

# Black protagonism is finally a hit: Self-representation in *Executive Order* and *Mars One*

## *O protagonismo negro enfim faz sucesso: A autorrepresentação em Medida Provisória e Marte Um*

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### ABSTRACT

This study points out an unprecedented media event: in 2022, two films directed and acted by Black individuals reached the mainstream. *Executive Order* by Lázaro Ramos, with 500,000 viewers and *Mars One* by Gabriel Martins, the Brazilian nominee for the Oscars. These works, differing in aesthetics and objectives, pointed to paths, constructing counter-hegemonic visualities regarding the Black and poor populations of Brazil and engaged with the public and critics. By briefly examining the Black presence in Brazilian cinema and the diverse experiences of its creators, we highlight how the construction of these films establishes, whether in form of dystopia or everyday life, other places, and images in a political gesture of rejecting violence.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Brazilian cinema, Black self-representation, *Executive Order*, *Mars One*

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### RESUMO

O artigo aponta um acontecimento midiático inédito: em 2022 dois filmes dirigidos e atuados por pessoas negras chegaram ao *mainstream*, *Medida Provisória*, de Lázaro Ramos, com 500 mil espectadores e *Marte Um*, de Gabriel Martins, o indicado brasileiro ao Oscar. Obras distintas em termos estéticos e de objetivos, ambas apontaram caminhos, construindo visualidades contra hegemônicas sobre as populações pretas e pobres do país, e dialogaram com público e crítica. A partir de um rápido exame sobre a presença negra no cinema brasileiro, da experiência diversa de seus realizadores, apontamos como a construção dos filmes estabelece, na forma da distopia ou da vida comum, outros lugares e imagens, num gesto político de recusa da violência.

**Palavras-chave:** Cinema brasileiro contemporâneo, autorrepresentação preta, *Medida Provisória*, *Marte Um*

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MATRIZES



# D

## Black protagonism is finally a hit

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Lincoln Péricles (2021), free translation. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buFUHow5D\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buFUHow5D_0)

“We are spectators of our absence”  
*Akins Kinte*, O que é um personagem?<sup>1</sup>  
24<sup>th</sup> Tiradentes Film Festival

<sup>2</sup> According to Propmark, a media outlet, in 2022, 53% of advertisements featured Black protagonists, an increase of 9% compared to previous years (*Pretos, LGBTQIAP+, mulheres e corpos*, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> I understand neoliberal empowerment according to Michel Feher (2009): The neoliberal subject is a being who must constantly seek to stand out from the crowd, to be identified as the most attractive among their competitors. They must maximize their market value, directing all their vital efforts to generate the greatest possible trust in society, presenting themselves as a great investment (pp. 21-41). This presupposes the understanding of neoliberal society as a corporate society, according to Foucault (2008), where bodies and minds are shaped according to the logic of maximizing their potential, and indifferent to compassion for others and significant social concerns.

ALTERNATING WITH THE PRESENTATION OF NEWS, when one advertise real estate, university courses, cars, or in a Christmas Special, with Black authors and protagonists on TV Globo – the commercial TV network – we observed in 2022, with unprecedented frequency, the inclusion of Black people in positive images in the media.<sup>2</sup> Not only personalities from soccer, popular music, or soap operas. Appearing in these advertisements, they follow conventional standards of elegance and neoliberal empowerment<sup>3</sup> – smiling, well-dressed, and not very black-skinned – and were present in generic and neutralized national representations and, as such, included as consumers. It was also the year in which two films by Black directors, with predominantly Black casts and crews, reached the mainstream (Martel, 2012). They are: *Executive Order* (original title: *Medida Provisória*), by Lázaro Ramos, with more than 500 thousand spectators, and *Mars One* (original title: *Marte Um*), by Gabriel Martins, a film from Contagem, a suburb of Belo Horizonte, the Brazilian Oscar nominee. This unprecedented relevance constitutes a media event according to Weber (2011) and demands an analysis that qualifies and demarcates this singular historical moment, and also those films. In addition to the international ‘trend’ triggered by barbaric events such as the murder of George Floyd in the United States in 2020 and related national events, the neoliberal focus on Black people as a consumer market to be further exploited, and an indelible racism in Brazilian social formation – which is thus exposed in reverse by denial, increasing the presence of black people where they do not usually appear – the media sphere has been having to open itself to the images and discourses of this minoritized majority of 54% of the Brazilian population (IBGE Data, 2020). A sign of the times, the result of decades of struggles and affirmation work that have intensified and improved since the introduction of quotas in universities (Santos & Santos, 2022, p. 448). In addition, this shift was compounded also by the introduction of public policies in the social and cultural spheres, especially in the audiovisual sector, allowing new expressions and self-representations to emerge, alongside the increased identity of a neoliberal bias.

*Executive Order* and *Mars One* are films with different themes, scope, social ambitions, forms of production, staging, and aesthetics. They were produced from 2018 onwards and commercially released in April and August 2022, respectively. The first, a production with a television cast, the participation of

a renowned Black foreign actor, a large budget and significant media exposure for the director and promotion on social networks, is aimed at a broad audience, characteristics of a commercial film, which does not imply a value judgment.

The other is a low-budget film by an independent production company recognized for its work by the public and critics, made with funds from a public notice for affirmative actions. What unites the two productions and justifies the selection was their unprecedented media relevance, public reception, and the reverberations they received as films by Black directors.

In addition, because they were released in the year of the presidential elections, their narratives, especially *Executive Order*, echoed and responded to the feeling of revolt and indignation by staging the suffocating situation of an oppressive and racist government, remembering that the film faced obstacles from the Bolsonaro government regarding its release (Evaristo, 2022). At a time of low attendance at movie theaters after COVID-19, the release caused audiences to fill theaters throughout Brazil, helping recover viewers who, with streaming, had settled on their couches at home.

Therefore, keeping in mind postcolonial and peripheral studies and representation, references such as Franz Fanon (2008), Lélia González (1988), Stuart Hall (2016), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985/2010), and Achille Mbembe (2011) are important for the theoretical reflection of this work. As well as those that deal with regimes of visibility such as Jacques Rancière (2013), or Black invisibility as in bell hooks (2019). Given the specific characteristics of each of the objects under study and the social and aesthetic processes to which they are associated, Sodré (2019), a specialist in communication and black cultures, when defining the Brazilian social form as one of unfinished slavery, since “the slave-owning form of spirits has not been abolished,” allows us to understand and base on its breadth the event that we seek to highlight here. According to the author (2019)

Social form is the way in which society is configured inside and outside. The idea of social form encompasses a vision of people's interiority: how one can understand the other, how one can see the other. . . The concept of social form tells me: 'slavery is not over.' In the social form, people still reject dark-skinned people. I usually refer to the expressions light skin and dark skin. . . Life can be difficult depending on the color of the person's skin. So, this form tells me: 'the slave form has not been abolished from spirits.' (p. 879, free translation)

From this paradigm that viscerally composes Brazilian social formation, one analyzes what films create, their political and ideological circumstances,

# D

## Black protagonism is finally a hit

expressed in the form of images and discourses that reject established, stereotyped, and reiterated visualities, promoting another imaginary to be shared by 'light or dark' skins and that will have repercussions in the mainstream (Bhabha, 1998; Sodré, 2019). As noted by director André Novais, from *Filmes de Plástico* [Plastic Films], the same production company responsible for *Mars One*, rejecting and going against the usual forms of representation of Black people is a political gesture. According to Spivak (2010), he opposes "epistemic violence," which is expressed through discourses and images and, thus shapes, imposes, and defines the identity of the other, subjugating this other. According to Novais, in an interview given in 2016, his intention was

portraying Black people as people who live normally. Without the issue of violence or drug trafficking, which is generally how they are portrayed in Brazilian cinema and even in world cinema. . . some people don't understand how political this is, in the sense that it's a way of getting people used to the idea that Black people from the outskirts also live in harmony. (*Ela Volta na Quinta*, 2016, free translation)

Based on these premises and remembering that each film expresses a distinct artistic, social, and aesthetic project, the differences provide the broader picture of the possible paths of this inclusion and what those self-representations bring that is new and disruptive. We proceeded to the case study of these films, seeking to mark in the studies of Communication and in the Historiography of Brazilian Cinema, in 2022, the unprecedented recognition by the public, critics, and social and cultural repercussion of two films by Black authors, actors, and professionals.<sup>4</sup>

It is necessary to clarify that we understand mainstream, according to Martel (2010/2012), as "the culture that pleases everyone."

The word, which is difficult to translate, literally means "dominant" or "large audience," and is generally used to refer to a means of communication, a television program, or a cultural product aimed at a wide audience. Mainstream is the opposite of counterculture, subculture, and niches; for many, it is the opposite of art. (p. 20, free translation)

Mainstream can refer to a 'market culture,' without aiming solely at the entertainment monetization. On the contrary, we believe that the purpose of these films is to reach a significant audience, circulate other narratives and images, build new imaginary elements, contradicting what is established by white Eurocentric otherness, assuming the leading role of creation, in a unique and original artistic aspiration.

<sup>4</sup> As we will show later, films by Black authors have had and continue to have recognition. What we point out as different is the box office takings of more than 500 thousand spectators with *Executive Order* and *Mars One* being chosen as the Brazilian representative for the Oscar, two significant markers of not yet achieved popular success and critical relevance.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EVENT

Contrary to Weber's (2011) characterization of the media event, the repercussion of the two films was not overwhelming, although the publicizing of *Executive Order* since 2020 has been extensive, achieving reverberation and constant work to engage the public. The impact of *Mars One* came from awards and repercussions at the Gramado Festival, but, above all, from the nomination by the Brazilian Academy of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts to compete for the 2022 Oscar for best foreign film. It is the exceptional character that marks the event: for the first time in the history of the exhibition of Brazilian films in commercial theaters, therefore in the history of Brazilian cinema, two films produced by Black people had significant public repercussion.

Cinema in general is an expensive activity, and Brazilian productions in particular depend on public or private funding, which does not guarantee their distribution in theaters and wide reception by the public. Only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with new digital equipment and their release windows, combined with public policies to encourage production, did it become possible to film on a larger scale. However, reaching the big screen and large audiences is still complex. Internal and external socioeconomic and cultural issues explain this panorama, and for Black people this difficulty is even greater (Gomes, 1980; Carvalho, 2005). It is possible to mention the contributions of professionals such as Cajado Filho, Odilon Lopez, Haroldo Costa, who worked as assistants, set designers, scriptwriters and even directors from the 1940s and 1950s onwards. With *Cinema Novo*, significant works by Zózimo Bulbul (*Alma no Olho*, 1974), Luís Paulino dos Santos (*Mar Corrente*, 1967), and Adélia Sampaio (*Amor Maldito*, 1984) emerged. Despite the density of their creations, which were in line with the new cinema, the expressive dialogue with what was happening between Black women's struggle and Black affirmation movements in the United States (González & Hasenbalg, 1982), the closeness with African cultures, characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s, and the oppression of the Military Regime, vividly expressed in *Alma no Olho* (1974) – an experimental short film by Zózimo Bulbul made with leftovers from another film, where the body and gestures speak of the place of Black people in Brazil – this film, like *Amor Maldito* (1984) by Adélia Sampaio – the first about the love between two women – had difficulty being shown and distributed, and only from the 2000s onwards did they begin to be revived.<sup>5</sup>

A director like Joel Zito Araújo, with documentary productions such as *A Negação do Brasil* (2007), fictions such as *Filhas do Vento* (2004) and TV series, continues with greater relevance to this pattern of difficulties in production and repercussion. In 2008, *Dogma Feijoadada* emerged as a manifesto, similar to the Danish *Dogma*, in which sociologist Noel Carvalho, filmmaker Jefferson De

<sup>5</sup> Studies on Brazilian female directors since the 2010s have brought back the contribution and characteristics of Adélia Sampaio's work and career (Cavalcante, 2017).

# D

## Black protagonism is finally a hit

and other signatories prohibit the reproduction of stereotypes, in addition to promoting reflections that have continued ever since (Carvalho, 2005, 2022). This can also be seen in *Bróder*, by De (2010). Furthermore, despite participating in TV series and the feature films *M8 Quando a morte socorre a vida* (2019), and *Doutor Gama* (2021), he and other independent male and female directors produced films that did not stand out in the mainstream.

With the Re-democratization and the beginning of the 2000s, according to Leroux (2019, p. 26), schools in several cities offered audiovisual training to “young people from the working classes, residents of slums, suburbs and outskirts.” As they were based on public notices and needed them to survive, they ended up becoming “social projects” that, in her opinion, present a “civicism of results.” Also according to the author,

This path soon assumes, to a greater or lesser extent, the well-known formula of using art reduced to a tool to civilize young people from the working classes, through the pedagogical construction of the artistic experience, by imposing a palatable thematic and aesthetic standard. The poor’s gaze and voice, even in these initiatives of “giving authorship,” would be somewhat restricted by the expectation that they express what is imagined as being “proper to the popular classes”: only what is necessary and useful. (p. 26, free translation)

This assessment certainly does not reflect the totality of these productions and the paths they open up, however it is important to retain from this analysis how the form of inclusion, the socioeconomic situation, and these producers’ place of residence were transformed into a genre – peripheral cinema – that was imposed on them (Leroux, 2019, p. 26).<sup>6</sup>

The uninterrupted production of documentaries and short films by Black people is significant, as well as the emergence of festivals, publications of Black feminist and peripheral affirmation, collectives, such as *Mulheres Negras*, in addition to production companies such as *Filmes de Plástico*, in Contagem since 2009. Any attempt at systematization will be incomplete, fortunately, because the achievements of various subjects throughout the country are multiple, powerful, and uninterrupted.

Amid this intense molecular movement of different achievements, geographies and territories that express themselves, from the mainstream point of view, it was the execution of George Floyd in the United States in 2020 that catalyzed another broad and international media process of indignation against racism. The case became known as the “primavera negra” [Black spring] (*Estamos vivendo*, 2020), a term originally referred to by Lélia González in *Primavera*

<sup>6</sup> Because of appropriations of this type, and because the notion of periphery is in itself a value judgment – it assumes a center, the place of the norm, and what is outside it is the periphery – I avoid using it, even though it is a word that is now widely used to designate a cinematographic and cultural genre, academic use, among others.

*para as rosas negras* in 1991, in the sense of a Blackening of women's and social struggles (González, 2018), and is revived by the Bahia's adman Paulo Rogério Nunes. According to him

This is a historic moment. We are experiencing a Black Spring, with several countries joining the American protests. It is a process that will continue for a long time. However, it is important to remember that police violence is something serious and is linked to issues of racism in the economy, in the media and in all areas. (*Estamos vivendo*, 2020, free translation)

Nunes, founder of *Acelerador Vale do Dendê* and *Instituto Mídia Étnica*, a Black media NGO in Brazil, believes that representation in the media was not a central issue in the fight against racism, but that “representation is fundamental to creating identity. The consumer wants to be seen in the media, in the movies. By placing them in these spaces, you include more people in the market, and by bringing in new consumers, you also bring more innovation to the sector” (*Estamos vivendo*, 2020, free translation).

From the movement of social awareness, self-awareness, and struggle proposed by González in 2018 and throughout her career – among other thinkers and activists of the Black cause today, in a neoliberal and identity-based bias – this movement becomes an enterprise of inclusion of poor Black populations marginalized or lower middle class by consumption, according to the adman's proposal. This approach seems to explain, in part, the current logic of the eugenic and tokenized presence<sup>7</sup> of Black people in the hegemonic media, approaching aspects of *Executive Order*, as we will show later. Contrary to what Nunes claims, there has always been concern with Black representation, and not only in the media. The question is how, in the unfinished Brazilian slavery, Black people had/have the power to control their representation. Remembering what Rancière (2013) defends, we have that,

<sup>7</sup>The term tokenized comes from tokenism (token: symbol), “the practice of making small concessions publicly to a minority group to deflect accusations of prejudice and discrimination” (Hogg & Vaughan, 2018, p. 387).

The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed. Having a particular ‘occupation’ thereby determines the ability or inability to take charge of what is common to the community. It defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc. There is thus an “aesthetic” at the core of politics. (pp. 20-21)

This ‘aesthetic’ mentioned by the author above echoes the disruptive party of *Filmes de Plástico*. Its opposite is visible in the whitewashed portraits of



# D

## Black protagonism is finally a hit

Machado de Assis for over a century. According to Rancière, he had the right to space for his noble activity as a writer and social recognition, however, the image of the Black man in the photograph was ‘retouched,’ one example among thousands of others.

<sup>8</sup>In the sense of Georges Didi Huberman (2017) in his book and exhibition *Levantes*.

On the other hand, the ‘uprisings,’<sup>8</sup> the peripheral insurrections of decades of cultural productions encouraged by NGO workshops, cultural centers, fostered by public or independent notices – such as the 24<sup>th</sup> *Tiradentes* Film Festival, in 2021 – poor experiments, mixes, remixes of the mainstream, of art, of cinema, practiced in different places, which with *Mars One* reaches a palatable form to the mainstream. It is a work by a director from Belo Horizonte’s outskirts and a production company that, since 2009, has been creating unique works and promoting other sensibilities, narratives, other perspectives and bodies on screen, an experience of the common that manifests itself among Black populations, but not only. Other types of miscegenation are expressed in Brazilian territories, as can be seen in rich discussions between creators such as Gabriel Martins, from Contagem, Minas Gerais, Lincoln Péricles, from Capão Redondo, São Paulo, or Carol Rodrigues, from the outskirts of the South Zone of São Paulo.

In these territories, one produces works that do not even intend to reach the mainstream, as happened in 1988, when the indignant rap of *Os Racionais* burst forth, today incorporated into the media sphere. These are audiovisual manifestations that, like music, seek to express, think, think together and in other ways, and often in connection with music, poetry with the slams of Akins Kinté (Slam Resistência, 2017) and audiovisual as occurs in the cinema of Péricles (Lincoln Péricles LK, n.d.), among many others (Silvino, 2021). These are actions by young people also motivated by access to university, which has contributed to the growth of a critical mass that has diversified the perspectives of academic production by ‘light or dark’ people (Sodré, 2019, p. 879). The expansion of federal universities to the countryside is also in the wake of the creation of collectives such as *Rozsa Filmes* (2017), from Recôncavo Baiano, among other examples.

There is a boom in anti-racist publications by national and foreign authors, whether through the Black women’s struggle with the recognition of the writer Conceição Evaristo, Ana Maria González, the return to the scene of Carolina Maria de Jesus, or through films by beginners being recognized at festivals such as *Tiradentes* Film Festival and taken to international festivals. There are numerous indications, and from this point of view, the production of a mainstream film like *Executive Order*, with a renowned Black actor like Lázaro Ramos as its director, took a long time to happen.



## EXECUTIVE ORDER

*Executive Order* is the first commercial Brazilian film to gain widespread acclaim by addressing racism as a central theme, in addition to its consequences, such as the distortion of laws and the existent aggressive and perverse normalization. Using popular genres today – horror, science fiction in the form of dystopia and humor – the film achieves an almost epic result by promoting the public exposure of Brazilian racism, while at the same time, it gives vent to the common feeling of oppression in the face of the political climate that has been established in the country since 2016, especially under the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro.

The play *Namíbia, Não*, by Adri Assunção, directed by Lázaro Ramos in 2011, is the origin of the film that the actor began to adapt for the cinema in 2013, transforming the play – in which two characters discussed Black belonging at a time when the country still seemed to have positive expectations for the future – into the disheartening dystopia filmed between 2019 and 2020, which had its release blocked by ANCINE. This blocking, delay, or veiled censorship of the premiere in theaters (Cruz, 2021) had already occurred with *Marighella*, by Wagner Moura, also with a Black protagonist, finished in 2019, but only released two years later.

The career of Bahia's Lázaro Ramos began at the *Bando do Olodum* in Salvador, at the age of 15, and has since been marked by successes as an actor in cinema, theater, and television, as an interviewer, as the author of five children's books and the autobiography, *Na minha pele* (2017), which has racism as its central theme, in addition to being the UNICEF ambassador in Brazil. He is a name linked to social causes and in particular to the racial issue, publicly embodying the figure of the 'one Black man,' that is, the one who has the visibility to speak for all others, according to the concept of Ana Maria Gonçalves, in *Um defeito de Cor* (2017), referred to by him on the television program *Roda Viva* (2022).

It was from this place of visibility and representation that Lázaro Ramos gave 72 interviews between 2020, the final moments of production and the ANCINE blockades, and 2022, when the film was released (*Roda Viva*, 2022). With this, he promoted a constant media intervention on the themes that the Afro-futuristic dystopia raises. It was also through this that he staged his experience under Bolsonaro government: "How did we not realize that this was going to happen?" a terrified question from the characters in the film and the viewer.

The dozens of interviews allowed him to address his ideas about destiny and the power that greater participation of Black people can bring to society: "The public wants this. It's not a social demand, it's a market demand" (*Roda*

# D

## Black protagonism is finally a hit

Viva, 2022, free translation). In the interview, it should be noted that the social became the market.

The interviews fueled expectations around the film, through an effective media campaign that combined the film and Ramos' speeches with a militant resistance against racism (the Instagram of *Executive Order* offers instructions and courses on combating racism in companies) and Bolsonaro government's oppressive power, "perversity as a State policy" (Roda Viva, 2022).<sup>9</sup> Following the initial good film reception, the author encouraged *Executive Order* to continue being showed in movie theaters across the country, stimulating the uninterrupted public presence, a mandatory factor for a film to remain on display. He achieved this over a period of six months, reaching 500,000 spectators in movie theaters, at a time when the public was rarely going to the movies, and practically no Brazilian films were watched. He also published *Diário do Diretor*, a book about the film making. These byproducts filled media spaces and corners with *Lázaro Ramos*, spreading the idea of a film about Black people made by Black people.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>The Instagram of *Executive Order* offers instructions and courses on combating racism in companies. Retrieved on July 26, 2024, from <https://www.instagram.com/mesadaprovisoriafilme/>.

<sup>10</sup>On the Instagram of the movie, in June 2022: "I've just watched it, and I confess I'm crying... As a Black woman, I felt in my soul the pain that the film shows, but I was also able to get involved in the strength of resistance that is explicit from beginning to end. *Executive Order* is not far from happening if we do not resist and fight for the country that is also ours" (free translation). Retrieved on July 26, 2024, from <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/18132077785260067/>

### THE PLOT AND THE STAGING

*Executive Order* builds a dystopian future, where an oppressive government decides to forcibly return the Black population to Africa in response to the demand for compensation for centuries of slavery. Antônio Gama (Alfred Enoch), a young lawyer – with the same last name as Luís Gama, a Black lawyer who fought against slavery, much like the character – married to physician Capitu (Taís Araújo), resists the expulsion by fighting against banishment through legal means. The couple lives with their cousin André Rodrigues (Seu Jorge), a journalist who is dating Sarah (Mariana Xavier), who is White. The *sending back* of citizens with 'heavy melanin,' a euphemism with which the government designates the Black population in the film, is commanded by Isabel (Adriana Esteves), "the dedicated and relentless bureaucrat" (Araujo, 2022a) and her secretary, Santiago (Pablo Sanábio). The feminine name is not innocent, since Princess Isabel became known, in official historiography, as the "Redeemer" of Black people and responsible for the abolition of slavery.

In the film, the rebels are hunted down violently by the police, which happens to Capitu in the hospital where she works as a physician. She and other fugitives run through the forest and are rescued by the resistance of the Afrobunker, the urban *quilombo* where they take refuge. There are countless Black people at the place, different in their ways of being, in their skin tone, profession, and age. Antônio, the lawyer, and André, entrenched in the apartment, resist, but are pursued by Izildinha (Renata Sorrah), the building manager of the place

they live. Outside the apartment, André is killed by the police. Santiago, Isabel's assistant, leaves his job and goes to meet Ivan, one of the people responsible for the Afrobunker and his boyfriend, but the resistance fighters, fearing that he is an infiltrator, execute him. Antônio meets Capitu again, the two are arrested, but manage to escape with the help from resistance fighters. In the end, hundreds of Black people take to the streets to the sound of *O que se cala*, a song by Elza Soares, and this image is superimposed on those of other Black personalities. After the end credits, the film shows that the couple and their son had a happy fate in some other land.

By working with popular genres, such as horror and science fiction, the film reaches a dystopia to contemporary taste, with persecutions, hiding places, arbitrary acts and violence by the oppressor, composing a melodramatic narrative of the struggle between good and evil, punctuated by tragic circumstances, with comic relief and a happy ending, and by using middle-class Black protagonists, which is unusual in Brazilian audiovisual fiction. It is a narrative arrangement to the mainstream taste, constructing a melodrama of Black self-representation with injustices, trials, the hero's trajectory, and even contradictions and mistakes among them.<sup>10</sup>

The director's inspiration coming from American and Black series and directors is clear. There is an amalgam of atmospheres from series such as "Black Mirror" and *A História da Aia* with landscapes from *Pequena África* [Little Africa], a significant territory for African culture in Rio de Janeiro, where a decade ago excavations at *Cais do Valongo* revealed the places where slaves arrived and were sold. These landscapes appear in chase scenes through the alleys, on the scribbled, gray walls – canonical settings of cinematic dystopia – with the reproduction of advertisements for escaped and wanted captives from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which evoke the persecutions of that time. It is there, passing by *Pedra do Sal*, an old reference point for slaves, that the Afrobunker is located. In contrast to the shadows of these territories of escape and resistance, the center of power is luminously oppressive with its rectilinear spaces of large, uninhabited glass buildings that also blatantly occupy other Brazilian cities.

The Afrobunker is the hiding place and spot of resistance where the film gives space for different characters – faced with the fear of being denounced by the White man Santiago – to cry out their pain of injustice and constant prejudice. It is the central moment of the film, in an intense psychodrama that appeals to identification and dialogue with the viewer in a moment of catharsis and engagement, which culminates in Santiago's execution.

According to Lázaro Ramos, he sought inspiration for the staging and lighting in *Moonlight* (2016), in the atmospheres of "If Baele Street Could Talk" (2019),

<sup>11</sup>White fiction about Black people is obviously full of melodramas, such as Castro Alves's *Navio Negreiro* and many others, not only Brazilian.

# D

## Black protagonism is finally a hit

both by Barry Jenkins, and in Spike Lee and Jordan Peele, all Black American filmmakers, seeking the terror that is constructed in the police officers' faceless image. Nonetheless, the terror sought does not come from the staging, but from the situation that is created, unlike what happens in "Us" (2019), by Peele. At the same time, as the director addresses the Brazilian racial issue by resorting to recognition by law, a practice that has not developed properly in Brazil – it is part of American law and it was through it that segregation was ended there, amidst the persistence of violence and racism – we understand the concept of a protagonist lawyer who seeks compensation and citizenship through the law that would protect Black people from exile. Compensation was never considered in Brazil, except by José Bonifácio, who was in favor of Abolition at the time of Independence. As a rule, only farmers claimed their losses from the Emperor and the Republic. What we had after a century of Abolition was the criminalization of racism by the 1989 law, not always practiced and respected, and reparation policies such as the still contested quotas in universities or funding notices in the audiovisual sector – only one in 2016.

In the 1970s, the Black movement in Brazil gained strength in a more structured way, inspired by what was happening in the United States at a time of great turmoil. In addition, we have the powerful struggles for civil rights, after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, motivated by his work in the cause and the militancy of intellectuals such as Angela Davis, of the Black Panthers, who would impact Lélia González and other Brazilian activists, as well as Zózimo Bulbul's artistic work, according to Noel Carvalho (2005).

What changes with *Executive Order* is the point of view from which the film and the characters move. The protagonist is a middle-class man, as is his wife, who is a physician. The plot censors and circumvents the established cliché images of Black people living in slums and/or with weapons. The slum is only mentioned in one dialogue and during a news report, reporting on the attacks, but it is distant. Ramos gave prominence to Black middle-class characters like himself, since they "are practically abandoned in the history of our cinema" (Roda Viva, 2022, free translation). In this way, another visual identity is sought, a geographic territory of its own, which at times will have appeared in exceptional characters from soap operas or TV series. The three protagonists have higher education and live in an apartment in *Botafogo*, not in communities or suburbs, where they are usually located in Brazilian mass-market audiovisual productions.

The ambition to reach a wide audience is noticeable, including outside Brazil, particularly in Africa, where it was released in early 2023, rekindling a dialogue that Brazilian cinema already experienced during the *Cinema Novo* period, or in the United States, where it was shown at Black film festivals. It is

clear, in Ramos' account, the importance of contact with the American cable TV channel Black Entertainment Television and its "sales strategies. . . it realized that there is an audience interested in stories linked to the Black population" (Ramos, 2022, p. 21, free translation). Put this way, for the director, seeing and being seen appear to account for the tragedy unleashed by the film.

At the same time, what can be seen in Ramos and what can be seen in the images of *Executive Order* is the experience he brings from the mass medium in which he performs, television, with the dramatic structure of its fictional products. Media wisdom can be seen in the composition of the actors and the team: co-director Flávia Lacerda comes from television, as does Daniel Filho, the producer, who gives the film the quality of setting and finish, noticeable from the presence of drones in the aerial and nighttime shots made from Botafogo Beach and also in the choice of the English actor Alfred Enoch, known for Harry Potter, son of an English actor with an Afro-Brazilian descendant mother, according to IMDb. In addition, we have in the film Taís Araújo, the charismatic Seu Jorge, the friendly chubby Mariana Xavier, his girlfriend, an Asian neighbor (Paulo Chun), highlighting the concern with diversity of representation, the consecrated television villains Renata Sorrah and Adriana Esteves, Black personalities such as D. Diva Guimarães, Emerica, not to mention 26 more Black people who make up the Afrobunker and the 77 actors in the cast, the majority of whom being also Black (Ramos, 2022, p. 48).

The director hired sociologist Aline Maia Nascimento to investigate what Black people did not want to see in the image as their own characteristics (Ramos, 2022, p. 13). This certainly contributed to the empathy that the film promoted among the Black and White viewers who watched it, since it is a film that also aims to speak to White people: it is about teaching them how to look at Black people.

The film addresses its audience from a new point of view, if we consider the characteristics of Brazilian films, according to the studies of Noel Santos Carvalho (2005, 2022) or João Carlos Rodrigues (2011); thus, it is not from the perspective of the violence of the oppressed or of resentment (Carvalho, 2005). The film also distances itself from conciliation based on narratives of cultural contributions – carnival, samba – according to Ismail Xavier, or from the supposedly happy sexual miscegenation that omits and erases conflicts (Xavier, 1993). It is not about examining the representations of Black people on television either, such as in the 2000 *A Negação do Brasil*, by Joel Zito Araujo, director that is also a screenwriter, producer, and curator who has recognized work for TV Globo. On the contrary, the film seeks to respond to the themes of the proposed research, and sheds light on the Princess Isabel syndrome, the

# D

## Black protagonism is finally a hit

good White human being who wants to help, the interracial relationship between Seu Jorge and his girlfriend, addressing other anchor points of the narrative, another perspective.

However, the dramatic structure does not escape the clichés of melodrama that overlap with dystopian essays: the central couple separated and sacrificed by adversity resists. The persecutors are stereotyped, caricatured, not without reason, given that they are consecrated soap opera villains. In the ending, the director creates a dramatic situation that parallels the murders of André (Seu Jorge), who was reported by the evil union, and Santiago, who leaves his job as Isabel's advisor at the Ministry of Sending Back and takes refuge in the Afrobunker, creating the expectation that the White man will successfully join the wronged heavy-melanin people, which does not happen. Santiago is there only because he is the boyfriend of one of the leaders – another diversity that the plot contemplates – but, misunderstood by the majority of Black people, he is executed. André, in Botafogo, is surrounded and killed by the police, the Sending Back henchmen. But Santiago, the White man, is also eliminated, not without violence or opposition, by those who fear for the safety of the *quilombo*. With the plot revolving around Santiago, the director stages the reverse of prejudice and its equally harmful consequences. Ramos thus sought to create a parallel between the irrationality of André's elimination by the police and Santiago's execution by Black people, but the comparison is of a different nature. Black people kill because of fear, to survive; police officers kill because that is their job, they are paid for it. The police have the rationality of power. The Black men in the Afrobunker fear being captured and do not want to believe that Santiago would be there because he loves a Black man. The construction of the scenes with Santiago, the entire sequence of his trip to the hideout and its consequences are disjointed, since his beloved, Ivan, one of the place leaders, forgets what happened right after the murder. There are many actions that simply build up, which must be shown to the viewer because they seem to respond to a progressive agenda of customs. Homosexual love, the support of a White man that only generates distrust, suggests that the issues concerning Black men can only be resolved by their own actions: it is not the White man's problem. The quick and lackluster scenes in this part are not clearly explained and do not have the time and development to make them understandable. They are there to show something and say something because it is necessary to capture the audience, the market, in the director's words, but they soon give way to another issue.

In short, *Executive Order* affirms the right to existence in *extremis*, in a dystopian scenario that leads to the proposal of taking action and raising

awareness. With this, or despite this, what stands out is the pedagogy on how Black people should be seen, reviewed, and see themselves.

At the end of the film screenings, over almost six months, especially on weekends, the film was applauded emotionally by the audience and had a social impact.<sup>12</sup>

## MARS ONE

*“You must have eyes to see this immense wealth of imagination that nestles under the everyday skin and to turn it into a movie”.*

(Guimarães, 2021, free translation)

*Mars One*, awarded by the popular jury at the *Gramado* Festival in August 2022 as best film and winner of the special jury prize for “bringing back the affection,” a feeling shared by “the tears at the end of the festival screening and wherever it has been shown in a short and hard-fought space in the Brazilian circuit in 33 theaters” (Dias, 2022), did not have the same space and media repercussion as *Executive Order*. The film was screened at the Sundance Festival in Toulouse, France, and won the Best Picture award at the Black Star Film Festival in Philadelphia (BlackStar, 2022), an event dedicated entirely to Black films (Anic, 2022), a fact practically ignored in the Brazilian mainstream. It was because 19 critics from the Brazilian Academy of Cinema (2023) chose this work for the 2023 Oscar that it gained attention, and despite the mobilization to raise funds and awareness among voters at the American Academy, in addition to interviews for newspapers and blogs, the film did not pass the barrier of the 15 pre-selected for the Oscar in December of that year. Before that, however, the independent production company Array Releasing,<sup>13</sup> owned by Ava DuVernay – the first Black American director to win a film festival, at Sundance in 2012, with *Middle of Nowhere* – bought the distribution rights for the United States, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, and for the American Netflix, premiering there in January 2023. According to Tilane Jones, the president of the collective, “Array is proud to distribute ‘Mars One,’ which marks the first time that Brazil has chosen a film by a Black Brazilian director to represent the country at the Oscars for best international feature” (Keslassy, 2022). As a result, in Brazil, the number of movie theaters interested in screening the film reached 69 and, according to Tela Viva (website), there was a 200% increase in audience (Campanha ‘De Minas para o mundo’, 2022).

<sup>12</sup>“Watching *Executive Order* in the cinema is a revolutionary act.” Comment on the Instagram of the movie. Retrieved on July 26, 2024, from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdY1w-9p6Gj/>

<sup>13</sup>Array is an independent film distribution collective created in 2011, with resources from arts advocacy organizations, volunteers, and rebel member donors around the world. Retrieved on July 26, 2024, from <https://arraynow.com/about-array/>



# D

## Black protagonism is finally a hit

*Mars One* does not address racial prejudice. Gabriel Martins, like his three colleagues from *Filmes de Plástico*, focuses on the dense being in the world that can emerge from the backyard, the street, the house, on the long bus rides that separate the city of Contagem from downtown Belo Horizonte, where there were movie theaters, university, a time for imagination, for imagined films that were created in the tedium of waiting for the trips. The observation and affections that flow from the supposed banality of a window where one sees a busy street and a gas station, in the short film *Fantasma* (2011), in *Pouco mais de um mês, ou Temporada*, by André Novais, in Martins' short films. As Guimarães observed about *Filme de Sábado*, Martins' short film summarizes much of his career, of *Filmes de Plástico*, and of *Mars One*, "when everything outside says no, the gaze turns to the backyard and sees there an immensity of possibilities" (Guimarães, 2021, free translation).

This is the central theme of *Mars One*, as it is also the central characteristic of the productions of these four college friends who created *Filmes de Plástico*, a suggestive name with an unpretentiousness that has led to unique films, recognized in Brazil and abroad at festivals such as Cannes and others. The dreams, fears, and the thread of life that is woven into the daily life of the family of Deivid (Cícero Lucas), a 12-year-old boy who, despite playing soccer well, wants to be an astrophysicist and colonize Mars, contrary to the plans of his father, the doorman Wellington (Carlos Francisco), a former alcoholic who attends the Alcoholics Anonymous Association (AAA) and works in an upper-middle-class building. Deivid shares his secret plan with his sister, Eunice (Camilla Damião), a young college student who helps him buy a ticket to see the conference by Black American astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, about Mars One, which the boy wants to be a part of in 2030. She, in turn, shares with him her love for her girlfriend Joana, her plan to leave home to live with her, and the fear of her parents' reaction. Tercia (Rejane Faria), the mother who takes care of the artist Tokinho's house, is the victim of a TV show prank at a downtown bar. Scared ever since, she believes she is the victim of a curse that could harm the family. Meanwhile, the father gets the help from a famous player so that Deivid can try out for Cruzeiro (football team); however, this would be on the same day as the conference and the boy does not want to miss it, just as he does not want to have football as his destiny. The father, hopeful about this possibility, leaves work for a few hours because of this event. He asks an assistant to replace him in the tasks at the building manager's house. However, he never imagined that the boy, who complained about the inequalities between his life and that of the residents of that building, would rob the manager's house in his absence. He is summarily dismissed, at the same time that Deivid causes an accident with his bike and

breaks his leg, putting an end to his future in football. The fired father finds out about his son's accident and, upset, goes back to drinking. After the storm of mismatched desires and dreams, Deivid is relieved, his father recovers and his mother realizes that fate spared her from a serious accident, while his sister continues with her girlfriend. Deivid builds a telescope with recycled material and gadgets from his grandfather, who, like him, was also inventive, and on the terrace of the house shows the family the stars and the possibility of reaching them and Mars. Life and its possibilities that can be thought of for everyone.

Limits, destinies, setbacks that everyone shares and that would tend, in other hands, to be treated with a drama that *Mars One* and *Filmes de Plástico* avoid. Limits can be drawn by social, racial, or gender situations, however, one must look at them, seek escapes, understanding, put oneself in the other's shoes. This is the political and affective gesture that the film proposes in a time of so much discord, of so many prejudices released with such violence and irrationality as those experienced in Brazil at that time. This is the empathetic insurrection proposed by the images, "showing Black people's lives without making it activism. The subject is there," as critic Inácio Araujo observes. However, "It is enough to see the way the father is treated when he loses his job – which reveals how this population and the lower social classes are treated in Brazil" (Araujo, 2022b, free translation).

Deivid is Gabriel Martins and his telescope, a sum of stories, personal experiences and the possible "do-it-yourself" to do what he has dreamed of since he was eight years old, as happened with him and his colleagues. Making 'plastic' films, films with the resources available to peripheral neighborhood young who like movies but don't see people like those they know nor the spaces where they live on the screen. Other lives, landscapes, and spaces like Tercia's birthday party, Eunice's dances, the family card game in the living room, the bicycle, the cafeteria, the tiredness, and discomfort on the bus. The doorman struggling with the building manager whom he tries to please and the cleaner who bothers him with criticisms of the unequal situation, the instability of Tercia's breadwinning as a housekeeper, and even the studious Black boy on the computer, with his big glasses. According to Gabriel, bringing this to the screen "is a state of mind, talking about characters in this condition of some kind of marginality, which is not the central place of the narratives, characters who occupy places that the world is not looking at" (Dias, 2022, free translation).

Thus, the characters are Black and live their lives, but they are all different, like the parents of Eunice's girlfriend who, having a better social status, welcome their daughter's relationship, whereas Wellington and Tercia do not understand at first. The tension is visible in the scene of Joana's first visit to Eunice's family,

# D

## Black protagonism is finally a hit

in front of the television where Cruzeiro, her father's team, and Atlético MG, her girlfriend's team, are playing a game and Atlético wins, which makes the father very upset. The behavior exposes not only the discomfort with the defeat, but also when he realizes the orientation of his beloved daughter. Small notes that are constructed with and far beyond racial issues.

If *Executive Order* spoke to a large audience by portraying the oppressive climate that was being experienced, *Mars One*, although initially resonating with a smaller audience, also fits into that same reality when, in the opening scenes, in the kitchen, the daughter who is washing the dishes criticizes her mother for not encouraging her brother to help with the housework, while the news of the 2018 election results can be heard on the radio in the background, but there are no comments. The characters, like the audience, experience that change, and they have to keep living. It is everyone's condition.

### **The bus and the cinema**

Gabriel Martins grew up in Contagem when it was still a forest, the place where the family could buy the land which the house that was gradually built on. He began to think about making films when he was eight years old, although there was no movie theater there or nearby. With the encouragement from his parents, at the age of 12 they took him to *Tiradentes* Film Festival, where he was able to participate in workshops and watch *Bicho de Sete Cabeças* (2000), by Laís Bodansky. "That blew my mind. Understanding that there were actors who could transform themselves made sense to me" (Dias, 2022, free translation). At the age of 17, he attended the *Escola Livre de Cinema de Belo Horizonte*, where he made his first short film and met André Novais and Thiago Macêdo Correia. Maurílio Martins, the fourth partner of *Filmes de Plástico*, came to the film school that he attended on a scholarship. In a debate with other creators, he says that,

in order to go to college, I lived far from Belo Horizonte, spending more than an hour on the bus. Home and study, home and work, a place of experiences, of tedium and delays in moving between home and study. This social neglect, the government's neglect of public transportation, ends up creating an excuse to invent in dreamy and very stubborn minds. This is my story, it's the story of André and Maurílio, public transportation has always been a point of great invention. And these people that I saw, still awakened something very strong, parallel with the cinema that reached me. . . . And when I started to think about what it would be like to make a film, what I saw in my daily life and what I accessed in the cinema were very opposite and very distant things, What I saw was mainly American cinema and some things

that came to me from Brazilian cinema and seemed very distant from me. In the late 90s and early 2000s, the Brazilian cinema I saw was quite limited in terms of themes and locations. (Universo Produção, 2021, free translation)

### **Plastic movies?**

In the production company that was founded in 2009, the four partners take turns in the different roles of production, filming, and editing, using their own homes as locations, and relatives, neighbors, and the girlfriend as actors. Their stories are used as themes, as seen in Novais' films, themes that have been expanded as they have obtained more resources and the films have been well received in Brazil and abroad, as was the case with *Mars One*, the first solo feature film directed by Gabriel after *No Coração do Mundo* (2019), with Maurílio Martins.

The idea for the script came about in 2014 with the euphoria of the World Cup, but it changed according as Brazil changed. The feature film was only made because Gabriel was approved in the first and sole ANCINE notice in 2016 for low-budget affirmative action films aimed at black people, which, as always, took a long time to be implemented and was only filmed in 2018, under very different political conditions, which is reflected by the film even in the option for a future lived on Mars.

The last few years have been very difficult for film production, and for Gabriel, although there are international streaming services that have employed local directors and crews for films under his supervision, it is public money that can include more, even from an economic point of view, because it gives work to a lot of people. "When you make a film with public money, you can present the personality of your collective in a much more direct way, without mediators. Which is very important, even in terms of income distribution in Brazil" (Anic, 2022, free translation).

As you can see, Gabriel Martins is not making a racially affirming film, even though it exists precisely because it brings Black people and lower-middle-class populations to the screen in situations that are not generally seen in the mainstream.

*Mars One* is not a film that will constantly pressure you to talk about race, politics, or affirmation. It will engage you from another perspective, it will engage you through emotion, to make you understand how to empathize with others' situation. (Brito, 2022, free translation)

To create this empathetic environment, the film uses an almost documentary tone in the close-up shots of the characters, in the construction of the dialogues, in the

# D

## Black protagonism is finally a hit

acting of the cast and in the lighting, which is generally warm for family gatherings, between a warm orange-brown or a soft blue, since it is usually at night when everyone comes back from work that they get together, or in the bedroom when the siblings talk. The camera work is close to the characters, without unnecessary juggling.

As we can see, the training and imagination of these filmmakers and their work say a lot about Brazilian inequality and the social abyss that is consecrated and reiterated in the hegemonic culture and in media products where these populations as such do not exist. They serve the news as administrative problems, security problems, or tearful pity without consequences, or as laughable caricatures, generally hysterical or dangerous in different fictional formats, as can be seen in countless productions by the Globo conglomerate, although with some exceptions. In the academic sphere, continuing to be defined as peripheral, seen as outside the center, outside the culture, or below the established culture, is to ignore that they are precisely transforming decentralization into inclusive culture.

### UNDER THE GUISE OF A CONCLUSION

New and vigorous perspectives are being seen in the mainstream through Brazilian films made by people from other spaces, social classes, and representation. As I have tried to show, each of the two films analyzed here, with their differences, offers other possible images of Black populations, free from the uncomplicated and unequivocally prejudiced clichés that have been historically manufactured and reiterated. This is about the possibility of, through new fables of distinct creations, making Black people fully “visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language” as Rancière (2013) points out, based on Brazilian cinema. This is a path that still needs to be followed, but it is important to highlight that, at a time when Brazilian box-office takings reached their lowest level in 2022, with 1.6% occupancy in theaters, it was these films and directors who pointed to other images and possibilities for cinema made in the country.

This activity continues and new films are being made in adverse realities and showing increasingly adverse scenarios. In this sense, the delicacy and depth of *O dia que te conheci* [The Day I've Met You], by André Novais, produced in 2023, echoes the possibilities of ordinary life and affection in the existence of *Mars One*, which in turn echoes the combative attitude of 2023 *Mato Seco em Chamas* [Dry bush on fire] by Adirley Queiróz. There, Black or mixed-race women prisoners are the protagonists of their lives, affirming their existence in the affection and harshness of segregation, injustice, and inequality. Their insubordination and the way the film is staged figure and revert to a liberating gesture, presenting new dramatic, gender, and representational arrangements

that come to us from filmmakers from the metropolises' outskirts, whose vigor of gaze and criticism has to gain center stage, as happened with the significant audience of *Executive Order* and *Mars One*. ■

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