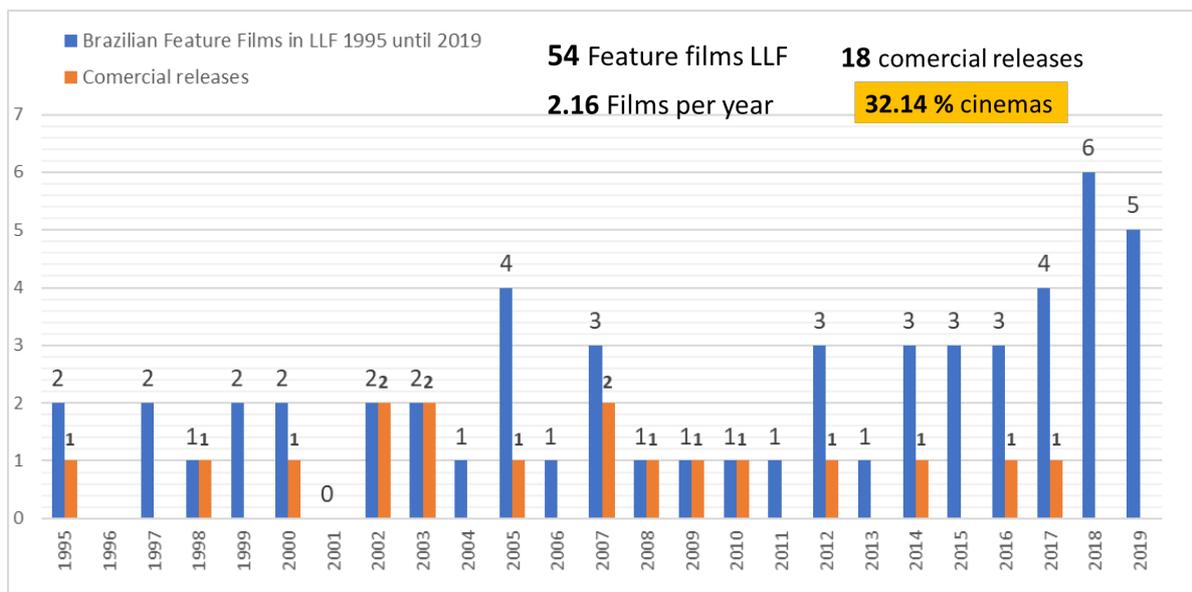


Fig. 3. Comparison between commercially distributed Brazilian films in the UK and Brazilian films screened during the BFI London Film Festival between 1995 and 2019.

As seen in Fig. 3 and Appendix 1, a total of 54 feature films were screened at the LFF between 1995 and 2019. This meant an average of 2.16 films per year, with a peak of screenings in 2018 (6 feature films) and 2019 (5 feature films). Of this total, 18 titles were released

³ According to these records, the first Brazilian film screened at LFF was *Black Orpheus* (1959), by Marcel Camus. Although the work is an adaptation of the play by Vinícius de Moraes, recorded in Rio de Janeiro and features Brazilian actors, it is actually a French film. Some sources (such as the film’s IMDb page) claim that it was an international co-production between France, Italy and Brazil, but this information remains contested. Thus, I would argue that the first Brazilian film to participate in the 7th edition of the LFF was actually Glauber Rocha's *Barravento* in 1963.

commercially in theatres in the year following their participation at the LFF. The data also revealed that 32.14% of the films released at the Festival achieved at least one week of distribution in commercial cinemas in the UK. In 2002 and 2003 all films released at the Festival also had a commercial release (See Fig. 4).

It is interesting to note that, for the outlined period, a total of 24 distributors negotiated the distribution rights for Brazilian films in UK cinemas. Of these, 15 companies released only one Brazilian film, ten released more than one title, and one work was released independently by its own production company. Walt Disney Int'l is the company with the most significant number of films, having released four Brazilian feature films by 2019.⁴ The first one was *Central do Brasil* [*Central Station*], in 1999, by Walter Salles. Three years later, the company released *Abril despedaçado* [*Behind the Sun*] by the same (already internationally acclaimed) director, and in 2003 it released the film *City of God*, which marked the international debut of Fernando Meireles, and the Brazilian production company O2 Filmes. *City of God* went on to become the highest-grossing Brazilian film between 1995 and 2019 not only for Disney but also in the UK as a whole, with an approximate box office of £2.3 million. It performed really well in international markets as well, solidifying the reputation of its production company and director, and introducing the so-called favela film genre – a particular type of film that presents the social reality of peripheral and marginalised neighbourhoods (Vieira 2010).⁵ *City of God* opened up new opportunities for Meireles, who managed to attract international funding for the co-production between Brazil, Canada and Japan *Blindness* (also released in the UK) and was invited to direct two drama thrillers with UK studios, the British-German *The Constant Gardener* (2005) and *360* (2011) – a co-production between France, Austria, Brazil and the UK, as well as the Netflix feature *The Two Popes* (2019). Trying to replicate the success of *City of God*, five years later, Walt Disney Int'l negotiated the licensing of O2 Filmes' *City of Men*, similarly themed around the experiences of young Brazilians in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, and directed by Paulo Morelli. However, the title did not reach even 2% of what *City of God* had previously earned. This serves to show that while breakthrough titles can become an opportunity to establish Brazilian talent and shed light on local social issues abroad, relying on formulaic plot and representation does not guarantee a film's popularity and success. So, I suggest, film policy should seek to encourage more risk-taking in terms of plot, settings and diverse characterisation to ensure Brazilian films remain original in their appeal to domestic and foreign markets alike.

⁴ In fact, some of the films were originally distributed by Buena Vista International UK before Disney acquired it.

⁵ Other films which exploited the stereotype of Brazil as marked by violence, poverty and suffering included: *City of Men*, *The Man of the Year* (José Henrique Fonseca, 2003), *Waste Land* (Lucy Walker/Karen Harley/João Jardim, 2010), *Trash* (Stephen Daldry/Christian Duurvoort, 2015) and *Elite Squad*, as previously mentioned.



Fig. 4. Films which were screened both at LFF and in commercial cinemas.

After Walt Disney Int'l, two well-established companies took a chance on distributing Brazilian films in the UK – the French StudioCanal and the British Lionsgate. StudioCanal released *O homem do ano* [*The Man of the Year*] (José Henrique Fonseca, 2003), *Elite Squad* (José Padilha, 2008) and, eight years later, *The violin teacher* (Sérgio Machado, 2016), garnering a total of £139,942 from the box office of the three films. Lionsgate distributed *On the Road* (Walter Salles, 2012). This was Salles' fourth film in the UK, making him the Brazilian director with the most film releases in the country. Following him is José Padilha who directed three of the Brazilian films released in the UK. With two releases in the UK each are Daniela Thomas, Fernando Meirelles, Kleber Mendonça Filho, and Sérgio Machado. More than half (25) of all films featured directors who were represented by only one work in the UK. This shows the importance of having films distributed by well-known companies who can garner marketing attention in a cultural context where the name of the director might not carry much awareness yet. However, it also reveals the potential danger of having a few Brazilian directors, who manage to sustain an international career and secure continuous releases abroad, becoming almost synonymous with Brazilian cinema as a whole.

When analysing the level of saturation Brazilian films have had on UK cinema screens, it becomes apparent that only three titles featured with more than 50 copies. These were *Trash* (Stephen Daldry/Christian Duurvoort, 2015) with 158 copies; *On the Road* with 100 copies and *Blindness* with 50 copies. In 2008, the total number of cinema theatres in the UK was 772 and the number of cinema screens was 3,661. So, at the time, *Blindness* was featured in 6.5% of the UK theatres and occupied 1.4% of UK screens. In 2012 there was a slight increase in the number of cinema theatres and screens in the UK (respectively, 750 and 3,858), so *On the Road* was programmed in 13.3% of the theatres and occupied 2.6% of UK screens. In 2015 there were 771 cinemas in the UK and 4,115 screens. *Trash* was programmed in 20.5% of theatres and occupied 3.8% of screens (Statista (a), n.d; Statista (b), n.d.). It becomes

apparent that between 2008 and 2015 the interest in programming big-budget Brazilian films in the UK increased, even if marginally so. However, it is essential to highlight that all three titles have English as their original language despite being Brazilian. This choice reveals an attempt to expand the marketing possibilities of Brazilian cinema in a territory which is notoriously inhospitable to foreign-language films (See: Gant 2017). This strategic positioning extends not only to the language but also to choosing an international talent pool. *Trash* features Hollywood actors Martin Sheen and Rooney Mara. *On the Road* boasts a star-studded cast, including Hollywood household names Kristen Stewart and Amy Adams, and British-born Tom Sturridge. *Blindness* stars A-listers Julianne Moore and Mark Ruffalo. In addition, all of them are international co-productions. *Trash* was a collaboration between Brazil, Germany and the UK. *On the Road* had participation from France and Brazil. *Blindness* involved Brazil, Canada and Japan.

When the original language of a production is Portuguese (regardless of whether that title is a co-production), however, the number of UK screens and theatres involved in the film's distribution falls dramatically. Only nine films (23% of the total) were released with more than ten copies in circulation. The film with the highest number was *City of God*, which featured across 77 screens due not only to its success at the 46th edition of the London Film Festival but also to its high production values and extensive marketing campaign (See: Rugunya 2021). However, this phenomenon was not replicated with the other titles. The second Portuguese-language Brazilian film in terms of number of copies was *Linha de Passe* (Walter Salles/Daniela Thomas, 2008), which was released on only 27 screens. *Aquarius* (Kleber Mendonça Filho, 2017) and *Elite Squad* featured on 16 screens, *City of men* – on 15, *Elite Squad 2: The Enemy Within* (José Padilha, 2011) and *Zama* (Lucrecia Martel, 2018) – on 14, *The Second Mother* (Anna Muylaert, 2015) – on 12 and *Tabu* (Miguel Gomes, 2012) – on 11. The rest of the films were released with only one copy each. This signifies that, beyond the few big, English-language co-productions, Brazilian film remains a niche area of distribution interest in the UK. The amount of time Brazilian productions remain on UK screens brings about a similar conclusion. Only four out of 38 titles remained in theatres for more than a week. The top one was *Trash*, released on January 30, 2015 and ending its run on March 29, 2015, completing nine weeks in theatres and bringing in a total of £181,859. The second longest running Brazilian film was *Waste Land*, which stayed in theatres for seven weeks from February to April 2011. *City of God* followed it with five weeks and *On the Road* with two weeks. So, it appears that the novelty appeal and sustained marketing power of Brazilian productions becomes quickly depleted after their initial release on UK screens.

Even on short runs though, Brazilian production companies which have their content distributed on UK screens turned decent income, with O2 Filmes earning a gross box office of

£2,858,182 for its seven pictures released in the country and Videofilmes (created by director Walter Salles) collecting £1,726,326 for the same amount of films (See Fig. 5 and Fig. 6).

Fig. 5. O2 Filmes productions and co-productions with releases in the UK.

What this type of industry reflection and analysis shows is the potential of Brazilian films to



- City of God* | 2003 - Dir. Fernando Meirelles
- The Pope's Toilet* | 2008 - Dir. Enrique Fernández, César Charlone
- City of men* | 2008 - Dir. Paulo Morelli
- Blidness* | 2008 - Dir. Fernando Meirelles
- Adrift* | 2010 - Dir. Fernando Meirelles
- Waste land* | 2011 - Dir. Lucy Walker, João H. V.Silva Jardim, Gwen Karen Harley
- Trash* | 2015 - Dir. Stephen Daldry, Christian Duurvoort

attract audiences and revenues abroad, particularly, in the UK. However, further consideration must be put into ensuring a diversity of topics and representations onscreen, opportunity for expression of new directorial voices, release strategies and co-production partnerships. To facilitate sustained growth, national government policies need to champion innovative production approaches, ensure continued support for local talent and promote ambitious releases abroad.



- Foreign Land* | 1999 - Dir. Walter Salles
- Central Station* | 1999 - Dir. Walter Salles
- Behind the Sun* | 2002 - Dir. Walter Salles
- Lower city* | 2005 - Dir. Sérgio Machado
- Linha de Passe* | 2008 - Dir. Walter Salles
- Lion's Den* | 2010 - Dir. Pablo Trapero
- On the road* | 2012 - Dir. Walter Salles

Fig. 6. Videofilmes productions and co-productions with releases in the UK.

Biographical note:

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Appendix 1:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jqRa58UvY-SVPIXSlE_Yyk8zK_vx5LpL/view?usp=sharing

Appendix 2:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sr9ggkfoVsMGj8_z8Z572LohxshEzNPG/view?usp=sharing