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**THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY:
ANALYZING PADILHA'S NETFLIX SERIES *O MECANISMO***

*O OUTRO LADO DA ESTÓRIA:
ANALIZANDO A SÉRIE NETFLIX *O MECANISMO* DE PADILHA*

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, two filmmakers/academics exchange ideas on the Netflix series *O MECANISMO* (Padilha, 2018, 2019), in its recent historical context and specifically its use of the phrase “based on true facts”.

RESUMO

Nesta entrevista, dois cineastas/acadêmicos trocam ideias sobre a série Netflix *O MECANISMO* (Padilha, 2018, 2019), em seu contexto histórico recente e especificamente seu uso da frase “baseado em fatos reais”.

My interviewee, Dr. Ulisses Galetto, is a Brazilian researcher and filmmaker whose focus has been the field of Cultural Production and History of Brazilian Cinema. Galetto has a PhD in History, as well as a Master and a Bachelor in the same area, which he obtained at Universidade Federal do Paraná (Federal University of Parana). He lives in Curitiba, the city which is home to the main operative that inspired the Netflix series *O MECANISMO* (Padilha, 2018-19), the *Lava Jato*.^{2 3} We held this conversation on November 7th, 2020.

¹ Dago Schelin (DS) moved from Brazil to Germany to pursue his PhD in Media Studies, which he obtained in 2018 at Philipps-Universität Marburg. DS also has a Master in Media Production, a B.A. in Music and a Diploma in Languages and Literature.

² In English: The Mechanism.

³ In English “Car Wash”, the operation by which the Federal Police of Brazil investigates and prosecutes alleged companies and politicians involved in corruption.



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DS: There is in Brazil a celebrated cinema of at least 100 years which, whenever it has excelled (in international festivals and in new movements that marked an era, otherwise called *Cinema Novo*), understands itself as engaged, especially alongside the exploited. Brazilian cinema has a history full of ups and downs, a revolutionary production that appears amid (and despite) antagonistic forces.⁴

These forces still seem to be the norm in view of the ongoing conflicts in ANCINE ever since Bolsonaro began his mandate.⁵ There are so many examples of these conflicts I could give, but perhaps it will be enough to allude to the historical revisionism so insistent in Bolsonaro's acts in favor of the former military regime which, according to his current confabulations, prevented communists from taking power.⁶ As we speak, the extreme-rightist ideological discourse has translated into 43% budget cuts in ANCINE's *Fundo Setorial do Audiovisual*, hiring of alt-right-wing personnel such as Vincent Olivier Jean Roux who has attacked the World Health Organization and the Black Lives Matter movement, and Evangelical Pastor Tutuca (Edilásio Barra) for the institution's Collegiate Board.^{7 8} In this context, Golden Globe nominee Wagner Moura tried to launch the film of his first direction, *MARIGHELLA*

⁴ For a recent analysis of Brazil's film production chronology and scholarly developments, see Alfredo Suppia's *On the present and future of Brazilian film studies* (2020).

⁵ *Agência Nacional do Cinema* (National Film Agency). According to ANCINE's own governmental webpage, its mission is to "create equal conditions of competition among economic agents operating in the Brazilian audiovisual sector and therefore to stimulate the development of a strong and sustainable audiovisual industry". The institution is responsible for funding major Brazilian films, including in their promotion and commercial dissemination.

⁶ Bolsonaro denies military dictatorship and says in a TV interview that the regime had "little problems" (Paraguassu, 2019).

⁷ "New Ancine employee attacks World Health Organization and black movement" (Nunes, 2020).

⁸ *Fundo Setorial do Audiovisual* (Audiovisual Sector Fund). *Folha de São Paulo*'s September 11th 2019 headline reads, "In offensive against Ancine, Bolsonaro cuts 43% of the Audiovisual Sector Fund" (Brandt and Uribe, 2019).



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(2019), but, according to him, faces ideological censorship.⁹ Not surprisingly, the theme of his film opposes everything that *bolsonarism* stands for, since it is a portrayal of communist revolutionary Carlos Marighella, who was killed by the military dictatorship in 1969.

It is an (apparently) impossible task to talk about the ideological discourse in the current Brazilian context without taking sides and giving voice to emotions. This difficulty stems from the principle that simply trying to start a dialogue with someone who, for instance, believes that the earth is flat (a phenomenon not uncommon among *bolsonaristas*) feels like entering a losing battle right from the outset.¹⁰

So, Ulisses, now that I have expounded this long introduction, we need to concede that you and I cannot pretend to be neutral to Brazilian politics. In other words, we do have a critical point of view that will be recognized as aligned with more progressive sentiments. Nevertheless, we will try to distance ourselves from the object we are analyzing in order to observe and evaluate both the general and specific circumstances of present-day Brazilian cinema.

I would like to focus on a specific case which I believe catalyzes the polemic: the Netflix series *O MECANISMO* (2018-19) by José Padilha. The episodes end with the phrase “Baseado na obra *Lava Jato: o juiz Sergio Moro e os bastidores da operação que abalou o Brasil*, de Vladimir Netto” (my *italics*).¹¹

⁹ In an interview Wagner Moura says that “It is a different censorship, which uses bureaucratic instruments to hinder productions with which the government disagrees. I have no doubt that ‘Marighella’ has not yet made its debut due to a political issue” (Sakamoto, 2020). At the time of review for publishing this interview (August 16th, 2021), ANCINE has shelved the project to release ‘Marighella’ in Brazil. <https://www.uol.com.br/splash/noticias/2021/08/13/ancine-lancamento-marighella.htm> (last accessed on August 16th, 2021).

¹⁰ In an article about the anti-science trend, and the preference for false theories, *El País* journalist Salas analyzes the phenomenon which combines a myriad of pseudoscientific beliefs in the article “You can’t convince a flat-earther and that should worry you” (Salas, 2019).

¹¹ Translation: Based on the book *Car Wash: Judge Sergio Moro and the backstage of the operation that shook Brazil* by Vladimir Netto



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The book was released in 2016, the series, 2 years later. What is the backdrop to these events? What is this “operation that shook Brazil”?

Ulisses Galetto: It all started in 2005. That year Brazil was on economic rise, the world was in a good momentum for commodities that Brazil produced. A government concerned with inclusion, the Pre-Salt in 2006 that caused large internal income in Brazil, as well as several other factors, generated the economic ascension of almost 40 million people who had been living in misery and would now begin to participate as consumers.¹² This is an unprecedented historical phenomenon in the history of this country. But the so-called elites did not want this. Already at that time, they tried to catch Lula with the *Ação Penal 470*, also known as *Mensalão* but couldn't find anything with which to incriminate him.¹³

Then, from 2010, we had an economic boom period until 2012. The 2008 crisis hit the United States and the world. Brazil started to feel the blow in 2012. The beginning of *Lava Jato* coincides with this moment. There is a natural wear and tear of President Dilma Rousseff's government, which was the third government of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT). Weakened before starting to serve her second term Rousseff was elected by a minimal difference. On several fronts the government tried to act, but the support-base was completely eroded by a series of issues. It is in this context that *Lava Jato* has an extremely impactful role in what became of the country.

¹² According to Brazil's largest oil company Petrobras, the oil that is possible to be extracted with specific technology lies below a very thick layer of salt (about 2 km thick) which itself is below 2-km-thick sediments, all of this below 2 to 3 km of sea water. It is very costly to drill through the sediments and the salt to attain the pre-salt oil and gas. <https://petrobras.com.br/en/our-activities/performance-areas/oil-and-gas-exploration-and-production/pre-salt/> (last accessed on August 1st, 2021).

¹³ *Mensalão* (the Big Monthly) was come to be known as a ploy that used public funds to pay coalition parties for political support. Over the course of the trial, 25 people were convicted for taking part in the scheme.



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There are two important figures that are often referred to in *O MECANISMO*. The names have been changed, but they refer directly to two companies: Odebrecht and Petrobras. Petrobras was, up until then, the 10th largest enterprise in the world since it had exclusive ownership to deep waters oil prospecting technology (Pre-Salt).¹⁴ Petrobras made concessions to foreign companies when they wanted to use the technology. This way Petrobras received large sums in royalties. In only 10 years this Brazilian company became one of the largest and most profitable companies in the world.

Odebrecht was one of the largest heavy engineering companies in the world. It had 160 thousand employees. In spite of all the problems with the payment of bribes (which is a historical problem of at least 50 years, not only with Odebrecht), the result of *Lava Jato*'s actions was the annihilation of an unparalleled source of Brazilian income and employment. Today this company practically does not exist.¹⁵ It has around 12 thousand employees. And Petrobras, we all know, has sold a large portion of the refineries, the exploration of the Pre-Salt is no longer Petrobras' property. The concession is now made by the government. Thus, the impact of *Lava Jato* on the Brazilian GDP was tremendous!

O MECANISMO portrays *Lava Jato* and its hero Paulo Rigo (in real life, Sergio Moro) as the good guys, the heroes. That is the polemic context. The series was launched in March 2018. Lula was imprisoned 2 weeks later.

DS: I agree. The book (Netto, 2016) and the series (Padilha 2018-19) portray *Lava Jato* as a great solution for Brazil. According to their explanation, Moro and *Lava Jato*

¹⁴ According to Forbes 2018, Petrobras is still the 10th largest oil company in the world, though much of the company has been privatized so that Brazil has much less of the profit it used to have (2019).

¹⁵ "4 years after being involved in *Lava Jato*, Odebrecht lost about 80% of the workforce" (Trevizan, 2019).



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shook Brazil, yes, but according to what you are saying, it seems like a case of the medicine that actually kills the patient.

UG: Exactly. There is a period, in the middle of Rousseff's first year of administration, in which the Brazilian GDP decreases 3%. Two thirds of this loss are the result of *Lava Jato*'s mechanism. A 2% of GDP decrease is a lot! What Brazil lost in order to recover, in thesis, R\$ 160 billion, is much more and with long term consequences. The balance doesn't add up.

I am not defending the company business administration, much less the corruption. But in any serious country, if an intervention is needed, a team of public arbitrators is appointed, the company keeps its doors open, and the criminals are sent to jail.

So, it is in this context that I see the whole plot.

At the moment we are living a destruction of the Brazilian State – in every sense, in public policies, in cinema, for example. The current government is a consequence of what began before *Lava Jato* was on the scene. But this group wanted to destroy Lula's government from the day it was born, then again in 2004-2005. They did not succeed. From 2013 to 2014, *Lava Jato* was the missing element that made it all possible.

DS: The most common version of the facts accepted by many Brazilians is that there has never been a government as corrupt as that of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT). This has even become a meme. How and why did this narrative materialize, which, in my opinion, helped form *bolsonarism*? In fact, *O MECANISMO* is nothing more than the Netflix-style representation of this narrative, is it not?



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In other words, the plot already existed in the imagination of the people.¹⁶ In a way, Padilha helps to officialize a specific interpretation of the plot, dramatizing not necessarily the historical events, but an imaginary of the events. It is a series based on a specific point of view, that the Brazilian Left is an enemy. In this case, it is a meta-fiction, a fiction not based on facts, but on symptomatic anti-left reactions.

This is the current setting: flat-earthers, pro-Chloroquine, anti-vaccine activists, pro-gun supporters, Pentecostal and conservative Evangelicals backing a government that openly practices a hate rhetoric.¹⁷ It could be said that, as a nation, we are suffering from dissociative disorder since both sides of the political spectrum seem to be so incompatible.

Lula is a beloved character by many respected world figures. The trope emphasizes his being born in poverty and he fighting all the way up to become a voice for Brazil's many less fortunate. Unlike any other politician seized by *Lava Jato*, Lula was considered by many not as a politician in prison, but as a political prisoner. Among those who visited him while he was incarcerated are Noam Chomsky, Chico Buarque, Perez Esquivel (Nobel Peace Prize), Leonardo Boff, Frei Betto, Pepe Mujica, Martin Schulz, among other intellectuals, writers, musicians, former heads of State, national and international social and party leaders. The series portrays Lula as a despicable criminal politician, a representation that perfectly corresponds to the imaginary of flat-earthers, pro-Chloroquine, anti-vaccine activists, and pro-gun supporters.

Your comments?

¹⁶ The word that I used during the interview was "imaginário" (imaginary). As in English, *imaginário* is usually used as an adjective. However, in Portuguese it is also used as a noun meaning a domain created by imagination within a repertoire of symbols and concepts common to a given community or large group of people.

¹⁷ For a quick read on the background of the Brazilian extreme right aligning itself with international movements, read "Tropical Trump?: Bolsonaro's Threat to Brazilian Democracy" (Weizenmann, 2019, pp. 12–14).



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UG: Allow me to touch upon my personal experience. Since my adolescence I have identified with left-leaning principles. People have commented to me about hatred towards PT in the last few years, but the fact is that I have lived under that hatred all my life. The difference is that now there is a catalyst, until recently represented by Sergio Moro and *Lava Jato*. Bolsonaro is the result of that hatred. The potential was always there.

Secondly: inclusion is an inconvenience (*speaks ironically*). I live in a modest apartment building. Most of the people who live in that building are lower-middle class. Well, what I'm about to tell you is symbolic of the struggle of ideologies in a small setting. It was in 2011. One day, as I went up the stairs, I realized that the lady who cleaned the building was going in and out of an apartment. Later that day, I ran into her and asked: "Sonia, are you working for the residents of this apartment?" to which she answered: "No, I moved in." When she said that, I was very moved. Previously she had lived in a slum about 200 meters from the building. A few weeks later there was a condominium assembly. At the end of the meeting, an old lady asked for the floor and said, "Oh, I wanted to say something. I don't think it's right for Sonia, who cleans our building, to live in the building. I think we have to do something about it". (Anyway, I'll stop the story here so I don't have to express my frustration in words).

The economic rise of 40 million Brazilians within Lula's two mandates and Dilma's first mandate had an effect on social hierarchy. These newly-included class started going to shopping malls, traveling by plane, buying cars. The middle-class was not happy to share their space with the people who cleaned their homes.



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Combine this way of thinking with the obsession of the judge (Moro) who has always been openly averse to left-wing ideals.¹⁸ In addition, Brazilian media has always associated the figure of Lula, Rousseff, and PT with villains. *O MECANISMO* represents them as a refined trafficking gang.

For that lady who was against Sonia coming to live in our building, the enemy-rhetoric fit like a glove! So much so that Sonia moved out and went back to the favela.

DS: I believe Sonia's story can be seen as an allegory of the problem we are trying to express. In view of the forces that are acting against Brazilian cinema at the moment, it must be said that it is not only against the film industry. It is impossible to speak only of the misfortune of the audiovisual sector. It's about ideology. The question is deeply ideological. And, let's be honest, it's not only in Brazil that this is happening. Now, allow me to approach the series from another angle. *O MECANISMO*, as classified by the Internet Movie Data Base, is a crime, drama, thriller TV series. But perhaps the subgenre is that of historical fiction even though the history it is portraying is still unfolding.

At the beginning of every episode, there is a disclaimer in text which reads:

This program is a work of fiction freely inspired by real events. Characters, situations and other elements have been adapted for dramatic effect¹⁹

Until this series was released, I had never had a problem with films that started with "based on true facts" or "inspired by real events". There are so many films that claim

¹⁸ Throughout 2019, after renouncing his position as judge to accept Bolsonaro's invitation to become Brazil's Minister of Justice, Sergio Moro was confronted because of a number of leaks which revealed "serious wrongdoing and abuse of power at the heart of Lava Jato [...]. It is now apparent that Moro was not acting as impartial judge, but actively conspiring with the prosecution to make sure Lula was put behind bars" (Bevins, 2019).

¹⁹ Original in Portuguese: Este programa é uma obra de ficção inspirada livremente em eventos reais. Personagens, situações e outros elementos foram adaptados para efeito dramático.



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their basis on the real, on facts, on historical events that it had always seemed like a harmless cliché. In so many docudramas the phrase seems to appeal to our belief sensibilities. “Based on true facts” may have served as a kind of certification in order to prepare the spectator for something non-fictional (many of the films residing on the hyphen). In the end, at least for me, it mattered fairly little whether the claim was there or not. Even *THE EXORCIST* (Friedkin, 1973) claims to be based on true facts (Kruth, 2019).

I was trying to remember if a based-on-true-facts claim really ever struck me. Perhaps the most memorable one was *FARGO* (Coen and Coen, 1996). The film is brilliant for many other reasons as well, to be sure, but the initial based-on-true-events trope did give it an edge.

This is a true story. The events depicted in this film took place in Minnesota in 1987. At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred (Coen and Coen, 1996).

Also, *FARGO* (Hawley, 2014-) the series uses the same trope.

It seems that there are at least 3 main kinds of films that make this kind of claim. On the one end of the scale, there is the *mock true story*. The subgenre mockumentary would fall into this category, like *THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT* (Myrick and Sánchez, 1999). It is a film that claims to be and presents itself as truly based on real events (with made up found footage, for example), but is actually fabricated from beginning to end. Some people feel cheated when watching such a film after finding out it was all a sham. For Film Studies it presents an interesting phenomenon which has led research into aesthetics and ethics within cinema.

On the very other end of the based-on-a-true-story scale we find the *factually true story*. Here the film tries to be faithful to historical accounts. An example of this kind of film could be *127 HOURS* (Boyle, 2010).



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Challenging to classify are the movies within these two extremities. Since the concepts of truth and reality are so difficult to pin down, most films (if not all) fall into this in-between category. I guess we wouldn't want to advocate for a truth coefficient. Many times, it is the blurriness that we enjoy, isn't it? Werner Herzog has said that "if you're purely after facts, please buy yourself the phone directory of Manhattan. It has four million times correct facts" (Murphy, 2007).²⁰

Granted, *O MECANISMO* falls into the gray area. Of course, it is fictional. Perhaps we should care less whether it uses the based-on-facts trope.²¹

UG: Let's take the trajectory of Padilha from the film *Bus 147* (Padilha and Lacerda, 2002). He uses the documentary language to question the bigger problem behind a hostage situation. The criminal is represented as a criminal, but there is also the question of why someone becomes a criminal in the first place. Padilha takes the position of observer-filmmaker.

I remember when the first *ELITE SQUAD* (Padilha, 2007) came out. It was a good film, a great film. But both the first and the second (Padilha, 2010, 2007) are films with a questionable argument: the bad guy has to be killed, the good guy is from *BOPE*.²² Well, we know today that the *BOPE* is infiltrated by the militias.

²⁰ Werner Herzog on how he reacts to accusations that he's taken factual liberties in some of his documentaries

²¹ Bivona very poignantly argues that *O MECANISMO* "was released into a world that some call post-truth or post-fact. Padilha's series enters into a struggle over how to represent past events that are part of a still unfolding scandal fought in the global context of accusations of so-called fake news and over a justified fear that media can acutely manipulate public opinion to influence elections" (2020, p. 83)

²² *Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais (BOPE)*, translated literally as "Special Police Operations Battalion". *BOPE* is a controversial policing branch of Rio de Janeiro, having been criticized for violating fundamental rights of large parts of the poorer population on a regular basis (Brazil: "They Come in Shooting": Policing Socially Excluded Communities, 2005).



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With *O MECANISMO* it is the same thing: it presents an extremely Manichean reality. It paints a unilateral figure, almost assuming the form of propaganda.²³

DS: Here in Germany there is the polemic case of Leni Riefenstahl who, among other undertakings, directed Adolf Hitler's *TRIUMPH OF THE WILL* (1935). Riefenstahl is still considered a reference in nonfiction cinematography. She passed away in 2003 aged 101 still claiming neutrality in that she only filmed the events of her time and didn't know what Hitler was all about.²⁴

I wonder if 50 years from now Padilha will also claim neutrality saying that he had no idea his series would give the Brazilian far-right a boost? Perhaps I am giving *O MECANISMO* more credit than it is due.

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²³ For a detailed exposition of all of the differences between the fictional characters and their actual counterparts, I recommend Bivona's article *Historical Fiction and the Age of Fake News: Debating Brazil's Past Over Audiovisual Culture* (2020) in which Dilma Rousseff's detailed critique of *O MECANISMO* and José Padilha's response are discussed.

²⁴ In an interview for *Der Spiegel*, Riefenstahl stated that "Triumph of the Will is a documentary film about a party conference, nothing more. This has nothing to do with politics. Because I recorded what really happened and elevated it to the extent that I made no comment on it. I tried to express the atmosphere that was there through pictures and not through a spoken commentary. And to make this understandable without text, the visual language had to be very good, very clear. The pictures had to be able to say what is usually spoken. But that doesn't make it propaganda".

Original in German: "Triumph des Willens ist ein Dokumentarfilm von einem Parteitag, mehr nicht. Das hat nichts zu tun mit Politik. Denn ich habe aufgenommen, was sich wirklich abgespielt hat und habe es insofern überhöht, als dass ich keinen Kommentar dazu gemacht habe. Ich habe versucht, die Atmosphäre, die da war, durch Bilder auszudrücken und nicht durch einen gesprochenen Kommentar. Und um das ohne Text verständlich zu machen, musste die Bildsprache sehr gut, sehr deutlich sein. Die Bilder mussten das sagen können, was man sonst spricht. Aber deswegen ist es doch keine Propaganda" ("Ich bedaure zu 100 Prozent, Hitler kennengelernt zu haben": Zitate von Leni Riefenstahl," 2003)



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