

Fire damages Cinemateca Brasileira, largest South American audiovisual collection: The outcome of Bolsonaro government policy

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On July 29, fire tore through a portion of the Cinemateca Brasileira in São Paulo, Brazil, one of the most important film institutions in the world, which houses the largest audiovisual collection in South America. The Cinemateca houses some 250,000 reels of film dating back to 1910, in addition to more than one million cinema documents and items, including photos, scripts, posters and books.

In 2010–11, a survey conducted by the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF) rated the Cinemateca third in the world for its photochemical processing capabilities. It is also an important training centre for technicians and researchers from partner institutions.

The fire, whose full consequences are not yet known, is the outcome of the policies of the ultra-right Jair Bolsonaro government. However, various commentators have pointed out that worsening condition at the Cinemateca began under previous administrations, including the Workers Party (PT) government of Dilma Rousseff.

Shortly after Bolsonaro took power in January 2019, his ultra-right government dissolved the ministries of culture, sports and social development, merging them into a single department called the ministry of citizenship, and froze the funds of Brazil's National Film Agency (ANCINE). Fernanda Brenner, of the São Paulo-based art non-profit PíVO, noted at the time that Bolsonaro “turned the ministry [of culture] into a small secretariat,” according to Artnet News. “Among so many disastrous measures in such a short time, this almost went unnoticed.”

In December 2019, Bolsonaro's government failed to renew its contract with the Association for Educational Communication Roquette Pinto (ACERP) for the operation and management of the Cinemateca. The government unhappiness with the perceived leftist content of certain programs televised on ACERP's education channel apparently influenced the decision.

ACERP requested an emergency contract to maintain the Cinemateca's staff to ensure the safety of flammable nitrate reels stored in temperature-controlled rooms, as well as other audiovisual material requiring frequent inspection. Despite the

loss of its contract and funding, ACERP continued to pay utility bills, but staffing was reduced. As the months passed, those who stayed on worked as unpaid volunteers.

In July 2020, Cinemateca employees wrote an open letter in which they protested that they had gone three months without receiving pay or benefits. The letter explained that besides “salaries and water and electricity bills that have been overdue for three months, the Cinemateca Brasileira has recently started to lose its outsourced employees, who are equally crucial for the maintenance of the collection and the physical space. The electrical and air conditioning maintenance teams have not given support to the Cinemateca Brasileira since June 10. ... This increases the risks of a great tragedy.”

In August 2020, according to *New York* magazine, “the new secretary of culture, actor Mário Frias, escorted by federal police, forced out all of Cinemateca's remaining employees, whose salaries hadn't been paid.”

With the entire staff now fired, a “Cinemateca Brasileira Workers” (Trabalhadores da Cinemateca Brasileira) group was formed to fight for wages and jobs, and for the preservation of the cinematheque collection. The workers regularly denounced the situation and warned about its consequences.

As the *Irish Times* observed, the “former employees campaigned desperately to save the institution they served ... In April they published a manifesto demanding the government take action warning ‘the risk of fire is real.’” Other commentators also warned about such a disaster. In May 2021, a columnist at *Frieze* asked in a headline, “As Fires Consume Brazilian Cultural Heritage, Could Cinemateca Brasileira Be Next?”

A devastating fire in September 2018 gutted Brazil's National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, destroying the 19th century palace which housed the institution and destroying the majority of the 20 million items held in its collection. Similar to the Cinemateca, the National Museum had been starved of resources by successive governments, making such a disaster possible.

In November 2020, at an awards ceremony, well-known Brazilian filmmaker Walter Salles (*Central Station*, *The*

Motorcycle Diaries, On the Road) spoke about the importance of the Cinemateca for his own development as a filmmaker and added that “an award dedicated to the preservation of memory, in a country where this very memory is being attacked in such a violent and obscurantist way, is and should be understood as an incentive to resistance.”

The previous day, Salles explained in an article published in the *Folha de São Paulo* that “the Cinemateca Brasileira has never been so abandoned as under the current government, marked by a visible effort to erase our collective memory.”

Salles also included a message from filmmaker Martin Scorsese, president of the Film Foundation, an institution dedicated to the restoration of films from around the world. “I am writing to express my concern,” explained Scorsese, “about the Cinemateca Brasileira. Concern is not the right word. It is anguish and utter disbelief. The possibility that the largest audiovisual collection in Latin America will have its funding suspended in the midst of a pandemic is totally inconceivable.”

“The arts,” the director went on, “are not a luxury—they are a necessity, as their undeniable role in human history well demonstrates. And the preservation of the arts, especially one as fragile as film, is a difficult but essential job. This is not my opinion. It is a fact. I sincerely hope that the federal authorities in Brazil will abandon any idea of withdrawing funding and do what needs to be done to protect the Cinemateca’s collection and dedicated staff.”

In his article, Salles also took note of the fact that the crisis of the cinematheque was “not new,” and that it had been exacerbated by both the Rousseff PT government and the administration of Michel Temer that replaced it.

Likewise, São Paulo-based film critic Filipe Furtado told the BFI website that the institution had been in trouble for some time, “thanks to budget cuts under previous governments.” Furtado told the BFI that “the Cinemateca’s woes started ... before Bolsonaro came to power: In 2013, the culture ministry under [former President] Dilma Rousseff found problems with the NGO who had long run it and decided to cut its resources. The Cinemateca has been operating under budget and fighting to stay alive since then.”

The combination of the attacks by the government and the pandemic made conditions extremely difficult. But many workers persevered. A source who works at the archives told the BFI: “During lockdown, and despite not being paid, some technicians dealing with the collection and building maintenance continued to monitor the holdings, in a relay system. There have been movements of solidarity and the organisation of a fund for a minimum survival for the most needy who work there... Many have protested, firmly but peacefully, in front of the institution—employees, filmmakers, researchers, cinephiles, councillors and residents of the neighbourhood.

“It is almost unbelievable,” the source went on, “that everything is at imminent risk of loss... that we have not

convinced governments of what should be common sense: that any closure of institutions that keep memories—so that a better future can exist—is a death sentence for what these institutions harbour. May future generations gaze, through films, at their ancestors’ ways of life, their good deeds and their villains; the black-and-white film recordings of a family from the early 20th century enjoying Sunday lunch and also the insanities of wars recorded in newsreels; the beautiful landscapes of their old country and the fictional narratives that have nourished our imaginary since the advent of cinema.”

One day after the recent fire, the Cinemateca Brasileira workers issued a manifesto denouncing the fire as a “crime,” detailing the losses it caused and warning about the damage still impossible to calculate precisely because of the lack of a specialized technical team.

The workers explained that the fire “that burned down the Cinemateca Brasileira building in Vila Leopoldina on the night of July 29, 2021, was a predicted crime, which culminated in the irreparable loss of countless works and documents from the history of Brazilian cinema. These facilities are a fundamental and complementary part of the space in Vila Clementino, where most of the Cinemateca Brasileira’s collection is stored. Recently, in February 2020, a flood had already affected a large part of the documental and audiovisual collection stored there.”

More than a year ago, the workers continued, “we publicly denounced the possibility of a fire at the Cinemateca premises due to the absence of any documentation, preservation and diffusion workers.” The workers had warned about the possibility “of an accident in the nitrate collection in Vila Clementino, because it is a flammable material that can self-combust without periodic inspection. ... Surely, many losses could have been avoided if the workers had been hired and participating in the day-to-day activities of the institution.” The Cinemateca workers also explained that they were “in mourning for the loss of more than half a million Brazilians [in the pandemic], and now for the loss of part of our history.”

The workers have called for a front “in defense of Brazilian cinema” and demonstrations in numerous cities. Their appeal raised these issues:

Let’s avoid a new fire. Enough of predicted tragedies. Neglect is a crime. We cannot preserve collections without workers! An institution dedicated to memory cannot survive without its technical staff. For the immediate hiring of audiovisual preservation technicians and the safeguarding of the Cinemateca Brasileira’s remaining collection.



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