



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*O Quatrilho* by Luiz Carlos Barreto; Fabio Barreto; Jose Clemente Pozenato; Leopoldo Serran; Clemente Pozenato

*Four Days in September [O que e isso companheiro?]* by Lucy Barreto; Bruno Barreto; Fernando Gabeira; Leopoldo Serran

*Foreign Land [Terra estrangeira]* by Flavio Tambellini; Antonio da Cunha Telles; Walter Salles, Jr.; Daniela Thomas; Marcos Bernstein

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## Film Reviews

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O QUATRILHO. Produced by Luiz Carlos Barreto; directed by Fábio Barreto; screenplay by José Clemente Pozenato and Leopoldo Serran from the novel by Clemente Pozenato. Brazil, 1995; color; 120 minutes. Portuguese. Distributor: Palace Films (Australia/New Zealand).

FOUR DAYS IN SEPTEMBER [*O que é isso companheiro?*]. Produced by Lucy Barreto; directed by Bruno Barreto; screenplay by Fernando Gabeira and Leopoldo Serran, based on the novel by Gabeira. Brazil, 1997; color; 113 minutes. Distributor: Miramax.

FOREIGN LAND [*Terra estrangeira*]. Produced by Flávio Tambellini and Antônio da Cunha Telles; directed by Walter Salles, Jr., and Daniela Thomas; screenplay by Marcos Bernstein, Salles, and Thomas. Brazil, 1995; black and white; 110 minutes. Portuguese.

Prior to World War II, far more people emigrated to Latin America than left the region for Europe or the United States. Only after 1960 did a significant number of Latin Americans seek new economic opportunities and in some cases escape political and social persecution by leaving their countries. Brazil is no exception to this trend. As in the United States, immigration has helped shape its national mythology and in some regions has played an important role in shaping local identities. It is therefore not surprising that the themes of migration, expatriation, and exile inform many of the Brazilian films appearing in the last few years.

Brazilian film production has recently received a boost after having undergone a period of decline under the government of Fernando Collor de Mello (1980–1992), which abolished Embrafilme, the federal agency that supported film production. In 1994, new legislative incentives and a more favorable economy improved conditions for filmmakers. Since 1994, three critically acclaimed Brazilian films have examined various aspects of the push-pull factors that define migration patterns, detailing the lives of Brazilians either inside or outside Brazil at important stages in the country's political history. *O Quatrilho*, a feature film directed by Fábio Barreto in 1995 and nominated for the Academy Award for best foreign film in 1996, relates the story of the assimilation and integration of Italian immigrants to the southern province of Rio

Grande do Sul at the end of the nineteenth century. *Terra estrangeira*, created by newcomers Walter Salles, Jr., and Daniela Thomas in 1995, breaks new ground as the first feature film to explore the lives of Brazilians abroad (in Lisbon) during the early 1990s. Finally, Bruno Barreto's latest film, *Four Days in September*, nominated this year for the Oscar for best foreign film and based on the testimony of Brazilian writer Fernando Gabeira, is a powerful political drama that re-creates life under the military dictatorship of the late 1960s. This period also produced a diverse Brazilian diaspora as the Brazilian government forced many into exile.

Based on a novel by José Clemente Pozenato, *O Quatrilho* centers on the struggles and triumphs of two Italian couples who settle in the state of Rio Grande do Sul at the turn of the century. Passion and the temptation of infidelity provide the major tensions throughout the first part of the film, until one wife (Teresa) elopes with the other's husband (Máximo), bringing to life the title of the movie—a four-handed Brazilian card game in which players are able to change partners. Circumstances that might first appear tragic for the individuals left behind prove to be a blessing in disguise when the newly paired couple (Pierina and Angelo) find out that they are perfectly suited for one another.

This well-crafted, beautifully filmed story is also a clever romantic reconstruction of turn-of-the-century Brazil. Brazil had begun to receive thousands of European immigrants in the early nineteenth century, but after the abolition of slavery in 1888 these numbers skyrocketed. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Economics, between 1904 and 1913 Brazil received 384,672 Portuguese, 224,672 Spanish, 196,521 Italians, 33,859 Germans, and 42,117 Turkish immigrants, most of them headed for the temperate regions of the southernmost states. Like many immigrants to Brazil, the main protagonists quickly find opportunities for advancement despite the odd, conservative values and complacency of the communities in which they live, and in the process they incorporate themselves into the capitalist economy.

Barreto's vision is undeniably romantic, focusing on the integration and social mobility of two Italian families rather than the social tensions of the time.

The film makes the not-always-true argument that immigrants who work hard reap their rewards in this land of opportunity. Only passing references are made to the problems of capitalism and other dominant political ideologies. One of the main characters, for example, is branded a "capitalist" for his ruthless entrepreneurial machinations, and an anarchist criticizing capitalism appears drunk in a bar. Historians have already shown, however, that the Brazilian state was hungry for European immigrants, partly to distance itself from slavery and slave labor and to whiten the population, partly to bring in skilled labor for a rapidly expanding economy. Indeed, conditions were so horrific in some cases that many governments warned their citizens against migrating to Brazil. (Switzerland, Prussia, and other German-speaking jurisdictions, for example, banned Brazilian efforts to recruit immigrants.) Still, for many, Brazil was a land of opportunity, and this is the theme that Barreto has chosen to present.

Barreto's focus on the integration of two Italian immigrant families into a Brazilian locale over time parallels general historical developments in Brazil. Both families move away from rural, provincial towns to vibrant, bustling cities governed by the spirit of progress. As the families grow and change (becoming more Brazilian), so does Brazil. By 1930, the immigrant's contribution to the country's development was difficult to ignore and, in part, fueled the anti-immigrant sentiments of Brazilian nationalism, which emerged during the government of President Getúlio Vargas (1930–1944).

In 1937, the popular Vargas established Brazil's first dictatorship, which was largely supported by the military, intellectuals, and the middle classes. The Brazilian military, which supported Vargas in the 1930s, established its own dictatorship in 1964. Although initially endorsed by the middle classes, the military government grew increasingly unpopular. Brazil saw unprecedented restrictions on civil liberties and an escalation in violations of human rights. Censorship and corruption were rampant as the government orchestrated an official Brazilian patriotism. Meanwhile, the list of intellectuals, artists, and political dissidents jailed or invited to leave the country grew. Bruno Barreto's 1997 film *Four Days in September* creates a window onto this tumultuous period in Brazilian history.

Based on the testimony of Fernando Gabeira in his 1979 book, this film reconstructs the events of four days in September 1969, when a group of urban guerrillas (The 8th of October Revolutionary Movement, or MR-8) decided to kidnap the American ambassador to Brazil, Charles Burke Elbrick (Alan Arkin), in hopes of forcing the military dictatorship to cease its censorship and to release a limited number of political prisoners. While remaining true to the spirit of Gabeira's testimony, Barreto and screenwriter Leopoldo Serran have taken several poetic liberties to adapt his work to the silver screen. The film version accentuates the relationships among the people in-

involved in the kidnapping and tries to understand the personal motivations of those who chose to take up arms.

Barreto, who released his most celebrated film, *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (adapted from the Jorge Amado novel) exactly two decades ago, has opted to tell this story employing techniques from the political thriller, a move that not only makes the story accessible to American audiences but also uncannily recalls the tensions within a population that was heavily censored and controlled. Barreto renders a thoroughly engrossing historical reproduction while allowing the viewers to examine notions of individual responsibility and the relationship between the state and the individual. Many of the members of MR-8 were middle-class "revolutionaries" untrained in guerrilla tactics and guided only by a naïve or vague sense of revolutionary struggle. Yet they never doubted the moral legitimacy of their battle against an illegitimate, torturing military regime.

Barreto's film also offers several important comparisons between civil society in the United States and Brazil during the 1960s. The captive ambassador narrates his letters to his wife, in which he comments on the Brazilian reality and describes his captors. One of them, whom he calls "the intellectual" (Fernando Gabeira), manages to engage the ambassador on U.S. political questions such as the demands of the Black Panthers movement and American involvement in Vietnam. Interestingly, it is through this dialogue that we glean an understanding of the relationship between the state and the individual. The ambassador, an official representative of the United States, carefully distinguishes his personal opinions from his discussions of U.S. policy on issues such as Vietnam and the U.S. government relationship to Latin American dictatorships. Gabeira, on the other hand, has decided to change his identity and join the armed movement precisely because his personal views were out of step with the Brazilian military dictatorship.

Complete with historical legends illustrating important dates and places, and black-and-white footage from the time period, *Four Days in September* offers students of history insight into the complexities of life under dictatorship. The film attempts to explain how and why the main protagonists have become revolutionaries, but it also shows how dictatorship survives with the help of ordinary people who report anything that seems suspicious or out of order, creating an atmosphere of repression.

By filming a local soccer match at the Maracana stadium, a huge structure with a capacity for 200,000 spectators, Barreto recalls that this historical era was also a time of growing Brazilian patriotism and popular class celebration. Brazil had become a dominant force in world soccer, having won the World Cup in 1958 and 1962. It was therefore fitting that the rebels chose to release the ambassador outside the Maracana stadium. The filming of the match with all its revelry provides a marked contrast to the silence and repres-

sion outside. During the 1960s and 1970s, then, official patriotism encouraged cultural and popular celebration but did not tolerate political challenges. Government officials routinely tortured dissidents and forced many into exile—as one of the last images of the film indicates. The film is economical and prudent in its construction of scenes of torture without downplaying the horror. Moreover, Barreto is careful not to create heroes and villains; rather, he recalls the multiplicity of emotions and responses to Brazilian dictatorship.

Overwhelming protest by students, workers, and the middle classes, coupled with a failing economy, eventually forced Brazil into a period known as *abertura*, or political opening, which led to the selection of a civilian president in 1985. Five years later, Brazil's popularly elected president, Fernando Collor de Mello, began a new era in Brazilian democracy amid national feelings of optimism and hope. The euphoria was short-lived, however. Collor inherited an ailing economy and fragile political institutions plagued by corruption, and he did nothing to change them. Moreover, his economic, political, and social policies exacerbated the problems of the country's middle class and the working poor. Collor, who was forced to step down as president on charges of corruption in 1992, stifled cultural production by cutting back subsidies and closing many cultural institutions while lining his own pockets with bribes.

*Foreign Land*, a poignant *film noiresque* production set in the 1990s, re-creates the mood of this period in Brazilian history. The first part of the film vacillates between two separate realities and two separate spaces. On the one hand, the film focuses on the challenges faced by two Brazilians (Miguel and Alex) who have left the chaos of Brazil to live in Portugal and the difficulties they face in that "foreign land." At the same time, the film underscores the fact that many living in Brazil under Collor's government had become somewhat disillusioned, regarding Brazil itself as "a foreign land" that deprived them of their dreams and ambitions.

The main plot in Brazil revolves around the Spanish-born seamstress Manuela and her son Paco who live in São Paulo. The shock of Collor's economic policies kills Manuela, who had been saving money to take her son to visit her native land. After his mother's death, Paco begins the journey that she intended for him, but before he arrives in Spain finds himself in the Portuguese capital. Unknowingly, Paco enters a world of crime and drugs, and in his attempt to escape finds companionship with another Brazilian (Alex) who has also been swept away by historical circumstances. *Foreign Land* relies on several classic detective motifs to propel the story forward, and at times the melodrama can be overbearing, particularly the chase scenes, which borrow elements from American gangster movies, and the ending, which is reminiscent of the American road movie with the stars riding off into the sunset.

The film nonetheless communicates the frustrations

of Brazilians living in Brazil and especially in Portugal during the early 1990s. The directors take us through Lisbon's enchanting streets, small stores, and immigrant enclaves. Brazilians attempt to find refuge in the ancient colonial metropolis, but they are disappointed. The fact that thousands of Portuguese and other immigrants had successfully crossed the Atlantic to make Brazil their home is not lost on the filmmakers. Despite the shared language, history, and common cultural practices, Lisbon is a foreign place where Brazilians meet with other immigrants, including Angolans, Mozambicans, and Cape Verdians, who joke that they can't believe Portugal was ever a formidable empire. These would-be immigrants do not assimilate or integrate into Portuguese society, as Europeans did in Brazil almost a century before. Nor have they been "forced" to travel abroad like the political exiles of the 1960s. These are new times, times of democracy, but also of economic and political uncertainty. All the while, a Brazilian diaspora continues to grow in a number of European and North American cities.

These three films chart the vast economic, social, and cultural changes that Brazil has experienced in the twentieth century. *O Quatrilho* and *Foreign Land* provide opposing images of the Brazilian reality. The former, romantic and upbeat, represents a patriotic vision of Brazil at the turn of the last century and attests to the popular slogan "Brazil Is the Place to Live!"; the latter, decidedly downbeat, attempts to explain why Brazilians at the end of this century must flee their homeland. Based on specific historical events under military dictatorships in 1969, *Four Days in September* is neither romantic nor overly critical of Brazil. This was an era when another popular slogan reigned: "Brazil, Love It or Leave It!" The differing cinematic visions are not merely reflective of middle-class perceptions of three distinct eras in Brazilian history, they are emblematic of the diversity among Brazilian film productions since 1994.

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**TITANIC.** Produced by James Cameron and Jon Landau; written and directed by James Cameron. 1997; color; 210 minutes. Distributor: Twentieth Century Fox.

Like it or not, James Cameron's *Titanic* will be the cultural reference point through which a generation will approach issues of turn-of-the-century gender, class, and technology. To ignore *Titanic* is to set aside a valuable entrance into issues of historical representation and myth making, but to engage it is to venture onto a well-churned battleground of pedants: witness the controversy over which version of "Nearer My God to Thee" was actually played by the ship's band. Rather than repeat the catalog of elisions that mark our world apart from an "authentic" 1912, it is more interesting to view the film as a source for the preoccupations and values of 1997.