

The introduction of film subtitling in Brazil*

O início da legendagem de filmes no Brasil

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ABSTRACT

The conversion to sound cinema in Brazil beginning in the late 1920's can be best defined as the systematic adoption of mechanic and synchronized sound film projection as the standard practice in the national theatrical exhibition circuit. This process was not short nor simple, but long and complex, resulting also in changes in the way imported film copies were distributed and exhibited in Brazil. The paper analyzes, through research in the contemporary press, as film subtitling was introduced and consolidated amid numerous procedures that were tried to present in an understandable and appealing way to the Brazilian public movies originally spoken in English.

Keywords: Silent cinema, sound cinema, film distribution, subtitling, dubbing

RESUMO

A conversão do cinema silencioso para o sonoro no Brasil na passagem para a década de 1930 pode ser mais bem definida como a adoção sistemática da projeção de filmes sonorizados mecânica e sincronicamente como padrão comercial do circuito cinematográfico exibidor nacional. Este processo não foi breve nem simples, mas longo e complexo, envolvendo ainda alterações significativas nos modos de distribuição, exibição e recepção das cópias de filmes estrangeiros. O artigo analisa, através de pesquisa na imprensa da época, como a legendagem foi introduzida e se consolidou em meio a inúmeros procedimentos experimentados para se apresentar de forma compreensível e atraente ao público brasileiro os filmes originalmente falados em inglês.

Palavras-chave: Cinema silencioso, cinema sonoro, distribuição de filmes, legendagem, dublagem

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INTRODUCTION

THE SCARCE EXISTING studies which address more directly the arrival of sound cinema at Brazil reported, vaguely and briefly, how several trials were performed until the consolidation of subtitling in the national market, differently from other European, Latin American and Asian countries, which would adopt dubbing as their commercial standard. (Paranaguá, 1995; Gonzaga, 1996; Costa, 2008).

By observing this gap in the historiography of film in Brazil, this article aims to investigate with greater detail the intricacies of the consolidation process that set subtitling as a hegemonic practice which, once adopted by the time sound cinema was introduced, became prevailing until nowadays in the national exhibition circuit. Today if subtitling is considered something natural and usual, distributors and exhibitors' choice for this procedure so as its public acceptance, were results of a historical process marked by experiences of failures and successes, of trial and error. This article demonstrates, therefore, the need for further historical studies for a truly rich and nuanced understanding of the complex translations and adaptations in the reception processes of transnational mass media as cinema.

SYNCHRONIZED FILM AND SOUND FILM

The very first exhibition of a sound film in Brazil took place in April 13rd 1929, at the opening of sumptuous Cine Paramount in São Paulo. Preceded by short films, with a speech in Portuguese and three lyrical songs, the displayed feature film, *Alta traição* (*The Patriot*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch, 1928/1929br), had in its soundtrack only music, hubbub and noise, hardly presenting dialogues. This opening reflects the original trend in Brazil of presenting “sound films” or “synchronized films”, but not necessarily “talking pictures” (or “talkies”, as they were called).

In the following month, at the time of the first exhibition in the country of a partially English speaking film, *Anjo pecador* (*The Shopworn Angel*, dir. Richard Wallace, 1928/1929br), with dialogue only in the final climax, the same Cine Paramount – belonging to the studio and distributor agency of the same name – had to seek some kind of adaptation. In order to facilitate the understanding of the film by the audience, booklets were handed to the viewers, as traditionally in opera presentation. The measure was praised by critic Octavio Mendes, correspondent of the Rio Cinearte magazine in São Paulo: “The programs distributed at the entrance cleverly presented the translation of the dialogues. At least, the public knew what it was about and

was able to follow with due interest the development of the *end of the movie*". (Mendes, 1929, n. 170: 20-21) [no original emphasis].

However, it was not a procedure to become standard in the commercial distribution, because if the news seemed interesting at first, the very Octavio Mendes would criticize those same booklets six months later. This would occur, especially when the amount of dialogues in the talking film had grown substantially, starting to become present throughout the length of the film:

[The program] brings all the dialogues of the film and its translation on the following sheet. The song verses. It is, in short, a complete brochure. This, however, requires the public to decorate both. The translation and the verses of the song ... Or, it is necessary that the film exhibitor quits his regime and provides special flashlights to the general audience so that we can hear and read in the dark at the same time.... (Mendes, 1929, n. 199: 16).

Perhaps the booklets distribution procedure was only considered acceptable in the case of part-talkies, as would also clear the critical reviews of the first sound film in Rio de Janeiro in June 1929. On exhibitor and distributor Francisco Serrador's point of view, the dialogues in English supposedly would not be a big problem for this premiere, because despite having a plot, the greatest appeal of *A melodia da Broadway* (*The Broadway Melody*, dir. Harry Beaumont, 1929), sumptuous Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production, was the songs and the revue theater musical numbers.

The same opinion was shared by *Correio da Manhã*'s journalist after watching the whole film in a closed session for the press, on June 19th, in the debut eve at the remodeled theater Palácio Theatro. He said that despite *The Broadway Melody* being spoken in English, "the explanation that the program provides, clearing the film plot with plenty of detail, will allow viewers to understand the ongoing scenes on the screen" (*O Cinema...*, 1929: 6).

However, even with the huge success that *The Broadway Melody*, with its stylish appeal of jazz and fox-trot, reached in its premiere in Rio, *Fon-Fon!* magazine's critic did not fail to make a complaint: "It is unfortunate that the dialogue was in English, a language that ninety percent of people do not understand. Having dialogues, the intertitles were dismissed. The confusion was even greater" (*Fon-Fon!*, 1929, n. 27: 69). In *O Globo*, the problem was also pointed:

The dialogues, all in English, that is, in the US English, spoken rapidly, are lost almost entirely. Viewers have to guess the plot. In the end, however, they leave satisfied ... and willing to learn English (*O Rio...* 1929: 5).

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On a personal letter to his brother Julio Ferrez, the competitor exhibitor Luciano Ferrez observed that the audience watched pleasantly this first test of sound film, but claimed that Serrador was wrong to choose for a sound film premiere in Rio a whole feature film sung and spoken in English, despite being a revue theater film.

However, in the following correspondence between the brothers, dated June 27th 1929, Luciano mentioned that Serrador had realized his mistake and ordered a internegative – a negative material produced from a positive film which can give rise to new prints – containing brief words corresponding to the actors' lines.¹

In fact, the exhibitor quickly fixed the initial problem, starting to advertise in newspapers the film *The Broadway Melody* as “All SET TO MUSIC - SUNG - SYNCHRONIZED and SPOKEN in English (But since SUNDAY displaying superimposed subtitles with TRANSLATED DIALOGUES in PORTUGUESE)” (Correio..., 29 jun. 1929: 16) [original emphasis] (Fig. 1).

1. Documentation part of Family Ferrez Collection (National Archives, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil).



FIGURE 1 – *The Broadway Melody* subtitled print ad (Correio..., 29 jun. 1929: 16)

That was even mentioned in the chronicle *O cinema falado fez sucesso no Rio* (Sound cinema had success in Rio), written by poet Manuel Bandeira, correspondent for the newspaper A Provincia in Recife:

The Palácio Theatro, the largest theater room in Rio, was sold out on a daily basis for the first English speaking film exhibition that took place in Rio – and what an

English! the American nasal *twang* –, the audience was interested and amused. It is true that situations are always eloquent at first sight and the whole world is now trained by twenty years of film to understand the plot only by the silent travel. Besides, the Brazilian businessman added himself some essential subtitles in the film. (Bandeira, 1929: 3-4).

In his book on the chanchadas, journalist Sergio Augusto indicated that *The Broadway Melody* had opened in Brazil – and perhaps in the world – the subtitling process of foreign sound films: “one day [...] the Italian Paulo Benedetti [...] suggested to MGM office in Rio cutting off the redundant cards. Metro accepted the suggestion and instead of cards, they inserted subtitles, the same as today” (Augusto, 1989: 76). However, Augusto has provided no data that confirms this pioneering and no explanation on how that subtitling was first held before this process was adopted more widely.

The answer to this isolated case of subtitling is an article published in the magazine *Cinema*, seven years after the event, entitled *Memórias de um publicista de cinema (Memoirs of a film publicist)*, reporting the professional experiences of Waldemar Torres, the head of publicity at the distributor agency of Metro in Brazil. When mentioning the exhibition of the first talking picture in Rio de Janeiro, the publicist remembered “rides to Benedetti’s lab after midnight on Tavares Bastos street [a street located on Catete neighborhood], to put some subtitles in the film” (Torres, 1936: 4).

In other words, the subtitles of *The Broadway Melody* were produced in Brazil, after the film première, at Benedetti’s lab, at the request of the Brazilian agency of Metro. An Italian technician settled in the country since 1897 (and in Rio de Janeiro since 1916), and eventually taking part in national productions – as *Barro humano (Human Clay)*, dir. Adhemar Gonzaga, 1929) – Benedetti earned his daily living by manufacturing trailers and Portuguese intertitles of Hollywood releases for foreign distribution agencies.

Waldemar Torres proceeds in his important account:

The Broadway Melody premiered on a Friday with no Portuguese subtitles. On Saturday there were eight or ten subtitles (with myself praying, in the audience of Palacio, so there was no sync trouble) and on Sunday twenty subtitles (oh, how we dreaded the Vitaphone!). And between one day and another, a night out in Paulo Benedetti’s lab, I was setting the places of the dialogue translations – and their auxiliaries in place, making the scenes internegatives that would gain the few superimposed subtitles, perhaps the first used in worldwide! (Ibid.).

First, it is clear by the publicist's memories that it was an impromptu operation and almost an emergency in face of criticism – and probably also due to the audience's reaction in the first sessions – of the fact that the English dialogues are incomprehensible to most viewers and undermine their understanding of the film.

Secondly, it is clear that the film dialogues have not been fully translated and subtitled in Portuguese. Superimposed subtitles probably contained only a summary of the main dialogues and events or were concentrated only in the key moments of the film. As pointed out by Manuel Bandeira, they were only the *most essential* subtitles.

Third, the print coming from the United States has not received the impression (superposition) of the subtitles in Portuguese, as would become the standard subtitling process. In fact, subtitled sections that replaced the dialogued parts were developed and copied in the Brazilian lab, which made necessary to re-edit the print to include these sections produced from the internegative. This seems to indicate that *The Broadway Melody* print was in the Vitaphone system, whose sound was recorded in other media, which only allowed the replacement of film excerpts provided by others exactly with the same length (ie, with the same number of frames), not resulting in loss of synchrony².

Despite all these setbacks, *The Broadway Melody* remained in Palácio Theatro with full house for several days, beating box office records. It was only due to the pressure from First National distributor (then already acquired by Warner Bros.), that the Metro production was replaced by *A divina dama* (*The Divine Lady*, dir. Frank Lloyd, 1929), a movie that had only music, songs and noises synchronized by phonograph records. Thus, it was announced that the film “would be easily understood because it has no dialogue, but it has Portuguese subtitles” (*Gazeta ...*, July 2 1929. 5). In this case, however, it was not about superimposed subtitles with the images as in *The Broadway Melody*. In fact, by subtitles the journalist meant intertitles, ie cards usually with black background and texts written in white letters, which were interspersed with images in the film. At the time, however, in Brazil, the intertitles (*intertítulos*) were also called captions (*legendas*), letterings (*letreiros*), subtitles (*subtítulos*) or titles (*títulos*)³. Another comment of the press leaves no doubt about it stating that “its regular captions [The Divine Lady] were as usual” (*Phono-arte*, 1929, n. 23: 36).

This same procedure simpler and already usual was adopted, then by the occasion of the exhibition of *Follies de 1929* (*Fox Movietone Follies of 1929*, dir. David Butler, 1929), a Fox musical picture in the same genre that *The Broadway*

2. This issue is controversial. A reader's comment, complaining about “the noise made by the microphone, especially when it reaches a splice, is simply obnoxious”, indicates that the print would be in optical sound, in the Movietone system (*Cinearte*, 1929, n. 176: 19).

3. Although I also use the term intertitle (inter-titles), Kristin Thompson (1985: 442) indicates that in the US, in the 1910s, the most common expressions were *leaders* or sub-titles - ie, subtitles, because the credits would be the main titles. However, in the middle of that decade and until the end of the silent period, the sub-titles term came to be used more often than *leaders*.

Melody. There are no doubts on the procedure adopted as the press announced that the viewers would understand everything, since, “although the dialogues are in English, [they] are interspersed with Portuguese captions explaining every scene with detail” (Gazeta ..., 1 Aug 1929: 5).

We find, therefore, that the term sound film referred to a multitude of possibilities, since the movies could be partially or totally set to music, sung and / or spoken as well as displayed on the Vitaphone systems (sound recorded on discs separately from the images) or Movietone (sound photographically printed in the same film roll of the film: the optical sound).

Generally the so called *synchronized films* were those who had only music, noises and songs, but without English dialogues (these were *talkies*), of course keeping up the usual practice of inserting intertitles with written texts. After all, if until then the standard procedure in the Brazilian market was the translation and replacement of information written in a foreign language for the information written in Portuguese in the silent movies, it happened to be also done in synchronized films that still had cards with explanations or dialogues. The new problem was how to explain to viewers the content of the new partially or wholly English spoken movies. That is, how to translate or adapt the novelty of *verbal information in a foreign language* to Brazilian prints.

Faced with this dilemma, in that first moment the public attraction by sound films probably led the exhibitors and distributors to focus less on solving the understanding problem of English dialogues by the Brazilian public, than experiencing in many ways the multiple appeal of innovation.

As already mentioned, the introduction of sound film in São Paulo from April 1929 followed a gradual and progressive strategy, when there were initially displayed only films with synchronized music and noises, such as *Alta Traição* (*The Patriot*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch). In May, the first part-talking films began to arrive, as *Anjo Pecador* (*The Shopworn Angel*, dir. Richard Wallace). Soon, around June, it was the turn of the first prints of “all-talking pictures”, period which the first movie theater in Rio, Palácio Theatro, was preparing to inaugurate its sound equipment with *The Broadway Melody*. Only from there and throughout the second half of 1929, Brazilian distributors and exhibitors were forced to face in fact the inevitable linguistic problem of the talkies, risking several different solutions.

In addition to the improvised, costly and burdensome subtitling of *The Broadway Melody* – an infeasible practice to be adopted as standard for all commercial releases –, one of the first alternative was to resort to other languages than English. This would be the trump of *Inocentes de Paris* (*Innocents of Paris*, dir. Richard Wallace, 1929), first Hollywood film of the *chansonneur* Maurice

Chevalier, which employ French in “no small number of dialogues and in almost all the songs.” Ads came to sell the film as “50% sung and spoken in French” (Folha ..., 11 October 1929: 17).

For this reason, the press argued that the elite audience who applauded many French theatrical and lyrical companies could “with complete satisfaction, enjoy songs whose lyrics were crafted in the sweet language of Molière” (Gazeta ..., 4 October 1929: 5). It was spread abroad, that with *Innocents of Paris*, a Hollywood film partially spoken in French, the language problem would be minimized and the Brazilian viewers could “hear and understand” the new Paramount production (Ibid.)⁴.

Switching English for other languages was also released as an option in the case of *Bulldog Drummond* (dir. F. Richard Jones, 1929):

An all-talking picture cannot be exhibited to an audience who does not know the language spoken by the actors [...]. The Brazilian public does not know English and the few people who do understand are not worthwhile the screening of a movie in this language (Gazeta..., 17 oct. 1929: 5).

For this reason, the distributor United Artists announced soon the screening of the film with “dialogues in Spanish”, made through the use of “doubles” (stunt or dubbing actors) (Ibid.).

Obviously, changing the English by French or Spanish was not a permanent solution for almost all of the public of movie theaters who spoke and understood only Portuguese.

SILENT VERSIONS AND INTERTITLE INSERTION

In addition to the question of how to enable the understanding of the sound films by the public of the large and luxurious Brazilian theater rooms adapted for sound cinema over 1929, distributors also faced the problem of how to meet the largest part of the national exhibition circuit not yet equipped to exhibit the so-called *talkies*, nickname of *talking pictures* (cf. Freire, 2013).

As distributor agencies could not be restricted to so few-equipped screens in these first few months, it must be emphasized that the same sound films also circulated at the same period as silent prints in other movie theaters. These versions were silent copies that had been made simultaneously to spoken versions, but without the incorporation of sound, or synchronized films were simply exhibited without the corresponding discs.

Also in June 1929, announcing the last exhibition of *A rosa da Irlanda* (*Abie's Irish Rose*, dir. Victor Fleming, 1928 / 1929br) in São Paulo, the advertising

4. Despite its huge success, *The Innocents of Paris*, with several English dialogues, brought no solution. In fact, a critic did not fail to point out that “many, many scenes [of the film] had its charms overshadowed by the lack of understanding of the scenes” (O Paiz, 1929: 13).

warned: “this film will only be presented with ‘sound’ in Cine Paramount, and no other cinema in the capital, which will only present the silent version” (Folha..., 16 jun. 1929: 6).

In addition to the opening of sound film in Palacio Theatro in June, the Brazilian public was watching only the silent prints of movies like *The Patriot*, *The Divine Lady* or *Abie’s Irish Rose*, which in equipped rooms in Sao Paulo were already released accompanied by Vitaphone discs. In such cases, the music and sounds were performed live by orchestras in the theaters of Rio de Janeiro, as was usual until then.

Something a little bit different occurred in the exhibition of the movie *Paixão sem freio* (*Interference*) in São Paulo, which had its two versions, silent and talking, distributed together, the first one with the title in Portuguese (and accompanied by the cinema orchestra) and the second with the original title in English.

Paixão sem freio (dir. Lothar Mendes, 1928/1929br) was shown at the Cine Paramount from Monday until Wednesday, June 24th to 26th, giving way, as of Thursday, the 27th, to its English talking version, *Interference*. The movie advertising team tried to convince the viewer to watch both versions, the first serving to understand the film, and the second for the full sound novelty delight:

Be sure to watch the silent version of the film, to understand the talking version (without captions) later, in English, that the Cine Paramount will soon show, and in which, Evelyn Brent, Clive Brook, William Powell and Doris Kenyon talk throughout the whole film (Folha..., 25 jun. 1929: 17).

The exhibiton of *Paixão sem freio* apparently represented the introduction in Brazil of a criticized attempt to adapt Hollywood in that moment of transition. It was the presentation of an originally talking film (in English) in a silent or synchronized version by eliminating the dialogues (replaced by music) and adding of intertitles⁵.

The procedure was explained (and defended) in the Mensageiro Paramount magazine, official vehicle of the US distributor:

O lobo da bolsa (*The Wolf of Wall Street*, dir. Rowland V. Lee, 1929), new production of George Bancroft for Paramount retains in its silent version, all cinematic passes of the original talking version. It is a very original work and proves the perfect adaptability of vocalized movies to our known technique of captioned movies. This means that the talking productions of Paramount lose nothing when translated into Portuguese or any other language (Mensageiro..., 1929, v. 9, n. 4: 26).

5. These versions were called *International Sound Versions*.

On the other hand, the Cinearte critic, for instance, has not expressed the same opinion when watching this very film. The silent version of *O lobo da bolsa*, exhibited at the Cine Capitólio in Rio, was criticized for lack of care in their adaptation:

It seems that to turn it into a silent movie they only cut a few close ups and nothing more [...]. Huge talking-titles that follow one another dramatically, all the action restricted to four or five shy “sets”, unjustifiable close ups, slow and studied movement as in the theater, “drama” in the subtitles and talking titles and a buzz that never ends and many other things. How terrible is a talking picture without voice! (Cinearte, 1929, n. 176: 29).

With the arrival of more and more talking movies to movie palaces of Rio and São Paulo in the second half of 1929, the criticism of their corresponding silent versions also increased: “a sound deprived talkie is an absolutely unbearable thing, to prove it there are several of them already exhibited, such as *Paixão sem freio*, *Evadidos* [*Fugitives*, dir. William Beaudine, 1929], *A guerra dos Tongs* [*Chinatown Nights*, dir. William Wellman, 1929] and so many others” (Cinearte, 1929, n. 181: 3).

However, most of those originally talkies that were exhibited in silent versions (as *O lobo da bolsa*) would be re-released in Rio de Janeiro, also in 1929, in sound versions. Incidentally, the fact that the film was already known in its silent version was even a plea to bring back the public at the same film now spoken in English⁶.

Despite the initial success of talkies, exhibitors and distributors had a complicated dilemma before them. At the same time the public started to reject more and more movies spoken in English, which had extensive dialogues most viewers did not understand, there was still the desire of Brazilian fans to finally hear the true voice of the Hollywood stars. In other words, the attraction of the talking picture was just the fact that it was spoken, which was at the same time its biggest problem.

An attempt to conciliate took place with *A máscara de ferro* (*The Iron Mask*, dir. Allan Dwan, 1929), which began with a prologue in which the star Douglas Fairbanks, speaking in English, explained directly to the audience his and his three companions, the other Dumas’s novel musketeers’ achievements. So that prologue satisfied the public’s desire to hear the American actor’s voice (maybe even without understanding what was said), although the film itself had no dialogue, and so, offered no difficulty for Brazilian spectators understanding. Also, unlike the recent sound films criticized as slow, motionless and theatrical, *The Iron Mask* action would be “continuous, fast, full of energy without fainting” (Gazeta..., 1º set. 1929: 10).

6. Further, they began to release new synchronized versions of old silent movies, as the great success of the late star Rodolfo Valentino, *Sangue e areia* (*Blood and Sand*, dir. Fred Niblo, 1922), and even more recent films such as the popular *Garotas modernas* (*Our Dancing Daughters*, dir. Harry Beaumont, 1928/1929br), released a few months before the sound film première in Brazil.

Paramount also tried a similar solution in which an explaining prologue, produced in the US, was inserted, but with written and narrated Portuguese titles. The Phono-Arte magazine told what it was about:

Paramount asked the public an honest opinion about its new idea to precede the various sessions of the film with explanatory texts in Portuguese, which as were played on the screen, were also transmitted by the voice of a “speaker”. The initiative, frankly, it was not the most successful one. The “speaker” almost spells the words, tiring the listener, and its English accent when transmitting the name of artists still needs some improvement. We prefer a lot more the silent text, since the “speaking” brings no advantage (Phono..., 1929, n. 30: 24).

In this case, the prologue written and narrated in Portuguese explained what would happen next in the English speaking film. Poorly received, the procedure did not go beyond the experimental stage. Despite the problem of anticipating the events – as did the booklets distributed to viewers – this attempt, that aimed at inserting text and voice to explain the story before the movie started, had probably intended to prevent any impairment to the original film edition, an issue resulting from the need to include Portuguese explaining cards in the talking scenes. That must have been the case in the part-talking film *Presa de amor (His Captive Woman)*, dir. George Fitzmaurice, 1929), for one critic complained that “when the dialogues are interrupted to make way for the description of the narrated film scenes, the desired ‘continuity’ ceases to exist” (Phono..., 1929, n. 28: 26)⁷.

After all, the addition of Portuguese intertitles was the most adopted practice in the early sound films launched in Brazil – not only in fiction feature films. Also in August 1929, the Mensageiro Paramount magazine announced the adoption of the same procedure in their newsreels, which “will gain explaining titles before every incident in which music, sound or talking in the country language from which derives the frame play the main role” (Mensageiro..., 1929, v. 10, n. 2: 35).

In September, Fox again repeated this practice in the premiere of *No velho Arizona (In Old Arizona)*, dir. Irving Cummings, 1928 / 1929br), an all-talking picture. The method that would turn it into a real charm was explained in the newspapers:

It is that in the key moments, and in the main dialogues, Portuguese captions have been inserted, so that the plot not only becomes understandable but also exciting to the viewer as he “hears” it. The artist’s voice, the inflection, the smallest noises and sounds, supplement those subtitles (Gazeta..., 10 set. 1929: 5).

7. The consequences of inserting the intertitles for the narrative pace and suspense can also be noted in this critical text at Cinearte on the film *Fogo nas veias (Hot Stuff)*, dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1929): “The film starts. English jabber. [...] Then, the crowning of the films is now ruined because it always appears a caption that explains all the final dialogue” (Rocha, 1929: 28).

In fact, the Phono-Arte magazine praised the initiative: “They helped understanding the film, a series of captions in Portuguese, interspersed between the various dialogues with enough expertise” (1929, n. 27: 30).

Although called by several names, we named them intertitles, as they had been used in silent cinema, ie, in film as it existed until then. It was not silent cinema then, it was simply the Cinema. This can be proved by the statement that *No velho Arizona* would be presented with:

...Portuguese intertitles, so that it becomes a regular movie, with the advantage of having the artists’ voice and all the noise of real life. A regular movie, we say comparing it to the films we’re used to watch, with intertitles (Gazeta..., 11 set. 1929: 3).

If *No velho Arizona* was a film whose intertitles were added among the English talking scenes, in the other films the intertitles began to replace the dialogued scenes then in silent or just synchronized versions. In the first case the film would become longer due to the additions. In the second case, the copy was mutilated by the replacements, but probably remained approximately the same length. Moreover, this situation also changed significantly the editing of the movie, as noted by Octavio Mendes in the copy of *Primeira noite* (*Twin Beds*, dir. Alfred Santell, 1929), a First National Production. The critic pointed out that films like these – “all set to music”, but with suppressed dialogues – were rejected by the public, for “due to the cuts that it went through, it had incredible jumps” (Mendes, 1930, n. 201: 10).

It is worth mentioning that the first procedure of adding cards with translated dialogues was held only in copies of the Movietone system with optical sound (as it was in *No velho Arizona*, by Fox), in which the intertitles inserting would not change the sync between picture and sound, for this was photographically printed on the film.

In the case of Vitaphone system copies (eg, *Primeira noite*), with the sound recorded on discs, the careless addition or subtraction of any length of the film roll would result in loss of image synchronization (projected) with the sound (from the disc). The alternative to including the intertitles without loss of sync in Vitaphone copies was the replacement of a scene for a card with exactly the same film length.

On the other hand, replacing portions of the film by same lengthed intertitles in the Vitaphone copies did not change the continuity sound – music would still play during the intertitle. In the Movietone copies, Portuguese intertitle inserting, although did not affect the synchronization between picture and sound – which was interrupted and then resumed – brought an

unexpected silence, since the added cards interrupted the optical soundtrack of the film. This was pointed in the review of *Letra e música (Words and Music)*, dir. James Tinling, 1929), a Fox Production, therefore in Movietone: “We only noticed that the captions in Portuguese are too extensive, which worsens with the forced silence of the musical sync, entailing a bad effect” (Fon-Fon!, 1929: 110).

Thus, besides exhibiting the silent versions after their sound versions, there was also the re-release of the same movies in different sound systems copies. That was precisely what happened following the first screening of a talkie in Cinema Pathé Palace, in Rio de Janeiro, at the opening of their conjugated projector to the Vitaphone and Movietone systems, on August 22, 1929. The title chosen for the premiere was *Boêmios (Show Boat)*, dir. Harry A. Pollard, 1929), described by the press as a “full-fledged sound film, with synchronized music, chants and noises” (Gazeta ... 18 Aug 1929: 9). It was a Vitaphone print, with sound discs, but with no original dialogue, versions eventually dubbed by the press as *voiceless talkies* or *mute screamers*.

The exhibition of this *Boêmios* version was reviewed by Octavio Mendes. According to the critic, the film “had its talking part suppressed. There were left up only the singing parts with Laura La Plante’s *double* and Jules Bledsoe’s final song that, no doubt, is beautiful and touching” (Mendes: 1929, n. 182: 9).

The Cinearte correspondent in São Paulo proceeded:

This is praiseworthy. It is even intelligent. But, by itself it already shows one of the defects of talking films. It is that these movies, almost all to be shown here, have to be all cut up and mutilated. Either in regard to their talking part. Or as to their main portion. And yet, entire movies will fail to reach us...

It is perfectly clear that there are missing dialogues. The scene [...] was noticeably suppressed. And yet, I believed there was a sequence that could be spoken, because just Emily’s speaking and Joseph’s exaggerated performance would be worth as a comic effect to the audience. (Ibid.).

However, a few weeks after this Vitaphone synchronized version premiered, the newspapers announced “*Boêmios in Movitone*” [sic]: “After the sound version on disc, Universal received the *movitoned* [sic] version” of the same movie (Gazeta ... October 3 1929. 5). It was the “American version, with very expressive dialogues” (ibid.), plus a prologue in which the famous producer Florenz Ziegfeld – responsible for the stage production that was adapted for the cinema – talked to viewers (Ibid.). As a talking Movietone version, this new print, unlike the previous one, had “some Portuguese captions, which coupled with the very expressive scenes, allowing perfectly the plot understanding, even by

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8. The *Boêmios* Movietone print was in fact only exhibited on the Pathé Palace five months later (O Paiz, 1930a: 5).

those who did not know the English language” (Ibid.). As this report did not indicate the movie theater in which this new print would be released, we can probably consider it a review paid by the Universal distributor agency, which had not then its own movie theater in Rio⁸.

Anyway, unlike some care perceived by Octavio Mendes in the making of the non-dialogued Vitaphone version of *Boêmios*, most silent prints of originally talkies were criticized for its lack of adaptation in cuts or deletions. On the other hand, the cards added in the Movietone copies jeopardized the rhythm and continuity of the film, causing also rising complaints. Face of coming issues from all sides, Brazilian press claims have multiplied for the allegedly mistaken choice of Hollywood for sound film, neglecting other countries fans.

FROM THE ADDICTION OR REPLACEMENT OF INTERTITLES TO SUPERIMPOSED SUBTITLES

In the last months of 1929 with the growing rejection to the incomprehensible English talking pictures, the attested poor quality of the mute or silent versions was seen as the reason for the public rejection and the for the Brazilian film market crisis. The concern of distributors and exhibitors only increased, around November of that year, when the “invasion of English talking films” and the rising unemployment of musicians from orchestras of movie theaters started to motivate the discussion of draft laws for lifting taxes to limit the import of foreign sound films (Freire, 2014).

The situation doesn’t seem to change even with Hollywood studios officially stating that the silent cinema was still earning the same interest and importance as the talkies. A Cinearte editorial summarized emphatically what the real problem: “99% of our cinemas are not equipped to the sound. And the silent versions are not up to” (1929, n. 194: 3).

9. Despite this strategic analysis, it seems there have been a greater emphasis by historiography on the supposed naivety of a delusional optimism or a false euphoria of Brazilian cinema by the statement that “the public will prefer one poor quality film spoken in Brazilian, to a very good one all spoken in English”, as wrote the film critic Pedro Lima in October 1929 (apud Gomes, 1974: 350, 353; apud Vieira, 1987: 134-135).

The question was serious, since the talkies were at a deadlock, the other films were also not pleasing. After all, as stated in *Selecta* magazine report (1929: 14), the public of Rio de Janeiro attended almost only the silent or synchronized versions. The reporting also stated that in the screens of the Rio cinemas the English talking movies rarely appeared “and most of synchronization was limited to the songs that accompanied the films” (Ibid.). In the meantime, there was a hope that Brazilian producers of the national cinema, through silent movies, could occupy the cinemas that were unable to afford the costly conversion to sound projection. It was a vast market overlooked by US distributors that privileged at that moment the marketing of large spoken or synchronized productions in movie palaces of cities like Rio, São Paulo, Curitiba and Porto Alegre⁹.

In this context where circulated prints full of Portuguese intertitles instead of the original dialogues in English, the main Cinearte critic Paulo Vanderlei, said that in a film like *Último recurso* (*Fast Life*, dir. John Francis Dillon, 1929), screened in Rio Odeon, “we see more intertitles than pictures” (Vanderlei: 1929, n. 198: 28). The same reason explained its rejection of *O segredo do médico* (*The Doctor’s Secret*, dir. William C. DeMille, 1929), exhibited in the Rio Capitólio, an adaptation of the JM Barrie play. It was the second all-talking Paramount production in which all the words were replaced by “kilometric subtitles and spoken titles with inconceivable pretension” (Vanderlei: 1929, n. 199: 28).

The case of the screening of the film *Maneiras de amar* (*Fashions in Love*, dir Victor Schertzinger, 1929) at the Cine Império, was treated with irony by the same critical:

This film “solves” the problem of Sound Cinema in Brazil. Now it’s easy. The public does not want talkies in English?

Well – replacing the entire dialogue for long talking-titles is the first measure. To insert explaining sub-titles and more tens of useless and... weak talking titles... is the second measure that is imposed.

And the third – so the film would not fall into the class of sound, synchronized, musical bogus and other nonsense – a hundred horrible discs are arranged and in absolute contrast to the action of the film, the public hearing is tortured from the first to the last scene (Vanderlei: 1929, n. 194: 28).

Paulo Vanderlei’s indignation with this sound film in which the star Adolphe Menjou appeared mute seems understandable, because it was the case of a silent version of an originally talking picture whose (weak) Portuguese intertitles were added by the Brazilian distributor and that was accompanied by discs (poorly) selected by the carioca exhibitor himself.

If adding intertitles, for instance, may broaden the duration of the news-reels, as for fiction, the recurrent replacement of the talking scenes by those intertitles not necessarily altered the duration of films, but raised the proportion of captions. According to David Bordwell (1985: 60), between 1915 and 1928, intertitles amount to approximately 15% of the total number of Hollywood movies shots. On the other hand, Kristin Thompson (1985: 186-187) pointed out that, from the mid-1910s, the idea that the American films should just tell the story visually has spread, with explaining titles being passed over by cards with the character’s dialogues (the talking titles). In addition, during the 1920s, the use of intertitles in general was being severely limited. Incidentally, this record was also pointed out by Sergio Barreto Filho, in Cinearte:

Titling has been an indispensable resource in the cinema, in its early days. Then it began to be treated with the utmost care. In 1922 came a film that did not bring a single title, but the idea did not yield results. Finally, the introduction of “detail” suppressed in plenty of explaining titles, leaving, as necessary, only the talking titles. *The Last Laugh* [dir. F. W. Murnau, 1924] it was the best example of this truly artistic and cinematographic direction. However, then came the talkies (Barreto Filho, 1930: 8).

Thus, with the popularization of the replacement procedure on the talking scenes by intertitles adopted in Brazilian prints of Hollywood talkies from 1929, the percentage of written cards relating the images appears to have risen as regards to the usual then in silent movies, which triggered the rage of the Brazilian critics.

As it did not slow the expansion of the sound film in Brazilian capitals, complaints against the silent versions have increased further in early 1930s. The *Cinearte* editorial on January 22nd, 1930, for instance, protested spitefully against that state of affairs:

...we twist our nose to the dialogued movie, we admit synchronized, but refute with all our energies the silent versions, burdened with explaining captions that the Yankee producers are trying to shove onto us and that will eventually leave the movie theaters to the flies (*Cinearte*, 1930, n. 204: 3).

In the previous magazine issue, the editorial depicted the film market crisis in the country mentioning the testimony of an official affiliate of an US distributor in Brazil that have complained about the Hollywood studio policy of only producing sound films, sending here “the waste movies which were the silent versions of talking films”, threatening the Brazilian branches with bankruptcy (*Cinearte*, 1930, n. 203: 3).

As it has been recognized at the time, a simple replacement of dialogued scenes by intertitles did not solve the problem of the talkies, for although it made it comprehensible, the movies became less attractive. This would be the case of *Ante os olhos do mundo* (*Thru Different Eyes*, dir. John G. Blystone, 1929 / 1930br). This theatrical adaptation, according to the evaluation of the *Cinearte* critic, was a film “more to be read in captions than to be watched. It was a talkie. It is silent” (Vanderlei: 1930, n. 206: 29).

One of the suggested solutions would be US producers to invest more efforts in the silent versions of talkies, as recommended an unsigned text from *Cinearte*:

In *Curvas perigosas* [*Dangerous Curves*, dir. Lothar Mendes, 1929], for example, the scene where Clarinha [Clara Bow] goes to Richard Arlen room to call him back to the circus, could be much shorter. Two captions explain everything and the rest of the scene could be cut to get closer to the silent movie pace. Just replacing dialogs for captions is not enough. The producers could even shoot some more scenes for these “versions”... (Cinearte, 1930, n. 204: 37).

The studios, in turn, apparently were trying to change that. An edition of Mensageiro Paramount commented that during comedian Harold Lloyd’s first talkie, *Haroldo encrencado* (*Welcome Danger*, dir. Clyde Bruckman, 1929 / 1930br), great care was taken with the silent version: “Numerous scenes of the silent version were filmed giving strength to the former mime; others, however, appear indistinct in both versions, the talking and the silent one” (Mensageiro..., 1930, v. 11, n. 1: 7).

A few months later, the same magazine highlighted in relation to the sound film *Agora ou nunca* (*The Virginian*, dir. Victor Fleming, 1929 / 1930br), filmed outdoors, that:

Whoever watches its silent version, full of movement, modeled on the same scenery of lush western films of the famous silent drama times, did not get to feel the atmosphere difference, because it is there in all forms of beauty. As it turns out, there is no incompatibility between the two systems. A good talkie always gives a good silent film (Mensageiro..., 1930, v. 11, n. 5: 32).

Despite these statements, the flood of criticism of silent versions continued in the first months of 1930. An exception that proved the rule was *A cativante viuvinha* (*The Last of Mrs. Cheyney*, dir. Sidney Franklin, 1929 / 1930br), by Metro: “It is the first talkie whose silent version is truly silent and is not mute as it have been happening for months. It is a version that inevitably moves away from the spoken at many points. It is likely that with few exceptions their spoken sequences have been re-shot” (Vanderlei: 1930, n. 209: 28).

Consequently, distributors tried three new ways to adapt the movies spoken in English to the Brazilian public. The first was the launch of the first multiple-language version – Hollywood production that keeping the script, setting and original costumes, were re-shot in other languages with international cast. In Brazil, the Spanish versions began to appear in mid-1930. The second innovation brought that year was the exhibition of the first foreign films dubbed in Portuguese¹⁰.

10. On the receiving of dubbing in Brazil, see Freire, 2011.

While in the foreign-language versions and in the dubbed films there was the replacement of one language for another, the third alternative experienced in 1930 remained the customary offering of verbal information in the form of written information. However, this was no longer about *replacing* dialogs for the written text nor *inserting* cards between images, but to *overlap* them. Instead of exchanging information (verbal, in English) by another (written in Portuguese) or switch them (text / image and sound / text / image and sound), *they began to be offered simultaneously*.



FIGURE 2 – Ad of the subtitled copy of *The Love Parade* (O Paiz, 1930b: 10)

The film operetta *Alvorada de amor* (*The Love Parade*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch, 1929 / 1930br) – the second partnership between the German Hollywood director and the French singer Maurice Chevalier after the success of *Inocentes de Paris* – was the film that truly popularized the method of “photographed explaining titles on the scenes” (*Mensagemiro...*, 1930, v. 12, n. 1: 12) (Fig. 2).

If before *Alvorada de amor*, the film *The Broadway Melody* had already been partially subtitled to be exhibited in Rio de Janeiro, the Paramount production brought two major differences from the release of the previous year. First, the musical with Maurice Chevalier was fully subtitled, not only in its main parts. Second, subtitling was held in the United States, directly on the print to be exported, and therefore with much higher quality and photographic homogeneity than the Metro film had. The process was well described by Paramount magazine:

The film is sent to every foreign country with English dialogs, as shown in America, and the explaining captions printed on the negative so that there is perfect synchrony between the verbal phrases. So, who do not know English follows the subtitle system printed at the foot of the scenes while those who understand the film language appreciate it through the spoken word. (*Mensagemiro...*, 1929, v. 10, n. 6: 25).

Those differences are evidenced by the fact that, before coming to Brazil, the print was especially exhibited in Los Angeles to the correspondent for the Brazilian magazine *Cinearte* in Hollywood. But Lamartine S. Marinho understandably considered subtitling as just another among many trend experiences of the moment:

The Love Parade, by Maurice Chevalier, to which I was invited to watch the other day has superimposed captions on each scene. And this, of course, will appeal to the Brazilian public. The film has all dialogues in English. But it carries on because the caption helps perfect understanding of the action. This is the new thing. Won't be a new one next week?... (Marinho, 1930: 34).

Despite Marinho's reluctance, the success of *Alvorada de amor* in Brazil was booming, showing to distributors the potential of subtitling. Released on April 21st in Rio de Janeiro, the film was over a month in theaters in Cinelandia, beating box office records. Consequently, the method began to be applied to other releases. The *Vida Capichaba* magazine, for example, commented that after the pioneering *Alvorada do Amor*, whose "superimposed captions" were received in Brazil "with fair applause", the musical film *Glorificação da beleza* (*Glorifying the American Girl*, dir. Millard Webb, 1929 / 1930br) also adopted the same process with "identical success": "work done by American experts, the impression of the letterings did not spoil the film projection, thanks to the process of merging down the letters as fast as the time necessary for reading was over" (*Vida Capichaba*, 1930, n. 233: 145).

The usage of *superimposed captions* adapted the inclusion of explaining texts in the film to the most prized quality in early sound film: synchronization. Provided no more before the start of the session (in booklets or the prologues) or immediately before or after the corresponding scenes (added in intertitles), the text started to be presented to the viewer only when the matching words were spoken, avoiding any change in the original rhythm of images and sounds of the film.

In the face of the apparent public acceptance, the *Mensagem* Paramount magazine went on to announce that releases like *Aplausos* (*Applause*, dir. Rouben Mamoulian, 1929 / 1930br) would be exhibited in two versions: "With Portuguese captions superposing the talking scenes and other fully silent" (1930, v. 11, n. 4:12).

However, if releases like *No rodopio da vida* (*The Dance of Life*, dir. John Cromwell and A. Edward Sutherland, 1929 / 1930br), *Queridinha* (*Sweetie*, dir. Frank Tuttle, 1929 / 1930br) and *A batalha de Paris* (*The Battle of Paris*, dir. Robert Florey, 1929 / 1930br) were shown in Brazil in sound versions with Portuguese subtitles, not all titles from Paramount also launched in 1930 were captioned. Therefore, the magazine mentioned conducting an "English week" at the *Cine Império*, in Rio, with the exhibition of sound films in the original version for the English and American colonies and viewers who mastered the language.

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The reason for conducting this experience would be the higher additional costs that still prevented subtitling from being immediately applied to all releases: “This exhibition system, as soon follows, covers only a certain number of films that were not included in our Portuguese translation plan with the photographed titles over the scenes” (Mensageiro ..., 1930 v 12, n. 1: 12). In such cases, as had eventually been made in the previous year, a program with plenty of English dialogues next to their translation into Portuguese was handed in the sessions (Fig. 3)¹¹.

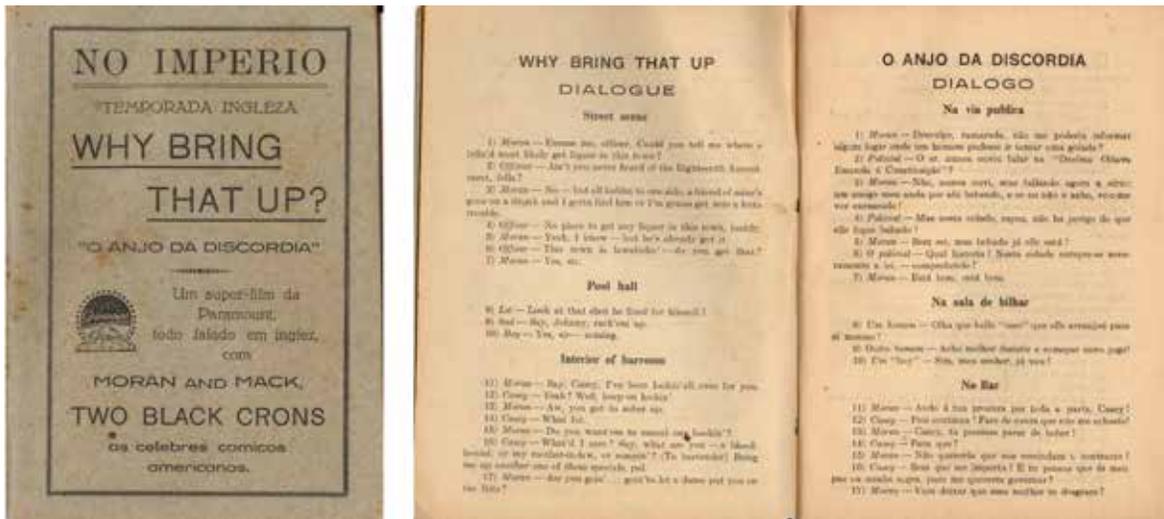


FIGURE 3 –Exhibiting program of film fully spoken in English in 1930 (Cinematca do MAM-RJ Collection)

11. The films shown in English week were: *O anjo da discórdia* (*Why Bring That Up?*), *A repudiada* (*The Laughing Lady*), *O poderoso* (*The Mighty*), *Orfãos do divórcio* (*The Marriage Playground*), *O processo de Mary Dugan* (*The Trial of Mary Dugan*) e *Uma pequena das minhas* (*The Saturday Night Kid*). Later, some of these films, such as *The divorced*, were relaunched in subtitled copies..

From the mid-1930, the number of films released with Portuguese subtitles greatly increased, although co-existing with other methods and without settling as standard practice and systematically adopted by all distribution agencies in Brazil, which was reflected even on how the process was described. In order to differentiate what we now understand as subtitling from the practice of adding intertitles, for instance, it was important make explicit whether it was *superimposed titles*, *titles over the scenes* or *photographed titles over the scenes*.

In late 1930, subtitling began to be seen by critics as the best system compared to others, whether were the silent versions, the dubbed one or the Spanish versions. The finding, for example, is pointed in the review of *O adorador impostor* (*The Texan*, dir. John Cromwell, 1930): “These talking versions that Paramount has shown us, with superimposed captions are better, certainly, than the silent versions. Because they serve Greeks and Trojans, that is, those

who understand English and those who do not” (Cinearte, 1930, n. 248: 28). The same occurred in the evaluation of the Spanish-speaking American production *Assim é a vida* (*Asi es la Vida*, dir. George Crone, 1930):

The English speaking films are frankly better. It may be that no one understands, but at least there will be superimposed titles. The Spanish ones have many problems: they don't have captions and force us, thus, to hear it all without understanding, in most cases, because of the poor diction or due to foreign language that cannot be avoided and also often have weaker performing casts than the ones who we had the pleasure to watch. (Cinearte, 1930, n. 244: 29).

In the review of *Noiva da esquadra* (*True to the Navy*, dir. Frank Tuttle, 1930), with Clara Bow, the critic came to designate *Paramount system* the films with “superimposed captions and all-talking prints” (Cinearte, 1930, n. 251: 29). In his view, a film should be released only in silent versions with musical synchronization, or “fully spoken and with superimposed or interleaved letterings. *Mute* is not pleasant” (ibid.). We realize, hence, that despite the growing popularity of subtitling, the intertitle insertion practice on copies of talkies launched in the Brazilian market remained and was even accepted.

CONCLUSION: THE CONSOLIDATION OF SUBTITLING

Despite Paramount initial experiences with Portuguese dubbing held in New York, USA, and the remakes, including in Portuguese, in Joinville, France, subtitling eventually became the dominant procedure for the distribution of talkies in Brazil. Of the three alternatives, it was certainly the least expensive, as well as the one that arouse less rejection together with critics and fans, as is apprehended in the comments of the press at the time.

During 1931, the silent versions or only part-talkies ads were becoming rarer, so Mensageiro Paramount magazine started to clear up when it came to an all-talking film, but with *explaining titles* in Portuguese or *all explained* by subtitles. The emphasis took place precisely in the terms *all* and *explained* probably as a way to overcome the initial repulsion to the first *talkies*, spoken in a language that Brazilian spectators could not understand.

The repudiated silent versions – in which “the voice was removed, then came the titles, and instead of that, just the sound and music, almost always poorly arranged” (Cinearte, 1931, n. 263: 28) – were still noted by the specialized press until at least early 1931, but apparently disappeared definitely over that year in the major theaters of the capital. At that time, the Cinearte magazine claimed that only films from Fox and Universal were still exhibited in versions without dialogued

scenes, but when these studios decided to “adopt the same system” (ibid.), that is, the intercalated or superimposed titles, the issue would be finally settled.

In 1932, while the choice of superimposed captions had not yet been fully adopted and naturalized, individual case of successful subtitling, including visually, were still being highlighted. This occurred with the film *Modelo de Amor* (*The Common Law*, dir. Paul L. Stein, 1931 / 1932br): “...What is more remarkable still is the arrangement of the superimposed captions, the best that America has to warrant. They translate the dialogues in an impressive synthesis, with quick words, in ordinary conversation and they have the advantage of being displayed in large letters, clearly legible” (O Globo, 1932: 5).

Around 1933, in the main Brazilian capitals, most of the theater rooms had been adapted to the sound cinema. In that context of global economic crisis and sharp devaluation of the Brazilian currency against the US dollar, the distributors came decreasing the number of prints put on the market, favoring only part of the exhibition circuit. Subtitling therefore established itself as practice for the distribution of major releases in the best movie palaces in the country – reaching the literate public with higher purchasing power – and that generated higher profits for the agencies. These, however, accounted for only about a third of the total number of the country’s movie theaters.

Most of the national exhibition circuit consisting of cinemas located in the suburbs of the major cities and in small and medium towns, would still be grappling with the technological conversion for the projection of sound films during the first half of the 1930s. Achieve popular public and illiterate – who frequented these theaters and for whom subtitles were perhaps not the best solution – had not been the priority of distributors between 1929 and 1931. Thus, dubbing experiences only return to be risky from the end of the decade when the conversion of the Brazilian exhibition circuit would be complete. However, at that time subtitling had definitely been also established as the standard for adjusting foreign prints for the Brazilian market. **M**

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