



Italian immigration in the south of Brazil and identity: the film *O Quatrilho* case-study¹

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Resumo

Esta pesquisa trata da imigração italiana no Rio Grande do Sul, buscando descrever a sua formação, que constitui uma identidade posicionada no lugar e na história. Visando demonstrar que a mídia se apropria de fenômenos históricos para contar e representar a história no presente, este estudo está delimitado na análise do filme *O Quatrilho*. O artigo explora o modo pelo qual o filme representa a história e os aspectos culturais do período da primeira fase da imigração italiana na região, final do século XIX e início do XX. A aproximação teórico-metodológica é baseada nos conceitos de identidade cultural e representação. O estudo inicialmente descreve o êxodo e a formação da diáspora italiana para, em seguida, fornecer informações sobre a narrativa do filme, destacando aspectos da sua produção na década de 90 do cinema brasileiro. Por fim, realiza uma análise de passagens e imagens que representam essa identidade. São, portanto, duas leituras: uma ocupa-se do fenômeno histórico representado no filme e a outra explora o contexto de produção atual do cinema brasileiro.

Palavras-chave

Imigração italiana no RGS; identidade cultural; representação; cinema brasileiro.

Introduction

The investigation that I am going to describe is about the phenomenon of the Italian immigration to Brazil related to media issues. Adopting theoretical approaches from History and Cultural Studies, the overall objective of this research is, on the one hand, to acquire knowledge about the narrativization of this particular history and, on the other hand, to interpret how the media uses these events to tell the story for the present. As a third generation Italian, born in a culturally hybrid country like Brazil, I consider it important to discuss these questions and compare both perspectives. I experience them in my everyday life and perhaps many others share these feelings. It is important to bear in mind that there is no essence to be discovered but identities which are under continual construction. Further, the media work as a mediator of these identities, producing modes of signification, constructing, representing and narrating them to a particular cultural identity group or person. The cinema constructs the meaning of these identities in various forms to submit to its audiences. In the Brazilian cinema, from the 1990s, identity matters became crucial arguments; this aspect will also be discussed in the following case-study of the film *O Quatrilho*.

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Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyse the historical development of Italian immigration to the south of Brazil, to the region called Rio Grande do Sul (RGS)³, in the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, through the film *O Quatrilho*. The film analysis will help us to better understand how the Brazilian media⁴ illustrate this phenomenon and how it relates to the Italian identity.

The statistics indicate that there are three million Brazilians of Italian descent⁵ in this region and many elements of their culture have been maintained and passed down to new generations. The Italian culture still has a strong presence in many Brazilian cities. We could even call them “little Italies”, in which Italian cultural aspects can be identified nowadays; for instance in Italian dialects, traditions and religion.

O Quatrilho is a Brazilian drama film directed by Fábio Barreto and produced in 1995. It is an adaptation from the novel of José Clemente Pozenato⁶ made by Antônio Calmon and Leopoldo Serran. The film tells the story of two Italian immigrant couples living in the state of Rio Grande do Sul in the early 20th century: Teresa (Patrícia Pillar) and Angelo (Alexandre Paternost); and Pierina (Glória Pires) and Massimo (Bruno Campos). While struggling to survive in the new country, Massimo and Teresa unexpectedly fall in love. Then, they react against their cultural traditions and leave the Italian colony in search of a new future, abandoning their present partners.

Quatrilho is a kind of a card game, in which the player has to betray his partner in order to become the winner. The film tells the story of families, which came from Italy to Brazil in late 19th century and beginning of the 20th, looking for a better life for themselves and their children. It talks also about their own traditions, behaviour, beliefs and political positions.

In order to interpret the subject matter, this research connects the historical process with the empirical data, that is, how the film represents the history and certain cultural issues. It explores the text through its narrative, dialogues, images and specific selected passages. In addition, the theoretical and methodological approaches arise from a consideration of the concepts of cultural identity⁷ and representation⁸. I am aware

³ There is a large amount of literature about Italian immigration in Rio Grande do Sul. For this research I have chosen especially two references De Boni & Costa (1979) and Manfroi (2001) which best describe the phenomenon giving a critical point of view in the historical narrative approach and also showing a wide context of the economic, politics, social and cultural environment.

⁴ It is important to outline that some significative research has been carried out about the argument in relation to the media: radio programs in Italian dialects (Golin, 2002; 2006), fiction production (Pesavento, 2001), comics (Bier, 2001), literature (Pozenato, 1979) and press (Pozenato, 2005).

⁵ The statistics registered by the Italian Embassy estimate 25 million people in Brazil have some Italian origin, three million of them are concentrated in the RGS. The Italian government analysis (31/12/2001) shows that 301,401 citizens are registered as “Italian living abroad” in Brazil; 165,697 are residents in São Paulo, 41,139 in Rio de Janeiro, and 36,888 in Porto Alegre, capital of RGS.

⁶ See POZENATO, J. C. (1985) *O Quatrilho*. Porto Alegre: Mercado Aberto.

⁷ For this analysis the Cultural Identity concept has been understood as Hall (2000) developed it in the text *Who needs identity?* He stresses that it is a complex concept “to refer to the meaning point, point of *suture*, between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us (p. 19).

⁸ The following quotations from Hall (1997) explain how this research is using the concept: “Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It *does* involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things” (p.15); in addition, he also outlines: “representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer* to either the ‘real’ world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional, objects, people and events”(p.17).



that there are many different approaches to the interpretation of films. This research concentrates on the concepts of cultural identity and representation as they are manifested in and through this film.

The first reading is concerned with the historical phenomenon represented in the film, which deals with the beginning of Italian immigration to the south of Brazil. The second is concerned with the period and context of the production of the film. The essay is divided into three parts. The first section provides, in order to give a wider understanding of the subject, a brief history of European, and especially, Italian immigration to Brazil. The second discusses the Brazilian cinema, characterising it in the context of the 1990's. The third is the narrative analysis, starting from a qualitative sample of dialogues and images that represent the identity of the Italian immigrants in that period of time.

The European immigration in Brazil

Before describing the history of Italian immigration to the region of RGS it is necessary to elucidate briefly some roots of the European colonization in Brazil in the beginning of the 19th century. It consists of a new historical period related to the country's economy and political independence. It was also when the process of building the nation started, after three centuries of subjection to Portuguese domination. The European non-Portuguese immigration to Brazil was determined by three main contradictory factors. First, the capitalist development that was starting to take shape in the world and did not recognize the slavery system but wanted to form a consumer market. The Brazilian government was also under pressure from Britain who wanted to abolish the slave trade in order to increase the production in its own possessed territories. Brazil used to produce sugar as well as the British Indies colonies. Second, the Portuguese bureaucratic elite was inclined to transform its colony into a country, and this explains the demand of European immigrants. Third, the biggest plantation-owner farmers group, were interested in maintaining the monoculture slavery system, fought against the colonization process considering that it could get a modern model of small propriety. During the 1840s the Brazilian economy went through an important change. Coffee became the main export product, rather than sugar, and the centre of the Brazilian economy was relocated to São Paulo. The Brazilian elite accepted the European immigration just when it became viable for them as a solution to substitute the manual slavery labour.

According to De Boni & Costa⁹, the colonization policy can be divided into the following periods: a) promotion of colonization (1808-1830); b) suspension of the colonization despite the slavery system stabilization (1830-1848); c) immigration incentive – not colonization – in order to substitute the African manual labour (1848-1889).

Everything started when the Prince Monarch ordered on 25th November 1808 a new decree allowing foreign residents to be landowners in the country in equal terms to the Brazilians. Until this period Portuguese, Indian and African slaves basically populated Brazil. The decree was more than just a simple

⁹ DE BONI, L. & COSTA, R. (1979) *Os italianos do Rio Grande do Sul*. Porto Alegre: Est, Correio Riograndense & EDUCS.



law, in this instance, D. João VI started a real immigration policy. Certainly, the deal was to attract immigrants to Brazil, but it was also followed for many other reasons. One was to create a nation by promoting the population growth. Two, to form an army to maintain the borders security. Three, to encourage economic development in order to establish a subsidiary agriculture, based on small properties and formed by free rural workers. And above all, to prepare the country to face the slavery abolition process, which started in 1826 and finished in 1888¹⁰, causing crucial problems to the Brazilian economy promoted by the owner farmers and maintained, basically, by slave workers.

Because of this the Brazilian imperial government started “the colonization propaganda” to disseminate promises and proposal benefits to Europeans interested in immigrating. The facilities started with giving free transport to the new country; then land concessions; afterward, supplying basic tools required to work, and finally, money to improve the agriculture production. Government agents, through a signed contract, recruited immigrants in Europe.

The first experience conducted by the Brazilian government was the one that introduced 1,790 immigrants from Switzerland to Nova Friburgo, Rio de Janeiro, in 1819. It was unsuccessful for several reasons, but basically because of very bad transport conditions and the fact that the plantation owners and the government did not carry out the contract clauses. Most of the times they left the immigrants in difficult conditions. Moreover, the proclamation of independence from Portugal, in 1822, did not change the immigration policy, the Emperor D. Pedro I followed the ideas from his father. And, in the same way, the second experience took place between 1824-1830, when 5,350 Germans were introduced to the São Leopoldo colony in RGS. In the beginning it was also unsuccessful because the plantation owners treated the immigrants no differently to the slaves, consequently it caused international criticism. Anyhow, the German immigration has been important in the south of Brazil a few years later. Restarted in 1844, the statistics showed more than 310,000 Germans immigrated to RGS during the 150 year period¹¹.

In other words, it is important to outline that the Brazilian immigration policy has been always contradictory. If on the one hand the aim of the Brazilian government was to attract immigrants to replace the slave labour force and to help the plantation owners to expand the extraordinary coffee production. On the other hand, the colonization was a secondary deal, despite fundamental, to achieve their scope. Laws, rules and promises were been made in order to invite Europeans to the new country¹². Instead, the reality, upon arrival, was completely different for the immigrants, whose work conditions were very poor, but they cost less than maintaining the slaves for the plantation owners.

The Italian immigration in the south of Brazil

After a short overview about the European immigration in Brazil, this research will be focusing on the historical narrative about the Italian experience, especially regarding those aspects concerned with identity

¹⁰ Adopted on May 13, 1888, the “Golden Law” finally abolished slavery in Brazil.

¹¹ Ibid, p.37.

¹² Manfroi, O. (2001) *A colonização italiana no Rio Grande do Sul. Implicações econômicas, políticas e culturais*. Porto Alegre: EST Edições.

issues. Initially it is necessary to remember that this research is delimited to the first period of the Italian immigration, which took place during the years 1874-1914. There are two motivations for this, first is considered necessary to delimit the analysis in order to comprehend the film, whose story is set in 1910; second, this study has been constructed also to understand how the cultural elements represented in the film attract the media attention nowadays.

There are many historical aspects that explain the Italian mass migration to the American continent; one of them is the Italian Unification, that is, the political and social process that unified the different states in Italy into a single nation. After the dissolution of the Roman Empire (476 AD) Italy was a fragmented region divided into politically independent units. The reunification process began only after the Congress of Vienna in 1815, when Austrian, French and the Catholic Church dominated these regions. During this period, different groups fought in favour of the unification, and then in March 1861 Vittorio Emanuele was proclaimed the King of Italy. Even though the *peninsula* became a Republic only in the 20th century.

According to Manfroi¹³ the concomitance between the abolition of slavery and the increasing of the migratory movement in Brazil was a mere coincidence. I believe it is valid to put this matter in a different order, it means that in this particular case the mass migration was followed by a crucial economic crisis experienced by Italy in that period, whilst Brazil was seeking farm workers to substitute for the slaves and to populate its lands in order to protect the borders. Anyhow, it is part of a long exodus process examined by literature studying this issue. Italians immigrated to all continents, and their adventures started in the medieval times and have been repeated in different situations¹⁴. In this case, the available data shows that, during the decades between 1876 to 1914, half, and sometimes three-quarters, of the European migration to Brazil were Italian. As there is not precise official data, the historians found it difficult to know the exact number, but all agree, following many sources, that the number of Italians who arrived only in RGS in this period is between 70,000 to 100,000¹⁵. Thus, it is impossible to describe here this wide and long historical process in-depth, but there are two key-points, in relation to the Brazilian experience, that must be stressed to better understand the subject matter of this research.

The first one is the economic situation in the north of Italy in the period in question, which explains why most of immigrants came from the northern regions such as Veneto, Trento-South Tyrol, Piedmont, Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy. In the beginning of the 19th century the north passed through several social and economic changes, as a result of the industrial development. The unification brought serious consequences to the Italian economy. The government tried, during the 50 years of fighting for the union, to consolidate the bases of the *New Italy* in many levels, for instance, bureaucratic, industrial, agricultural and commercial. Consequently, the Italian economy became not only vulnerable and submitted to the international oscillations, but there was also disparity after the region customs closure. The industrialised

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See CAMERANA, L. I. (2003) *Il grande esodo. Storia delle migrazioni italiane nel mondo*. Milano: Corbaccio.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.74.



production started to offer products at low price, discomposing the small agriculture and artesian structures. Then, the most important problem faced was to homogenize a territory culturally, socially and economically diversified and to build an Italian nationality *inside* and *outside* the country. From the economic point of view, the crisis affected the north first because the industrial development left their small farmers without work and no capacity for trading and exchanging goods; it was impossible for them to compete with the industrialised and the foreign products. Southern Italians migrated to Brazil only in the 20th century, because they started to face this crisis years later. This period is usually pointed out by literature as a second Italian migration experience in southern Brazil.

The second point is the fact that Italians have settled in different regions of Brazil. In other words, it is possible to divide them into two groups: those who have settled in the southeast and quickly integrated themselves into Brazilian society, and those that came to live in the south. The film-case tells the story of the latter one, those who have been isolated for a long time, based in rural colonies, maintaining, preserving and rebuilding their own culture.

In the first case the Italian immigrants had to sign a contract with the owner farmer, which obligated them to work during a predetermined period on the coffee plantations. The situation was not easy for them upon arrival, because the farmers used to treat them as slaves, imposing hard and servile work. But after working for some years, most of them earned enough money to buy their own land, allowing them to remain in São Paulo and integrate themselves in the Brazilian society and its hybrid culture.

Those who decided to go to RGS have taken, as Manfroi¹⁶ argues, another way in the immigration process. Seeking land, they found a different situation in south of Brazil. In 1875, the Portuguese and German populations had already occupied the best and centralized places in the region, leaving for the Italians only the isolated, mountainous and virgin forest parts. After a difficult and long trip to Porto Alegre, the government agents directed the Italians to the first colonies in the countryside, called *Caxias*, *Conde d'Eu* and *Dona Isabel*. In this case, sometimes, the immigrant received from the Brazilian government a plot in the cited colonies. Being abandoned by the Italian and Brazilian government, far from the urban and commercial centres, contacting only the local communities, the immigrants remained for a long time in complete isolation; which explains the fact that after more than 130 years, they still speak their old dialects and live according to their traditions. Even though in São Paulo the Italian immigration phenomenon, if compared to the RGS experience, was bigger in the number of immigrants, it has been culturally more heterogeneous.

In the historical process of the Italian colonies in RGS the cultural identity plays a special role. Therefore, it is difficult to affirm that the immigrants had maintained a kind of “national identity” in that specific period or it has been preserved. First of all, it is significant to consider that the migration process described took place only a few years after the Italian unification, which means, inside the *peninsula* a nationality was yet

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 51.



a project to be built. Second, many aspects of their culture are involved with the historical melting pot in which both, Italy and Brazil, have been joined. Thus, upon their arrival in the new territory, the immigrants reconstructed their identity, redefined it, and imaginarily delimited it in its new environment to establish, finally, its new social and familiar order.

On the other hand, the historical process also tells (represented in the film) that the cultural identity elements are recognized only when the Italian immigrant faced the *Brazilians*. Furthermore, it is possible to say that in Italy and also Brazil the process of building a nation began in the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. But it was only during the nationalist's governments, respectively, conducted by Mussolini and Vargas, in both countries in the 1930s, that the national identity, as an official project, in order to create and construct a nation, has been enforced. As Hall states, which helps to understand this question, *the emphasis in cultural practices is important. It is the participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects and events*¹⁷. Thus, in order to reflect upon this issue, it is relevant to describe some characteristics and cultural elements that have been maintained by generations and differ from the *Brazilianess*. Therefore, the main cultural aspects inferred in the historian's reports are:

- *Family values and prosperity as lifetime objectives*. On the contrary of the large scale production, practiced in the Brazilian economy cultivating only one product, the Italian immigrants looked to sustain firstly the family, and then to sell the surplus produce in the regional market. The economic system was based in the production of wheat, maize, wine, and so on. In addition, to work became the immigrant's main objective; it represented the most important way to gain prosperity. The family was the production's cell, as they lived an isolated existence they needed to survive and auto-supply and then all family components used to work together.

- *Religion*. The immigrant's social-political-cultural points of view were not considered a *risk situation* for the Brazilian politics at this moment; they were only a natural expression of some cultural values, especially concerned with religion. Without educational support, and also isolated in the region, they developed their small printing press, communication relationship, literature, arts; their social lives were centralised around the Catholic Church. Its rituals and ceremonies occupied a central role in their communities. Through the Church the immigrants could recognize themselves and the others, forming a unit between their work and beliefs.

- *Education and language*. The Italian immigrants language¹⁸ was the local dialect from the north of Italy, which also changed by fusing with many others. Far from the Portuguese-Brazilian centres, they used to speak their local dialect brought from their Italian home. There is also a kind of dialect that is still being used, called *Talian*, it was born when the immigrants moved to the new country, and it is a mix of Veneto, Lombard, Trentino, and Piedmont dialects with Portuguese. It is the "language" understood in the region, it

¹⁷ Hall, 1997, p. 3.

¹⁸ Standard Italian was adopted as the official language after the Italian Unification and it was based on the Tuscany dialect.

is still used in the familiar and communitarian environments and consequently in their cultural manifestations.

- *Participation in politics*. The participation of the Italians in the regional politics depended upon many aspects, for instance, their cultural integration in the Brazilian society, that involved language, education, and so on, were an important requirement. At the beginning it was difficult, but they used to portray themselves more politicised than the Germans in the region, a characteristic brought from Italy. They used to claim rights and to organize their community according to not only their social and economic position, but also the religious law.

Discussing cinema, identity and history

Prior to analysing the film *O Quatrilho* through its narrative it is necessary to consider not only the history of the Italian immigration to the south of Brazil as a *referent* which has been represented in the movie, but also to learn about the context in which it has been produced. Many studies and discussions have been carried out about the re-emergence of the Brazilian cinema in the mid-1990s¹⁹. Their consent to this *rebirth* is in the fact that the Brazilian cultural diversity is presented in the films through representations of particular national context, in which the film in question could be included.

For this reason, there are a number of issues that should briefly be taken into consideration about the Brazilian film industry. For many years the film industry in Brazil has been restricted because it depended on the state for production financing. Except during the period called *Cinema Novo*²⁰, it is possible to refer to the Brazilian cinema as a production collapse. Without financial support, Brazilian cinema nearly disappeared from the market between 1960s and 1990s²¹. Even though the *Instituto Nacional do Cinema* (INC), created in 1966, and the *Empresa Brasileira de Cinema* (Embrafilme), in 1969, have played the role of state regulator of the market for a long time. However, the bleakest period was during the government of Brazil's first democratically elected president, Fernando Collor de Mello, who erased any policy for cinematographic production, closing down mainly cultural public institutions, including *Embrafilme*.

Further, contrasting these experiences, in the mid-1990, beyond the diversity of themes about Brazil's context, was a combination of factors that also contributed to the *rebirth* of the Brazilian cinema. For instance, President Itamar Franco, who completed the Collor's mandate, reallocated *Embrafilme* and created the Brazilian Cinema Rescue Award. These actions, including the Rouanet Law (1991), that offered a credit tax for investments in culture, marked the first step for a cultural policy in Brazil, as well as the

¹⁹ For an in-depth reading about this theme see Cunha (2004), Rossini (2005), Shaw & Dennison (2005), Nagib (2006).

²⁰ *Cinema Novo* was a modernist movement guided by Brazilians filmmakers (Glauber Rocha, Carlos Diegues, Nelson Pereira Santos and Joaquim Pedro de Andrade) in the 1950s and 1960s. The main concepts of their productions were related to notions of class and national identity; the topics were based in the dry northeast (*Sertão*) and the reality of large cities, their slum environments from a particular aesthetic and ethical issues. Rocha, for instance, proposed, by producing films and manifests, a radical twist, rejecting the sociological discourse of denunciation and victimization related to Latin America misery. He wanted to show suffering and poverty without falling in to paternalist humanism; thus, from the aesthetic point of view, he created new representations of these questions, avoiding clichés about exclusion and showing images of unbearable power to the viewer.

²¹ Cf. JOHNSON, 2005, pp. 17-18.

Audiovisual Law, signed in 1993 by the following president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, which was crucial to the re-emergence and development of the Brazilian cinema.

More importantly, the audiovisual law allowed public and private business and corporations to invest a portion of their income tax in audiovisual projects, thus offering the possibility of making a profit at no risk, because funds invested would otherwise be paid to the federal government. In addition, the law permits foreign film distributors in the country to invest up to 70 percent of their income taxes in national film production (Johnson, *Ibid*, p.20).

Johnson's analysis argues that both - Rouanet and Audiovisual laws - are not perfect, because access to the funds available is not equal, in the sense that some filmmakers have more capital social relations than others. As a result of this policy, the government has created the *Agência Nacional de Cinema* (Ancine) in order to regulate the distribution and the exhibition market. The investigation also indicates that there is a debate surrounding *Ancine's* structure, that it could be designed according to the relation between the Brazilian cinema and Hollywood. Regardless of the validity of the statement, it is true that issues about cultural production and film industries are always combined with several economic, social, ideological and cultural aspects.

Furthermore, it is not only the cultural policy that has contributed towards this revival of the Brazilian cinema, but also the diversity of themes and styles present in the content of the current production such as historical dramas [*Carlota Joaquina/ Princesa do Brasil* (Carla Camurati, 1995)], children's films [*Xuxa Popstar* (Tisuka Yamasaki, 2000), *Xuxa e os Duendes 2* (Paulo S. de Almeida, 2002)], comedies [*Pequeno Dicionário Amoroso* (Sandra Werneck, 1997)], urban dramas [*Central do Brasil* (Walter Salles Jr., 1998), *Cidade de Deus* (Fernando Meirelles, 2002), *Orfeu* (Carlos Diegues, 1999), *Carandiru* (Hector Babenco, 2003)], literary adaptations [*O Quatrilho, O que é isso companheiro?* (Bruno Barreto, 1997), *Guerra dos Canudos* (Sérgio Rezende, 1997)], and so on. By exploring different themes, the filmmakers are re-establishing communication between the national cinema productions and its audience. Some Brazilian films have received recognition in Brazil and abroad, with the nominations for an Oscar Award for the Best Foreign Film: *O Quatrilho* (1996), *O que é isso companheiro?* (1997) and *Central do Brasil* (1999)²².

Therefore, in the Brazilian cinema production, from the mid-1990s, the audience can find a composition of realism and self-reference elaborated within a national context subject, which plays a contradictory role between tradition and modernity²³. The argument deals with the interpretation of these issues:

There are two forms of globalisation, which still struggling with one other, an older, corporate, enclosed, increasingly defensive one which has go back to nationalism and national cultural identity in a highly defensive way, trying to build barriers around it before it is eroded. And the other form of the global post-modern, which is trying to live with and incorporate difference (Hall, 1991, p.33).

²² It is important to outline that the film *O Quatrilho* registered in audience numbers 1,117,154 only in Brazil; and approximately 7 million in 48 different countries.

²³ Cf. XAVIER, I. (2006) 'Brazilian Cinema in the 1990s: the unexpected encounter and the resentful character'. In: NAGIB, L. *The new Brazilian Cinema*. London: I. B. Tauris, p.40.

The quotation above explains why films like *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*) and *Carandiru* are capturing the audience's attention. Both explore the environment of the big cities, or slums in Brazil; and also, it can make clearer the meaning of the questions of identity and migration explored in the film *O Quatrilho*.

The Italian immigration represented in the film *O Quatrilho*

Thus it is important to bear in mind that in the same way a story is told by any media production, history is also a construction, based on evidence and documents followed by a method. Considering this, there are two perspectives that can be joined together to better understand *O Quatrilho* (Figure1). One is concerned with the plot characteristics; that is a literary adaptation about the Italian immigration in RGS. The other is concerned with the analysis about the representations present in the film, which takes some *clues* from a historical film method. Even though the film is a drama, its narrative is portraying issues about a particular migration process that was *real* and happened in the Italian and Brazilian history.



Figure 1

Plot characteristics

For the first reading the contribution of Pesavento²⁴ is important. The Brazilian historian compares the literature and the film versions of the *O Quatrilho* from the *New Cultural History* point of view, which concentrates on its representations, imaginary and sensibilities. It is also an indication of how the media production can help the historians look at a historical film. It is argued in the article that even though films are always fiction, historians should consider the representations created by this kind of media as “another way” of looking at the history:

O Quatrilho, as a film and, therefore, fiction material, translates a situation that ‘could be happened’. And this is portrayed to the historians as a possibility to look at the real from other issues (Pesavento, *Ibid*, p. 226).

The film narrative explores not only representations about historical and cultural elements, but also sensibility, passion, contrary order and behaviour, which can be understood in different levels by the audience, depending upon their background. The images in sepia, the texts and the music transport the

²⁴ PESAVENTO, S. J. (2001) ‘De razões e sentimentos: O Quatrilho na tela’. In: SOARES, M. C. & FERREIRA Jorge. *A História vai ao cinema*. Rio de Janeiro: Record.

audience to the past, which is delimited in the Italian immigration to the extreme south of Brazil, and based in an environment made up of poor people, workers, with simple habits, numerous families, distant roots, and so on. As part of the Brazilian history, the process of construction of meaning is associated in different levels, someone could just follow the plot taking references from self-memory and cultural identity group. Another person could identify it as an aspect of the Brazilian hybridism. The film plot tells not only about the historical context, which is implied, but also makes a discussion about the Italian immigration society reporting family, work and religious values. The narrative describes the story of two immigrant couples living in the Italian colony of RGS in 1910: Teresa and Angelo, and Pierina and Massimo. The film starts with the wedding of Teresa and Angelo stressing the narrative metaphor of the *Quatrilho* game, in which the players are changed – *man cannot divide what God has united* - says the priest. The description of the couples in the beginning indicates that the characters are very different. Teresa is sensitive and Angelo is rational, a hard worker and ambitious; Pierina is serious, methodical and she never smiles; her husband Massimo is a big dreamer, he is an attractive man who hates to work. There is a rupture in the conservative social order when the couples change their partners, which will be restored only at the end of the movie. Each protagonist plays a stereotypical role to elucidate the cultural values in the narrative, which can be linked with the cultural characteristics inferred by the historians and highlighted in the historical part of this research. The narrative expresses, through the protagonist's role, characteristics of the Italian families - their own traditions, behaviour, beliefs (Catholic Church) and political positions.

***Quatrilho* mainstream construction analysis**

Even though *O Quatrilho* is an adaptation from literature, its narrative is about a particular migration phenomenon and a *real* historical process is represented. For this reason, this research will also follow some clues, exposed in the Rosenstone's historical film method²⁵. It is considered that this approach helps to better understand the film case, especially, those issues concerned with aspects of historical films that invoke conventions, developed in order to create realism and representations about a particular event of the past.

O Quatrilho tells history as a story with a beginning, middle, and an end. The narrative is a type of moral tale. The conservative social order starts perfectly and finishes as well as it begins. It could be divided into three progressive parts, which means that it describes a successful story – marking the improvement of the immigrant community. The first part describes the story and protagonists; it shows them trying to survive in the new country. The second part represents the passing of time – when the two couples decide to buy land and share the same house in order to have for their own property. Then the partners change, and many

²⁵ Cf. ROSENSTONE, R. 'The Historical Film: looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age'. In: LANDY, M. (2001) *The Historical Film. History and Memory in Media*. This perspective indicates that there is a different way to identify history in films, such as, outlining some categories: history as (anti)drama, spectacle, personal history, postmodern; and also that seldom history focuses on dramas. According to this method, historical films can be differed between *document* or *experiment* history into a film, and sometimes can have a combination of these varieties. If, on the one hand, films identified as *document* are more accepted by the historians because it seems closer to the written history; on the other hand, those as *experiment* are made in opposition with the Hollywood conventions and struggle against the representation codes, pp.50-66.

aspects appear, such as family and religious values. The third part shows the prosperity of the couples and the film ends when the plot is resolved and both families are living happily (figure 2).



Figure 2

***O Quatrilho* narrative is delimited in a closed, completed and simple past.** The first image of the movie is a black screen and the following sentences are written on it, stating what is coming next and they clearly delimit the narrative to the beginning of the Italian immigration in Brazil:

Leaving their own homeland, looking for better days, many groups of Italian emigrants have moved to the distant America in the second half of the 20th century. An important parcel of these adventurers had come to the extreme south of Brazil, where they, their children and grandchildren, had built a prosperous society, based on the small rural propriety, and later, on the commerce and industry.

Location buildings, photos, landscapes and artifacts give the impression of the past. Then, comes images, produced in sepia and by setting up the camera in a static position, in order to depict the scene: old buildings and streets (figure 3), a man working with wood in the middle of the forest, a church, a wedding, couples dancing, all elements report to the past, whilst a piece of music tells the story in Italian²⁶:

Dall'Italia noi siamo partiti, siamo partiti con nostro onore, 36 giorni, di macchina e vapore, e in Mèrica noi siamo arrivati, Mèrica, Mèrica, Mèrica, cosa sara questa Mèrica?



Figure 3

²⁶ We left Italy, we left it with our honor, 36 days, of wagon and steamer, and in America we arrived, America, America, America, what would be this America?

In addition, the film director, Fábio Barreto, in an interview for the DVD version, describes how it was possible to reconstruct the past in the first scene (figure 4). He argues that he used not only the real location (scenery, where the history took place) tools, utensils, furniture, clothes, objects collected from accurate research, but also *original* sources, for instance, for the wedding of Angelo and Teresa:

We worked with a huge quantity of extras, most of them are Italians descents, and their characteristics were so important to get the reality, to create the verisimilitude.



Figure 4

The film dramatizes history by depicting adventures of the main protagonists:

Working as a value - suffering, triumph and heroism (figure 5). Angelo plays an important role in the narrative. He characterizes the stereotype of the Italian workman; he is ambitious, has good business skills and he symbolizes prosperity. For most of the people, who descend from the Italian immigrants, working hard became a worth and value, because they lived and abided by their saying *we have done the America*. The Italian colony is nowadays one of the richest and most developed regions in Brazil, and the Italian descendents are seldom recognized for their family merits. They are proud of the fact that they transformed the isolated land, where only forests existed, into an important commercial and industrial centre. The plot, through Angelo, exposes this situation, depicting the protagonist as one among many other immigrants who have built their flourishing world out of nothing.



Figure 5

Language and gender. Another method used to make the film realistic is that the script also provides many passages mixing north Italian dialects with Portuguese. It is possible to illustrate in the following dialogue, when the sweet dreamer Teresa, after the wedding, goes to visit her strong aunt, who represents another stereotype: the Italian woman/mother, the matriarch who always makes the rules in the family cell.

Aunt – I want to know everything about your husband...What a nice guy you have got!

Teresa – (seeming shy and sad)

Aunt - (smiling) Don't worry, nobody can hear us here! How do you feel?

Teresa – (expressing sadness) So so, like a woman without a husband!

Aunt – Don't say that Teresa, Angelo has such great stature! Is it nothing to you?

Teresa – Is not that aunt, I'm just saying...

Aunt – Yeah, but you are not happy! Be honest, tell me everything! How is he?

Teresa – (suspiring) I thought it would be different!

Aunt - Every woman thinks that!

Teresa – How do you manage a husband?

Aunt (sitting behind Teresa) – First, never leave him without an answer, if he shouts, shout louder! Men are afraid to lose their women. Then, where would they find a slave to work for them? Thus, don't do everything he asks, including in bed! Invent any illness!

Teresa – But sometimes I feel a fever in my body!

Aunt – This is stupid! Think of something different. This is stupid! Think of another thing, like a good *salame con vino*...

Teresa – (laughs)

Aunt – Eating is the best thing in the world, a thin waist is not for work, it is just to get a fever in the body. Do as Pierina did, she got married before Christmas and she's now three months pregnant. She doesn't have a waist Teresa, she's as strong as men like!

Economics and politics. There is a sequence of shots that well illustrate the wide contexts for the main plot. When capitalism started to be discussed in Europe, the effects were felt around the world. The film also discusses these aspects. Following is the conversation between Angelo and the man in the trader shop (figure 6):

Un-known man (looking to the others and the trader) – Gardoni Angelo our new neighbour! Vitor Sciopa, Gardoni!

Trader – How the maize is going?

Angelo – Doing good, without any problem!

Trader – Yeah the weather is helping, we are going to have a lot of maize this year!

Escariotis (drunk, looking furious) – He is telling you that the prices are going down! Look Gardoni, you've just arrived and this pig capitalist is already exploiting you. It is true, isn't it Barbagli?

Trader – Anyone can be capitalist, it is just to drink less and work more, instead of sleeping on the streets!

Escariotis – It's a shame that the Devil didn't take out your two eyes! Hey pirate, fill me another glass of your horse's piss!

Angelo – Could you give me a cigar, please?

Trader – Of course Gardoni.

Escariotis (spitting on the floor) – Pig capitalist!

Trader – Don't worry Gardoni, Escariotis is always like this: he sounds tough but can't kill a fly. He talks a lot about the Priest. He learns these silly things in books; he's an anarchist!

Angelo (misunderstanding) – Anarchist?

Trader – I will do good business for you, but is our secret! I know that we will be good friends. And this cigar is free for you!



Figure 6

Community life and Church values. The film's plot portrays also the conservative society. In the Italian isolated colony, the Catholic Church rules used to guide the life of community. There are two sequences that represent this power. In the film, after the couple's partners have changed, and one of them has left the colony, the couple betrayed and abandoned - Angelo and Pierina - begin to understand that they are perfect for each other and decide to live together. They have children and continue to prosper. But, the small community, presided over by the Priest, starts to isolate them because they have violated the Church moral law, which mean, transgressing God's will.

The first sequence of shots shows Angelo listening to a sermon by the Priest inside the church (figure 7), after Teresa, his wife, left him with Pierina's husband, Massimo. The scene is set outside the Church and then the camera takes us inside:

Priest – I feel sorry for you Gardoni, it must be hard!

Angelo – (sitting down, showing his sorrow, hearing the Priest but looking lost and away from the Priest)

Priest – But you should see in this the will of God! Your wife has accepted the temptation of the body, but it is not your fault! But it you will be, if you do the same as her. You cannot marry again Gardoni, this is the cross that God reserves for you, and you must carry it and pray. You cannot live with another woman. It is worse if she's also married, this is a horrible situation. Abominated by the law of God and a bad example to the community. I've been informed that you are still living in the same house of Pierina. (...) You must leave that house! Can you promise that you will obey my order?

Angelo – I promise Father!



Figure7

They have lost their friends and could not participate anymore in the social and economic life of the colony - as the Priest ordered, because they decided to live together as a couple. Until the day that the strong Italian woman Pierina, with her children, came over into the Church during a crowded mass and broke down all the rules and faced the Priest (figure 8) - who is the most important authority in the colony. It is described in this sequence of the film:

Pierina – (Looking at and walking forward to the Priest) You know my name Father. I'm not a pig. I brought the children so everybody can see they are not pigs! They are human like the others Father!

Priest – I don't understand you!

Man – (her neighbour, stands up) Calm down Pierina!

Pierina – Calm means bullshit! I'm not a bitch. I'm a mother of three children and I have another coming. Go to hell Father Gentile! You all go to hell! I'm without a husband at home. I said, husband, because I'm not a bitch. Why? Because you did everything you could to make him work far away from here. Why can't he work here? If you weren't a Priest, I would have come with a gun. Look at the children, they cannot go out of their home, because everybody says *va dei fiori della puttana*, and who taught them this? You Father! You hate women. You hate them because you can't have one. Nobody guarantees to me that you are a saint. Who can guarantee that you don't have a bitch?

Man – (her neighbour, stands up) Pierina be careful!

Pierina – I want to say everything. I also have sinned, I'm not saying that I haven't, but I have never seen Christian people doing what you have done!

(Then, she walks towards the main door and look again at the Priest, crying as she says) – Hell also exists for Priests! Don't forget it Father Gentile!



Figure 8

There are many other passages, images and dialogues that could be quoted and discussed in this analysis, but what is important to highlight is that, even though *O Quatrilho* is a fictional text, its narrative is conceptualised, localised and dated in a historical *referent* event of the Italian immigration in RGS.

Conclusion

This research explored a brief history about the Italian immigration in Brazil. Then, brought forward issues about the Brazilian cinema, characterising it in the context of the 1990's. In the latter part, the narrative film analysis was the focus, bringing into discussion a qualitative sample of dialogues and images that

represent the identity of the Italian immigrants in that period of time. It also suggested that the film tends to be a sort of realistic production. Everything is constructed in order to interpret how the media used this event to relate this his(story) to the present. The historical narrative was linked with the mediated narrative. It was not my intention in this research to give definitive answers to the subject matter exposed, but to reflect about two key-points, based in *Cultural Studies* approaches. On the one hand, there is the reading concerned with the historical phenomenon represented in the film; on the other hand, there is another reading concerned with the period when the film was produced, that is, a new tendency of portraying self-representations and particular identities in order to capture the attention of the audience.

This research chose to face the phenomenon considering a wide context – which searched for interpretations from several disciplines such as history, sociology and economy in order to explain some issues – but it was in the *circuit of culture*²⁷ that I found inspiration – reflecting about the representations, identities, production, regulation and consumption – to look at *O Quatrilho*, its language and representational system, and it was an instructive exercise.

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²⁷ Cf. Hall, 1997.