

The lie that told the truth: (Self) publicity strategies and the myth of Mário Peixoto's *Limite*

Bruce Williams

October of 1931 witnessed the inauguration of the statue of Christ the Redeemer atop Corcovado mountain overlooking Rio de Janeiro. The breathtaking cityscape of the 'marvelous city' would now become much like the one we know today; our picture postcard view of Rio was now complete. Less than five months earlier, Rio had provided the venue for the first screening of Mário Peixoto's *Limite*, a film which has become as synonymous with Brazilian cinema as the statue has with the city itself. The difference between the two events is significant; while hundreds of thousands have visited Christ the Redeemer and millions more recognize it as a Brazilian landmark, Peixoto's film was virtually inaccessible for some forty-six years, and during this time, was only viewed by a small inner circle of critics, artists, and students. We are hard-pressed to think of a film in any national cinema which has been at once as absent and present as *Limite*. Despite its initial 1931 screening, this avant-garde feature was never released until 1978, enjoying only occasional private screenings. Nonetheless, a good number of film directors and critics deemed it the greatest Brazilian film of all time, even during its years of obscurity. Moreover, the film's cult status in Brazil (and internationally!) was founded upon a tightly woven net of deception and intrigue which, when unraveled and exposed, has failed to render the film any less of a milestone. One might dub *Limite* 'the lie that redeemed itself', or to appropriate Phillip Core's remarks regarding the phenomenon of camp, 'the lie that tells the truth'.¹ When Bakhtin speaks of a heteroglossia of discourses, his remarks apply to *Limite* in a unique manner, for in this film, we encounter the convergence of myth and reality, of fabrication and

earned acclaim.² Despite the director's own personal self-deception regarding the film's true status, it was in part the mystique *Limite* had attained which spurred a campaign spanning almost two decades to save the masterpiece from irreversible deterioration and to restore it as closely as possible to its original state. Today, thanks to the efforts of the Mário Peixoto Archives in Rio de Janeiro and its curator, Saulo Pereira de Mello, himself one of the two main champions of the restoration of the film, a wealth of documentation exists which permits the construction of an 'archeology' of *Limite* and of its true place as a national cultural icon. Mello, who has edited many of Mário Peixoto's own writings, has produced a cornerstone around which further scholarship on *Limite* can now be undertaken and a solid critical corpus built.

Given the film's absence for many key years in the development of Brazilian cinema, one of the most significant factors contributing to the development of what I will term its 'pre-status' as cultural icon was an extensive publicity strategy which extended from well prior to the film's first screening through its restoration. Integral to this strategy was the self-promotion undertaken by Mário Peixoto and the director's own

Bruce Williams is Professor and Graduate Director of the Department of Languages and Cultures at William Paterson University. His research focuses on issues of national cinematic discourse and on the sociolinguistics of the cinema. He is widely published in such journals as *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *The New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *The Canadian Review of Film Studies* and *The Journal of Film and Video*.
Correspondence to WilliamsB@wpunj.edu.

creation of an extensive apocryphal history of the film's reception, which clouds even recent critical discourse. Pivotal players in this strategy have numbered leaders in the arts, including director Glauber Rocha, poet/songwriter Vinícius de Moraes, and actress Carmen Santos, whose own career was built upon a complex publicity campaign which bestowed on her celebrity status long before her sporadic film career became a reality. The publicity strategy of *Limite*, moreover, embraced individuals who never actually saw the film, among these, Eisenstein and Pudovkin, to whom favorable reviews were attributed.³ Again, had it not been for the film's deceptive paratextual baggage, a cornerstone of Brazilian cinema would have been forever lost.

Long before *Limite* was actually released, critics and students were familiar with its structure and theme. Contributing to this phenomenon were both legitimate reviews (such as those published by Octávio de Faria in *O Fan* and *O Jornal* following the first screening of the film) and apocryphal writings, especially the review attributed to Sergei Eisenstein published in 1965 in *Arquitetura* with an introduction by acclaimed Brazilian director Carlos Diegues).⁴ The film's diegesis, moreover, was familiar to all *conoscenti* of Brazilian cinema who had never had the opportunity to see the film prior to 1978. *Limite* is a feature-length film which is not merely silent, but contains only three intertitles. It relates the elusive story of two women and one man adrift in a boat – we are not privy as to the fate of the vessel from which they have obviously escaped or if the boat in which they are trapped is indeed even a lifeboat – who one-by-one recount events from their lives which reveal the sharp chasm between their aspirations and the limitations/confines (*limites* in Portuguese) imposed by the human condition. The first story tells of a woman who escapes from prison with the help of a jailor, only to fall into the monotony of life as a seamstress. The second story follows a woman who abandons her drunken husband and humdrum existence in a coastal town, all the while fighting the temptation of suicide. The third, by far the most hermetic and ambiguous of the embedded narratives, focuses on a man who is obviously involved with another man's wife. A chance (?) meeting between the rivals in a cemetery is imbued with strong homoeroticism and opens an alternative narrative, which emerges through the fissures of the narrative by means of provocative camera angles, copulatory pans, and an ambivalent interplay of gazes and



Fig. 1. Olga Breno in *Limite* (1931).

gestures, to operate in counterpoint to the primary story line. The characters in all these narratives remained unnamed; the present discussion will follow suit with most criticism on *Limite* and refer to them by the names of the corresponding actors: Olga Breno, Taciana Rei, Raul Schnoor, Mário Peixoto, and Brutus Pedrera.

The elusive narrative is truly secondary. *Limite*'s essence lies in its haunting photography and innovative montage, elements stressed in virtually all critical discourse on the film. The work's rhythmic structure, moreover, was foregrounded in even the most negative critiques following its initial 1931 screening.⁵ As Mário Peixoto himself frequently asserted, the film's story was born from images, and most specifically, from the image of a handcuffed man embracing a woman, her body trapped in the very restraints which hold him prisoner. This image, which Peixoto discovered in Paris in 1929 on the cover of the popular magazine, *Vu*, haunted the future filmmaker and would lead to the creation of the film's rudimentary screenplay.⁶ Thus, the entire concept of the film was inspired by visuals; Mário Peixoto (with Sergei Eisenstein as a *nom de guerre*) once referred to himself as a 'camera-brain registering an eyeball'.⁷

Chasing *Limite*

Limite has been for me the subject of a twenty-seven year personal odyssey, born of segments from the film itself, yet nurtured by the work's extensive paratext. While on a Fulbright-Hayes Research Grant in São Paulo in 1977, I happened on a retrospective of

'Eighty Years of Brazilian Cinema' playing in what I recall to be a cinema triplex near the corner of the Avenida Paulista, later made famous by a telenovela of the same name, and the Rua da Consolação, which stretches from the fashionable Jardins neighborhoods to the downtown urban blight immortalized by Rogério Sganzerla and other directors associated with the so-called 'Garbage Mouth Cycle' of late Sixties, early Seventies films.⁸ I attended a documentary on Mário Peixoto made by his close acquaintance, Ruy Santos, entitled *O homem e o 'Limite'*. The Portuguese title suggests a *double-entendre*, 'The Man and *Limite*', or 'The Man and Boundaries', which conveys much of the existential *angst* of both Mário Peixoto and his film. Interwoven with documentary footage and period photographs were segments from *Limite*. Breathless, I viewed what I perceived to be the most beautiful film images I had ever seen. Not only was my professional destiny in film studies sealed at that moment, but moreover, I embarked on a long-term adventure to decipher the film and its mysteries, which at that time was a next-to-impossible enterprise given the film's inaccessibility.

Although I returned to the United States only a few weeks before the restored film was screened at the Funarte in Rio de Janeiro, it continued to haunt my memory during my remaining years as a graduate student. Unable to view the film for many years, I studied a frame-by-frame analysis of it published in 1978 by Mello. Like most Brazilian critics who had written on the film during its lost years, I had the comfortable feeling of having actually seen the film, so thoroughgoing was Mello's work. Finally, in 1984, Ana Maria Falaschi of Embrafilme graciously allowed me to view the film (repeatedly!) *in situ* in Rio de Janeiro. My viewing of the entire film was like meeting an old friend and realizing that there had always been a sexual attraction; I was astonished, yet thrilled, by the work's inherent homoeroticism. I had never seen this aspect mentioned in critical discourse, and it certainly had not come through in Pereira de Mello's superlative work. In 1988, the film was finally available to me on home video, and later, I had the opportunity to attend a screening of the film in Columbus, Ohio. Each repeated viewing with or without my students enhances my appreciation of its merit.

A visit to the Mário Peixoto Archive in Rio de Janeiro in Fall, 2001 provided me with an unprecedented opportunity to separate reality from fiction, all the while further justifying what I knew to be an

indisputable truth – the film is a milestone in international as well as Brazilian film history. At the same time, my encounters with the Archive have brought home to me the complexity of *Limite*'s paratext and its significance as a historical discourse in and of itself.

Tropical fanzines

The magazine *Cinearte*, Brazil's main 'fanzine' during the silent and early sound era, combined updates on Brazilian film production with broader discussions of world cinema oriented towards a non-specialist audience. On 9 July 1930, the magazine announced that *Limite* was more than half filmed. It listed the cast and principal crew members and suggested that the principal photography would virtually be completed by the end of July. The article lists the actresses as Yolanda Bernardi and Alzira Alves, stressing that the latter was making her debut and did not yet have a screen name.⁹ Only three months later, the magazine ran a feature on the making of the film and interviewed the two actresses, this time under the names of Taciana Rei and Olga Breno. The interviews were held in the Cinedia studios, where some 'final details' were being filmed. The short article, spanning slightly less than two pages of the 8 October 1930 edition and entitled 'The Stars of *Limite*' ('As estrelas de *Limite*') includes two stills of Olga Breno (one of them the famous handcuffs still), a publicity still of Taciana Rei posing coyly in front of a car, and a publicity photo for *Limite* depicting Mário Peixoto opening a wooden box labeled 'Mário Peixoto, Magaratiba, Handle with Care' from which Taciana Rei emerges, holding a small suitcase.¹⁰ The latter photo is labeled 'Taciana Rei Arriving in Mangaratiba where *Limite* Was Filmed. Mário Peixoto Opens the Package'.

In the interview with Taciana Rei, which opens the article, *Cinearte* gives itself credit for her discovery by Mário Peixoto, explaining that the director searched the archives of the magazine, where he found a still photograph of actress Yolanda Bernardi, whom he would christen 'Taciana Rei' for *Limite*. Rei contextualizes Peixoto's film, alluding to her favorite Brazilian films, Ademar Gonzaga's *Barro humano* (*Human Clay*, 1929) (in which she herself played) and Humberto Mauro's *Sangue mineiro* ('*Mineiro*' *Blood*, 1929) as well as to her favorite American film, Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*. Stressing that she always dreamed of being Lillian Gish, Rei, nonetheless, cites Norma Talmadge and Brigitte Helm as actresses she particularly admires. Referring to her role in *Limite*,

Rei discusses the particular challenges of her favorite scene in which Raul Schnoor resuscitates her by throwing water on her face as she lies unconscious in the boat.¹¹ She lauds Peixoto's talents as a director, specifically alluding to the simplicity of his explanations and the intelligence with which he directs actors. The interview continues as the actress discusses her personal tastes, her ideas on romance, her love for Italian novels, and her belief in the superiority of silent film over talkies.

Like Rei, Olga Breno mentions *Barro humano* and *Sangue mineiro* as her favorite films. Together with Brazilian actress Grácia Morena, she stresses her admiration for Greta Garbo and Gary Cooper. Corroborating her colleague's views, Breno argues that 'talkies are the worst thing in the world'. Describing her favorite scene as one in which she remains afloat holding onto a piece of wood following the storm at sea, she affirms Mário Peixoto's directorial merits. The rest of the interview exposes personal information, including her dislike for reading – except *Cinearte!*

Filling out the second page of the featurette are brief notes from Hollywood, including updates on the work of Howard Hawks, Victor Fleming, Lionel Barrymore, Barbara Stanwyck, Colleen Moore, and Laurel and Hardy. Like all editions of *Cinearte*, issue number 241 is heavily oriented towards American cinema. Yet the brief featurette on the making of *Limite* suggests the film's commercial potential and attempts to create a star persona for Taciana Rei and Olga Breno in the shadow of the Hollywood greats whose photos and stories plaster the remaining pages. The presence of publicity photos attests to Peixoto's firm belief in the commercial merit of his project and in essence initiates the mystique of the film some seven months prior to its first screening.¹²

Will it play in Piauí?

The invitation-only premiere of *Limite* in Rio de Janeiro's Cinema Capitólio was held at 10:30 AM on Sunday, 17 May 1931. The event, sponsored by the Chaplin Club, was introduced by Otávio de Faria. Over the course of the days that followed, a number of reviews, ranging from overwhelmingly positive to scathing, appeared in the local press. On the negative side, the 18 May 1931 edition of the progressive newspaper *A Esquerda* is harsh in its assessment of the film's intent and artistic merit. Anonymously authored, the article source speaks favorably of the importance of rhythm in *Limite*, yet indicts the film's



Fig. 2. Mário Peixoto and Taciana Rei in a publicity shot for *Limite*. From *Cinearte*, 8 October 1930.

exaggerated camera movements and pointless special effects (especially the use of embedded negative images). It moreover scathingly critiques the female performers who essentially 'do nothing'.¹³ On the other hand, the 'Bazar' section of the 19 May edition of *Diário da Noite* was most favorable.¹⁴ The most impressively positive review, however, appeared on 19 May 1931 in *A Pátria*. *Limite* is described as a film of intelligence, of cerebralism, something difficult for conventional spirits to accept. 'It is a film which we must feel, live, continue. The brain must keep following the camera step-by-step, completing things merely suggested [my translation]'.¹⁵ The review continues by discussing the mood of the audience at the 17 May 1931 screening and of the mixed reactions to the film.

Of particular consequence is that the first screening of *Limite* appears to have gone virtually unnoticed in São Paulo. Although Rio de Janeiro was Brazil's capital at the time and a center for the arts, São Paulo, less than a decade earlier, had been the birthplace of the 'Modernist' movement in Brazil, a literary movement which sought to find an authentic voice for the Brazilian writer. *Limite*'s filmic discourse draws upon advances of the Soviet and German

cinemas, yet synthesizes these in a highly original manner, reflecting many aspects of literary Modernism. In fact, Mário de Andrade, one of the leaders of the movement in São Paulo, was most impressed by Peixoto's 1931 book of poetry, *Mundéu*, deeming it to be the most important literary revelation of the year.¹⁶ São Paulo, moreover, was home to the most radical of Brazilian Modernists, Oswald de Andrade (no relation to Mário), whose experimental poetry was highly cinematographic.¹⁷ We need to question what the reception would have been for *Limite* had there been an opportunity for screening in São Paulo.

The mixed reviews not only threatened the release of *Limite*, but problematized an ongoing association with Carmen Santos, a Portuguese-born actress/producer/director, whose level of celebrity in the 1920s far exceeded her scant appearances on the screen. Santos, impressed by the footage she had seen, allowed Peixoto free use of her private film laboratory to complete *Limite* in exchange for his promise to write and direct *Onde a terra acaba* (*At the Edge of the Earth*) in which she would star.¹⁸ The failure of *Limite* to receive distribution needed to be immediately countered. Once again, *Cinearte* would play a key role. Over the course of the Brazilian winter (June through August), the magazine published profiles of both Olga Breno and Taciana Rei, reminding the reader of the actresses' roles as 'Woman 1' and 'Woman 2' in *Limite*.¹⁹ These features, not unlike the 30 October 1930 interview with the cast, seek to present the actresses in human terms and create a bond with readers. They discuss their lives, personal tastes, thoughts on love and marriage, and ideas on the cinema as an art form. The strategy was obvious; like any advertising strategy, Peixoto and (by exten-

Fig. 3. Mário Peixoto (center) during production of the never completed *At the Edge of the Earth*.



sion, Santos!) were attempting to create a *need* for *Limite* to be released in Brazil, an event that would facilitate the completion and distribution of *At the Edge of the Earth*.

Over the course of the second half of 1931, the focus in *Cinearte* moved from *Limite* to the film-in-the-works. The magazine published several brief references to the ongoing production of the Peixoto/Santos project, focusing specifically on the involvement of Carmen Santos. *Cinearte*'s issue 287 presents a two-page photo spread of Santos. (The same issue contains similar spreads of Lupe Vélez and Joan Crawford.) The captions to the Santos photos name her as the star of *At the Edge of the Earth*. Such extensive references to Peixoto's proposed second film attested to the potential of a film which would have the biggest budget in Brazilian cinema history to date. The association of Peixoto and Santos promised as much as the budget.²⁰ Peixoto's primary focus and attention temporarily moved from *Limite* to *At the Edge of the Earth*. However, when the latter film was abandoned due to difficulties on location between the two key figures, Carmen Santos continued with the *At the Edge of the Earth* project.²¹ She was able to salvage the extraordinarily high expenses for publicity by keeping the name of the film, changing directors, and completing the work as an adaptation of José de Alencar's 19th-century novel, *Senhora*. Peixoto, on the other hand, was forced to construct a case for *Limite*'s role as a pivotal film in international film history. In this way, the damage from the failed production of his second film could be mitigated and the director could move on to other projects.

'F' is for fake – and fetish

How did *Limite* manage to set the tone for parallel cinema movements in Brazil when virtually no one was able to see it? How did the accolades awarded by critics and filmmakers who based their assessments on secondary sources create a link between Brazil's film tradition and the continental avant-garde? A brief glance at the web of inaccuracies surrounding the film's reception between 1931 and 1978 will shed a good deal of light on this issue.

The primary missing pieces of the puzzle were the result of a series of long-term hoaxes perpetrated over the course of four decades by none other than Peixoto himself. Almost immediately following the initial screening of *Limite*, word began to circulate about the screening of the film in Paris and London.

As Mello stresses, the likelihood of such screenings has been grossly exaggerated, so much appears to be the result of Peixoto's own creation of what he deemed 'should have happened to the film'.²² In 1932, the director published an anonymous review of the film in the British magazine *Close Up*. In the guise of an objective critic, Peixoto describes *Limite*:

A series of themes, of variations, of situations, of movements and life, caught by the artist, developed and constructed geometrically to form a whole; a film in which the pictures speak for themselves through rhythm ... Every scene has its interior rhythm well defined, and belongs in duration and form to a rhythm of sequences; a structural rhythm, building according to plan.²³

Accentuating the importance of rhythm in the film, Peixoto gives the film an English name under which it has never been known (since it had to date never been shown outside of Brazil). He concludes, [it is] 'rhythm which defines the limits, which defines *Limits*'.²⁴ Much of this essay is an uncontextualized English translation of passages gleaned from the negative review of the film published on 18 May 1931 in *A Esquerda*. Although the film was never screened in England at this time, the glowing review, once translated into Portuguese, became the cornerstone for further critical analyses of *Limite*. Traditional histories of Brazilian cinema also assert that Pudovkin and Welles were highly impressed by the film. Vinícius de Moraes clarifies that Welles was indeed invited to a screening of *Limite* in 1942. According to the Moraes, Welles was determined at all costs to see the film (despite the difficulty in finding a projectionist for the screening) and had the highest regard for it once he saw it.²⁵ The reliability of Welles' viewing, however, has been contested. In 1991, a report appeared which alleged that an evening of heavy libations, however, had properly anaesthetized the American director, who dozed through the film.²⁶ There is, on the other hand, virtually no possibility that Pudovkin ever had the opportunity to see the film. The screenings were too rare and the possibility that it was ever shown overseas prior to its restoration is unlikely. Nonetheless, the notoriety engendered by such rumors of international acclaim have helped perpetuate the myth of *Limite*.

Peixoto, moreover, claimed that a copy of the film was sent to Paris in 1950 to be screened in a retrospective entitled 'One Hundred Days of World

Cinema'. There *Limite* was purportedly selected as one of the five most important films of all time, together with Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, Chaplin's *City Lights*, Vidor's *The Crowd*, and Flaherty's *Man of Aran*. There is no evidence that such a retrospective was ever held, even less that Peixoto's film ever left Brazil. Pereira de Mello stresses that the selection of films of the 'retrospective' were among those he (Pereira de Mello) deemed to be on a par with *Limite*. To this day, Pereira de Mello holds periodic private courses in Rio de Janeiro entitled '*Limite* and its Brothers', in which he argues that the film's true affinities are with the finest moments of international cinema. The list of *Limite*'s next of kin he names is slightly different; together with *Man of Aran*, Pereira de Mello cites *Mother*, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, and *The Old and the New*.²⁷

Inaccuracies regarding Peixoto's own life further contributed to the hoax. Critics have frequently maintained that the director made the film and the tender age of seventeen (or even fifteen!). Although it is unclear as to whether Peixoto was born in Brussels or Rio de Janeiro, his date of birth has been established as 25 March 1908.²⁸ This debunks earlier accounts of the scarcely post-pubescent director and establishes that Peixoto was twenty-two when the film was made and first shown. During most of the period of the film's inaccessibility, Peixoto lived on Ilha Grande, an island off the coast of the state of Rio de Janeiro. He was rumored to be as inaccessible as a person as his home. Pereira de Mello, nonetheless, enthusiastically contradicts such ru-

Fig. 4. Taciana Rei in *Limite*.



mors and stresses instead that Peixoto was a warm, sociable gentleman.²⁹ Certain personal idiosyncracies on Peixoto's part did, however, further the film's mythic status. Until well into the 1980s, Peixoto insisted that he refused to see *Limite*, claiming that the film was incomplete and that the concluding sequence needed to be refilmed. The director, in interviews, alluded to a sequence in which a stopped watch falls to the bottom of the ocean.³⁰ According to accounts released subsequent to Peixoto's death, it appears evident that the director was prone to false memory regarding the film. Although Peixoto asserted that the final sequence of the film had been totally lost to deterioration, witnesses to the initial screenings of *Limite* as well as to its production have denied that such a conclusion ever existed. Peixoto, moreover, may have also falsified his refusal to view the film. Pereira de Mello insists in a 1991 interview that the director had indeed seen the film in 1942, 1952, 1953, and 1959.³¹

In the histories of Brazilian cinema, it is more than obvious that most discussions of *Limite* are not only derivative, but moreover, are not based on actual viewings of the film. Film historian Alex Viany cites an early commentary by Otávio de Faria, originally published in *O Fan*, and lauds the film's pure imagery and its ability to relate things on the aesthetic plane and to synthesize emotions. Viany's sporadically original observations regarding the film foreground Peixoto's insistence in following a divergent path at a time when Brazil was making a transition to talkies. He furthermore stresses Peixoto's European education as well as his debt to both the Soviet cinema and the French avant-garde.³² (Although Mário Peixoto frequently denied the influence of any European directors, visual citation in *Limite* renders his claim incredulous. The director, despite his age at the time the film was made, had been exposed to European cinema as a young boy in a British boarding school and later during a stay in Paris with his father.)

In *Introdução crítica ao cinema brasileiro*, Glauber Rocha also cites in its virtual entirety the same article by Faria, making no reference to having personally seen the film. He discusses, however, an attempt initiated by Peixoto's friends in 1961 to save the film's negative from further deterioration, a task eventually assumed by Mello who would dedicate some seventeen years to the project. A true fanatic of the film, Mello maintained for many years that there was no laboratory in Brazil equal to that used

by the film's cinematographer, Edgar Brazil. When Rocha suggested to him that time was of the essence, Pereira de Mello replied that it would be better that the film be lost rather than altered in restoration since *Limite* is primarily a sensorial experience.³³ Rocha stresses that he himself was forever unable to gain access to the film, his historical observations having been drawn in part from discussions with actor Brutus Pedrera. The latter recounted the pains taken by Peixoto and Brazil in lighting and in the choice of background music to be played during screening. Pedrera also related to Rocha his versions of what became of the various copies of the film. According to his account, the only copy remaining in Brazil was the one Mello was restoring. Although Peixoto alleges another copy had been sent to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and was subsequently destroyed during an unusually cold winter, Pedrera insists that the copy had been sent to the library of Paramount Studios.³⁴ Explicit in Rocha's argument is his desire to debunk the myth of *Limite*. Peixoto's film, with its universal and avant-garde preoccupations could well be deemed a film which fails to reflect Brazil's social reality. These considerations would become an integral part of the critical baggage of *Limite* following restoration.

The first name likely to come to mind when one speaks of film history in Brazil is that of Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes of the University of São Paulo, the late husband of writer Lygia Fagundes Telles. Although Paulo Emílio's premature death in 1977 may have prevented him from viewing the restored copy of *Limite*, he does allude to the film in a collection of articles originally appearing in the *Suplemento Literário de Minas Gerais* and subsequently published in two volumes in 1982. The director confesses that he cannot remember having actually seen the film and stresses that it remains 'on the fringes of national cinema'.³⁵

Outside of Brazil, one of the key figures in attempts to gain access to *Limite* was Cinema 16's Amos Vogel. In June 1957, Vogel contacted the Museu de Arte Moderna in São Paulo to attempt to obtain a print of the film for consideration for a screening at Cinema 16. At that time, he suggested the possibility of distribution among film societies in the United States.³⁶ In the Arquivo Mário Peixoto, however, there is no record of a response from Brazil. *Limite* was not viewed in the United States until its Screening at the Museum of Modern Art's New Directors/New Films series in 1979.

I (eye)-senstein

The most significant part of the myth of *Limite*, which far transcended the self-promoting article in *Close Up* and the trumped-up history of screenings and acclaim, was a review allegedly published by Sergei Eisenstein in 1932 in the London magazine *Tatler*.³⁷ In the mid-Sixties, the director brought handwritten text to Pereira de Mello's wife Ayla to be typed, alleging that it was his own translation of laudatory comments by Eisenstein, which he himself had translated from the English. Later, Peixoto would allege that the remarks had actually been published in Germany and had been translated by *Limite*'s cinematographer, Edgar Brazil, a native speaker of German.³⁸ Not long prior to his death, Peixoto declared that he had been the author of the review.³⁹ This review is of particular consequence in that it was of considerable encouragement both to the ongoing work of the film's restoration and to Mário Peixoto's attempts to obtain financing for a future film. Gravely suspicious of the text's authenticity, Pereira de Mello attempted to force Peixoto into producing a copy of the original, warning him that the matter could have severe consequences for the director were the actual Eisenstein article not to appear.⁴⁰ Both Pereira de Mello and Sússekind Rocha were chagrined when the piece appeared in 1965 in *Arquitetura* with an introduction by Brazilian director Carlos Diegues, an event which became pivotal in critical discussions of the film.

Like the *Close Up* review, the piece attributed to Eisenstein focuses on the importance of rhythm in the film and the relationship between theme and image. It isolates three main elements at play: (1) man's solitude; (2) his desire to evade destiny and to seek communion, and (3) the 'mimetics' of the world and the mirroring by nature of human angst.⁴¹ Peixoto/Eisenstein stresses that the work was that of a boy who had just turned sixteen, which fueled the arguments pertaining to the director's age at the time the film was made. Summarizing the importance of *Limite*, the text states:

... And twenty years from now, I am sure, [the director] will pulsate again, just as full of structural cinema as the work I have just seen, at once poetic and bitter – but now uprooted, already, desolately born an adult, like one who was never granted a childhood [my translation].⁴²

Mello stresses that Peixoto did not share



Fig. 5. Frame enlargement from *Limite*, a film praised by 'Eisenstein'.

Eisenstein's theoretical inclinations, a vocabulary suitable for articulating them, or even the necessary interest.⁴³ Rather, he was instinctive and spontaneous. 'He believed in inspiration and felt that art was an expression of the human being's interior: thus creating art and not theorizing about it is what is at stake' [my translation].⁴⁴ He describes Peixoto as an 'anti-Eisenstein, the opposite of an intellectual who speaks a lot and, frequently, says very little' [my translation].⁴⁵ The article, as Pereira de Mello asserts, is a voyage through *Limite*, an intuitive, instinctive, and spontaneous voyage which only the creator himself could have written. Director Carlos Diegues asserts, 'if Eisenstein saw *Limite* but failed to write on it, he should have done so. And if, by chance, Eisenstein didn't even see the film, the poor man doesn't know what he missed!' [my translation].⁴⁶

The fact that the Eisenstein article actually appeared in print introduced by a major film director substantiates the extent to which it is of far more importance in the creation of *Limite*'s mythic status than viewings, real or imagined, by Welles or Pudovkin, or festival acclaim. By 'becoming' for a moment Eisenstein, Peixoto expressed to the world the greatness he perceived in his own film. He became at once an 'I' and an 'eye', the creating and viewing subjects. Doubtless the article published in *Arquitetura* constituted the greatest hoax of Brazilian cinema history. To an extent, this dual role was self-serving. In order to 'recover' an aborted film career, Peixoto had to view his own film as others should have viewed it. Mello has scrutinized biographical sources on Eisenstein and underscores the impossibility of the Soviet director having been

in Paris at the time of the alleged screening at the Salle des Agriculteurs, where Peixoto insists he saw the film and was inspired to write the review. Yet such a hoax kept the legend of *Limite* very much alive and the center of a cult among the curious elite. Although it never brought Peixoto the funds to make a second film, it bought Mello and Sússekind Rocha time to complete their painstaking restoration of the film. When a screening of *Limite* finally inaugurated the new screening room of Rio's Funarte in May 1978, the cult of the film was vibrant and the audience, unlike that of the Cinema Capitólio in 1931, was open and accepting. This screening alone left no doubt that the film stood on its own merit and not just as the object of an elusive mystique perpetuated by derivative discussions of an unseen and inaccessible masterpiece.

Chronicle of a restoration foretold

Over the course of the Sixties, sporadic mention of *Limite* appeared in the Brazilian press. Reference was made to the restoration process, to governmental support of said process, and to the approximate cost involved. The film was always referred to as an undisputed masterpiece. The *Diário de São Paulo* of 23 April 1961 lauds the President of Brazil, Jânio Quadros, for bestowing a grant equal to more than 400,000 cruzeiros for the film's restoration. Another article names Plínio Sússekind Rocha as the undaunted hero behind the campaign.⁴⁷ Yet another article in *Visão* from June of the same year is much more thorough in its discussion of the process. The source of the grant is listed as the Ministry of Education, and the amount quoted was 430,000 cruzeiros. Given the deteriorated state of the only copy of the film, *Visão* asserts that these funds were deemed to be considerably less than sufficient for the process. The first phase would be to create a new negative of the film, combining usable segments from the original negative with extensive segments of negative made from the existing positive copy. All special effects, such as the frequent use of dissolves in the film, would have to be redone. The *Visão* article foregrounds the rare professional acumen and patience required by the project. Since the cost of the restoration process was likely to exceed one million cruzeiros, such entities as the National Institute for Educational Cinema had promised their support.⁴⁸

Near the end of the process, the mainstream magazine *Veja* reported in 1973 that the restoration process was nearing completion, with only 50 meters

of film yet to be salvaged.⁴⁹ The article explains that the original nitrate negative was being replaced by an acetate one, which was less flammable. Describing the painstaking work of Saulo Pereira de Mello, who assumed primary responsibility for the project following the deaths of original grant recipients Sússekind Rocha and Rodrigo de Melo Franco, the article asserts that Mello first realized the need for the restoration during a screening of the film in 1959 when it was impossible to show the first three parts. At that time, Peixoto handed over seven reels of positive film and eight of negative to Sússekind and Melo Franco, authorizing the restoration process. The article recounts how Pereira de Mello hung negative segments on a cord in his own home to dry and meticulously examined existing portions of the sole positive print to re-establish cuts and dissolves. The most difficult part of the task had been copying the film due to wrinkling and buckling of the negative and existing prints. His dining room having been transformed into an editing room complete with Moviola, Mello is quoted as stressing the importance of respecting the high quality of the cinematography of Edgar Brasil, whose vision must not be violated lest the restored *Limite* be a different film.⁵⁰ The article concludes with a reference to the 1971 screening of the partially-restored film for students in the School of Communications of the University of São Paulo.

For our eyes only

The above-mentioned São Paulo screening was one of the most controversial showings of *Limite*, and preceded the Funarte presentation of the restored print by some five and a half years. Although an isolated event, it ushered in a new era for the film's reception. When the partially restored print was screened at the University of São Paulo on 25 November 1971, one of the conditions agreed upon between the USP and Sússekind Rocha was that there would be no press coverage. The *Jornal da Tarde*, however, learned of the monumental event, and the following day a one page spread entitled 'We've succeeded in Revealing the Greatest Secret of Our National Cinema (We've Been Waiting for this Page for Forty Years)' [my translation]. The event, unfortunately, led to a certain distrust between Sússekind Rocha and the academic community. *Limite* was not screened again until the final completion of the restoration process, some seven years after Sússekind Rocha's death. Conflicting informa-

tion, moreover, exists as to whether Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes attended the 1971 screening.⁵¹ The review was, in fact, the first critical comment of *Limite* in decades which drew upon an actual viewing of the film rather than upon previous critical baggage. Although it makes extensive reference to Glauber Rocha's essay and examines his concerns regarding the film's avant-gardism, it strongly argues for its place in Brazilian film history:

Only *Limite* (by Mário Peixoto) is an important film, despite the fact that it is not the type of film appreciated by Brazilian directors in the early 1960s. *Limite* is a very Brazilian film, despite its universalism (the protagonists are not fully characterized, the place is not defined) [my translation].⁵²

Some six months prior to the screening of the final restored print, the Goethe Institute of São Paulo scheduled a screening of *Limite* as part of a November 1977 brief retrospective of Brazilian film. (The retrospective was held only a few weeks before the Sixty Years of Brazilian Cinema festival, also held in São Paulo). The Institute coordinators were informed the day before the scheduled screening that the restoration had not been completed and hence no print could be sent. In an article in the *Folha de São Paulo* entitled '*Limite* Exists, or Is It a Myth' [my translation], Jairo Ferreira questions why so much of the restored print had been used by Ruy Santos in his documentary of the same year, *O homem e o 'Limite'* had the restoration indeed been unavailable.⁵³ Comparing the cancelled screening to an event five years earlier in which the film was to have been screened at the University of São Paulo at an event sponsored by the Friends of the Cinematheque in which once again the film was not shown (yet was actually screened the following day), Ferreira argues that a copy of the film must reach the public lest Embrafilme, the Brazilian national film distribution enterprise, become a 'mystifier rather than a mythifier'.⁵⁴

In June 1978, director Glauber Rocha wrote of having finally seen *Limite*. Although he defends his earlier position articulated in *Introdução crítica ao cinema brasileiro* that the film was an example of artistic decadence, he recoups such decadence in light of recent Brazilian film. 'Films [today] are worse than those of the 1960s. For this reason, *Limite* is a revolutionary classroom in montage for so many incompetent directors. Because our films are literary



Fig. 6. Mário Peixoto (1908–92).

and theatrical, and pornographic, not because of the sex but because of the bad taste ... [my translation].⁵⁵ In many ways, Rocha's article reflects the main direction of post-re-release criticism on the film. Having seen *Limite* with their own eyes, critics began to realize that the studies based exclusively on supposition or other people's viewings were not that far off course. The film was indeed the masterpiece it had been touted to be for some forty-seven years.

Following the 1978 screening, *Limite* embarked on an extensive international trajectory of festivals and other showings throughout the world. In 1979, it screened at the New York City Museum of Modern Art's New Directors/New Film series. On this occasion, Janet Maslin described it as a work of 'extraordinary youthful energies'.⁵⁶ Referring to Peixoto's frequent pans in and out and 'precarious' 360-degree whirls, Maslin argues that it is this daring approach to cinema which renders the film interesting. She writes:

He shoots up at his actors from such a low angle that a telephone pole appears to hover over them, or devotes long sections of the film exclusively to the players' feet. His choices are flashy, impetuous and nevertheless interesting.⁵⁷

Although Maslin's reading of the film is not unflawed – she misconceives the three embedded stories as 'more or less imaginary' and describes the narrative as 'elusive at best' – her reading draws our attention to a number of elements that account for the film's fascination. Describing Mário Peixoto as 'gaunt, intense looking and faintly diabolical, as befits the author of so solemn and furious a first effort',

Maslin was doubtless the first American critic who actually viewed the film and wrote on it.⁵⁸

Two years later, *Limite* was screened at the 1981 Berlin Film Festival. On this occasion, Barthelemy Amengual described it as 'a pure love story recounted in the poetic/enigmatic mode of *Un chien andalou* [my translation]'. Despite his obvious misunderstanding of the content, Amengual describes the film as an 'unprecedented avant-garde jewel from the end of the silent era [my translation]'.⁵⁹ *Limite* at last had received the attention it deserved and the honest and objective praise of the international critical community. At home, it has fared just as well. In 1988, it was deemed the best Brazilian film of all time by a jury of Brazilian film critics selected

by the Cinemateca Brasileira. Perhaps as the result of this honor, Mário Peixoto received a special award from the State Government of Rio de Janeiro in October of the same year. Peixoto died on 3 February 1992 in his Copacabana apartment. Although he never made another film, he at least had the opportunity to witness the return of *Limite* to its rightful place in international film history.

Nonetheless, poor Eisenstein never knew what he had missed!

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Notes

1. See Phillip Core, *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth* (London: Plexus, 1984).
2. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
3. Although none of Eisenstein's published writings make reference to *Limite*, the myth of his having seen and reviewed it continued well into the decade of the eighties, following the restoration process. It is likely that the references to Soviet directors were fabricated by Peixoto and stem in all actuality from his fascination with Olga Preobrazhenskaya's *The Peasant Women of Ryazan*, which, I learned in a November 2001 conversation with Saulo Pereira de Mello, was one of the films that influenced Peixoto the most prior to his filming *Limite*. There is also no published work by Pudovkin referencing *Limite*.
4. The article in *O Fan* has been cited by Alex Viany in *Introdução ao cinema brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Revan: 1993) and by filmmaker Glauber Rocha in *Introdução crítica ao cinema brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1963), and was key to the critical debates on *Limite* during the forty-six years the film was unavailable. Octavio de Faria's, 'Natureza e ritmo' originally appeared in *O Jornal* 17 junio 1931. It was reprinted in *Cine Club* 1.1 (1960): 7-9. Octavio de Faria and Carlos Diegues published 'Eisenstein sobre *Limite*' in *Arquitetura* 38 (1968): 21-24.
5. See Anonymous, '*Limite*', *A Esquerda* (18 May 1931): 2.
6. Saulo Pereira de Mello, *Limite* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1996) 22.
7. Faria and Diegues, 21.
8. See Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, eds., *Brazilian Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 313.
9. Anonymous, *Cinearte*. (9 July 1931): (unnumbered).
10. Anonymous, 'As estrelas de *Limite*'. *Cinearte* 241 (8 October 1930): (unnumbered).
11. This sequence is one of the few sequences of the film which has been permanently lost to deterioration. Saulo Pereira de Mello, unable to restore the brief episode, is currently working on a manuscript in which the minute and a half which has been lost is reconstructed through drawings, recalling his famous frame-by-frame analysis of 1978.
12. Together with production stills, the crew documented with film footage moments of the production of *Limite* and the daily lives of the cast at the Fazenda Santa Justina in Mangaritiba, where the film was made. This footage would later be used by Sérgio Machado in his 2001 *Onde a terra acaba* (*At the Edge of the World*), which presents the most thorough portrait of Mário Peixoto on film.
13. Anonymous, '*Limite*', *A Esquerda* (18 May 1931): 2.
14. Anonymous, '*Limite*'. *Diário da Noite* (19 May 1931): 4.
15. '*Limite*.' *A Pátria* (19 May 1931): 9.
16. Mário Peixoto, *Mundéu* (Rio de Janeiro: São Benedicto, 1931).
17. See Erdmute Wenzel White, *Les Années vingt au Brésil: Le modernisme et l'avant-garde international* (Paris: Editions Hispaniques, 1978).
18. One must not confuse Peixoto's intended film *Onde a terra acaba* with the documentary of the same name made in 2001 by Sérgio Machado.
19. The *Cinearte* pieces appear to constitute an attempt to place Brazilian cinema on equal footing with American film and make it clear to the readers that the stars of *Limite* deserve are worthy of intimate portraits.

20. Sérgio Machado makes mention of the budget and financial expectations of *At the Edge of the Earth* in his documentary, *At the Edge of the World*.
21. Once again, the split between Peixoto and Santos is dealt with at length in Machado's documentary.
22. Saulo Pereira de Mello, personal discussion with author (26 November 2001).
23. Anonymous, 'Limite', *Close Up* (March 1932): 47–48.
24. *Ibid.*, 49.
25. Vinícius de Moraes, *O cinema de meus olhos* (São Paulo: Schwarz, 1991): 70–72.
26. Leão P. Serva, 'Limite chega aos 60 envolto em verdades e mentiras de seu criador', *Folha de São Paulo* 17 May 1991: 5.2.
27. Saulo Pereira de Mello, personal discussion with author (26 November 2001). Pereira de Mello, moreover, has confessed to the author that, despite his own lifelong passion for the restoration and close analysis of *Limite*, it is not his favorite film! He actually prefers *Man of Aran*. It is frightening to imagine the obsession this film would have become for the restaurateur/archivist had Flaherty's film been as problematical as Peixoto's.
28. Saulo Pereira de Mello, 1996: 18. One must also note that in Brazil in the early twentieth century, births were not necessarily registered immediately. The delay in registration, which was often up to several years, can cause considerable speculation as to an individual's actual date of birth.
29. Saulo Pereira de Mello (26 November 2001).
30. Leão P. Serva, 1991: 5.2.
31. 'Limite aos 60 anos', *Folha de São Paulo* (17 May 1991) (Interview with Saulo Pereira de Mello and Mário Peixoto): 5.3.
32. Alex Viany, *Introdução ao cinema brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Revan, 1993): 45.
33. Glauber Rocha, *Introdução crítica ao cinema brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1963): 35.
34. Attempts by the author to locate any record of the film at either the Museum of Modern Art or the UCLA Film Archives (which now house the Paramount films of the time) have proven unsuccessful. It is essential, nonetheless, to note that Pereira de Mello affords a certain amount of credibility to this part of the myth. In his November 2001 discussion with the author, he claimed that it is indeed possible that a copy went to the Museum of Modern Art.
35. Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes, *Crítica de cinema no Suplemento Literário*, vol. II (São Paulo: Fundação Cinemateca Brasileira, 1982): 155.
36. Amos Vogel, letter to the Museu de Arte Moderna of São Paulo, 10 June 1957.
37. As Pereira de Mello stressed in his November 2001 contact with the author, this fabrication was evidence of a certain innocence on Peixoto's part. *Tatler*, a gossip magazine which took its name from the English verb 'to tattle', was scarcely the type of venue in which Eisenstein would publish, had either he or *Limite* been in London in the first place!
38. Saulo Pereira de Mello, 2000: 25.
39. Leão P. Serva, 1991: 5.2.
40. Saulo Pereira de Mello, *Mário Peixoto: Escritos sobre cinema* (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 2000): 24–25.
41. Peixoto, Mário, 'Um filme da América do Sul', in Saulo Pereira de Mello, *Mário Peixoto: Escritos sobre cinema* (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 2000) 85–86.
42. *Ibid.*, 93.
43. Saulo Pereira de Mello, *Mário Peixoto: Escritos sobre cinema* (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 2000): 33.
44. *Ibid.*, 33.
45. *Ibid.*, 33.
46. *Ibid.*, 35.
47. 'A salvação de *Limite*', *Diário de São Paulo* (23 April 1961). At the exchange rate in effect, 400,000 cruzeiros would have been equivalent to the impressive sum of \$1,480 US dollars.
48. 'Vai ser passado a limpo', *Visão* (9 July 1961): 58.
49. 'Mito restaurado', *Veja* (11 April 1973): 595.
50. *Ibid.*, 595.
51. Maria Rita Galvão, Personal contact with author, February 1978. Galvão, a professor of cinema at the University of São Paulo, asserted at this time that Salles Gomes had been present. Later the same year, an article in the *Folha de São Paulo* by Glauber Rocha refers to Salles Gomes, but only laments that the critic was unable to lead critical debates following the re-release of the film.
52. Anonymous, 'Conseguimos revelar o maior segredo do cinema nacional (Esta página é Esperado há 40 anos)', *Jornal da Tarde* 26 November 1971: 17.
53. Jairo Ferreira, 'Limite': o filme existe ou mito?', *Folha de São Paulo* 17 November 1977: 6.
54. *Ibid.*, 6. The reference to the intended screening of the film at the University of São Paulo probably refers to the November 1971 screening at the School of Communications.
55. Glauber Rocha, *Limite*, *Folha de São Paulo*, 3 June 1978: 30.
56. Janet Maslin, 'Old Brazilian Release in New-Film Series', *The New York Times* 21 April 1979: 8.
57. *Ibid.*, 8.
58. *Ibid.*, 8.
59. Barthelemy Amengual, 'Berlin 81: encore une fois festival et forum', *Positif* 243 (June 1981): 50.

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