

Suffering in Whitened Frames

Historical Films and Representations of Slavery
in Rio de Janeiro during the First Republic (1907-1916)

Sofrimentos em quadros embranquecidos

Filmes históricos e representações da escravidão
no Rio de Janeiro da Primeira República (1907-1916)

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ABSTRACT The theme of this article is the encounter between some historical films that portrayed slavery in Classical Antiquity and Rio de Janeiro's public scene during the First Republic, more precisely in the period between 1907 and 1916. Our main argument is that the consumption of such historical films contributed to the whitening of experiences of slavery in the common sense of *carioca* spectators of the time. The circulation of such productions thus fostered an erasure of the traumatic experiences that slavery represented for Afro-Brazilian populations. Our sources are the films *A Slave's Love* and *The Slave*, available in online databases of the Library of Congress and Cinémathèque Française, as well as advertisements published by several newspapers concomitantly to their exhibitions and collected in the Hemeroteca Digital da Biblioteca Nacional. In our conclusion, we emphasize how the narratives of

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the films used procedures related to the massive genre of melodrama and, in their consumption, obscured some references that were closer to carioca spectators' experiences of slavery in Brazil.

KEYWORDS Cinema, Rio de Janeiro, First Republic

RESUMO O tema deste artigo é o encontro entre alguns filmes históricos que representaram a escravidão na Antiguidade Clássica e a cena pública do Rio de Janeiro durante a Primeira República, mais precisamente no recorte entre 1907 e 1916. Nosso argumento principal é o de que o consumo desses filmes históricos atuou no embranquecimento das experiências da escravidão no senso comum dos espectadores cariocas do período. A circulação dessas produções cinematográficas teria contribuído, assim, para o apagamento das experiências traumáticas que a escravidão representou para as populações afro-brasileiras. Nossas fontes são os filmes *Amor de escrava* e *A escrava branca*, localizados em bases de dados online da Library of Congress e da Cinémathèque Française, além dos anúncios veiculados por diversos jornais por ocasião de suas exibições, coletados na Hemeroteca Digital da Biblioteca Nacional. Em nossa conclusão, enfatizamos como as narrativas dos filmes se apropriaram de procedimentos caros ao gênero massivo do melodrama e, em seu consumo, sobrepuseram-se a alguns referentes próximos à experiência dos espectadores cariocas em torno da escravidão no Brasil.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Cinema, Rio de Janeiro, Primeira República

INTRODUCTION

The transition period between the Empire and the Republic in Brazil was defined by several battles on political, economic, social, and cultural fronts. The shift from a slave-owning society to a class-based one brought about a thorough ideological reassessment of the Brazilian State's relationship with its people, as well as the values and practices that would uphold the legitimacy and effectiveness of such transformations (CARVALHO, 1998; COSTA, 2010).

One of the most pivotal struggles in the assertion of the nascent Republic revolved around the memories of the experiences of the slave system, which came to an end almost simultaneously with the Empire. Rui Barbosa's extreme gesture of burning a mass of documents referring to former slaves – interpreted in various ways by historiography¹ – is a vestige of the centrality that the recent past held for the affirmation of the First Republic and the posture of the regime's ideologues towards it.

In parallel, the whitening ideal gradually gained strength in academic and political debates, and it was embraced by the nascent republican regime (SCHWARCZ, 2005). Stemming from white fears (AZEVEDO, 2004), this ideal was a complex response to the question of dealing with the masses recently freed from slavery. Over more than half a century, it underwent several transformations and was marked by ambiguities (SCHWARCZ, 2005, 23-66).

Within mass culture studies, some authors have already addressed the circulation of the whitening ideal and its effects on caricature, press and cinema (SALIBA, 2002; LUSTOSA, 1993; LAPERA, 2012). These channels of expression served as sources of legitimacy in the affirmation of that ideal in the cultural realm, reinforcing social hierarchies and perpetuating the invisibility of Afro-Brazilian populations.

This article focuses on the encounter between some historical films that staged episodes of slavery in Classical Antiquity and Rio de Janeiro's public scene during the First Republic. Our research has uncovered 18 films produced by foreign studios, some of which achieved commercial success in Rio de Janeiro's cinemas,² thereby attracting

1 For different critical perspectives on Rui Barbosa's act, see: Carvalho (1998), Barbosa (1988), and Slenes (1983).

2 Here is the full list of films located in the Rio de Janeiro exhibition circuit and selected as the initial *corpus* for this article: *Aída, a princesa escrava* (Ítala Filmes, Italy, 1911); *Amor de escrava* (Pathé, France, 1907); *O Centurião São Jorge* (Gaumont, France, 1912); *A escrava de Ali* (Cines, Italy, 1910); *A escrava de Carthago* (Ambrosio, Italy, 1910); *A escrava* (1908); *A escrava branca* (Biograph, USA, 1909); *Escrava por amor* (Cines, Italy, 1911); *O escravo e o leão* (Gaumont, France, 1912); *O filho do escravo* (Biograph, USA, 1910); *Mulheres de Bronze* (Milano Film, Italy, 1912); *Patrícia e a escrava* (Cines, Italy, 1909); *Um idyllio em Corinto* (Gaumont, France, 1909); *Quo vadis?* (Cines, Italy, 1913); *O rapto* (1908); *Sacrifício de escrava*

audiences and guaranteeing the profitability of the largest film market of the country at the time (ARAÚJO, 1985).

The question that will guide this article is the connection between certain narrative elements within these historical films,³ their presentation in the public scene through cinema screenings – that is, their degree of diffusion, estimated through the number of projections – and the conformation of a shared perception among spectators about Brazil's recent past of slavery.

Our main argument is that the consumption (DOUGLAS, ISHERWOOD, 2004) of these historical films contributed to the white-washing of slavery experiences within the collective consciousness of carioca spectators during that period. In line with some racist theories that preached the whitening of the Brazilian population and with a fairly hierarchical republican project regarding racial issues, these films fostered interpretations of the recent past that sought to erase or mitigate the traumatic impact of slavery on Afro-Brazilian communities. That is to say, they exemplify active endeavors to produce a deep oblivion via an erasure of traces (RICOEUR, 2007, 455-462), at the same time seeking to reshape collective memory (HALBWACHS, 1990) to build a sweetened vision about this set of past experiences.

In addition, we argue that the presence of these films in Rio de Janeiro's cinemas constitutes an indication of a play between blocked memory and manipulated memory (RICOEUR, 2007, p. 452-459), insofar as these representations would operate as “substitution phenomena, symptoms, which mask the return of the repressed in different ways”⁴ (RICOEUR, 2007, p. 453) and would be framed by an active silence, preventing memories of recent slavery from reaching the public scene.

(Cines, Italy, 1910); *Spartaco* (Pasquali, Italy, 1914); *Virginia* (Cines, Italy, 1911). The main title found is listed, as the same film could appear under different titles.

3 We adopt Rosenstone's (1995, p. 54-59) concept of historical film. Among other aspects, this author emphasized the importance of historical narratives for the cinematographic market during the silent cinema era and showed that it is a category articulated by the historical subjects themselves.

4 Freely translated: “fenômenos de substituição, sintomas, que mascaram o retorno do recalçado de diversos modos”.

By presenting these arguments, we revisit the idea advanced by Brito Broca (2005, p. 157-160), who considered the use of the past related to Classical Antiquity to be a symptom of feelings of racial inferiority shared by intellectuals and authorities who took part in public debate during the First Republic, such as Olavo Bilac, Euclides da Cunha, Coelho Neto, and Hermes da Fonseca. In his words:

This Greece mania, as well as for the Latinity that had long prevailed among us, was a means, sometimes unconscious, for many Brazilian intellectuals to react against the rebuke of miscegenation, hiding their true racial origins, in a country that had stigmatized the contribution of black blood⁵ (BROCA, 2005, p. 157).

We acknowledge that the author identified a structure of feeling (WILLIAMS, 2002) relevant to the relationship between works and their reception in the public scene.

On a parallel horizon, Lima Barreto's criticisms against Hellenism were used in intellectual disputes, mainly against Coelho Neto. They were explored by Barbosa (2017, p. 238-244). At other moments, the writer also criticized the erasure of African heritage in Brazilian culture at the time, directly relating it to the use of this classic repertoire (BARBOSA, 2017, p. 169-180; SEVCENKO, 1983, p. 123-125).⁶ Read together, Broca's (2005) thesis and Barreto's censures allow us to infer

5 Freely translated: "Essa mania da Grécia, como também da latinidade que de há muito prevalecia entre nós, era um meio, por vezes inconsciente, de muitos intelectuais brasileiros reagirem contra a increpação da mestiçagem, escamoteando as verdadeiras origens raciais, num país que estigmatizara a contribuição do sangue negro".

6 Macário (2005, p. 66) also considered Lima Barreto to be one of the intellectuals "interested in fighting against the traditionalist and evasive tenor of the reference [to classical culture] and replacing it with the observance of present and 'living' issues (...) and, especially, national ones, on the path that will lead to the main concerns of the modernist movement". Freely translated: "interessados em combater o teor tradicionalista e evasivo d[a] referência [à cultura clássica] e de substituí-lo pela observância de questões presentes e 'vivas' (...) e, especialmente, nacionais, no caminho que conduzirá às principais preocupações do movimento modernista".

that racially oriented interpretations were directed towards products that drew upon elements from Antiquity.⁷

Even as we acknowledge that our initial effort to understand the interplay between these historical films and cinematic audiences draws from these contributions, we need to highlight some differences. We extend our arguments beyond intellectual circles and seek to situate such mass culture dynamics as one of the possible movements relating to the then recent past of slavery. The fact that we were able to locate 18 films in the exhibition circuit in Rio de Janeiro is significant evidence that the “Greece mania” transcended debates among intellectuals and reached sectors with lower levels of literacy, especially the middle classes, which were inserted in the same horizon of “casual Hellenism” (BROCA, 2005, p. 153-154). In other words, the need to situate oneself minimally within the framework of classical culture became ingrained, thanks to the pedagogical potential of the then-emerging medium of cinema.

It is necessary to point out that mass culture should be understood as a complex arrangement of mediations (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2003), rather than as a homogeneous or unilineal performance by its means and actors in the public sphere. It must be examined from a perspective that pays attention “to the articulations between communication practices and social movements, to the different temporalities and to the plurality of cultural matrices”⁸ (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2003, p. 270).

Our arguments thus identify only one of these mediations within mass culture – the whitewashing of past experiences of slavery. This is by no means the only mediation regarding such past experiences, even though its significance warrants our analysis. From the outset, it

7 We know that slavery in Antiquity is an academically established field of study. We also recognize that the issue of slavery goes beyond the experience of Brazilian colonization. It is impossible, however, to discuss these themes in-depth within the limits of an article. Therefore, we chose to keep our focus on the forgetfulness surrounding slavery throughout the First Republic.

8 Freely translated: “para as articulações entre práticas de comunicação e movimentos sociais, para as diferentes temporalidades e para a pluralidade de matrizes culturais”.

is crucial to emphasize we are not imposing a deterministic interpretation on the presence of these films in the public scene. Instead, we aim to establish connections between the act of attending cinemas and far-reaching structuring processes that intertwine with the circulation of tastes and repertoires.

The primary criterion for selecting the film *corpus* was the number of screenings that took place in Rio de Janeiro's cinemas, as identified through our research. Not only do numerous screenings strongly suggest commercial success, they also point to a potential shaping of shared perceptions among spectators about slavery in the past. In this regard, *A Slave's Love*⁹ and *The Slave*¹⁰ stand out for their degree of circulation within the exhibition circuit, for the narrative mechanisms they employed, and for the traces they left in the periodicals used as sources throughout our research. Other, less central, criteria were adopted: availability of copies of films in online databases, most helpful when access to archives was restricted; presence of relevant production data on film library websites; other traces of film narratives published by the press at the time, which constitute an indication of the popularity of these stories.

A Slave's Love is a 7-minute and 43-second production by Pathé Frères (France), directed by Albert Capellani. The narrative is set in an indeterminate moment in Ancient Greece and revolves around the love affair between Polymos – a free Athenian citizen – and a slave, whose outcome is tragic. In turn, *The Slave*, an 11-minute production by the company Biograph (United States), directed by David Griffith, follows the journey of Nerada, a free Greek citizen in Ancient Rome, who refuses a marriage proposal from a wealthy Roman nobleman to

9 AMOUR d'esclave. Direction: Albert Capellani. France: Pathé Frères, 1907, 7 min 43 s. Available at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006642150/>. Access on: 18 Nov., 2022. Screened in Brazil under the title *Amor de escrava*.

10 THE SLAVE. Direction: David Griffith. USA: Biograph Co., 1909, 11 min. Available at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015600217/>. Access on: 18 Nov. 2022. Screened in Brazil under the title *A escrava branca*.

marry a young painter out of love. The obstacles she faces in pursuing this relationship are at the center of the plot.¹¹

Advertisements featuring the schedule of cinematographers were published on the back of newspapers. This gave them a prominent place in the visual economy of that medium since it was not necessary to open the newspaper to read them. They also varied greatly in terms of shape and size. For the most part, they contained the cinema's address, ticket prices, session times, titles, and brief synopses of the films. These sources were gathered through the collection of periodicals available at the Hemeroteca Digital da Biblioteca Nacional,¹² focusing primarily on large-circulation newspapers that published advertisements for entertainment venues in Rio de Janeiro, such as *Jornal do Brasil*, *Correio da Manhã* and *Gazeta de Notícias*. In addition to these advertisements, we also examined films that we were able to locate on platforms of institutions such as the Library of Congress and the Cinémathèque Française, which made them available along with relevant information about their production and exhibition.

The decision to focus on the period between 1907 and 1916 stems from the consolidation of the presence of cinematographers in the urban landscape of Rio de Janeiro and the establishment of the habit of going to the cinema as an important leisure activity in the lives of many residents in the city (BERNARDET, 1995). This timeframe also corresponds to a relatively stable period of the First Republic, during which the erasure of slavery's past and popular practices became more clearly outlined, particularly due to the urban reform carried out by Pereira Passos (SEVCENKO, 1983).

Methodologically, we adopt Carlo Ginzburg's (2007) evidential paradigm for the analysis of textual sources, as we have discussed elsewhere (LAPERA; SOUZA, 2010). Based on apparently negligible signs

11 Both productions can be placed within the "pressure for narrativity" outlined by Costa (2008, p. 112-115), pointing to market, production, and public issues as driving forces of their focus on narration, in detriment of the "attractions" which were a key feature of Early Cinema.

12 HEMEROTECA DIGITAL BRASILEIRA. In: *Biblioteca Nacional Digital*. Available at: <http://bdigital.bn.br/hemeroteca-digital>. Access on: 18 Nov. 2022.

– the advertisements for cinematographers published in newspapers in the first decades of the 20th century – we believe it is possible to trace them back to the social structure. Just like Ginzburg (2007, p. 177), we start from the assumption that, “if reality is opaque, there are privileged areas – signs, clues – that allow it to be deciphered”.¹³

It is important to emphasize that we did not find qualitative sources – programs, distributors’ brochures, film reviews, memoirs, etc. – that refer specifically to the circulation of these films in Brazil. However, we do not perceive this as an obstacle in our attempt to connect these productions and their consumption to broader structuring processes. These gaps should not be filled, but incorporated into the production of historical knowledge, as Ginzburg (2006) advocated on another occasion.

When it comes to film analysis, our exploration of melodrama draws on insights from Baltar (2019), Brooks (1995), and Xavier (2003) regarding the genre and its relationship with mass culture. We assume that filmic representations operate an active production of the world that informs practices (CHARTIER, 1988), rather than merely propagating the past in a superficial manner.

Our interpretive endeavor engages with the tension exposed by Robert Darnton (1990, p. 55-56) when he analyzed Andrzej Wajda’s film *Danton* and the double movement of its representation of the French Revolution for the Polish public of the 1980s: “of course, no one has any way of knowing what the Polish see in *Danton* unless you interview a large number of them at a safe distance from the police. But it seems likely that many episodes in the film take on special significance in the conditions that followed the Solidarity ban”.¹⁴ The temporal distance in relation to our object, the scarcity of sources, and the absence of spectators impose similar limitations upon us.

13 Freely translated: “se a realidade é opaca, existem zonas privilegiadas – sinais, indícios – que permitem decifrá-la”.

14 Freely translated: “é claro que ninguém tem como saber o que vêem os poloneses em *Danton*, a não ser que se entrevistasse um grande número deles a uma distância segura da polícia. Mas parece provável que muitos episódios do filme assumem um significado especial nas condições que se seguiram à proscrição do Solidariedade”.

WHITENED DOUBLES IN THE PAST: EMOTIONS AND ENGAGEMENTS IN SLAVERY DRAMAS IN THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Lewinsky (2012, p. 225-227) situates the restoration of *A Slave's Love* (1907) within a larger process of recovery of its director, Albert Capellani, as one of the pioneers of silent cinema. This rediscovery began in the 1990s and gained momentum in the following decade. When analyzing the physical catalog available in the archives of the French production company Pathé Frères, the author highlighted references to literary works of figures such as Couperus and Sienkewicz, as well as the film's affinity to narrative patterns of 19th-century historical novels. She also underscores how the focus on an ordinary Athenian citizen was linked to the director's intention and was emphasized in the film's marketing to French and international exhibitors.

In Rio de Janeiro, the film premiered on October 18, 1907, at Cinematograph Parisiense, the first cinema exclusively dedicated to cinematographic activity, which had been established in August of the same year (ARAÚJO, 1985). The audience predominantly consisted of middle-class and elite patrons who frequented Avenida Central, much like other theaters in the newly renovated area of the capital. We found sources related to the exhibition of *A Slave's Love* between 1907 and 1912, an unusually long period for silent films. It was screened in at least 17 movie theaters located in ten different neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro and Niterói, in addition to itinerant exhibitions in other cities throughout the state.¹⁵

15 We were able to locate references to exhibitions in the following cinematographers: Cinematographo Parisiense (Avenida Central); Pavilhão Internacional (Praça Tiradentes), Cinematographo Brasil (Engenho de Dentro), Cinematographo Paris (Praça Tiradentes), Parque Novidades (Praça Onze), Cinematographo Colosso (Praça Tiradentes), Cinematographo Ouvidor (Centro), Cinema Sant'anna (near Central do Brasil), Cinema Brasileiro (at the 1908 National Exhibition), Cinema-Palace (Centro), Cinema Velo (Tijuca), Cinema Excelsior (Catete), Cinematographo High-Life (Botafogo), Cinematographo Livramento (Gamboa), Cinematographo Chic (Avenida Central), Coliseu Cinema (Cascadura); Cinema Staffa (Niterói); Cinema Polyterpsia (Niterói), in addition to itinerant exhibitions in Petrópolis and Campos.

It is also important to note that some theaters exhibited the film multiple times,¹⁶ suggesting a high degree of dissemination and commercial success. This achievement can be partially attributed to the efforts of the distributor Marc Ferrez & Cia. According to Moraes (2014, p. 283-284), the company secured exclusivity rights for Pathé Frères films in Brazil starting from 1907, employing aggressive commercial strategies to occupy cinematographers. This extensive network constitutes an indication that the film analyzed successfully triggered interpretive categories that related to social structures (GINZBURG, 2007), condensing world views that were shared by Rio de Janeiro's spectators.

In *A Slave's Love*, Polymos is a bored master who falls in love with one of his female slaves. The narrative follows the developments of this relationship. Seduced by her dance, he begins to dream of the slave, and she reciprocates his desire. However, their amorous interlude is abruptly interrupted by the protagonist's wife, who orders the guards to imprison the slave and subsequently poison her. Polymos goes to the prison to rejoin his beloved. Witnessing her death and discovering the poisoned cup, he drinks from it and agonizes, to the despair of his wife, who also joins the scene.

The first noteworthy aspect of the representation conveyed by the film is the focus on an ordinary Athenian citizen, rather than on a mythological, dynasty- or royalty-related character. Even though he is a free and wealthy citizen, Polymos is portrayed with human qualities, devoid of supernatural, mythological, and/or divine traits. This representation closely aligns with the depiction of the bourgeois man that prevailed in the 19th century (GAY, 1995; 2002), allowing for identification with the male and middle-class audience.

In Capellani's film, the role of the master brings together the characteristics of innocence, abnegation, and benevolence. The male figure is portrayed as a synthesis of qualities that render the master-slave

16 Cinematographer Parisiense screened the film at four different occasions (October 1907, October 1908, March 1909, and January 1911), and there are records of two separate seasons at cinematographers Brazil, Paris, Ouvidor, and Velo.

relationship morally acceptable, framed by the conventions of the melodrama genre, aimed mainly – although not exclusively – at propagating the world view of the upper classes (XAVIER, 2003, p. 96-97). The master's innocence positions him as the object of the slave's seduction, removing from him the responsibility for marital betrayal. His self-denial is also translated into the rupture of the master-slave hierarchy and his ultimate act of suicide, through which he sacrificed his own life for the love of the slave. Finally, benevolence makes him care about the fate of his beloved slave, going after her at upon her arrest.

This representation of the master in *A Slave's Love* contributes to a reading of the world that strips him away of the weight of supporting the slave system. Thus, it promotes forgetfulness by erasing traces (RICOEUR, 2007), preventing memories of trauma related to the figure of the slave owner from emerging in the public scene. As a direct consequence, the most recent experience of slavery becomes devoid of accountable agents, in proximity to the movement of modern representation that accentuated “the identity of status that brings stage [here, screen] figures closer to the audience”¹⁷ (XAVIER, 2003, p. 92).

In the foreground of the film, Polymos is displayed in an armchair, quite bored. At the behest of his wife, a slave girl enters the room and begins to dance for him. Very excited with the dance, Polymos gets up and attempts to go towards the slave, only to be restrained by his wife, who tells the slave to leave. The presentation of the romantic plot culminates in the next sequence, when the slave appears offering flowers and then kisses the mouth of a statue depicting her master. The gesture is witnessed by Polymos, who rushes towards her and asks her to dance. The sequence ends with a kiss between them.

17 Freely translated: “a identidade de status que aproxima as figuras do palco [aqui, da tela] e da plateia”.

Image 1: Polymos Witnesses the Slave's Kiss



Source: Frame of the movie *A Slave's love*. Available at <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006642150>. Access on: 18 Nov. 2022.

The dance reappears in another moment. After being led to his bed by a male slave, Polymos sleeps. Meanwhile, the female slave enters his room and begins to dance. A visual fusion ensues, indicating that the master is dreaming. Throughout his dream, the slave dances alongside a corps de ballet. Amidst the collective movements of this ensemble, the slave stands out as the other dancers revolve around her and then position themselves behind her, effectively placing her in the foreground of the image.

In addition to symbolizing the master's sexual desire for the slave, it is possible to draw a parallel between this representation and that of the black slave in Brazil, insofar as the same element of dance was often used in chronicles and other arts to portray slaves as lascivious and malicious. We speculate that, in its reception, the film activated a compensatory mechanism, in which the "black danger" (SÜSSEKIND, 1982, p. 54) represented by the potential misleading of the master by the black slave's seduction and the consequences thereof were mitigated by the fact that the narrative featured a white slave.

The film's substitution of a black female body for a white one aligns with Macário's (2005, p. 45-51) analysis of another cultural habit associated with Rio de Janeiro's elite and middle classes in the early decades of the 20th century: sea bathing. The chronicles examined by Macário, steeped in references to classical Greco-Roman culture, depict a more liberated display of sexuality, which was associated with Ancient Greece. However, the author notes the inherent ambiguity of this experience of transformation concerning bodies and clothing:

For the imaginary gaining force within the bourgeoisie, the delightful display of the beautiful and healthy athletic body and the libertarian behavior based on a modern fad are completely different from any idea of promiscuity and sensuality arising from the behavior of the economically lower classes, which were simply banished from the official and elitist plan of modernizing and “regenerating” society¹⁸ (MACÁRIO, 2005, p. 49).

Therefore, we can infer that the revival of classical culture is again associated with the dissemination of mass habits, inserted in the same game of masking social differences that is triggered in the consumption of the film's narrative. The body to be exposed on Rio de Janeiro's beaches is once more understood in light of the ideology of whitening and the physical removal of lower-class subjects from the spaces of sociability cherished by the bourgeoisie. In other words, they form a *continuum* with the projection of images in *carioca* cinemas at the time.

Within the film's idyllic portrayal, the parties are equalized, fostering a consensus on the approximation between them. The representation of the encounter between master and slave as peaceful not only

18 Freely translated: “Para o imaginário que frutificava no seio da burguesia está completamente diferenciada a deliciosa exposição do belo e saudável corpo desportista e o comportamento libertário baseado em um modismo moderno de qualquer ideia de promiscuidade e sensualidade advinda do comportamento das classes economicamente inferiores, simplesmente banidas do plano oficial e elitista de modernização e ‘regeneração’ da sociedade”.

serves as a moral justification for slavery itself but acts mainly as an engagement in this indulgent self-image of the white man in the public scene (GAY, 2002, p. 72). At this point, the engagement proposed by the melodrama captures the audience's sensory reaction (BALTAR, 2019, p. 97) and functions as an interpretive key that underpins the dissemination of a shared perception in which slavery is perceived from a greatly attenuated point of view. By “mobiliz[ing] sensorial and sentimental reactions of the audience”¹⁹ (BALTAR, 2019, p. 100), *A Slave's Love* shifts the tension to the affective master-slave relationship and acts in the manipulation of memory, removing the violence from the public/systemic scope and condensing it into a private relationship.

This classic past begins to be read in a pattern similar to that identified by Sússekind (1982, p. 25-28) in her analysis of José de Alencar's novel *Senhora*. She highlights that although the novel does not directly address the slave system, it interrogates this issue through the affective relationship between the protagonist and her husband: “by transferring slavery to an affective context, the relationship of domination itself is justified; it is the result of love”²⁰ (SÜSSEKIND, 1982, p. 28).

Regarding this cinematographic production, the transference occurs in relation to the past: slavery appears, but in its old guise. Despite its foreign origin, the film's commercial success cannot be dissociated from its narrative elements, such as the portrayal of the protagonist-master and the idyllic master-slave relationship. Thus, we can infer that the film's popularity coincides with the construction of a “softer” image of the slave master, which would be mobilized in historical representations of supposedly less violent forms of slavery even in later decades, by ideologues such as Gilberto Freyre and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (SÜSSEKIND, 1982, p. 34-36).

In the film, the element of violence often associated with portrayals of slavery is shifted away from the relationship between master and

19 Freely translated: “mobiliza[ndo] reações sensoriais e sentimentais da plateia”.

20 Freely translated: “transferindo-se a escravidão para um contexto afetivo, a própria relação de domínio se justifica, é fruto do amor”.

slave. Instead, it is depicted through the behavior of the master's wife, who plays the role of villain in the narrative: she represses the affective relationship between her husband and the slave, orders her to be arrested, and instructs the guards to serve her poison in the cell. The redemption of the idyllic relationship is attributed to the master, who visits the slave in jail, drinks the liquid from a poisoned glass, and dies embracing her, as his wife witnesses his death.

The representation of Classical Antiquity in the film is reminiscent of Broca's (2005, p. 154) observations regarding Brazilian literary production, which would constitute "a cardboard Greece, purely decorative, having nothing in common with the true Hellenic spirit".²¹ By additionally associating the cinematographic work with a colonial imaginary about modern slavery, we can possibly infer that the portrayal of women in the film bears striking resemblance to the depiction of women within the Brazilian slave system. When addressing Machado de Assis' short story *O caso da vara*, Gomes (2017) emphasizes that it falls upon the mistress to play the villain, by arbitrarily inflicting a cruel punishment on her slave. Identifying in the short story a synthesis of the contradictions of the transition from Monarchy to Republic, the author highlights that "*sinhá* Rita's living room reveals a lot about Brazil, in allegorical terms, but it is also the specific record of its historicity, in a realistic sense"²² (GOMES, 2017, p. 123). This simultaneously allegorical and realistic movement described by Gomes is also present in the relationship between the film's narrative and the *carioca* public of that period, whereby the figure of the master's wife in Ancient Greece can be read in parallel with that of the *sinhá*.

Regarding the theme of repression, two aspects of filmic representation are noteworthy. Firstly, the presence in the scene of the guards, who carry out the orders of Polymos' wife, escort the slave to jail, and

21 Freely translated: "uma Grécia de cartolina, puramente decorativa, nada tendo em comum com o verdadeiro espírito helênico".

22 Freely translated: "a sala de *sinhá* Rita tem muito de Brasil, em termos alegóricos, mas também é o registro específico de sua historicidade, em sentido realista".

force her to consume the poisoned drink. Since one of the characteristics of melodrama is the repositioning of the law following a conflict (XAVIER, 2003, p. 93), the dramatic function of these guards resonates with the spectators' gaze, insofar as it conforms to the same expectations of affirmation of order that permeate bourgeois culture.

Once more, the film's representation resonates with practices associated with modern slavery, as outlined by Späth and Tröhler (2013) in their examination of the bodies of film actors who portrayed ancient slavery. The authors point out that the images of Spartacus, Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, and Nero managed to survive through sculpture and painting. In the case of cinema, they face the following dilemma:

For the majority of ancient figures, however, a new tension arises, because no ancient body fiction can be made out. Twentieth-century actors thus shadow box with a symbolic body that is a modern construction from the outset – albeit one that stakes a claim to ancient referentiality (SPÄTH; TRÖHLER, 2013, p. 44).

We thus understand that this representation, since it constitutes an extension of the mistress' gaze and punitive vigilance, is similar to that of the *capitães-do-mato* in Brazilian slavery. Both were responsible for the punishment of transgressions (escapes, rebellions, etc.) and exercised a diffused form of the policing of customs. Moreover, they are temporally close to the spectators' experiences.

The second aspect pertains to the presence of a black actor in the battalion of Greek guards. Even though *A Slave's Love* is a foreign film, this man plays a role which is similar to that of black characters in Brazilian silent cinema. Carvalho's (2003, p. 162) analysis of the film production during that era highlights the limited presence of black characters in the silent films made in Brazil. According to him, "black people appear [in these films] laterally, that is, almost always on the edges and in the background of the frames and without any dramatic

function”²³ In the specific case of fiction films, Carvalho (2003, p. 163) is even more emphatic in his diagnosis: “the mismatch between the central representation and what we see at the edges and in the background of the frame is evident in street scenes, such as those in the films *The Lawyer’s Daughter* and *The Secret of the Hunchback*”²⁴ This narrative strategy aligns closely with the consumption of a classic past by the *carioca* public, placing emphasis on white characters to obliterate the experience of Brazilian slavery, relegating it to the margins.

Image 2: Guards Arrest the Slave under Order of Polymos’ Wife



Source: Frame of the movie *A Slave’s love*. Available at <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006642150>. Access on: 18 Nov. 2022.

23 Freely translated: “negro aparece [nesses filmes] de forma lateral, isto é, quase sempre nas bordas e no fundo dos enquadramentos e sem nenhuma função dramática”.

24 Freely translated: “o desencontro da representação central com o que vemos nas bordas e no fundo do enquadramento é evidente nas cenas de rua como, por exemplo, nos filmes *A filha do advogado* e *O Segredo do Corcunda*”.

In turn, the female slave is portrayed as the main causer of her own demise. She assumes an active role within the affective relationship, seducing the master with her dance, activating desire even in his dreams, and awakening him with a kiss. Having seduced her master, the slave becomes the target of his wife's wrath. The film depicts the latter's reaction as a consequence of the former's actions. The imprisonment and poisoning of the captive thus appear as moral punishments for the violation of order and the master-slave hierarchy. In *A Slave's Love*, the stigma of slavery falls upon the behavior of the female captive, rather than on slave property itself or the masters' actions. This aligns with the ideology of whitening, which placed the blame for the evil legacies of the slave system on its victims and not on its perpetrators, thereby holding these victims individually and collectively accountable (ALBERTO, 2011, p. 4-9).

Once again, the melodramatic elements of the film allow us to establish parallels with the then recent history of slavery in Brazil. The portrayal of the female slave closely resembles the representation of black women as lascivious and seductive, "with attitudes and concerns typical of the little mistresses of the big house [, that] work mainly as a concealment, via fiction, of the concrete life conditions of black women, who were object of pleasure and labor force at the service of a slave-owning society"²⁵ (SÜSSEKIND, 1982, p. 30). In the fruition of this narrative by the audience, erasure operates through the displacement of suffering that arises from slavery, emphasizing the melodramatic engagement in the tragic end of a white protagonist.

In short, the active dimension of deep forgetting (RICOEUR, 2007) through the consumption of the film occurs on three levels. Firstly, the Ancient Greek master functions as a double of the Brazilian slave owner, engendering a self-indulgent view of the role of the upper-class white man. Secondly, the master's wife, as a double of the *sinhá*,

25 Freely translated: "com atitudes e preocupações próprias às sinhazinhas da casa-grande[, que] funciona principalmente como um ocultamento, via ficção, das condições concretas de vida da mulher negra, objeto de prazer e força de trabalho a serviço de uma sociedade escravocrata".

catalyzes the melodramatic evil pole and becomes responsible for the systemic cruelty of slavery. Lastly, the white slave condenses the suffering caused by slavery, erasing its Brazilian referent, namely the enslaved black woman.²⁶

BETWEEN IDENTIFICATIONS AND ERASURES: REPRESENTATIONS OF MASTERS AND ENSLAVED SUBJECTS IN THE PUBLIC SCENE OF RIO DE JANEIRO'S BELLE ÉPOQUE

The examination of cinema audiences in Rio de Janeiro during the First Republic is a necessary step to understanding the consumption of representations of slavery. Cinema established itself in the entertainment market in Rio de Janeiro following theater, which was a prominent source of diversion (MORAES, 2014, p. 212-217). Its expansion was part of the urban reforms undertaken by Mayor Pereira Passos, aimed at controlling the circulation of lower-class individuals and elements culturally linked to them in the noble areas of the then Federal Capital (SEVCENKO, 1983).

We have argued elsewhere that ticket prices also served as a segmentation element for the audience (LAPERA, 2020). Although individuals from the lower classes could not generally make cinema a regular habit of consumption, they did go to screening rooms, albeit less frequently. We also emphasized the role that the press played in building a self-image of a middle-class audience and the exhibitors' efforts to draw public within the middle and upper social strata. Having been chosen for cinema programming because of their commercial potential, films that portrayed classical slavery enacted mechanisms activated by melodrama and were directed preferentially – although not exclusively – to such audience. It is important to note that this public had gradually formed

26 These are not simple parallels regarding slavery in antiquity and modernity, but a recognition that these representations of classical slavery were intertwined with readings of the modern phenomenon of slavery, in the realm of the production of cultural goods (for film directors and producers from countries central to the capitalist system – USA and France) as much as in the case of consumption evaluated in this article.

in Brazil since the mid-nineteenth century, based on the consumption of serial novels published in periodicals (MEYER, 1996, p. 292).

In parallel, the majority of the Afro-Brazilian population faced precarious conditions of dwelling, work, urban mobility, and access to education. They were pushed out of the noble areas of the then recently reformed capital and persecuted for their religious and popular practices (SEVCENKO, 1983, p. 25-36). They also faced competition from waves of recent immigrants who arrived in the city in a scenario of structural unemployment. Thus, they had little income left for leisure, since most of it had to be spent on subsistence items (CHALHOUB, 2012). Considering all these structural factors, we can infer that bourgeois-leaning leisure activities such as cinema were not primarily intended for this population in the post-Pereira Passos Reform scenario.

The Slave, a 1909 Biograph (USA) production directed by David W. Griffith, is a lesser-known work compared to *Intolerance* (1916) and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The historiography of American cinema has paid scarce attention to this film, indicating its relative invisibility within the broader panorama of Griffith's works.²⁷ However, *The Slave* was screened in Rio de Janeiro for almost a month, between the last weeks of September and the first half of October 1909, in four rooms.²⁸ It had been announced for at least a week before its premiere,²⁹ underscoring the distributors' and exhibitors' expectations for its success.

On the day of its premiere, Cinema Ouvidor's advertisement, published on the back of the newspaper *O Paiz*, provided detailed information about the film's narrative, which was quite unusual for that

27 Griffith directed more than 200 short films between 1908 and 1912, maintaining a steady presence in cinema until the early 1920s. See: D. W. Griffith. In: *IMDb*. Available at <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000428/>. Access on: 18 Nov. 2022.

28 It was released at Cinema Ouvidor on September 21, 1909, and exhibited at Cinema Brasil, Cinema Sul América and Cinematographo Sant'anna, the latter being located in the surroundings of the Central Station of Brazil.

29 Some advertisements on September 14, 15 and 16, 1909, mention the premiere of the film at the Cinema Ouvidor: [Cinema Ouvidor's Advertisement]. *Jornal do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, 14 Sept. 1909, p. 16; *Correio dos Theatros. Correio da Manhã*, Rio de Janeiro, 15 Sept. 1909, p. 2; [Cinema Ouvidor's Advertisement]. *Jornal do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, 16 Sept. 1909, p. 2.

time.³⁰ This is yet another indication of the commercial interest generated by the film and the exhibitors' perception of an alleged public interest.³¹ Similar patterns were observed in advertisements for the other theaters that screened it, albeit with slightly more concise descriptions.

An interesting aspect of the film's commercialization is the choice of the Portuguese translation of its title. The literal translation of *The Slave* would be *A escrava*, but it was released as *A escrava branca* (*The White Slave*). The inclusion of the adjective "white" raises certain issues. This choice can be interpreted as emphasizing the slave's racial aspect, insofar as it serves to mark the difference between the protagonist and black women who had recently been officially freed from slavery. It is important to note that this choice specifically targeted the Brazilian public. Furthermore, the expression "white slave" was used to refer to women – generally from ethnic and national minorities (primarily Jewish, but also Polish, Ukrainian, etc.) – who were forced into prostitution. This issue received significant attention from the press at the time and constituted a point of concern for administrators, civil servants, and politicians (KUSHNIR, 1996).

In terms of comparison, it is important to remember that few Brazilian films produced during the same period portrayed the experience of slavery, and when they did, they primarily focused on whitened female characters. According to the survey carried out by Morettin (1997), the most adapted novel on the subject during the silent period *A Escrava Isaura*, by Bernardo Guimarães. This literary work's plot was set in the slave society of the 19th century and featured a white protagonist. It was adapted four times for the cinema – in 1917, 1922, and twice in 1929 (MORETTIN, 1997, p. 263-288).³²

30 Descriptions of film plots in advertisements would only become frequent from 1913-1914 onwards.

31 [Cinema Ouvidor's Advertisement]. *O Paiz*, Rio de Janeiro, 21 Sept. 1909, p. 12.

32 Still according to the author's survey, of the fifty historical films made between 1907 and 1929 (that is, the production of silent Brazilian cinema), only five portrayed slavery: in addition to the four cinematographic adaptations mentioned above, Antonio Serra filmed in 1909 a version of the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (MORETTIN, 1997, p. 263).

Both lines of representation converge in the plot of *The Slave*, in which slavery alludes to an affective-sexual relationship mediated by ownership. In a previous analysis (LAPERA, 2015), we examined the film through its melodramatic framework, highlighting the absence of ambiguity in the characters' behavior, the centrality of the family, and the reaffirmation of patriarchal order throughout the narrative.

Like *A Slave's love*, *The Slave* features common characters rather than mythological ones and is set in an unspecified moment in Antiquity, this time in Rome. The film's love triangle is formed by the protagonist Nerada, the master Deletius, and the young painter Alachus, who marries Nerada. Together, the couple has a son. The narrative of *The Slave* is guided by Nerada's decision to renounce Deletius' wealth to marry her beloved Alachus and, as a consequence, lead a poor life.

Nerada's self-sacrifice, depicted as a virtue, was effectively exploited by advertising campaigns aimed at attracting the audience in Rio. The premiere announcement by Cinema Ouvidor described the protagonist's behavior: "she rejected the gifts and refused the master's proposals, accepting the court of an honest and poor [man], whom she married".³³ This pattern was reiterated in other advertisements, such as the one for Cinema Sul America, published by *Correio da Manhã*: "it describes the noble and pure feeling of a woman [who refuses] the money that a man offers her to follow the noble impulse mandated by love".³⁴

33 Freely translated: "rejeitava os presentes e recusava as propostas do nobre, aceitando a corte de um honesto e pobre [homem], com quem ela casou-se". [Cinema Ouvidor's Advertisement]. *O Paiz*, Rio de Janeiro, 21 sept. 1909, p. 12. It is important to highlight that we used a similar source published by another periodical in our previous discussion of the film, since similar texts about the film were published in different periodicals during the exhibition period (LAPERA, 2015). This can be interpreted as another sign of the film's commercial success, since the replication of texts – even if they were similar – about the same work was unusual in the press at the time.

34 Freely translated: "descreve o sentimento nobre e puro de uma mulher [que recusa] os milhões que um homem lhe oferece, para seguir o nobre impulso que o amor lhe indica". [Cinema Sul America's Advertisement]. *Correio da Manhã*, Rio de Janeiro, 14 Oct. 1909, p. 8.

Image 3: Nerada Thanks the Master for her Release



Source: Frame of the film *The Slave*. Available at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015600217/>. Access on: 18 Nov. 18, 2022.

It is crucial to emphasize that slavery is represented in the film as a voluntary choice, even in an extreme situation. Nerada, the main character, did not become enslaved because of some external factor (war, domination by another group, etc.), but as a result of her own will, so that her family would not starve, and her son would be saved from a miserable situation. This aspect is strongly underscored in the aforementioned announcements, urging the spectators to engage in the protagonist's drama. As Baltar (2019, p. 103) argues, "the melodramatic differential lies in the articulation of this moralizing pedagogy, which becomes effective due to the nature of sentimental engagement – through the dynamics of mobilization between audience and narrative"³⁵

35 Freely translated: "o diferencial do melodramático está na articulação dessa pedagogia moralizante, que se faz eficaz pelo caráter de engajamento sentimental – pela dinâmica de mobilização entre público e narrativa".

This representation of women also aligns with gender roles assigned to them in the republican family project, wherein they were tasked with upholding moral standards (CAULFIELD, 2000). The film additionally presents the character's enslavement from an individual and meritocratic point of view,³⁶ which further inserts the character within the bourgeois framework of the female social role (GAY, 2002, p. 125-132).

The depiction of poverty in the film resonates with the Brazilian cinematographic production of the time. Costa's (2013) analysis highlights the exclusion of poor and predominantly black populations from silent documentaries produced in Brazil. When they do appear, they are relegated to secondary roles and portrayed on the margins of the images. In *The Slave*, the portrayal of poverty via a white protagonist couple likely operates in a similar vein.

Another noteworthy aspect is the representation of the master. His performance is marked by eloquent gestures as Nerada refuses to marry him, initially conveying a sense of pride. However, upon discovering her personal struggle, he demonstrates selfless behavior and releases her from his ownership, allowing her to reunite with her family.

36 When it comes to modern slavery, the relationship between liberal ideas, capitalism, and the slave system has already been extensively explored by historiography following Williams' (2012) work. In Brazil, authors such as Chalhoub (2009), Süsskind (1982), and Azevedo (2004) emphasize how several intellectuals, politicians, authorities, legislators, and judges had to deal with the apparent contradictions between liberal ideas and the violence of slavery, promoting arrangements in a spectrum that ranged from conciliation to the material and symbolic erasure of enslaved subjects and their traumas.

Image 4: *The Slave's* Main Couple Reunited at the End



Source: Frame of the film *The Slave*. Available at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015600217/>. Access on: 18 Nov. 2022.

This narrative element leads us to the culmination of the protagonist couple's journey, since their reunion is made possible by the master's blessings and is projected into a future marked by union and, above all, forgiveness. The values of union and forgiveness are directly linked to the representation of slavery in the film. Not surprisingly, they featured prominently in newspaper advertisements: "[the master] recognizes the pure and gigantic ideals of this woman, which leads him to be generous in turn, granting her freedom and releasing her back into the domestic home, where her return produces ineffable pleasure, producing love and art, mental, moral, and physical".³⁷

37 Freely translated: "[o senhor] reconhece o ideal puro e gigantesco dessa mulher, que o leva ser generoso por sua vez dando-lhe liberdade reconduzindo ao lar doméstico onde a sua volta produz inefável prazer, produzindo amor e arte, mental, moral e física". [Cinema Sul America's Advertisement]. *Correio da Manhã*, Rio de Janeiro, 14 Oct. 1909, p. 8.

At this moment, the identification between the master and the middle-class spectator is exposed, insofar as the horizon of expectations of their actions is located in the same spectrum of bourgeois values, which condemn revenge that is explicit and marked on the body (GAY, 1995, p. 167-188). Furthermore, the exaltation of union and forgiveness at the end of the film can also be seen as a tendency to erase differences within a bourgeois culture (GAY, 2002, p. 212-216). In the Brazilian context, this erasure was utilized to obscure the sense of injustice surrounding memories of slavery.

The representation of the master in this film complements that in *A Slave's Love*. While the film analyzed in the previous section portrays the master as an object of dispute between the mistress and the slave, remaining seemingly indifferent to the cruelty and irrationality of slavery, in *The Slave* he appears as a propagator of values such as benevolence and selflessness – another trace of the repression of aggressive impulses within bourgeois culture from the 19th century onwards (GAY, 1995, p. 171-174). The same self-indulgence of the upper-class white man which prevailed in the earlier film is reinforced here, rendering him oblivious to the structural consequences of the slave system. This representation of the master was also identified by Chalhoub (2009) as a trait of the collective memory surrounding slavery in Brazil. It was mobilized by the abolitionist movement and updated after the legal end of the slave system, which further reinforces our interpretation that these films contributed to blocking traumatic memories around the slave master from emerging onto the public scene.

The behavior of the master in the film offers one additional parallel with the recent experience of slavery in Brazil. The liberation of the slave Nerada takes place within a horizon of conquest through affection and patronage within interpersonal relationships. This process is quite similar to that described by Sússekind (1982, p. 12-14) regarding the relationships within the slave system in Brazil, which were seen as networks formed from the affections between masters and slaves, intertwining esteem and favor to mitigate the violent nature of slavery. In this sense, Deletius' patronage of Nerada can be understood in relation

to the experience of Rio de Janeiro's spectators, who were familiar with this logic not only in terms of the collective memory of slavery, but also because of the social practices associated with politics and public administration during the First Republic.³⁸

This perception of the relationship between white masters and whitened slave protagonists was also highlighted by Stam (2008, p. 121-123). In his analysis of director Marques Filho's cinematographic adaptation of the novel *A Escrava Isaura*,³⁹ the author notes the valorization of the (white) paternal lineage in the casting of a white actress for the main role, in line with Bernardo Guimarães' original novel. Stam further references the criticism published in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, which referred to the film as a "poem of love and suffering in the era of black slavery"⁴⁰ (quoted by STAM, 2008, p. 123), allowing us to place it in the same horizon of erasure set forth by *The Slave*. Once more, forgetting by erasing traces (RICOEUR, 2007) occurs through the substitution of the black woman with a white protagonist, shifting the focus of identification with the suffering caused by slavery to the latter – a narrative operation shared by the films discussed here.

The representation of the family is another important element in *The Slave*. The protagonist's saga to protect her home and try to save her son from starvation follows a convention of melodrama (BROOKS, 1995, p. 35). This genre identifies in the family the source of everyday experience, in order to explore a moral polarization guided by the absence of ambiguity in characters and actions (BROOKS, 1995, p. 36-37). This perspective is similar not only to the ideals advocated by First Republic leaders (CAULFIELD, 2000), but also to perceptions of the experiences of Brazilian families of enslaved people in the 19th century.

38 On the use of interpersonal relationships in public administration during the First Republic and the reproduction of this logic of patronage in the granting of benefits and persecutions, see Chalhoub (2012).

39 Although the author focuses on the 1929 film version, we believe that the comment can be extended to the 1917 adaptation, since these films would hardly leave the scope of the original literary work in the period covered here.

40 Freely translated: "poema de amor e sofrimento na era da escravidão negra".

Chalhoub (2009), in his analysis of the meanings of freedom for these individuals, recounts several legal battles between them and their masters. In many cases, discussions about whether emancipation would be extended to children or whether parents and children should remain together after the lawsuits took place.

Maternal suffering also found expression in literature. José de Alencar's *Mãe*, a reference work of its time, emphasizes "mainly motherhood and [attenuates] slavery"⁴¹ (SÜSSEKIND, 1982, p. 49). Süssekind (1982, p. 49-52) argues that Alencar obfuscated the protagonist Joana's condition as a slave, shifting the focus to her maternal sacrifice for her son, in a melodramatic attitude, while slavery merely serves as a backdrop. The consumption of *The Slave* can be viewed through a similar lens, in proximity with Alencar's attempt to whitewash the protagonist's experience of maternal suffering.⁴²

Regarding the theme of the family, the emphasis given to the child throughout the narrative is noteworthy. In the very first sequence, children appear throwing flowers at Nerada, as if they were greeting her. This presentation of the protagonist serves the purpose of clearly associating her with the pole of goodness and virtue (XAVIER, 2003, p. 95-99). The next appearance of a child in the film is precisely that of Nerada and Alachus' son, who is depicted as sick and lying in bed. The parents display great concern for their child, which is expressed by the characters' exacerbated gestures, further signaling their virtue. After Nerada goes to the market to enslave herself, the camera focuses on the child again. This time, Alachus kisses him and, in a desperate state, caresses his face and confirms his death. The father then takes the child in his arms, cradling his lifeless body, employing a convention commonly seen in melodrama

41 Freely translated: "principalmente a maternidade e [atenua] a escravidão".

42 At this point, it is interesting to recover the parallelism between the representation of ancient and modern slavery in cinema outlined by Davis (2000, p. 74-99). Although dealing with more recent films, the author suggests that, for both experiences of slavery, very similar narrative conventions about the family are mobilized in cinema, namely the emphasis on female/maternal suffering and on heroism/eminently male protagonism in the struggle against the slave system. This practically constitutes an update of the representations conveyed by silent cinema.

where childhood is depicted as an object of protection by the protagonists (MEYER, 1996, p. 245-249). Finally, after Nerada's release, Alachus welcomes her and delivers the news of their child's death.

The focus on a child's suffering can be connected to the then recent experience of Brazilian slavery, insofar as, throughout the 19th century, a series of changes occurred regarding the perception of this phenomenon. It gradually shifted from being solely viewed from the perspective of the private domain to a prominent presence in the public sphere, due to the issues of emancipation, preservation of the unity of the slave family and their children (CHALHOUB, 2009, p. 122-151). Thus, *The Slave's* portrayal of the death of a white baby was offered for consumption within a circuit that accentuated another erasure of the collective suffering of the Afro-Brazilian population, this time regarding childhood.

We can argue that *The Slave* whitewashes the suffering that was deeply ingrained in the collective memory of individuals who had been enslaved up until a few decades earlier, in a process of appeasement and self-pity on the part of the upper classes regarding the legacy of slavery. Nerada's family can be seen as the whitened "double" of the families who had experienced slavery, and the commotion surrounding the child's death was heightened by the fact that he was white. Here, the ideal of whitening takes on its melodramatic form to place in the spotlight the subjects who should receive the audience's collective compassion.

In a broader perspective, these acts of erasure performed by the analyzed films can be placed within the formulas of silence detected by Trouillot (1995, p. 96). Alongside a mitigation of the experience of slavery itself – given the considerable presence of films depicting Classical Antiquity in the exhibition circuit, the few Brazilian films from the silent period that addressed slavery, and the exclusion of the Afro-Brazilian population from this cinematic production (CARVALHO, 2003; MORETTIN, 1997) –, the consumption of these filmic narratives favors the creation of a void regarding the collective experience of slavery. Ultimately, "the joint effect of these two types of formulas is a powerful silencing: whatever has not been cancelled out in the generalities dies in the cumulative irrelevance of a heap of details" (TROUILLOT, 1995, p. 97).

CONCLUSION

Understanding the reasons for the success of the films discussed here amid *carioca* audiences is a complex task, as little information about their consumption is available. Throughout our analysis, we have attempted to shed light on this aspect by examining the historical context and also the cultural production preceding or contemporaneous to these films. While discussions of media products often revolve around falsifications or manipulations of history, little is said about how they can actively stimulate forgetfulness in the public scene. This article sought to analyze precisely this dimension, which can provide significant insights into the erasures surrounding historically framed subjects. The consumption of both *A Slave's Love* and *The Slave* likely favored such erasures, based on “strategies of forgetting [that] are directly grafted onto [the] work of [narrative] configuration: one can always narrate in another way, suppressing, shifting the emphasis, refiguring the protagonists of the action as well as its contours”⁴³ (RICOEUR, 2007, p. 455).

Drawing from Chalhoub's (2009, p. 79) considerations about how segments of historiography promote the “elimination of black persons from the condition of subject of their own historical experience,”⁴⁴ our intention was to acknowledge the asymmetries inherent in the emerging media of the time. It is impossible to overlook the unequal access to cinematographers during that period, the exhibitors' targeting of an eminently white and middle-class audience, or the expressive number of films centered around Classical Antiquity exhibited in the Rio de Janeiro market, which immersed spectators in the diffusion circuit of the “Greece mania” (BROCA, 2005, p. 157).⁴⁵

43 Freely translated: “estratégias do esquecimento [que se] enxertam diretamente n[o] trabalho de configuração [narrativa]: pode-se sempre narrar de outro modo, suprimindo, deslocando as ênfases, refigurando diferentemente os protagonistas da ação assim como os contornos dela”.

44 Freely translated: “eliminação do negro da condição de sujeito de sua própria experiência histórica”.

45 The 18 films unearthed by our survey refer only to slavery in Classical Antiquity, but countless productions related to Greco-Roman myths, the expansion of the Roman Empire, and

The uses of the classical past cannot be generalized, and therefore, it was crucial to examine the socio-historical conditions of cinema exhibition in Rio de Janeiro during the First Republic. Thus, the mobilization of this repertoire to silence the effects of Afro-Brazilian slavery and construct whitened doubles of these experiences can be situated within this specific moment and in relation to *carioca* audiences of the first decades of the 20th century.

Within the republican society, historical melodrama functioned as a means to reconcile social tensions and establish a collective memory that remained silent about the traumas of slavery. Whitening ceases to be just an “ideal” and starts to inform consumption practices, crystallizing in the shared perceptions of spectators. These practices, along with other effects, had already been produced in academic debates as much as in different practices of the Brazilian State regarding immigration, policing, and control of people deemed potentially dangerous (SCHWARCZ, 2005).

Although the consumption of these historical films focused on the classical past was used to activate a profound forgetfulness (RICOEUR, 2007, p. 437-462) regarding the experience of Afro-Brazilian slavery, they did not operate in isolation in the public scene. Therefore, they were prone to a reversal, in the logic of reserve forgetting (RICOEUR, 2007 p. 427-462). These erasures were by no means impervious to reversal, which occurred more systematically both in the field of historiography, from the 1980s onwards – with the recovery of documentation that sheds light on the role of enslaved subjects in contesting and ultimately overthrowing the exploitative slave system –, and also in mass culture, starting from the 1990s.⁴⁶

the Greek republics were screened in Rio de Janeiro cinemas during the same period.

46 As examples in historiography, we can mention the works of Robert Slenes (1983), Hebe Mattos (2013), Flávio Gomes (1996), Sidney Chalhoub (2009), and Celia Azevedo (2004). In the field of mass culture, we highlight the soap operas *Xica da Silva* (Manchete, 1997) and *Lado a Lado* (Globo, 2012). This does not mean that there have not been previous movements in the same direction, but this recovery of the slave system has become more clearly present from the end of the 20th century onwards.

Finally, it is also possible to conjecture whether the films under analysis might be symptomatic of anxieties projected onto colonization (in the case of *A Slave's Love*) or the North American post-abolition period (in the case of *The Slave*). But that would lead us onto a different path, another detour.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Varia Historia*, who carefully read and made excellent suggestions for improving this article. I would also like to thank the researcher and friend Marina Caminha for reading the article, making suggestions for the research, and supporting me. All the choices made in this study are solely my responsibility.

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Received: 4 May 2022 | Reviewed by the author: 18 Nov. 2022 | Accepted: 19 Jan. 2023