

# *I'm Still Here*: A serious portrait of life under Brazil's military dictatorship reaches mass audience

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More than 4 million Brazilians have already seen Walter Salles' film *Ainda Estou Aqui* (I'm Still Here), the 5th highest box office in the country's history. The film premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September of last year, where it received a ten-minute ovation and won the award for best screenplay. Since then, it has won over international audiences and critics.

It was named one of the five best international films of 2024 by the National Board of Review, won Best International Film at the Palm Springs Film Festival, received the Goya Award for Best Ibero-American Film and is among the Oscar nominees in the Best Picture category and for best leading actress, an unprecedented achievement for Brazilian cinema.

Based on the book of the same name by writer Marcelo Rubens Paiva, *Ainda Estou Aqui* tells the story of Eunice Paiva's fight for justice after the disappearance of her husband Rubens Paiva, who was arrested, tortured and killed by the military dictatorship.

The point of view is that of a middle-class family in 1970. Rubens Paiva, a member of the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) who had his mandate as a federal deputy revoked after the 1964 military coup, then worked as a civil engineer and lived with his wife and five children in a house in Rio de Janeiro.

In the first scene, Eunice is in the sea. Floating, all the noise around her muffled by the water, she sees the blue sky and then the silence is pierced by the roar of a helicopter. The ominous presence of the military hovers over her.

The first part of the film is marked by a luminous setting in mid-summer Rio de Janeiro. Eunice and Rubens live a happy and affectionate routine with their children in a house with low gates, facing Leblon Beach. A sense of freedom is emphasized from the perspective of the kids, two children and three teenagers. They come and go as they please, playing on the beach, crossing the streets on their own and surrounded by friends.

The vitality that enveloped this family's home was something that the film's director, Walter Salles (*Central Station*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Linha de Passe*), never forgot. Salles met the Paiva family in 1969, when he was 13, through his friend Ana Lúcia, one of Rubens and Eunice's daughters. This interaction certainly gave him an intimate understanding of the family dynamic, allowing him to give the film remarkable sensitivity and naturalism.

The photography, exploring the film shot on an analog camera in the hands of the eldest daughter, Vera (Valentina Herszage), contributes to a realistic journey to the early 1970s and gives the viewer the feeling of entering the memory of those who were present.

The military regime (1964-1985) was already in its sixth year. After officially leaving politics, the former deputy believed he was safe, or at least made a point of conveying that sense of safety. The image of a

humorous and even hopeful Rubens Paiva, in Selton Mello's radiant performance, conveys this.

In a conversation with a friend who is planning to leave the country and invites him to come along, he rejects the idea of a new exile, saying he is out of danger. However, in another scene, he is convinced by Eunice that the invitation could be accepted by Vera, the eldest daughter, who was already aware of the regime's repression.

In the midst of the joy and excitement of youth, Vera goes out for a walk with her friends and they are stopped in a police blitz. Up to this point, the danger of repression was still just a passing tunnel on the road and is presented in a subtle way by the radio and television news.

These were the "years of lead", considered the most violent period of the military dictatorship. Shortly after facing massive demonstrations and strikes, the military government closed the year 1968 by imposing Institutional Act number 5 (AI-5), which suppressed civil rights, instituted a censorship regime and massively expanded the arrests, torture and killings by the state.

The film insinuates that former deputy Rubens Paiva maintained informal political relations and some clandestine collaboration with opponents of the regime. A news report about the kidnapping of the Swiss ambassador by a guerrilla group arouses the couple's apprehension. Rubens Paiva's probable contact with members of the group is implied, hence the fear that he would be sought out by agents of the dictatorship.

On January 16, 1971, the Swiss ambassador was released in exchange for the release of 70 political prisoners, a humiliating episode for the regime that led the repressive agencies to launch a witch hunt. On January 20, six Air Force agents entered the Paiva family home and took the former deputy away, supposedly to give a statement. That was the last time Rubens Paiva was seen by his family.

The atmosphere of the movie changes completely after Rubens' forced disappearance. Some of the agents remain in the house and hold Eunice and her children hostage. The scenery becomes obscure, closed environments dominate the screen, creating a sense of terror and uncertainty, reflecting the brutal impact of state repression on the family.

On the same day, Eunice and her daughter Eliana, then 15, are also taken to testify. Eliana was detained for 24 hours, Eunice for 12 days, being interrogated. At this terrifying turning point, Eunice's practical and sensible personality takes on a deep and silent character.

"She can't just panic. She has no time for self-pity. But there is something profound in her actions. When something violent was happening to her, she remained calm. She smiled. She didn't show that she was suffering," explained actress Fernanda Torres in an interview with *Variety*.

Eunice and her family see their comfortable financial situation crumble. Because she doesn't have a death certificate, she can't access Rubens'

assets and is forced to leave the beautiful house where they lived. She moves to São Paulo with her children, resumes her studies and becomes a lawyer while fighting to prove that her husband was killed by the state.

In the character's sober reaction, the actress was able to delicately express the oppression that rested on Eunice's shoulders, as well as her integrity and courage. In an attempt not to break down in front of her younger children, she takes them for a walk to the ice cream parlor. Almost without saying a word, Torres' face and posture convey the pride, melancholy and indignation of the character, who observes other "complete" families, indifferent to the country's tragedy.

Fernanda Torres' mature performance earned her an Oscar nomination and the award for Best Actress at the Golden Globes. Upon receiving the award, completely surprised and without a prepared speech, Torres declared that *I'm Still Here* is a movie "that can help us think about how to survive in difficult times".

In many interviews, she has emphasized the film's resonance in the current political moment. "It's not just in Brazil. I think Eunice Paiva and the Paiva family were victims of the Cold War, a very dystopian time in the world. (...) And it has a lot to do with the moment we're living in now, I think," she said in an interview with the BBC.

This is not just the actress's opinion. One of the film's great assets is precisely this: the assumption that the events involving the Paiva family are part of a story that we should be looking at now, that should be discussed and brought into the present. There was a conscious effort on the part of the team, who actively took part in debates after screenings in movie theaters and festivals in different parts of the world.

#### **The impact of *I'm Still Here* and its implications**

The campaign for *I'm Still Here* takes place amid political tensions in Brazil with the specter of a new military coup. In December last year, five-star Gen. Walter Braga Netto was arrested for hindering the investigation into the attempted fascist coup of January 8, 2023, that he led alongside former president Jair Bolsonaro.

Also last December, the National Council of Justice ordered the recognition and ratification of the death certificates of the 434 dead and missing victims of the military dictatorship catalogued by the National Truth Commission (CNV). Rubens Paiva's death certificate now states that his death was violent, caused by the Brazilian state in the context of the systematic persecution of the population identified as political dissidents by the dictatorial regime established in 1964.

The film *I'm Still Here* was directly cited in a decision by Supreme Court (STF) judge Flávio Dino. When analyzing a specific case about the disappearance of militants in the Araguaia guerrilla organization, Dino proposed an amendment to the 1979 Amnesty Law, arguing that the disappearance of bodies, without the possibility of burial by the families, is a permanent crime. It could not, therefore, be pardoned.

"The crime of concealing a corpse is therefore extremely damaging, precisely because it deprives families of such an essential act (burial). Presently, the film *I'm Still Here* is moving millions of Brazilians and foreigners. The story of the disappearance of Rubens Paiva, whose body was never found and buried, underlines the imprescriptible pain of thousands of fathers, mothers, brothers, sons, nephews, grandchildren, who have never had their rights in relation to their missing relatives attended," wrote the STF minister.

Rather than a commitment by the government and democratic institutions to confront the dictatorship's legacy, Dino's attitude exposes the fragility of bourgeois democracy, which has never punished the military or confronted them in power. Last year, on the 60th anniversary of the 1964 military coup, the Lula government tried to minimize its significance, canceling official ceremonies and avoiding discussions on the subject.

In this context, the repercussions of the film have been used by the Brazilian media to promote the defense of bourgeois democracy and its

institutions as the way forward.

After all, that's how the steps taken by Eunice could be summed up. As Rubens Paiva's lawyer and wife, she fought through the legal channels of the state itself to have it recognize her husband's death. The death certificate – a great victory for the family – only came in 1996, when the administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazilian Social Democracy Party, PSDB) approved a law recognizing those "disappeared" during the military dictatorship as dead.

At the time, Paiva's widow was a member of the commission set up by the government to analyze compensation for victims' relatives. More than ten years later, in 2012, the creation of the National Truth Commission revealed new facts about Rubens Paiva's case. According to his son, Marcelo Rubens Paiva, this led to his revising the story told in the book that gave rise to the film.

Establishing herself as a human rights defender, Eunice dedicated herself to the cause of Brazil's indigenous peoples, acting as a lawyer against land expropriations suffered by this population. In 1988, she was a consultant to the National Constituent Assembly, which promulgated the Brazilian Federal Constitution.

The trajectory of Eunice and the Paiva family coincides in many ways with that of the country itself. And one of the most significant confluences is in the political party to which Rubens was affiliated, the PTB, whose historical role was of crucial relevance to the events that led to the 1964 coup.

Founded in 1945 by former president Getúlio Vargas to, in his words, "separate the unions and the communists", the PTB was based upon the politics of corporatism. At a time when Brazil was experiencing an expansion of industry and the working class, the PTB functioned as an instrument to co-opt union leaders and keep the labor movement under the aegis of the state.

João Goulart, Vargas' political heir, took over the leadership of the party and carried forward the PTB's nationalist policy when he took office in 1961. The country was experiencing an intensification of the class struggle – in 1953 with the "Strike of the 300,000", in 1957 with the "Strike of the 400,000" and in 1963 (with Goulart already in office) the "Strike of the 700,000".

While the working class was advancing rapidly, the PTB and João Goulart, supported by the Stalinist Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), promoted illusions in reforms implemented by the bourgeois state and underestimated the danger of a fascist coup backed by imperialism. João Goulart and his PTB served, fundamentally, as a roadblock to the revolutionary advance of the masses.

As soon as he was elected a federal deputy in 1962, Rubens Paiva took part in the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) that investigated the Brazilian Institute for Democratic Action (IBAD) and the Institute for Social Research and Studies (IPES). These organizations were suspected of receiving foreign funding, especially from the United States, to influence the Brazilian political process and promote anti-communism. Later, not only the influence but also the decisive role of such imperialist-led "democratic" institutions in the Brazilian military coup were confirmed.

In the early hours of April 1, when the military junta was already in power, Rubens Paiva delivered a historic statement on National Radio. He called on workers and students to resist the coup with a "general strike," "peacefully," "obeying the slogans of the unions" and "in full solidarity with the legality now represented by President João Goulart." Paiva argued that the reforms proposed by Goulart were aimed at the political and economic emancipation of the country.

"The challenge has been thrown down entirely to the whole country: on the one hand, the majority of the Brazilian people want the reforms and want wealth to be distributed, on the other are the coup plotters who must be repelled, and this time, definitively, so that our country can really see

the dawning of its liberation,” concluded the speech.

Despite Rubens Paiva’s radical tone, João Goulart himself, the deposed president and the PTB’s main leader, chose not to resist in order to avoid a civil war. The PTB was immediately dismantled after the coup. The party, which had been one of the country’s main political forces, abruptly ceased its activities.

On April 10, 1964, Rubens Paiva had his mandate revoked by the first Institutional Act (AI-1). Faced with repression, he sought asylum in the Yugoslav Embassy and later went into exile in Europe. He returned to Brazil in 1965, where he continued his activities as an engineer and maintained contact with political exiles, until he was arrested and killed by the military regime in 1971.

The Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), which had worked for years to subordinate the working class to the PTB and the national bourgeoisie, systematically minimizing the danger of fascism, had no perspective to present for the working class. At the same time, the Pabloite renegades from Trotskyism had prevented the development of a revolutionary alternative by liquidating the significant political influence acquired by Trotskyism among the Brazilian working class into Stalinism, bourgeoisie nationalism and guerrillaism.

The working class was politically disarmed and handed over to the fascist military. Twenty thousand people were tortured under the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985), according to a survey by Human Rights Watch (HRW). Although the official figures mention 434 deaths, the current president of the Special Commission on Political Deaths and Disappearances recently declared that the number of political deaths and disappearances in Brazil could exceed 10,000. A study published in 2024 by the University of Brasilia found that there were 1,654 victims among peasants alone.

It’s fair to say that one could not expect director Walter Salles and his film to cover all the political and historical forces that shaped the lives of Rubens and Eunice Paiva. At the same time, there is a political decision in choosing these characters and restricting the focus to a specific moment in their lives.

Through this portrait, however, *I’m Still Here* asserts its relevance by presenting a moving work that has been able to win a massive audience and provoking popular reflection on the most critical period in the country’s history in the last century, essential for responding to today’s political challenges.



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