

# A Valencian Tycoon in Brazil: The Economic Trajectory of Francisco Serrador Carbonell (1887-1921)

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the economic trajectory of the Hispano-Brazilian businessman Francisco Serrador. The immigrant is highlighted as a major figure in the history of film exhibition in Brazil. In contrast to previous studies, that have veered towards hagiography, this paper will rebuild and refine the initial stages of Serrador's career, being strongly based upon new and yet unpublished data found in the Ferrez Family Collection in the Brazilian National Archive of Rio de Janeiro. Rather than merely providing a different approach to an historical figure, this revision suggests that the life of Francisco Serrador may be divided into several distinct phases. Throughout these phases, the entrepreneur gradually developed both his business profile and his public image. Although these transformations took decades to materialize, it is possible to locate a crucial moment that represented a major turning point in Serrador's career, namely, when he expanded his business to Rio de Janeiro in the late 1910s.

**Keywords:** Francisco Serrador; History of Brazilian Cinema; Economic History.

## Resumen

En este artículo se analiza la trayectoria económica de lo empresario hispano-brasileño Francisco Serrador. El inmigrante se destaca como una figura importante en la historia de la exhibición cinematográfica en Brasil. En contraste con estudios anteriores, que han privilegiado un enfoque hagiográfico, el presente documento tiene por objetivo reconstruir las etapas iniciales de la carrera de Serrador, siendo fuertemente basada en datos nuevos y todavía no publicados de la colección documental Familia Ferrez del Archivo Nacional de Brasil en Río de Janeiro. En lugar de simplemente ofrecer un enfoque diferente a una figura histórica, esta revisión sugiere que la vida de Francisco Serrador se puede dividir en varias fases. A lo largo de estas fases, el empresario desarrolló gradualmente tanto su perfil de negocio cuanto su imagen pública. Estas transformaciones tardaron décadas a materializarse, pero sería posible localizar un momento crucial que representa un importante punto de inflexión en la carrera de Serrador, es decir, cuando el empresario expandió su negocio a Río de Janeiro en el final de la década de 1910.

**Palabras clave:** Francisco Serrador; Historia del cine brasileño; Historia económica.

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## Introduction

This article analyzes the economic trajectory of the Hispano-Brazilian businessman Francisco Serrador. Throughout the literature dedicated to Brazilian First Cinema<sup>2</sup>, the Valencian immigrant is highlighted as a major figure, especially within the field of film exhibition, the economic sector in which he was most prolific. Serrador's personal and business papers have been studied by several authors from various historiographical approaches. However, revisiting these documents reveals patterns, limitations and gaps within these various biographies. More than a chronological exposition of life events, this paper will provide new and yet unpublished data found in the Ferrez Family Collection in the Brazilian National Archive of Rio de Janeiro.<sup>3</sup>

Previous biographies of Serrador have veered towards hagiography, referring to Serrador with epithets such as “visionary entrepreneur” and “cinema tycoon”. This approach, solidified in the mid-twentieth century, is based excessively on Serrador's activities in the 1920s and 1930s when he created his largest and most extravagant cinema project – Cinelandia, an elegant block of theaters, hotels, bars and offices in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to these studies, this paper will rebuild and refine the initial stages of Serrador's career, when he was still headquartered in the cities of Curitiba and São Paulo. This switch in periodization significantly revises the businessman's public image.

Rather than merely providing a different approach to the same figure, this revision suggests that the life of Francisco Serrador may be divided into several distinct phases. Throughout these phases, the entrepreneur gradually developed both his business profile and his public image. Although these transformations took decades to materialize, it is possible to locate a crucial moment that represented a major turning point in Serrador's career, namely, when he expanded his business to Rio de Janeiro in the late 1910s. Although this is one of the least studied periods in his life, it is also a period in which

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<sup>2</sup> Brazilian First Cinema refers to the silent film era. There are many possible periodizations, but due to my focus on film distribution and exhibition rather than production, I define this period as beginning in 1896, with the first registered film exhibition and ending in 1929, when the first talking film was exhibited in Brazil. For critical reflexion on the national cinema history, see Bernardet (1979).

<sup>3</sup> The analysis and tabulation of these data are part of an ongoing doctoral project in the Department of Economics of the Faculty of Philosophy, Letters and Humanities at the University of São Paulo (FFLCH-USP), under the guidance of Professor José Flávio Motta, co-guidance of Professor Eduardo Morettin and support from the Research Support Foundation of the State of São Paulo (FAPESP).

<sup>4</sup> Cinelandia is currently a central district in the city of Rio de Janeiro, located at the end of the Rio Branco Avenue, between the Municipal Theatre and the Passeio Público. It can also be referred to as the “carioca Cinelandia”; *carioca* refers to residents of Rio de Janeiro, as opposed to *paulista*, which refers to residents of São Paulo.

significant data is available, including his company's accounting documents, found in the Ferrez Family Archive.

### **Serrador, a tycoon: The Genesis of a Historical Myth**

On September 30, 1955, *Gazeta de Notícias*, a Rio de Janeiro newspaper, published a lengthy article on the unveiling of a commemorative bronze bust of Francisco Serrador Carbonell in the city center<sup>5</sup>. In a laudatory tone, the article highlighted the many “business ventures and efforts” made by Serrador, his “unquestionable contribution to the city”, and his “entrepreneurial character and pioneering activities.” Cinelândia was one of the final achievements in his successful life.<sup>6</sup>

Around this time, Gastão Pereira da Silva published the biography *Serrador: o criador da Cinelândia* (Serrador, the Creator of Cinelândia). Being an openly hagiographic book<sup>7</sup>, it highlights the public honors granted to Serrador in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> Despite the exaggerated bias in Silva's text, it provided a basis for the official narrative of Serrador's life, elevating the businessman to the pantheon of local heroes and public figures. The book also popularized the image of Serrador as the Spanish immigrant with a “carioca soul”<sup>9</sup>, an image which appears repeatedly in later biographies.<sup>10</sup>

One can see the resonance of this image in the illustrated book *Cinelândia: breve história de um sonho* (Cinelândia: Brief History of a Dream), by João Máximo, published in 1997. The beautiful album of texts, photographs and testimonials was sponsored by the Brazilian oil company Petrobras, the current owner of the Serrador Building, a skyscraper in the heart of Cinelândia. A former mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Luiz Paulo Conde, wrote the

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<sup>5</sup> There was some dispute in choosing the location of the bust. Biographer Gastão Silva opposed the choice of Floriano Square in favor of the Passeio Público where, according to him, the statue would be much more connected with the history of the entrepreneur (s/d, p.13).

<sup>6</sup> *Gazeta de Notícias*, 09.30.1955.

<sup>7</sup> “This book is not a biography (...). It is, at best, a profile. A profile seen by a single angle. However, it will be the most significant and flagrant expression of the life of a truly extraordinary man, a man who wanted and was able to transform, by the everyday miracle of work, the dream into reality” (Silva, s/d, p.1). Most of the books and articles used as references for our text do not have available translations. Therefore, all the quotes were translated by the author.

<sup>8</sup> Further information about the book, including the reasons for its publication and the sources for its financing was unavailable. The discovery of such information might explain more about the real position of such research and its author within the socio-political of the moment. It is highly possible that the “Serrador myth” was already present in the public opinion in earlier decades. However, only a more accurate analysis of magazines and newspaper from the period could prove such an argument.

<sup>9</sup> Serrador was proclaimed a Brazilian citizen on 20/03/1941. A copy of a document signed by the Minister of State for Justice and Internal Affairs is attached at the beginning of Silva (s/d, p.17).

<sup>10</sup> The power of this historic myth can not be ignored. The movie theaters and, by extension, the businessmen linked to them, seem to have a special capacity for social mobilization, not only in sentimental and nostalgic term, but also to concrete political efforts and actions in regards to heritage and urban politics, for instance. We see our research, in this context, not as a mere static historic review, but rather as an up to date discussion.

preface. More than a simple academic publication, the book was part of a wider project of urban revitalization of Rio de Janeiro's historic city center. Within this context, contemporary politics, in addition to academic historiography, have directly influenced the image of both Serrador and the cinemas he held in Rio de Janeiro. While Máximo's book contributes with new data and information on the economic trajectory of the tycoon, one cannot deny that it is still heavily based on the idealistic views presented by Silva (1997, pp. 89-117).<sup>11</sup>

The image of a symbiotic relationship between Francisco Serrador and Cinelandia, and consequently, between he and Rio de Janeiro, is not limited to literature written in Rio de Janeiro. In many cases, the excessive importance attached to Cinelandia dominates histories written from other geographical perspectives. One such example appears in a study of movie theaters in São Paulo:

[Serrador, in the 1920s] established himself in Rio (entrusting São Paulo to reliable employees, among them J. Llorente) because there were better conditions and support for the development of a modern entertainment industry, in which film would emerge sovereign. Serrador was fully aware that other profitable business would arise around the cinemas (1990, p.17).

Even in a book dedicated to analyzing movie theaters in another city, Silva's work is again echoed (Cf. *idem*, p.15). Although the author is clearly not writing a biography,<sup>12</sup> Simões is still unable to avoid portraying Serrador as the Cinelandia entrepreneur.

### **Beyond Cinelandia: Serrador in the 1910s**

To what extent are these biased analyses of Francisco Serrador and Cinelandia problematic? First of all, excessive attention given to the entrepreneur's activities in the 1920s and 1930s overshadows the earlier stages of his life. Under the shadow of this teleological narrative, whose apotheosis is the constitution of Cinelandia, the initial moments of his life have been ignored, obscured or viewed as mere embryonic stages for a later triumph.<sup>13</sup> What criteria exist to justify the hegemony of "the Cinelandia Serrador" over other interpretations? Why not focus on the Serrador from Curitiba or from São

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<sup>11</sup> There are relevant information especially in relation to the final moments of the trajectory of Serrador, as well as data about the continuity of his company by his sons and partners. Anyway, the book doesn't claim itself as a reference on the subject. According to the introducing words of the book: "This is not a reference book and has no comprehensive, global and detailed intentions. It focuses, almost in the form of a chronic, decade by decade, the history of Serrador's Cinelandia" (1997, book ear).

<sup>12</sup> "The tone of the biography is clearly hyperbolic" (1990, p.15).

<sup>13</sup> Gastão Pereira's narrative has, in fact, a somewhat "dramatic" narrative structure, being the burning of the Alhambra Theater and the death of Serrador in the year 1941 the artistic ending of the book.

Paulo, or even the young Serrador of Valencia? Why not widen the focus of his official biography in order to cover these periods of his life? It is with such questions in mind that we move forward in our review.

The first book that revealed fundamental aspects of Serrador's activities in Brazil was the work of Vicente de Paula Araujo, "Salões, circos e cinemas de São Paulo" (Music Halls, Circuses and Movie Theaters in São Paulo). From a collection journal ads and *crônicas* (short stories) from São Paulo during this period, Araujo creates a comprehensive portrait of São Paulo's entertainment industry, including its businessmen, attractions, and the companies of the nascent metropolis<sup>14</sup> (Cf. 1981, *passim*). Araujo divides the chronology of his study in two parts: from 1897 to 1906 and from 1907 to 1914. Highlighting Serrador's importance, it is Serrador's arrival in São Paulo that marks the watershed in Araujo's periodization (*idem*, p.137).

Araujo's work portrays the diversity of Serrador's activities in this period. In addition to pioneering the exhibition of films in fixed rooms, introducing the city's first movie theaters, Serrador also expanded his activities and competed with local rivals, investing in the fields of both film production and local theater companies (*idem*, p.172-222).

Amidst his many enterprises in São Paulo, Serrador also began expanding his businesses to Rio de Janeiro. By analyzing newspapers, Araujo reveals that during this time, Serrador and one of his major rivals in film exhibiting, the Italian immigrant Jácomo Staffa, were often at odds in the courts of Rio de Janeiro (*idem*, p.213). In fact, the appearance of Serrador in the juridical pages is not surprising; as we shall see later, there were many struggles and enemies against whom Serrador fought throughout the 1910s (Cf. Souza, 2004, pp.295-335).

Although Araujo's work significantly advances in the reconstruction of the paulista cinematographic scene at the beginning of the century, it does not explore the relationship between Serrador's work in Rio de Janeiro and his work in São Paulo. Nor does his other historical analysis of the period, *A Bela Época do Cinema Brasileiro* (The Belle Époque of Brazilian Cinema), fills this gap in Serrador's biography (1976, pp.357-375).<sup>15</sup>

Alice Gonzaga's *Palácios e Poeiras: 100 anos de cinema no Rio de Janeiro* (Palaces and Nickelodeons: 100 Years of Movie Theaters in Rio de Janeiro) is another fundamental

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<sup>14</sup> The city of São Paulo experienced, during the first decades of the twentieth century, a process of great increase in population, due to the massive arrival of immigrants (mostly from Italy, Portugal, Spain, Japan and Lebanon). Only to get an idea of this process, we can mention that, in 1890, the city had no more than 65 thousand inhabitants. Thirty years later, in 1920, it was almost 600 thousand people.

<sup>15</sup> Nor could it be otherwise: besides the fact that the book focuses on the production sector (rather than exhibition), its chronological framework ends in 1912, so that during much of the period covered by its analysis, Francisco Serrador was still located in São Paulo.

work in this historiography (1996, p.100). In expanding the period of analysis, Gonzaga is able to address all stages of the entrepreneur's activities. Yet, although it mentions Serrador's past in São Paulo and Curitiba, the work focuses on his years in Rio de Janeiro, especially in the period immediately after he settled in the city. Thus, although the book repeatedly mentions the important interstate relations of Serrador's business enterprises, the general narrative follows, once more, the "Cinelandia paradigm" (*idem, ibidem*).

*Francisco Serrador e a primeira década do cinema em São Paulo* (Francisco Serrador and the First Decade of Cinema in São Paulo) by José Inácio de Melo Souza, seems to be the first to eschew studying cinema history from the exclusive perspective of one city<sup>16</sup>. Based on a diverse and new collection of historical sources<sup>17</sup>, the author revisits the period in which Serrador worked in São Paulo. More than a mere embryonic stage to greater achievement in Rio in the 1920s, the paulista period appears as a crucial moment of raising capitals, as pointed in the following passage:

The first major movie entrepreneur came out of São Paulo. [Within the historiography], a decades-long contempt for exhibitors and an excessive focus on the film industry in Rio de Janeiro in the 1920s, has left São Paulo in the background, obscuring this fact. Due mainly to the mobilization of large financial capital, the city of São Paulo between 1908-1911 was the main battlefield for control of the [exhibition] market, not only of the city, but of the richest region in the country, (Souza, 2005, pp.189-190).

This argument is expanded in *Imagens do passado: São Paulo e Rio de Janeiro nos primórdios do cinema* (Images of the Past: São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in the Early Days of Cinema). In this research, Souza further develops the biography of Serrador, analyzing the business networks he established in São Paulo (Souza, 2004, chaps. 6-8). The image of the tycoon that comes out of this context during the 1900s and the 1910s differs greatly from the one painted by Silva and his successors.

The relative silence of the official literature on this period of Serrador's life is not accidental. However, shifting the focus to Serrador's earlier activities in São Paulo and Curitiba not only adds new elements to his biography, but alters it qualitatively. In fact, details related to these activities has the potential to tarnish his image as a public figure and local hero, as Serrador beared a somewhat troublesome past.

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<sup>16</sup> "[The Serrador empire] encompassed São Paulo and other cities, Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais, as well as agencies in the south and north-northeast regions" (2005, p.189). On such theme, we also suggest the work of Moraes (2007, p.139).

<sup>17</sup> Souza works with legal documentation, licenses and applications for permits in the Municipal Archives of São Paulo.

## From the Curitiba Coliseum to the Brazilian Film Company

Francisco Serrador Carbonell was born on December 8, 1872 in the Spanish city of Valencia<sup>18</sup>. Except for the facts that he was “son of Francisco Serrador and Modesta Carbonell” (Silva, s / d, p.17) and that he had worked briefly as a “traveling salesman in Madrid” (Máximo, 1997, p.62), little is known of his career before coming to Brazil. A full reconstruction of his life involves a deeper analysis of the material conditions of his family in Valencia, the reasons for his coming to Brazil and the existence of any relatives or friends already installed in there.

Serrador arrived in Brazil in 1887, first landing in the port of Santos. There he was employed in a drainage company in the harbor, making a rather poor wage of Rs. \$800<sup>19</sup> a day (Silva, s/d, p.35 and Souza, 2005, p.187). As the city did not offer him much, Serrador moved to a port further south, Paranaguá in the state of Paraná, and from there, to the state capital of Curitiba (Máximo, 1997, p.63). Apparently it was there that the Spanish immigrant found his first true entrepreneurial possibilities (*idem, ibidem*).

Máximo states that Serrador began his activities in Curitiba “selling fish” and sometime later, began a “groceries and fruits” business (1997, pp. 63-64).<sup>20</sup> According to the author, in these first months in Curitiba, the young immigrant established a messaging agency (probably of telegrams) with another Spanish immigrant, Manuel Busquets Laffite (*idem, ibidem*). It would be, however, with a different local merchant, Antonio Gadotti, that Serrador would establish a long-lasting business partnership. The meager information we have on the period suggests that Gadotti, five years older and supposedly already established in the city, provided the initial means and resources for Serrador to expand his projects (Cf. Souza, 2005, p.186).

The partnership proved to be very fruitful and by 1902, local newspapers announced their first commercial activities together (Souza, 2004, p.201). First, the trio Busquets, Serrador and Gadotti rented a theater, the Frontão Curitibaano, to host the popular Spanish and Basque game of *Pilota*. They then worked as agents of a local circus and also held bullfighting matches (Cf. *idem, ibidem* and Máximo, 1997, p.63). Assessing the array of the attractions, it seems that the Spaniards, and more specifically Serrador, were responsible for choosing the repertoire of attractions. A similarly Iberian profile can also be

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<sup>18</sup> Souza, using the information of the voters registration in São Paulo, identifies an alternative date of birth of the immigrant, which would be the year of 1876 (2005, p.187). 1872 is, however, a more likely date.

<sup>19</sup> The “Réis” (Rs.) was the national currency until the middle of the XX Century. A “Conto de Réis” is an expression that indicated a million Réis.

<sup>20</sup> According to Souza, in Curitiba “his business grew. From a traveling peddler, he became a kiosk owner, and soon conquered a ‘select clientele’” (Souza, 2005, p.201). These kiosks, however, were popular among the masses, and held a rather negative social reputation. Therefore, one could say that the reference to the social status of this clientele should be viewed with some skepticism (*idem, ibidem*).

seen in Serrador's Cervantes Club, a social club that functioned as a gambling house, where the partners held matches of the Spanish card game *Bisca* (Cf. *idem, ibidem*).

The role of gambling in Serrador's entrepreneurial activities is a matter of some disagreement. Unlike other entertainment entrepreneurs of the early twentieth century, like the Italians Paschoal Segreto or Jácomo Staffa, Serrador never considered himself to be involved in illegal gambling, setting apart these Spanish games from the popular Brazilian *Jogo do Bicho* (Gonzaga, 1996, p.100).<sup>21</sup>

In any case, Serrador's activities in Curitiba, more than generating mere revenue (whether illegally or not), allowed him to establish a series of important business contacts. Not only did he work with these other immigrant entrepreneurs who lived in Curitiba, but he also established relationships with agents in the larger markets of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (*idem, ibidem*). Gonzaga states that Gadotti and Serrador bought and rented amusement equipment from the aforementioned Italian businessman Paschoal Segreto, at the time a major figure in the entertainment industry of Rio de Janeiro (1996, p.100).

In 1904, Serrador and Gadotti bought a Pathé projector (called a Richembourg) and began exhibiting films in the Coliseum Curitiba (Souza, 2005, p.187)<sup>22</sup>. According to José Inácio de Melo Souza, the town quickly became too small for their ambitions, so the partners began touring other locations. At first, they returned to the cities they already knew, first to Paranaguá and then to Santos. In 1907, they presented at the Teatro São Carlos in Campinas and in August of the same year, they reached the city of São Paulo (*idem, ibidem*).

Serrador's move to São Paulo is a well documented and studied event, both by Vicente de Paula Araujo and by José Inácio de Melo Souza. On August third of that year, the Richembourg Projector was the main attraction of the Santana Theater, the most prestigious theater in São Paulo until 1911, when the Municipal Theater was opened (Moraes, 2007, pp.103-104). In November, the partners opened the Bijou Theater, the first fixed exhibition theater in the city (Araujo, 1981, p.145).

From this period on, Serrador's business experienced dizzying growth. José Inácio de Melo Souza shows that the Serrador Company managed to eliminate or take control of its main competitors from 1907 to 1911 (2004, pp.207-220). It is not surprising therefore that in 1913, the immigrant's firm reached the staggering number of 28 cinemas in the city; this local empire was spread over several districts. The following year, although the number

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<sup>21</sup> The close relationship between entertainment businessmen and gambling should not be surprising to the scholars of the Brazilian *Belle Époque*. A more detailed analysis of this keen relationship between the two sectors is undertaken by Moraes (2007, p.116-118).

<sup>22</sup> The Curitiba Colosseum was an "amusement park with skating rink, carousel, shooting kiosks and a splendid bar" (Souza, 2005, p.187).

was slightly lower (21 theaters), the company held no less than 31,000 seats (Moraes, 2007, p.138).

During this period, Serrador's expansion was boosted by a new institutional mechanism: the raising of funds through public subscriptions. If, by then, the entertainment industry had been expanding exclusively through the use of personal capital, the possibilities of financial market funding from various new investors gave the sector unprecedented potential (Souza, 2004, p.216).

Serrador's first company to go public was the Amusement Company. In 1909, subscriptions to buy equipment totaled Rs. 112:000\$000. The quotas were quickly bought up by major figures of paulista society (*idem*, p.216)<sup>23</sup>. However, it was the opening of the Brazilian Film Company (*Companhia Cinematográfica Brasileira*, CCB) in 1911 that created a major boost in São Paulo's film activities (*idem*, p. 220).

The establishment of the CCB was a major step in a long upward trend of expansion in São Paulo's exhibition sector. By analyzing the company's accounting receipts, we see that the company was composed primarily of Serrador's own capital, along with money from his previous business partners. Additional open market shares in the company were held by elite groups linked to the coffee plantations and real estate interests of São Paulo state (Moraes, 2010, p.10).

This ownership structure, however, would change in the following year. In a meeting on June 23, 1912, the company's board decided to expand the capital of the company from two to four million réis (Souza, 2004, p.227). In this second lot of shares, the largest subscribers were neither the large coffee capitalists from São Paulo, but a trading and importing house from Rio de Janeiro called Marc Ferrez & Sons (*Marc Ferrez & Filhos*, MFF). An analysis of the relationship between Serrador and the Ferrez Family is crucial in understanding Serrador's economic trajectory and a fundamental point in his choice to move from São Paulo to Rio de Janeiro in the late 1910s.

### **Serrador in Rio de Janeiro: The Quarrel with Ferrez**

The first registered contact between MFF and Francisco Serrador took place in 1907, when the tycoon was still settled in Curitiba. According to Máximo, the MFF contacted Serrador in order to "dissuade him from representing Pathé" in Paraná (1997, p.73). The relationship between the Pathé Frères and Ferrez is central to understanding the Brazilian film industry in this period. In 1907, the Rio de Janeiro firm became the sole suppliers of Pathé films and equipment to all of Brazil. Soon after, the company made

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<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between the CCB and the coffee capitals, see Chapter "The capitalism of Culture: theaters and cinemas in São Paulo" in Moraes (2007).

contracts with a number of companies to commercialize locally their materials across various regions (Moraes, 2010, pp. 5-10). The vast collection of legal documents from the Ferrez Archive reveals that the Serrador/Gadotti Company was one such company, maintaining MFF's exclusive distribution of Pathé films and equipment in the states of São Paulo and Paraná<sup>24</sup>. Although fundamental for the establishment of Serrador in São Paulo, the role of Pathé's regional representing did not last long. The growth of the CCB in the early 1910s had caused an imbalance of powers between it and the Ferrez family. Thus, the relationship between them was formally changed in 1912, the precise date of the CCB's aforementioned expansion (Moraes, 2010, p.11).

For MFF, an alliance with the CCB signified a change in economic scale; in supplying films to a single client (the CCB), they replaced the fragmented model of contracts which had been used until then. Also, the firm became a shareholder in the CCB and received profitable dividends from the growing paulista company (*idem*, p.12). As for Serrador, the alliance yielded a number of advantages.

The first of these was the possibility of advancing into the competitive exhibition sector in Rio de Janeiro, the federal capital<sup>25</sup>. A comparative analysis of accounting documents for the CCB's theaters in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in 1914 reveals the advantages of the Rio de Janeiro market. Despite the size of the exhibition chain in São Paulo, the box office revenues of eleven theaters in São Paulo was less than that of Rio de Janeiro, although the latter had only four cinemas.<sup>26</sup>

Serrador's interest in Rio de Janeiro was not necessarily to dominate the exhibition sector, but rather to expand vertically within the film industry. José Inácio de Melo Souza hypothesizes that, in this time period, "the key to success was not in film exhibition, but rather in film distribution" (2005, p.190). The CCB's accounting documents in 1914 supports this argument: Rio de Janeiro's importance as the central site for the distribution of films throughout the country is clear. According to these documents, the carioca branch was not only responsible for providing films to the cinemas in the capital, but also for the markets in Pernambuco, Bahia and Rio Grande do Sul (Moraes, 2010, p.10)<sup>27</sup>.

Finally and most importantly, MFF was the only channel of contact between Brazil and European film producers, in particular the French companies Pathé and Gaumont. According to the agreement signed between the CCB and MFF, "the carioca branch would be responsible for importing films from Europe" (Moraes, 2010, p.12). This is undoubtedly

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<sup>24</sup> "Contracts, letters of credit, receipts etc. MFF", 30/05/1908.

<sup>25</sup> Rio de Janeiro was the capital of Brazil from 1763 until 1960.

<sup>26</sup> "Board report of the CCB" 29/11/1914. There is also a fundamental demographic issue: although São Paulo was a city in a large increasing process, the population of Rio was bigger. In 1900, the city had 811.443 inhabitants and in 1920 it was more than 1,1 million people.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*.

the most fundamental reason for Serrador's interest in Ferrez and his interest in Rio de Janeiro.

In the early 1910s, the importation of films from various European producers to Brazil was the exclusive prerogative of MFF (*idem, ibidem*). The firm functioned through the use of intermediaries, commissioning agents in various parts of Europe. These agents occupied the dual role of purchasing agents and "foreign correspondents" on behalf of Ferrez in Europe (*idem*, p.8). The CCB inherited this management model, used by the firm since the late nineteenth century at the time of the merger in 1912.<sup>28</sup>

By 1914, with the increasing difficulty of obtaining films amidst the outbreak of the First World War, this system began to show signs of fatigue. Serrador, as director of the CCB, realized that MFF's loyalty to certain European producers and its dependence on intermediate agents was becoming a weakness. Serrador presented his opinions in a letter to Julio Ferrez:

As you well know, the company's interest is to conduct business directly with the producers, something that we have always struggled for, giving up the business done by the intermediates (...). This company cannot rely on intermediaries for their supply of films, being, as we are, the largest importers and consumers of films in Brazil.<sup>29</sup>

According to the exchange of correspondence between the various parties involved, the CCB wanted to increase the number of films imported in order to maintain its immense exhibition chain throughout the country. The distribution model based on regional agents, however, was becoming too limited. The volume of films imported by MFF from Europe was decreasing while the Brazilian movie-going public's demand for films was increasing. This imbalance, along with the need to satisfy pressure from CCB shareholders<sup>30</sup>, pushed Serrador to arrange direct relationships with European producers, bypassing the Ferrez brothers and their agents.

The first arena in the battle to obtain films was Italy. The importance of Italy in this period is not only recognized by contemporary historians of the early film industry, but also by film entrepreneurs of the time. (Cf. Sadoul, 1951). In the words of an MFF/CCB agent, A. Nevière, "Italy is the only country that still resists the war"<sup>31</sup>. Dissatisfied with the CCB's agent in Italy, Enea Malaguti (an agent connected to Ferrez), Serrador delegated a

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<sup>28</sup> For an analysis of the administrative structure of the MFF, see Moraes (2010, p.9).

<sup>29</sup> "Letters between Julio Ferrez and Francisco Serrador" 05/10/1915.

<sup>30</sup> Given the scope of this work, we will not analyze the pressure from shareholders on Serrador. The argument, however, comes from the analysis of two letters written by Marc's sons. Several of the core figures of the paulista branch of the CCB pressured the director to increase control of the company, forcing a struggle between the interests of the paulista and carioca branches ("Letters of Marc Ferrez to his sons" 19/10/1914 and 25/01/1915).

<sup>31</sup> "Letters from A. Nevière to Luciano Ferrez", 01/09/1914.

new agent of his own, Salvador Dell'Osso, who was instructed to follow only his orders and make purchases strictly according to his deliberations.<sup>32</sup>

In May 1915 the situation became more critical. Besides the difficulties caused by the war and the complications of buying and shipping films to Brazil<sup>33</sup>, a new challenge arose in the Italian market: the presence of Mr. Aubert, a rival agent representing Jacomo Staffa. Malaguti describes the situation as follows:

The difficulties for the expedition of films to Brazil rise every day. The lack of films comes also from the fact that Mr. Staffa sent Mr. Aubert to buy everything that he finds. He buys 3 copies and is willing to pay the highest prices. In such conditions, you can understand that the Italian firms gave him the preference (...). It would be good if Mr. Serrador could be here to see how things are<sup>34</sup>.

Serrador's encroachments in the European market threatened Julio and Luciano Ferrez, and were part of a larger context of personal discordances between the tycoon and the brothers. In December 1914, for example, Luciano wrote a letter to Julio criticizing Serrador's decision to use one of their theaters to host "theatrical and variety act performances"<sup>35</sup>. In another letter from the same time, Luciano complains to his brother that Serrador was "not paying the employees and not sharing dividends to the smaller shareholders of the CCB"<sup>36</sup>.

The friction between the Ferrez and Serrador increased until coming to a head in 1915, spurred by the sudden Serrador's arrival in Rio de Janeiro in April of that year. Claiming at first that he was there for "purely personal reasons"<sup>37</sup>, his intentions soon became clear: to assume control over the importation of films from MFF. After scouring all of the accounting documents in MFF's carioca branch, Serrador identified what he called an "inconsistency in the sums made by Luciano Ferrez with the accounts between

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<sup>32</sup> The presence of two members of the CCB in Italy (Dell'Osso and Malaguti) causes some difficulty in fully understanding their responsibilities. The analysis of the letters, however, leaves no doubt about the subordination of the first to Serrador and the second to Julio Ferrez ("Letters of A. Nevère to Luciano Ferrez", 13/08/1914 and 10/11/1914 and also "Letters of Luciano Ferrez to Salvador Dell'Osso", 12/07/1914").

<sup>33</sup> It was very difficult, for example, to find ships that would regularly transport large volumes of films from Italy. ("Letters from Luciano Ferrez to Enea Malaguti" 20/10/1914 and 11/10/1914).

<sup>34</sup> "Letters from Enea Malaguti to Julio Ferrez", 13/07/1915. The presence of Staffa and his agent Aubert in Italy is also the theme of another letter, this time written by Nevère: "Staffa is, without doubt, the most active cinemata tycoon, a man that will never give up in face of any sacrifice to satisfy his wills" ("Letters of A. Nevère to Luciano Ferrez", 10.27.1914).

<sup>35</sup> "Letters of A. Nevère to Luciano Ferrez", 12/04/1914.

<sup>36</sup> *Idem*, 12/02/1914.

<sup>37</sup> "Letters from Carolina Espinheira to Julio Ferrez", 09/05/1915.

the CCB and Pathé Frères”<sup>38</sup>. Outraged by such accusations, Luciano resigned from the company, a decision soon followed by his brother.<sup>39</sup>

With the end of the partnership between the two firms, a period of open hostilities began between the parties. Serrador’s ambitions in Rio de Janeiro became increasingly clear. The tycoon tried at all costs to gain direct control of trade with European, and especially French, producers. His strategy was to prove, in legal terms, that Pathé and Gaumont had formal obligations to provide films to the CCB and not to MFF. On May 6, 1915, Serrador sent an official letter to Pathé Frères stating that:

On May, the 30th of 1912, we have signed a contract with MFF in which they have transferred us the advantages and the rights that they held from the anterior contract with Pathé. MFF stayed responsible for the contract, being obliged to the CCB to the commitments established between the two firms. Under such conditions, the films continued being send to MFF, although the deals were paid by our company. Since these contract between MFF and Pathé doesn’t exist anymore, we have the pleasure of maintaining direct commercial relations with you<sup>40</sup>.

The quarrel and the subsequent split between the Ferrez brothers and Francisco Serrador was not due only to mere differences in personality. One could frame it also within a broader historical framework. Unlike the Spanish immigrant who arrived in the country as a poor laborer, Julio and Luciano Ferrez were children of Marc Ferrez, one of the most renowned Brazilian photographers of the nineteenth century, and grandchildren of Zeferino Ferrez, an artist from the prestigious French Mission of 1816 (Moraes, 2010, p.2)<sup>41</sup>. Heirs of a traditional commercial enterprise and of an antiquated way of doing business in Europe, their business rationale still followed something like an “old-school” ethical list of principles: family-based relationships, emphasis on establishing personal links, and fidelity to trading partners<sup>42</sup>.

Without the intention of falling into a generalization, we could say that more than mere intermediaries, agents like Nevière, Malaguti, and even Charles Pathé himself, were commercial partners and personal friends of the family. After the outcome of the supply crisis in 1915, the patriarch Marc Ferrez, then 72 years old, decided to intervene. Throughout a series of letters, Marc drew on all of his personal capital to convince his

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<sup>38</sup> “*Letters from Carolina Espinheira to Julio Ferrez*”, 22/05/1915.

<sup>39</sup> “I leave for disagreeing with the way of exhibiting films, the way to rent them, the way to deal with the services of employees and the way to acquire films” (“*Letters between Luciano Ferrez and Enea Malaguti*”, 15/04/1915).

<sup>40</sup> “*Letters from Carolina Espinheira to Julio Ferrez*”, 06/05/1915.

<sup>41</sup> In 1816, the royal court of Portugal, then exiled in the city of Rio de Janeiro due to the Napoleonic Wars, sponsored a group of French artists to immigrate to Brazil in order to create a school of Arts and Crafts.

<sup>42</sup> Such argument still needs further development and is shown here in a very preliminary way.

friend Charles to ignore the demands of Serrador and to uphold the original contract with MFF<sup>43</sup>.

The collection of letters and telegrams sent by Marc Ferrez to his sons in 1915 gives the impression that Ferrez and Charles Pathé would soon settle their quarrel. Marc believed that the international crisis, together with the war itself, would soon be over, as explained in a letter to Luciano in 1915:

I think we ought to continue to maintain our good relations with Pathé and Gaumont during these days and to avoid the approach of the enemies but, at the same time, let the firms continue to supply CCB during this last phase of the war<sup>44</sup>.

Further evaluation of additional letters reveals, however, that while Marc Ferrez bet on his personal contacts with Pathé and Gaumont, Serrador gained their confidence through purely economic arguments. He convinced them to continue supplying products to the CCB, the first Brazilian company formed “of capitalists, industrials and honored investors”<sup>45</sup>.

Although it is not clear how the representation of Pathé in Brazil was settled in the two years of 1915 and 1916, there is no doubt that Serrador came out with the advantage. With fewer opportunities, the Ferrez Brothers left the field of distribution, limiting themselves to film exhibition. In 1917, the brothers rented the Cine Pathé, a theater that, ironically, belonged to the CCB (Moraes, 2010, p.14). From a quasi-monopolist supplier of French brands in the 1900s, MFF turned out to be just one of the many subordinate partners of Serrador’s now triumphant company.<sup>46</sup>

By then, however, the interest of national exhibitors in French firms had already fallen significantly; local entrepreneurs were now rushing to obtain films from the ascending American film industry. According to José Inácio de Melo Souza, the first North American distributor to establish an office in Brazil was Universal, followed by Fox, both in 1916 (2004, p.328). For the CCB, the arrival of the North Americans represented a new

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<sup>43</sup> “*Letters from Marc Ferrez to Luciano Ferrez*” 03/06/1915 - 12/06/1915. In this collection of letters, Marc does not speak directly with Pathé, but with his assistant, M. Hache. In that same week, the patriarch also contacted an agent named “Fournet”, from the Gaumont Company. The telegram sent to Paris in July 21, 1917 is very positive and suggests that Ferrez had triumphed: “Pathé refuse proposition Serrador our accepted”. The same optimism is felt in a letter written by A. Nevière to Luciano Ferrez: “I went to Pathé where I received your letter. I’m quite sure that you don’t ignore that the different contracts held by the Maison Pathé for the exclusive sale of its films and equipment to Brazil stayed all this time under the name of MFF” (“*Letters between Luciano Ferrez and A. Nevière*”, 05/06/1915).

<sup>44</sup> “*Letters from Marc Ferrez to Luciano Ferrez*”, 14/04/1915.

<sup>45</sup> Copy of a letter from Francisco Serrador to A. Nevière (“*Letters from Carolina Espinheira to Julio Ferrez*”, 22.5.1915).

<sup>46</sup> “The CCB, in order to follow the instructions received from the Pathé Frères factory in a letter from Paris dated September 21 instructed us to deliver your excellencies 50 boxes containing 206,744 meters of film” (“*Letters between the firm Marc Ferrez & Sons and president of the CCB, Vivaldi Leite Ribeiro*”, 22.01.1918).

lucrative possibility but also relief, allowing them to demobilize the resources and efforts spent in obtaining films from Europe (*idem*, p. 334).

### **Brazil Film Company and the Death of Gadotti: A Conclusion**

The arrival of North American producers in Brazil began slowly but soon enough caused significant changes in the exhibition industry. The first novelty introduced was the “exhibition chain” model. This model established that the premiere release of a given producer would enjoy exclusive exhibition in a single theater before being released in the smaller, peripheral cinemas with lower admission prices (*idem*, p.332). This pattern inaugurated a new quarrel in the exhibition sector: a dispute as to which one of the many local entrepreneurs had the infrastructure to legally and economically obtain the North American premiere releases.

Highly sensitive to this change in the industry, Serrador decided to eliminate the carioca branch of the CCB, incorporating the buildings and assets of the firm to a new company, the so-called Brazil Film Company (*Companhia Brasil Cinematográfica*, or CBC), dedicated exclusively to the exhibition sector (Gonzaga , 1996, p.103). Given the new needs of the industry, Serrador began to raise funds for the acquisition of an unused lot at the end of Avenida Rio Branco, a large and central area of the city, large enough to accommodate the installation of a chain of theaters throughout the next decade (*idem*, p.119).

Finally fully settled in Rio de Janeiro, Serrador also headed the creation of the Film Importing Commerce Chamber of Brazil in 1919. At this point, the interrelationship of his activities with North American interests were more than clear, since one of the chamber deputies was a manager of the Universal Company (*idem*, p.125). In this series of developments, Serrador ceased business relations with the capitalists of São Paulo, abandoning the city where he had first found success in favor of the promising and increasingly elite consumer market in Rio de Janeiro (*idem*, p.127).

The culmination of this stage in his career was a trip to the United States and Europe in 1921 where, according to his biographers, he became familiar with both the Hollywood star system and the theater models of Broadway (Silva, s / d, p.119-127). The tycoon did not return to the country until 1924, one year before the opening of the first of his movie palaces in Cinelandia (Máximo, 1997, p.77).

In 1927, with the opening of the Odeon cinema, Francisco Serrador cemented himself as the premiere film exhibitor in Cinelandia. Unlike Julio and Luciano Ferrez, the formerly dominant film distributors of Brazil, Serrador never hesitated to discard his

personal and business partners when he judged them inconvenient, replacing them with new economic partners. Just as in Curitiba in the 1900s and São Paulo in the 1910s, Serrador devoted himself in the 1920s to do what he knew best: “to convince new capitalists to fund his projects” (Máximo, 1997, p.76).

There is perhaps, no more poignant illustration of this personality trait than the episode that occurred in 1927. On December 12, a funeral was held in São Paulo. Affected by debt and hounded by loan sharks, a businessman had committed a double suicide by poisoning himself and his wife of 32 years. This man was no other than Antonio Gadotti, Serrador’s longtime friend and business partner with whom he had later quarreled. (Cf. Souza, 2004, p.337). Serrador did not attend the funeral, sending a local representative in São Paulo, his Spanish compatriot Julio Llorente (*idem, ibidem*) in his place.

## **Conclusion**

Providing a major reconstruction of the socio-economic aspects of Brazilian First Cinema History, this article has analyzed the economic trajectory of the Spanish entrepreneur Francisco Serrador. Born in Valencia in 1872 and immigrating to Brazil in 1887, in a few decades, the businessman acquired a central role in the Brazilian film exhibition sector, especially after the inauguration of Cinelandia.

Although we cannot deny the importance of Cinelandia in his economic trajectory, this paper has focused on an earlier period of his life, notably his activities in the city of São Paulo during the 1910s and his quarrel with the Ferrez Brothers during World War I. The analysis of new and unpublished documents has revealed a public figure quite different from the one presented by previous biographers. More importantly, it has shed a revisionist light not only of the life of Serrador, but also contributed new information on the internal and external dynamics of Brazilian First Cinema in the early decades of the twentieth century.

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## Gallery of Images

**Image 1: The young Francisco Serrador**



*Source: Álbum Imperial, nº4, 20/04/1908, p.142 apud Araújo (1981, p.136)*

Image 2: Advertisement from the CCB listing theaters in São Paulo and other cities around Brazil (1913)

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Source: O Pirralho, nº74, jan/1913. Biblioteca Mário de Andrade

Image 3: The Bijou Theater



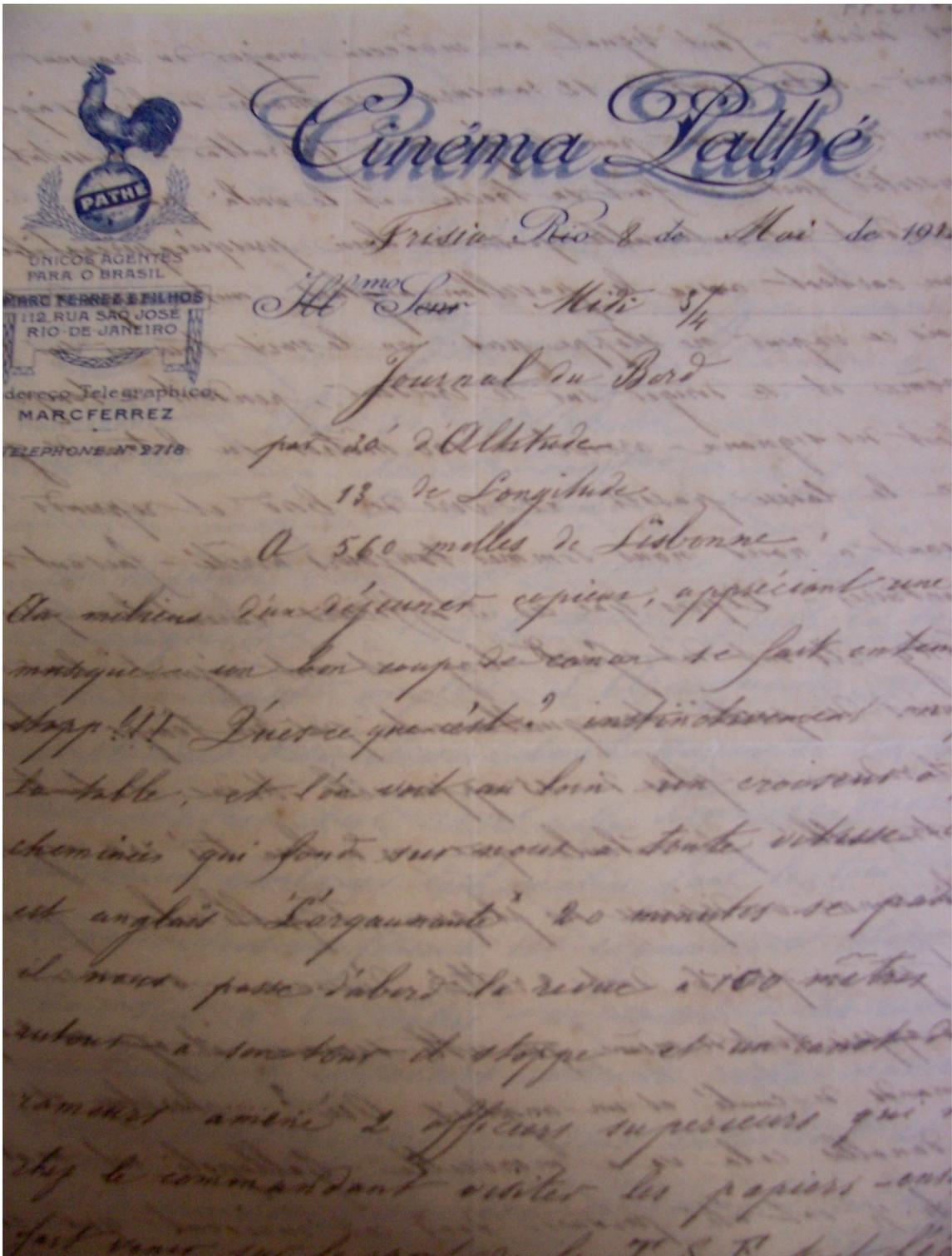
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Image 4 : Accounting documents from the CCB (1914)



Source: Arquivo Família Ferrez

Image 5: Personal Letters from the Ferrez Family



Source: Arquivo Família Ferrez

Image 6: International Payments and receipts from the CCB and Pathé Frères



Source: Arquivo Família Ferrez

Image 7: Major cities in Francisco Serrador's trajectory in Brazil

