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## “Embrafilme: Present Problems and Future Possibilities”

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### Introduction

Shortly after becoming director of Embrafilme, Roberto Farias named filmmaker Gustavo Dahl (*The Brave Warrior, Uirá*) to head its distribution agency. Temporarily abandoning his filmmaking career, Dahl, who is Argentine by birth, quickly transformed Embrafilme into the largest film distributor in Latin America, responsible for more than 200 films. By 1978, however, disagreements arose between the two men about the role of the distributor, and Farias asked for Dahl's resignation late in the year. In this interview, published in the newsweekly *Veja* on 13 December 1978, Gustavo Dahl discusses some of the reasons for his impending resignation and his vision of the future role of Embrafilme in distribution. He feels that Embrafilme must strengthen its role in distribution in order to counter the tremendous power of the multinational distributors in the internal Brazilian market. He speaks as well about the implication of Cinema Novo's collaboration (and his own) with the government of President Ernesto Geisel (a topic also dealt with by Carlos Diegues and Rui Guerra in the previous document in this volume). In March, 1979, Geisel was succeeded by General João Batista de Figueiredo and Farias by career diplomat Celso Amorim. Finally, Dahl speaks of the legacy of Cinema Novo and the “cultural dictatorship” that it maintains even today in Brazilian cinema.

## “Embrafilme: Present Problems and Future Possibilities”

GUSTAVO DAHL

*Veja:* Why did you submit your resignation to Embrafilme?

*Dahl:* I had the feeling that my work had finished. When I entered Embrafilme, four years ago, the distributor was merely one department of the sector of operations; today it is itself a superintendency with 150 employees, 10 branches, and a budget of over \$5,000,000 per year. At this point a reformulation and a deep discussion about the problem of distribution is necessary. Roberto Farias and I disagree about distribution. I think that the distributor cannot remain dependent on an endowment or on the whims of a bureaucrat. He sees the project of distribution with undefined growth as dangerous, running the risk of being concentrated in the hands of a single group. For this reason he proposes the reactivation of private distributors. I disagree. I think that the answer to a market structured by large theater chains is precisely a strong distribution organ that can offer a sizeable volume of programming—or else we will be swallowed by the large monopolies. This divergence of opinion, by the way, is not only with Roberto, but also with a number of other leaders of Brazilian cinema.

*Veja:* Who are these leaders and what kind of criticisms have they made of your position?

*Dahl:* It is difficult to establish who they are because there is no face-to-face discussion; positions are known more on the basis of “so-and-so said. . . .” But one of the criticisms that the distributor frequently receives is that it favors exclusively big films like *Dama do Lotação* and *Tudo Bem*. But it is utopian to believe that if we spend a million *cruzeiros* on the publicity of all films each of them will behave in the same manner on the market. We, the distributor, must establish the margin of risk that each film can handle.

*Veja:* What has been the price of the filmmaker’s alliance with the state?

*Dahl:* During the Geisel period, there was a political pact between cinema and the government that implied the existence of a certain unity to be maintained at all cost. I believe that this formula had a very strong social result, permitting a new flourishing of Brazilian cinema. This unity, however, had its price: the total neutralization of debate. But such neutralization is increasingly linked to the past. Now the whole country is debating its future. Brazilian cinema meanwhile, is still grasping at a ragged unity, as if it were the price of its material existence and as if the political pact had not been exhausted.

*Veja:* What do you expect from the next government?

*Dahl:* A permanent dialogue with the cinematographic class, the maintenance of a policy aimed at the occupation of the internal market, action in the area of exhibition, attempting, at the very least, to double

the market, the utilization of electronic means of communication for the diffusion of our cinematic culture, the penetration of the Brazilian film in Latin America, Africa, and also in the American market. And above all: that the funds given cinema be compatible with the service it performs for the nation.

*Veja:* The political pact you refer to has been considered by many to be a cooptation. . . .

*Dahl:* When the money for films came from the National Bank of Minas Gerais no one talked about cooptation. Nevertheless, we could say that filmmakers were just as coopted then as now. In truth, there is a profound ignorance about the process of film production, principally in an emergent country. Films have to be made either with foreign capital or with the money of the state. Here in Brazil there is no such thing as a professional producer. The problem of capital for cinema did not begin with the current boom. Personally, I think that the return to bourgeois democracy, in which films are made with funds raised in banks and co-signed by millionaire friends, is a frightening perspective. Equally frightening is the hypothesis of a cinema totally controlled by the state, as in socialist countries.

*Veja:* What was, in reality, the collaboration of Geisel's government with cinema?

*Dahl:* The investment of Geisel's government in cinema was a task of cultural restoration. No easy adherence was being bought. The people's memory is very short. In the last moments of the Goulart period, a whole phase of literary films was being conceived: *Matraga*, *Plantation Boy*, *The Priest and the Girl*. The cinematic project of the government was that of valorizing the director, rather than production as such. What pushed Brazilian cinema in the direction of big films was the situation of the market. Few moments in the history of cinematic production have had the freedom to produce as did Brazilian cinema during the Geisel government.

*Veja:* Can you give an example of this freedom?

*Dahl:* Glauber Rocha dragged the script of *A Idade da Terra* around for five years. He proposed it in Los Angeles, Paris, Rome, Mexico, and Venezuela. Only in Brazil did he find the possibility of making it. The greatest freedom that we had was that of exercising language, of using the vehicle. There is nothing more corrupt, more damaging to a cineaste, than not making films. That is true censorship: censorship at the source. This type of barrier—silence—was overcome during the Geisel government.

*Veja:* But what about censorship?

*Dahl:* It is impressive that there was much more freedom to make than to judge. We have had cultural production, but not much discussion. The responsibility is not of censorship, but of the intellectuals.

*Veja:* Why then did today's cinematic production cease being critical as in the days of Cinema Novo?

*Dahl:* The term "critical" always has a negative meaning. What was in-

credible about Cinema Novo was its desire to build the country through cinema. But building a country through cinema does not eliminate its hunger, but merely gives it an identity. That is what was missing. People need to feel free and responsible for the social group in which they live, which is what happens in any Indian village. What bothers me deeply, today, is this opposition between individual and collective destiny, this lack of coincidence between them.

*Veja:* Why has this desire to build the country been lost?

*Dahl:* This desire was also capricious: believing that the film was a magic wand that, thrown on the screen, would change people's minds. This loss is a worldwide phenomenon. Pasolini said that the sixties was a decade of destruction and that the seventies would be one of restoration. I think that we have also lost contact with world cinema.

*Veja:* But isn't censorship to blame in this case?

*Dahl:* No! Police censorship plays its part, but the laws of the cinematic market play an equal part. Today, in Brazil, two thirds of the market is dominated exclusively by American cinema. This is not a problem of police censorship, but of economic realities. The fact that it has become uneconomical to import a film by Godard is a censorship just as violent as the cuts made in Bertolucci's *1900*.

*Veja:* In relation to the pact with the military government, some filmmakers have been accused of collaborating with the dictatorship.

*Dahl:* It is necessary to say once and for all that you cannot have a country like Brazil, with 120,000,000 inhabitants and 4,000 kilometers of coastline in the South Atlantic, without the political presence of the military. Through the professional activities of the Army, the military is linked to a project for the nation. For some, this project is seen as fascist. Others, including myself, see it as a road to independence, autonomy, and liberation. There is no great cinema without a national project, and vice-versa. In this sense, Brazilian cinema is something that goes beyond governments and regimes.

*Veja:* It is said that, with the pretext of defending nationalism, filmmakers have adhered to the dictatorship.

*Dahl:* I did not collaborate with the Geisel government unconsciously. I believe that the end of torture, the liberalization of the press, and the resignation of General Sylvio Frota have generated profound modifications that the country has not yet understood. Nothing has been sold or exchanged. A job was merely done. I don't like the dictatorship, but neither do I like the bourgeois democracy that kills millions of Brazilians with a smile. One should not confuse democracy with freedom for the national bourgeoisie to continue living off the public coffers while defending free enterprise. The same bourgeoisie that today longs for a socialist party is the same one that, several years ago, was marching with God for liberty.\*

\*A reference to the extreme right-wing Tradition, Family, and Fatherland organization that was active in Brazil in the 1960s and early 1970s.

*Veja:* How do you see the kind of cinema being made today in Brazil?  
*Dahl:* There are only two types of cinema: industrial and experimental. They sometimes mix. *Tudo Bem* is an example of a film conceived as experimental, but that came to life within the parameters of industrial cinema. In Brazil we have not yet had our *La Dolce Vita* or *Lola Montes*; great films of spectacle that also exploded cinematic language. Today there are no movements in Brazil. There is no group of directors working in a common direction with an affinity of themes, language, cinematic vision. Brazilian cinema has not yet been able to digest its last movement. It still lives under the cultural dictatorship of Cinema Novo. After fifteen years, the most enthusiastically awaited films are those of the Cinema Novo directors.

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