



MISTRAL

Journal of Latin American Women's
Intellectual & Cultural History

“Making films in Brazil has become a political battle”: An Interview with Moara Passoni

Moara Passoni, Filmmaker, São Paulo, Brazil

Lídia Mello, University of Coimbra, Portugal

To cite: Moara Passoni & Lídia Mello. 2022. “Making films in Brazil has become a political battle”: An Interview with Moara Passoni.” *Mistral: Journal of Latin American Women's Intellectual & Cultural History* 2 (1): 69-77, <https://doi.org/10.21827/mistral.1.39905>

**“Making films in Brazil has become a political battle”
An Interview with Moara Passoni**

Moara Passoni, Filmmaker

Lídia Mello, University of Coimbra, Portugal

1. How did cinema appear in your life? Why did you choose filmmaking and not some other art or area, seeing as your initial background wasn't in the Arts.

It all began when I was 7 or 8. My parents have always been social-movement activists. As a kid, they would take my brother and I to all sorts of events. One day, trying to have some fun in that environment, I “nicked” my dad’s Nikon camera and started taking photos. After that, I’d photograph the movement’s activities: rally-rounds, meetings, assemblies, votes, etc. The camera became a sort of passport for me to transit between the kids’ world and the adult world. I used to play Peter Pan among the legs of all these adults who would go on to become leading figures in national politics—mayors, governors, and even a president. In addition to pictures, myself and my friends set up a newspaper called *Blah Blah Blah*. It was all about politics. And through it all I learned the relationship between words and images. But it wasn't only that. I practiced classical ballet for many years, and whenever I could I’d line the adults up as a jury panel and perform. I put on plays with my cousins and made horror movies with Cidinha—who lived with us and was studying communication.

Later, while still in school, our class started transforming concepts into experiences. The first book we transformed into an installation was “The Discovery of Paradise” by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda.

When the time came to apply for college, I spoke to a professor at the University of São Paulo’s School of Communication and the Arts about how divided I was between the Social Sciences and Cinema. She said: “Do Social Sciences, because it’ll teach you how to think.” So I did as she advised. And while studying for my degree I started to understand that films are aesthetic thoughts about the world.

At university, my first research project was about the construction of stigma in horror films. Later, myself and some friends set up a film club called *Cinestrábico*, and, along with Thiago Mendonça, I started to discover Glauber Rocha, Sganzerla, and Latin American Cinema Novo. So, I think cinema had already sunk its hooks into me.

There's an important question inside your question, and that is: "what forms an artist?"

In my case, though my formal education wasn't in the arts (I'm talking about my first degree here, leaving aside the Body Arts, my three master's degrees in cinema, and the years I spent studying ballet and taking exams.), my connection with the world has always been filtered through art. From my father's camera to the hundreds of t-shirts and banners we made for the movement and my mom's election campaigns, which I printed and painted purely for fun.

Very often, formal education, for me, came from something that sparked inside the field of art. I'll give you a simple example. I started learning French at a Godard exhibition at Cine Sesc. I spent the whole day in the theater, and I'd mouth out sentences that struck me. And out of that game came my appreciation for the language. In a sense, it was there that I learned the sonority of French.

In fact, I really tried to flee cinema and do other things. My first paid job was an interview with prison directors throughout São Paulo state. My second job was as an aide to the alderman and, later, state assemblyman Vicente Cândido. But something always dragged me back to film. Vicente introduced me to Kiko Goiffman and Jurandir Muller, and I spent a year working as their assistant at PaleoTV. I also studied philosophy and aesthetics in France for a while.

But film kept pulling me back. Whether through study—I have three master's degrees: two in documentary from the University of Campinas and the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a course administered by Eduardo Escorel, and one in fiction screenwriting and directing from Columbia University, New York. Along the way, I interviewed filmmakers for *Le Monde Diplomatique*—Brazil; curated a film exhibition called CinePop; co-created the first retrospective of the filmography of Marguerite Duras, with Maurício Ayer, which traveled Brazil-wide; and organized an exhibition of photos, films and music with seminars and courses (a six-month project called *Revolutions*, held at Sesc Pinheiros, with participants as diverse as Marilena Chauí, Friar Betto, Zizek, Bernard Stiegler and Alexander Kluge, etc). I was assistant curator of the Latin American Festival; collaborated with Petra Costa on her debut, *Elena*, and then *Olmo and the Seagull* and *On the Edge of Democracy* (I'm also working with her on two new projects). I co-founded Coletivo Vermelha (The Red Collective) with Iana Cosoy Paro, Caru Alves de Souza, Lila Halla and Manoela Ziggiatti; co-Chaired Columbia Women in Film with Gina Hackett; co-founded the Brazilian Filmmakers Collective with Alex Moratto... ah yes... I also went to Cuba in search of new Latin American cinema and ended up making a short film—half doc, half fiction—called *Tilden's Dream*, which debuted at the It's All True Film Festival...—after that, I shot a feature—also hybrid—called *Ecstasy*, based on my own experience of anorexia between the ages of 11 and 18. I've also been a juror on documentary awards, given some classes and taken part in the Torino Script Lab, Cine Qua Non Lab... and so on.

In short, I think cinema kept kidnapping me. It's one of those things you can't explain; it's just stronger than you are. I couldn't breathe without filmmaking. It's my way of being in the world. My way of metabolizing/thinking about/relating to reality.

In the end, however tough filmmaking is, it's what makes me happy.

2. What are the main obstacles a female film director faces in Brazil?

The obstacles facing any contemporary filmmaker in Brazil are immense. To make a movie is basically to work a miracle. It's a political battle. When it comes to women, we have to run a 20km marathon in two hours while the men put in a 5km stroll. And that's saying nothing about the difficulties faced by indigenous and black women, or the LGBTQIA+ community.

Let me tell you a story from America that seems pertinent to Brazil too. The collaborator of a theater director I went out with decided to change sex. After the transition, he could see the difference when he stepped into the theater as a man, because people paid more attention, obeyed his commands more readily, and showed him more respect. That really made him understand what it means to be a woman directing theater.

On the other hand, everywhere I've been involved in cinema, the most interesting projects are being developed by women. And the women in charge tend to be hugely talented and highly professional. As Marguerite Duras said, citing Michellet, witches were women who stayed behind with nature and the kids while the men marched off to war. They started talking to the plants and the animals, and that helped them invent a voice of their own. And precisely because they had that voice, they were branded witches and killed—silenced—by the Inquisition. The men were startled by the power of those voices. They were afraid, without knowing that they, too, could harness that power. But, instead, they decided to eliminate what they could not understand.

3. What is the importance of women taking the lead in cinema?

To be able to look at the world without the blind spots that necessarily pock the vision of all those who subscribe to the white male worldview.

To be able to tell stories that are invisible to those who occupy that position.

To narrate realities that we're not used to seeing on the screen. And which make the world a far more complex, difficult, interesting, but also fun and delightful place.

And, of course, when a woman supports another woman, incredible things can happen.

But it's a real challenge. There's no point in women simply aiming for the spaces historically occupied by men. I think the challenge is bigger than that. We have to find ways to break the patriarchal structure that informs the logic and functioning of our industry.

The challenge is men "becoming" women. Not women becoming increasingly like rich white men. Gabriel Cohn, a professor of political theory at the University of São Paulo, once said to us while we were tackling the thorny task of reading *Mein Kampf* that so long as the enemy is setting the rules of the game, he's already won. Those rules are what builds our reality, not who wins or loses the game. If we play in such a way as reproduces and corroborates the enemy's logic, we're done for.

It's not easy. At the same time as it is important that women occupy positions of power, it's also important that we transform the underlying logic once we get there.

To finish answering this question, let me just quote the anthropologist and historian Lilia Schwarcz. On her Instagram, she analyses a video which Congress made to celebrate 200 years of Brazilian Independence. She calls attention to the model of history defended by the present government: "A history of white protagonists who seem to live in a fairy-tale land. It's impressive that, in 2022, on such an important date, the history of Brazil is still being recounted in such a superficial and apparently innocent way, starring an all-white cast of European men. Independence is a social process, not a commemorative date. And history is an open process because we look back to the past through the lens of today's agenda. What Independence is it they want to commemorate?" And she ends with a challenge: "Better put: what Independence do you want? In 2022, be independent!". That's what it's about.

4. Regarding your film *Ecstasy* (2020), where did you get the idea from, and why did you want to tell this story?

The idea came to me during some research I was doing on teens and plastic surgery for two directors. At a certain point, they wanted to lump anorexia in the same boat. And that really bothered me. So, I decided to hand in the research and leave the project. It seemed to me that the two themes did not necessarily go together, and broaching them in the same key struck me as problematic.

I wanted to tell this story in order to understand that anorexia is not an isolated symptom. To understand that this highly stigmatized and underestimated condition is a magnifying glass that allows us to see certain aspects of our culture which we are not used to really looking at, and so don't register as all that strange. For example, narcissism.

5. What was the filmmaking process like, and what challenges did you face?

The first challenge was finding funding to make the film. I spent years applying for sponsorship. The second was finding the right language, one capable of expressing the experience of anorexia in film. But perhaps the toughest challenge was internal: accepting that the film would never be perfect. In other words, breaking out of my own anorexic logic. And, of course, my own torments as an artist.

In addition, it was crystal clear to me from the outset that the film should not pander to the logic of spectacle that usually accompanies anorexia. The anorexic body is too “seductive” and “shocking.” The risk is that you get wrapped up in the image for a moment, then forget all about it afterwards. As we do with most of what we don’t understand.

I wanted to go beyond that shock and incomprehension.

6. How does a young anorexic woman (like the character in your film) deal with sexuality and corporeality (the way the brain uses the body as an interface in relating to the world)?

I think that question is key to understanding anorexia and *Ecstasy*. It’s important to highlight that *Ecstasy* is the product of many hands and hearts. My experience was just the kick-off point. Clara’s story is transversal—it runs through the stories of all the women who were involved during the research stage and throughout the film’s making: the different layers, functions, collaborations.

But, on this point, I’d rather stick to my own experience and what I felt/feel about it. I think that, at the core of anorexia, there is a panic about desire, about openness to the other—which is what sexuality is. A panic so strong that I wanted to transform myself into the victim and the torturer at the same time, so as to protect myself from any openness that might generate vulnerability in me.

On one hand, it was a refusal to submit—as if my body was refusing to become the object of the other’s desire, but, moreover, the object of the other’s control. On the other hand, it was an inverted form of refusal, because it imitates the power our society exercises over our bodies through control. Lastly, it was as if the body was becoming a concept. An abstract idea. Something to be determined from the outside-in.

7. Embarking from the title of my own critical piece about your film, what can a body in “ecstasy” do?

I think a body in ecstasy is a body that is open to the other. In anorexia, the ecstasy striven for is a narcissistic ecstasy, in and of itself. It’s an ecstasy that is completed by nothing but death.

8. In what way does an anorexic body deal with “desire and control, delirium and reality”?

I think it's by throbbing somewhere between those extremes. “Everything” in anorexia is about opposites, and is deeply complex. The desire to be free from external control leads to “total” control over one's own body. And that desire for total control leads, in turn, to a total lack of control. At the same time, it hovers between lucidity—almost as if the anorexic body were trying to transform into a tragic mirror of the world—and delirium: in disconnecting the brain from the body and trying to control the body, the anorexic loses her hold on reality. In wanting to “become” beautiful, she falls into the trap of pursuing perfection, which is a doomed endeavor.

As Edgar Allan Poe wrote in “The Oval Portrait”, about an artist who loses himself in the painting of his beloved, the artist is seeking perfection, but when he finally completes the portrait: “there were admitted none into the turret; for the painter had grown wild with the ardor of his work, and turned his eyes from the canvass rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife. And he *would* not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvass were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him. And when many weeks had passed, and but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth and one tint upon the eye, the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp. And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, ‘This is indeed *Life* itself!’ turned suddenly to regard his beloved: — *She was dead!*”

9. Is there prejudice or discrimination against women—that is, against the female body—suffering from anorexia?

Above all, there's a stigma, banalization and spectacle. Guy Debord speaks of society of the spectacle: a set of social relations mediated by images. This spectacle prevents us from understanding how images were produced and circulated.

Something similar seems to occur with the image of the anorexic body. When we see photos of bodies beset with anorexia, it's as though we lose all access to the people behind the pictures. That's why, in *Ecstasy*, images of the anorexic body are used very sparingly, and only in specific contexts in which I invite the viewer to reflect upon them—at least that was my hope, as director.

10. In what way does your character's experience serve to help other women suffering from this condition?

I hope that *Ecstasy* can serve as an instrument for dialogue and listening, and so for openness. That women can recognize some of their own experience in the film, shed their fear of talking about it, and start getting into contact with their own pain. I also hope it might help those close to

these people, so they can understand that their refusal to eat is also a cry for help, and, despite the many complexities, a way of rebelling against what oppresses us.

11. Do you have a new film project? If so, what's it about? Is it fiction or documentary?

I spent the first semester of 2022 collaborating with the director Petra Costa on two new feature-length films she's making.

In 2021 I co-wrote a feature with the representative of Brazil's indigenous peoples, Célia Xakriabá, and it's now in post-production. It was one of the most transformative experiences in my life. Célia is a poet. Her way of looking at the world transforms us completely. Getting to know Célia and having the opportunity to create with her was an honor and a joy.

As for my personal projects, I'm in post-production on a short film called *Minha mãe é uma vaca* [*My Mother is a Cow*]. As a director, I'm also preparing *Howler*, a horror film written by Christina Lazarida and Sydney Smith. Christina is a screenwriter who teaches at Columbia. Even before she became my teacher, we'd already been sort of "courting" each other, and that turned into an important artistic collaboration. Sydney was a dancer on Broadway and has been working as a screenwriter for the last few years. She works between New York and Tamarindo, Costa Rica.

I'm also developing a feature-film, which, I hope, will be my first fiction film. It's based on the *Cost of Living Movement* led by mothers from the outskirts in the 1970s. Lastly, I'm developing a fiction series based on the Corinthian Democracy (Corinthians is a popular soccer team from São Paulo that adopted a democratic decision-making policy in opposition to the military dictatorship), and an article for *The Blizzard*, edited by Jonathan Wilson.

In parallel, I teamed up with the indigenous representatives Célia Xakriabá and Sonia Guajajara and former footballer Walter Casagrande Jr., on a charity match to call for the demarcation of Indigenous territories. After staking-off one hectare—which corresponds to the size of a standard football pitch (and is a popular yardstick for measuring deforestation)—, Team Forest (green jerseys, jaguar crest) will play Team Earth (red jerseys, headdress crest). Célia and Sonia will be the team captains. Celebrities and sports stars like Porchat and Rycharlyson, and a load of other incredible people, will be involved. Team Forest will be trying to score against a keeper dressed up to represent fires, while team Earth will take on a goalie representing mining. The ball will be specially painted as the planet Earth. At the end of the match, we'll reforest that hectare of land. The game will be played in the indigenous community of Brumadinho, gravely affected by spillage from a burst tailings dam.

In addition, I finished my MFA from Columbia in May, and I'm anxious to get started on something new. Perhaps a doctorate. Research is one of the things I most enjoy. And it's also where I draw my inspiration.

12. In your view, what's the importance of emphasizing cinema directed by women?

To help echo the voices of these powerful women. Help female filmmakers to think about their work; help the audience to find those works, and offer new doorways and possibilities for navigating through them, and with them.

13. Do you happen to know the percentage of Brazilian films made by women directors over the last decade?

According to the Brazilian Film Institute, ANCINE: "between 1995 and 2005, men directed 79% of Brazilian films, women directed 18%, and the remaining 3% were mixed productions. Two decades later, in 2017, the female share of the film market remained practically unchanged: men accounted for 77%, women 16%, and mixed productions 7%."¹

It's time for a new study to ascertain whether that deadlock has changed between 2018 and now. One way or another, we still have a long road ahead of us when it comes to achieving parity for women. Surprisingly, contrary to our expectations, players like Amazon have created some fundamental spaces for female directors to take the lead on television series.

Recently, I had the chance to take the screenplay for my *Cost of Living* film to the Cine Qua Non Lab in Mexico (a lab that has been growing in relevance and enjoys the support of the Academy, Projeto Paradiso and many other important institutions). Of the 14 projects selected, 12 were by women. When we commented on this, their response was that the applications were all assessed by seven different readers, and those 14 just happened to be the best. Something similar happened with the Torino Script Lab, which I took in 2021. There, too, women authors were the majority.

14. What has changed in recent years, especially in Brazil, in relation to female participation in leading roles in the film industry (I am thinking screenwriters and directors)?

Not very much, according to those stats from ANCINE. But the consistency of the projects women are creating has been so strong that I really believe we'll be able to turn this around.

¹ Source: <https://institutodecinema.com.br/mais/conteudo/mulheres-no-cinema>

15. Is there anything I didn't ask which you would like to add?

It's not an addition, but I would like to thank you for the opportunity to answer these excellent questions. This dialogue is fundamental for us to reflect on our work as creators. It provides a key space in which to develop/think about/mature our work.

Lastly, I would like to propose that we begin to think about women in film from a transversal perspective that includes blacks, indigenous filmmakers, and the LGBTQA+ community.