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Review / Reseña

Lula, Filho do Brasil [Lula, Son of Brazil] directed by Fábio Barreto. Rio de Janeiro: Producers LC Barreto, Filmes do Equador, Intervideo Digital and Co-Producer Globo Filmes, 2009. 128 minutes.¹

Politics, Memory, and Working Class Life in the Commercial Biopic *Lula, Son of Brazil*

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This Brazilian biopic led to whining from a British neoliberal magazine: “once upon a time it was considered indecent to turn living people into myths.” This film about Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a “poor boy made good,” was deemed controversial by *The Economist*

¹ For their helpful suggestions on earlier drafts, we would like to thank Bryan Pitts and Tracy Devine Guzmán, as well as Matt Lymburner for his observations.

while a Lula opponent complained to the *New York Times*: they're "not just doing a movie about an ordinary Brazilian" but about the poor Brazilian who went "from a shack to become President of Brazil."² In an election year with Lula's popularity sky high, upper class print outlets in Brazil also cried foul about this commercial film from the Barreto movie-making dynasty since it was generously funded by private companies doing business with the government. At its November 2009 premier, *Lula, Son of Brazil* was dubbed "a piece of political propaganda" by the newsweekly *Veja* for presenting Lula, they said, as a "messiah who suffers, perseveres, and is destined to lead his people to the promised land." They were especially critical of the film's triumphal scene, which recreates the striking episode when Lula, as union president, was raised on the shoulders of thousands during a strike of 150,000 workers against foreign auto manufacturers in the late 1970s. Deeming the tear-jerker (*chororô*) part of "an authoritarian project," *Veja* attacked the film for cultivating a "dangerous fascination with a charismatic leader," something that might be expected in Stalin's Soviet Union or Mussolini's Italy but never in a democratic republic like Brazil.³

Putting aside its politically-fraught context, this Hollywood style film on Brazil's most famous trade unionist derives from interviews that historian Denise Paraná conducted with Lula and nine family members in 1993-94.⁴ Like the book (Paraná was a script consultant), the film covers only the first thirty five years of Lula's life from his birth in rural misery in 1945 through his family's migration to industrial São Paulo. Tracing the family's trials and tribulations, it tells the story of Lula's unfaithful and abusive stevedore father and his abandoned and soon-to-be-separated mother Dona Lindu, an illiterate but wise woman "who symbolizes female

² "Lula, Sanitised; Brazil's Presidential Biopic," *The Economist*, 2010; Alexei Barrionuevo, "New Film May Sway Brazil's Vote on President," *New York Times* (12 January 2010).

³ Diego Escosteguy and Otávio Cabral. "A Construção de Um Mito," *Veja* (25 November 2009): , 76-83, 14.

⁴ Denise Paraná, *Lula, O Filho do Brasil. Edição Revista e Ampliada* (São Paulo: Editora Perseu Abramo, 2002). Interviews make up 327 of the book's 486 pages with the remainder offering an interpretation based on Lula's movement from what the author calls an Oscar Lewis "culture of poverty" to one of transformation.

strength and intuition.”⁵ In evocative footage, we get glimpses of Lula’s brief early schooling, his experience as a peddler and shoe shine boy, and his love of soccer. His life takes a different path because of an opportunity pursued by his mother: gaining entry into a multi-year factory training program to produce skilled workers. The factory world depicted in the film includes camaraderie between older and younger workers, Lula’s loss of a finger in a press, his relation with his older activist brother, and his adolescent encounter with strikes during the early 1960s.

Focused above all on Lula’s personal life, the film depicts his first marriage, which ends with the death of his pregnant wife and child due to negligence at a public hospital. From there, it covers the romance with his second and current wife while tracing his rise within the metalworkers union of São Bernardo from 1969 through 1980. The film ends with his mother’s 1980 death while her son was in jail after leading his third and final strike in the São Paulo industrial suburbs known as ABC (named after the *municípios* of Santo André, São Bernardo, and São Caetano). Foreign viewers will be especially impressed with the film’s final whirlwind of images of these famous strikes: massive stadium assemblies, a siege of the union headquarters, police violence, and arrests. The film ends with Lula being taken from jail to the cemetery for his mother’s burial; as the crowd hails him, the film begins to fade out before ending with scenes from his 2002 inauguration as President. Those interested in how he reached the presidency will be disappointed; the film doesn’t touch upon the emergence of the radical “New Unionism” of the 1980s or the history of Workers’ Party founded by Lula; “that’s history” in the director’s words.⁶

The film is well executed with quality cinematography, a strong cast, and a powerful emotional appeal (director Fabio Barreto’s 1995 film *O Quatrilho* was nominated for best foreign film Oscar). Shot in ABC and Lula’s birthplace, the film is visually accurate in its representation of the popular milieu from which Lula emerged (they even returned to his birthplace to film as well as returning his union’s HQ to how it looked in

⁵ From an interview with Glória Pires who plays Dona Lindu, in *Press Book. Lula: Filho do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: 2009), 12.

⁶ *Press Book*, 7.

the 1970s).⁷ In choosing the actor to play the adult Lula (Rui Ricardo Diaz), the key was the “emotional *pegada*, the charisma, the force, the intensity of his relations starting with his mother,”⁸ Dona Lindu, who is played powerfully by Glória Pires. Yet this epic melodrama⁹ is not, the director insists, a story about trade unionism nor was it designed to explain Lula.¹⁰ Rather, it is the tale of a man who—against all odds and inspired by his mother—achieves success through perseverance, determination, and courage. In the director’s words, it shows what is possible if the common people overcome the inferiority complex inculcated within them by an elitist society (a favorite theme of Lula).

Yet despite its disclaimers, *Lula, Son of Brazil* does aspire to be taken seriously in historical terms. While combining real individuals with invented ones, it dates the events depicted while using newsreel-like vignettes and actual film footage from four documentaries about the ABC strikes.¹¹ If not everything is history, not all is fiction by any means. The result is that “curious blend of entertainment and interpretation”¹² that defines a cinematic history whose depictions of “specific personalities and [actual] events” usually produces skepticism among historians.¹³ Historical film’s “putative connection to accuracy and truth” is especially true for biographical films which are characterized, a historian notes, by the genre’s relentless teleology and “highly conventionalized strategies.” The resulting product is marked by a “structural conflict between loyalty to Clio and reliance on cliché,”¹⁴ a truth that this Brazilian biopic clearly illustrates.

As historians of ABC’s metalworkers, we recognize that bringing Lula’s incredible life to the screen has to pass through the exigencies of

⁷ *Press Book*, 7-11; Eduardo Socha, “Lulismo Paz e Amor. Diretor da Maior Produção da História do Cinema Brasileiro, Fábio Barreto Projeta Imagem de Um Lula Sem Defeitos [Review and Interview].” *Revista Cult* no. 142 (2009).

⁸ *Press Book*, 2.

⁹ *Press Book*, 7-11; Socha, “Lulismo.”

¹⁰ *Press Book*, 5.

¹¹ *ABC da Greve*, de Leon Hirszman. São Paulo, 1979. *Braços Cruzados, Máquinas Paradas*, de Roberto Gervitz e Sérgio Segall, 1979. *Greve!*, de João Batista de Andrade. São Paulo, 1979. *Linha de Montagem*, de Renato Tapajós. São Paulo, 1982.

¹² Toplin, X.

¹³ Toplin, IX.

¹⁴ George F. Custen, “The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961-1980,” *Biography* 23, no. 1 (2000): 139, 136.

script, production, filming and editing. One expects a mixture of invented and actual events, the summarizing, cutting, and condensation of facts and processes, and the fusion or breaking into two of certain individuals. The weakest point of *Lula, Son of Brazil* lies exactly in the decision to exalt the central personality while depriving the viewer of a deeper understanding of Lula's working class roots. In the film, the extraordinary individual Lula represents someone entirely new who stands in total contrast to the long history of São Paulo's workers and their unions. In an effort to hail the new post-Lula era after 1980, the past is caricatured through established stereotypes of riot (*baderna*), subversion (communists), and sell out trade unionists (*pelegos*).

Following Robert Rosenstone's suggestion, this review explores how *Lula, Son of Brazil* "relates to, reflects, comments upon, and/or critiques the . . . the larger discourse of history."¹⁵ In particular, we explore two key scenarios in the movie: 1) the depiction of the intersection of the adolescent Lula with strikes in the early 1960s, which is tied up with his union activist brother, a Communist; and 2) a distorted rendering of Lula's mentor Paulo Vidal, the union's president from 1969-1975, who appears as a cynical sell out under the fictional name of Cláudio Feitosa. Widening our evidentiary base beyond the film, the interpretative sections that follow explore how these depictions reinforce mistaken visions of Brazilian labor history and working class life, including the film's radical dichotomy between Dona Lindu, Lula's saintly mother, and his demonized father Aristides.

First Scenario: Strike in the Factory (São Paulo, 1963)

After receiving his diploma as a metal turner (*torneiro mecânico*) from the National Industrial Apprenticeship Service (SENAI), the principal character in *Lula, Son of Brazil* goes to work in the factory, this time as a fully formed professional with signed working papers. He is still young: at this stage in the film, he is 18 years old. In this first appearance as a new skilled worker, someone arrives next to Lula's machine to tell him that a strike has broken out: "you are all dispensed. There are a lot of pickets (*piquetes*) out there and the boss has ordered the factory closed. You're on

¹⁵ Rosenstone, *History*, 39.

strike. Take your things and go home.” Surprised, Lula asks: “It’s obligatory to be on strike, huh?” An older colleague explains the customs of his fellow workers: it’s better to leave now, go to your house, and not get caught up in any *confusão* (literally confusion but metaphorically trouble). Strikes are for subversives and rioters while good workers go home and wait for the dust to settle until the bosses say ‘Get your things and come back to work.’

This scene is followed by black and white newsreel footage of a strike movement in São Bernardo in 1963. Actually, it only appears to be contemporary to the strike since the footage and voice-over are produced by the filmmakers. In doing so they remain faithful to the public representations of strikes in the 1950s and 1960s. “Inspired by leftist doctrines,” the announcer says, workers and plebeians have transformed “São Paulo into a true spectacle of vandalism.” The accompanying images include a car and a house on fire as well as a bus with shattered windows. The film then returns to Lula, who is now on foot in the street as a truck passes packed with workers, among them his affectionate older brother Ziza (the real nickname of Lula’s brother José Ferreira da Silva who is also a blue collar worker in the metalworking industries of ABC but, unlike Lula, a member of the Communist Party).¹⁶ After Lula gets onto the truck, the brothers encounter a picket composed of dozens of adult men and join the crowd as it forces its way into a factory that, incredibly enough, has neither its own guards nor police protection. Rushing through the gates, the pickets begin to overturn cans with much running around and yelling (*baderna*). Lula and Ziza make their way to an alley between two buildings where they hear an orator call everyone’s attention to the death of a fellow worker. Swearing and euphoric, a small group appears on an upper floor pushing a foreman or office worker down the stairs before they push the man over the side and he dies from the impact of his fall.

Frightened, Lula and Ziza return to the central factory patio where the pickets are still engaged in breaking things (*quebra-quebra*) while amusing themselves with their clubs and rocks. Outside the factory, the two

¹⁶ This was a necessary biographical alteration driven by film's demands for compressed narrative. In the early 1960s, Ziza was active in the union but not yet a communist. According to Ziza, he formally joined the Brazilian Communist Party only in 1970-71 (Paraná, *Lula*, 157).

brothers talk with Ziza speaking of the strike's political importance and the need to fight workers' exploitation while mentioning Communists in the factory being beaten. Lula, by contrast, disparages talk of politics saying that "the crowd was there simply to break everything" while criticizing the victimization of a man who, he says, "wasn't any different than us peons." But the Lula in this scene is still young, anonymous, and uncommitted; he prefers dances and chasing girls while staying far away from any *confusão*, be it striking or union activism.

Second Scenario: "Cláudio Feitosa" and the Origin of Brazilian "New Unionism"

After his brother's insistent hectoring, Lula is convinced to attend a union meeting and enjoys the back and forth surrounding the disputes, which reminds him, he says, of a soccer match. Not only does Lula like to watch soccer but he also plays very well which, along with his ability to talk with everyone, makes him popular with his peers. At the meeting, one orator gets angry and complains about the low level of worker participation. The reply from union's President—"Cláudio Feitosa" (a fictitious name for the real Paulo Vidal)—is conciliatory as he explains that the workers lack confidence in the union and that the union has to win them back so that they come to see the union headquarters as the workers' second home.

In this first encounter with Cláudio Feitosa, the young Lula is impressed with the shrewdness of Feitosa and his claim to know the correct path to resolving the workers problems. The older man talks about the need to act intelligently and that there is a time for everything, including fighting or stepping back. Perceiving his brother's attraction, Ziza tells him that there is a place for Lula on the slate for union office headed by Feitosa. When Lula asks whether this union business can really change things, his brother cautions him that no one in the meeting is a blue-collar worker like them, just people "born and raised in the offices." Ziza then goes on to explain that real change will come only when new people are in control who think differently. Speaking to each other like strangers in an opponent's lair, the filmmaker creates the first real contrast with Feitosa.

As Lula plunges into union activity (against his mother's wishes), he tries to make something new and different out of the union while Feitosa incarnates the old ways. In their next scene together, the president's secretary puts off the younger man Lula who wants to talk with the experienced and cunning Feitosa about his earnest ideas on how to improve the union. Suddenly the office door opens and Feitosa and a shop floor leader come out quarrelling and Lula hears Feitosa denounced as a sell out (*pelego*). Chatting with the president, Lula tries to explain his ideas but the distracted Feitosa is more excited about his scheduled dinner with the governor. The year is 1969.

When Feitosa is elected President again in 1972, he is now openly accused not only of being a *pelego* but of being too close to the military men (*milicos*). In this scene, his Communist brother Ziza urges Lula, now in the leadership, to open his eyes to what's happening and Lula soon takes his first step towards independence. When workers are indifferent during a factory leafleting, Lula criticizes the language being used and wins over other union leaders against Feitosa. While Lula pushes for innovation, the conventional Feitosa advises him to proceed calmly. But Lula begins goes up the stairs, which leaves him above Feitosa, a fat man too attached to his position and its privileges.

Once again, it is Ziza who moves Lula forward. Meeting discretely because of the dictatorships persecution of Communists (an illegal party), Lula's brother asks whether he has not, in fact, become a tool (*pau mandado*) of Feitosa. Lula responds negatively but, in a tense scene that follows, the Feitosa's reign begins to come to an end while Lula's star shines. Entering the president's office without permission, Lula and another worker confront Feitosa; banging his fist on the table, Lula demands that he give up the Presidency in the upcoming 1975 union elections. While still calling Lula "my pupil," Feitosa is harshly criticized as a coward when it comes to mobilizing the workers for struggle. At the inauguration of Lula as president in 1975, the new President Lula jolts his ex-tutor with a final wink; applause and jeers in the air, Feitosa, without a word, leaves the movie.

Interpreting Collective Action: Strikes as Riots or as Rooted in Communities?

In its depiction of strikes in the early 1960s, the film echoes the judgment of the simulated 1963 newsreel: mass collective action as a sad spectacle of chaos and riot, a real mess (*uma confusão mesmo* as it is said in Brazil). Yet a very different portrait emerges when we look at the stories Lula actually told Paraná in 1993-94, none of which presents strikes, even violent ones, as riots orchestrated by a militant and/or subversive minority.

“My first experience with strikes,” Lula told Paraná, was “when I was fifteen years old. . . . When I left house for work, the street was totally covered in graffiti.” At the factory entrance, his apprehensive boss Mr. José spoke about the rumors of large scale picketing and that it was better to avoid trouble and let people go home. But Lula explains that he didn’t return home but instead, with other workers, got onto a small truck that belonged to the company and went off “to see what was happening.” The newer workers, he explained, “did what the older workers ordered us to do: when we passed in front of a factory that was still working, we threw rocks at the windows.” Everything was a novelty: “it was something I had only heard the older workers tell stories about.”¹⁷

It is from this same moment that Lula reported another strike experience. A large number of workers were picketing the jute factory where his sister Maria worked and Lula had been sent to bring her home. The picketers, in his description, followed the established pattern of dragging companies into the strike as they “moved along closing the factories” in their wake. On this occasion, the bosses of Maria’s factory preferred to test the balance of forces by resisting. Given that, “the crowd pushed over the factory wall. It was a tall wall. Everyone put their hands on the wall and started to push, push, push...and a big piece of it fell. With this, the factories functionaries were freed” but the picketers formed “a Polish corridor and as they left the little guys (*nequinhos*) breaking the strike took a cuffing on their head, their rear end,” while being jeered and mocked. However his sister “was not hurt” when she passed through the

¹⁷ Paraná, *Lula*, 79-80.

corridor. Lula was at the factory gates because he “had not wanted her to break the strike” since he “was afraid of the tumult.”¹⁸

The third strike episode that Lula remembered in his interviews dated from 1962 when he was seventeen years old. In this case, the violence was far greater. As the pickets entered a small textile shop with eight or nine workers, they were met with gunfire from the owner who hit “a *companheiro* in the bladder.” In retaliation, the picketers threw the owner out the second floor window (he was taken to the hospital where, Lula said, he believed he may have died). “It was the most violence scene I had seen...[and] I was frightened. I thought it was a lot of violence...but at the same time we’d been shot at. So I thought the people were acting justly (*fazendo justice*, literally ‘doing justice’).”¹⁹

Lula’s final childhood recollection about strikes introduces a central actor completely neglected in the film’s early 1960s footage: the forces of repression in all of its varied manifestations. It was on the Via Anchieta street that the young Lula encountered the “pickets” of the militarized police, the feared *Força Pública*, mounted on horse back. As a young boy, Lula reports, it was an amazing adventure to witness the strikers’ ingenious response to the cavalry men. Throwing marbles onto the street caused the horses to lose their footing and prevented their riders from intimidating, beating, and arresting the crowd. The novelty of such a banal weapon stayed in the memory of the young Lula.²⁰

Without losing filmic coherence, *Lula, Son of Brazil* would have done far better if they had let the viewer know that Lula never saw the strikes of his youth, in the “bad old” (pre-Lula) days, merely as riotous vandalism (*baderna, quebra-quebra*). As Lula himself explains, he lived and worked in peripheral neighborhoods served by the train line that linked São Paulo with the industrial suburbs of ABC. While controversial to many, strike cordons were composed of workers and the phenomenon was integrated into working class life. Even before his first encounter, Lula had heard stories about pickets from older workers as they chatted with those they knew and trusted. The pickets acted in the neighborhoods surrounding

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

or near the factories, residential areas inhabited by families whose life project was to get one of their own hired there. Moreover, Lula was a young man who had learned to follow the guidance of older workers, whether kin or not: he went to get Maria at the jute factory.

Much was to be learned from this intensely local web of conversations, which were also marked by heated disagreement about unions and strikes. Lula's mother, for example, was wary of unions and opposed to collective action, a sure way of losing your job in her judgment. His older and beloved brother, by the way, disagreed. For Ziza it was a good way of changing things for the better. In a similar fashion, Lula saw the heated verbal disputes at union meetings as similar to the clashes over soccer he knew so well, whether debating a local game played in a vacant lot or a contest between rival big teams, each with their loyal followers in the community. In his words, how workers stymied the attacks by military police on horses with marbles was a moment for noisy euphoria and celebration (*farra*). Thus, while offering retrospective criticism of aggressive pickets as linked to weak rank-and-file organization, Lula was by no means alien to a sensation that direct action against the man who shot a striker was a matter of righteous justice.²¹

Mothers, Fathers, and Mentors: Interpreting Generational Conflict

Lula's mother Dona Lindu played the most important single role in Lula's life and in the film. It was she who gave love, protection, guidance and education to her brood of kids. As Paraná noted, Dona Lindu's project of safeguarding her eight surviving children from the evils of poverty took gigantic effort and was, in the end, successful with all of them. She took pride in the fact that none of her family's boys or girls stole or sold themselves. Lula's father Aristides acted differently. While Aristides treated the children of his second partner better, something depicted in the film and that he would hide from no one, the two boys by his wife—Lula and his brother Ziza—existed to labor at his patriarchal command; they received not presents but punishments and felt abused by a father, often drunk, who

²¹ Ibid, 81-82 where he discusses the lessons to be drawn from the aggressive use of pickets in the early 1960s as well as the existence of the same tendencies in 1980 in São Bernardo.

pursued and beat them.²² For him, the role of children was to work and, in that fashion, be honest.

In crafting a parallel between Aristides and Feitosa, *Lula, Son of Brazil* speculates on the relationship between the personal and the political in the context of the generational conflict engendered by patriarchal models of masculinity. While avoiding the name Paulo Vidal, the film's invented character Feitosa exists solely to highlight the personal challenge faced by the film's fictional Lula who struggles over accepting paternal authority. Moreover, the film's Feitosa—as opposed to the real Vidal—is little more than the well-established Brazilian caricature of a sell out trade union leader (*pelego*). A conciliator popular with the office employees, he spends his time behind closed doors while trying to curry favor with the authorities. This unconvincing didacticism is meant to lead the viewer to identify more closely with the promising youngster who, as he grows in stature, will eventually displace Feitosa; Lula's one-time mentor is the molehill that produced a mountain. While enhancing the drama of personal growth that lies at the heart of this biopic, the director's choice also serves as a vision of the past for a twenty-first century audience. The man who referred Lula as a pupil is presented as incarnating the imagined defects of those trade unionists of the early 1970s, who identified with neither of the main political forces traditionally in contention (laborism and communism). Criticized by the union's leftists (including Ziza), Vidal and his group is denied any sincerity or authenticity in the film.

Returning to the question of generational conflict, it is easy to see that Lula's challenge in relation to Paulo Vidal was entirely different from his open conflict with his father. This is true both in film and in real life where the death of Aristides in 1979 prompts no reconciliation and his father was buried in Santos as an indigent unattended by family. With Vidal, however, the process of separation between the pupil and his teacher was complex, delicate, and sinuous. Contrary to the film, Vidal himself was a manual worker not a white collar employee and Lula continued to cultivate Vidal's rhetoric of "authentic trade unionism" as president. Indeed, his winning slate in 1975 included Vidal in the second most

²² Paraná, *Lula*, 53, 282.

powerful position and key elements of Vidal's strategic formulations were still visible during Lula's second term in office when the union was in fact transformed.²³ The real Lula, in other words, had learned a lot from his mentor just as he derived important lessons from his Communist brother.

In placing Lula at the center of an extended family drama, *Lula, Son of Brazil* deserves praise for communicating an enlightening vision of family life among these first generation urban residents and industrial workers. After World War II, the Aristides left behind his wife, with young kids and pregnant again, in the miserable poverty of the *agreste* of Pernambuco. He set off with a lover, in the film pregnant, for the city of São Paulo where this migrant, who liked his liquor (*cachaça*), had no fear of working long hours at a brutally hard job. Neither a vagabond nor a hustler, Lula's father became a stevedore in the "red port" of Santos. The job was only for real men (*machos*)—carrying heavy sacks of coffee for export—and the political options were courageously class-based: either Communism, Laborism, or some mixture of both. Aristides was by no means a good father, as Lula recounts. He beat his sons and believed that they should pass their childhood and adolescence working hard at his command. Like him, they would become adults who didn't know how to sign their name and were thus ineligible to vote according to the prevailing law.

In a port well known for its intrepid and tough men, Lula's father soon became a *getulista*, a man who supported President Getúlio Vargas (1930-45, 1951-1954), the populist creator of Brazil's labor laws and founder of Laborism. In looking at Lula's trajectory after 1980, one might say that his long range goal was to do away not only with his biological father but also to abolish the influence of Vargas, the paternalistic "father of the poor" who was also "mother of the rich." For the young trade unionist who would conquer the hearts and minds of millions of Brazilian workers in the 1980s, Vargas was no more than a dictator, a bad father. To him, a true father would never sleep in peace knowing that his children were being beaten and abused.

²³ John D. French, "Lula, the 'New Unionism,' and the PT [Workers' Party]: How Workers Came to Change the World, or at Least Brazil," *Latin American Politics and Society* 51, no. 4 (2009): 50-51.

This all-embracing family politics is well captured in a moving scene in the film: the large Sunday gathering of the Silva family with Lula's brother Ziza who has been released after the trauma of painful and bloody torture at the hands of the police; Lula is depicted, correctly, as boldly confronting the military in search of his brother (though the details of how he hears the news is different than in real life). The table is set, the food is good, and the feeling is truly that of a jubilant family reencounter with Lula, his new wife, his real life brother Ziza, and his actual sisters. After all, Ziza has survived and the viewer, stepping back for a moment, can see how Dona Lindu, a suffering and separated woman, has raised two honest sons in her home, both of them metalworkers and fighters. As a communist, Ziza represents the vital historical role of that illegal leftist party as it sought, with the assistance of honest workers of other ideologies and ideals, to organize zealously the workers vis-à-vis their bosses.

For a broad audience unfamiliar with Brazil, this well made film gives a glimpse into the intimate and community roots of a social movement that changed the history of a whole country. And it was the ability of one worker, Lula, to reach and channel this transformative energy that also made it possible for him to cut the apron strings that bound him to Paulo Vidal. In a similar fashion, the events of the 1970s and 1980s transformed workers into a social and political force with its own say in the political rule of their society. Brazilian society owes a lot to its Dona Lindus who, despite their fears and deep skepticism, raised thousands of male and female activists who would, with their fellow workers, change the course of Brazilian history.

The History and Politics of Lula, Son of Brazil

In writing about *Lula, Son of Brazil*, we have recognized that characters "based on actual historical figures become on screen an invention"²⁴ and that we cannot treat "dramatic entertainments simply as non-fiction brought to life with actors."²⁵ Nor are we surprised that the past on film is "manipulated to serve unarticulated ideological preconceptions"

²⁴ Rosenstone, *History*, 39.

²⁵ Toplin, 226.

or even, in this case, short term political-electoral objectives.²⁶ Premiered in November 2009, Barreto's film proved an early skirmish in the run-up to an October 2010 presidential election that did not, at the time, have a clear front-runner in the contest between Lula's center-left coalition and the center-right candidate José Serra. When Lula's critics attacked the film as shameless electioneering, the PT's Paulo Bernardo, a minister and former trade unionist, responded bluntly: "you make your own film about one of your leaders if you can find any of them with a life interesting enough to film!"²⁷

As for the film's director, Fábio Barreto joked that "Lula doesn't need this film given his indices of popularity. It is we who are taking advantage" of him to try to make some money. Asked if treating Lula as a hero had any "political party connotation," he observed that Lula had been the man who led "an army of 300,000 workers against the Brazilian army...[that] was there defending Volkswagen, GM, and Mercedes."²⁸ The director's father, Luis Carlos Barreto, its producer, was equally political when he spoke in ABC. "It is here that the working class, especially the metalworkers, bent and broke the spine of the dictatorship...[and] it was this fight that permits us to live in a democracy today."²⁹ As for charges about the film's financing, they pointed out that they had not used tax incentives which require government approval but rather straight Donations from companies (which no doubt explains certain product placements like cigarettes, VW beetles and Brahma beer).

Yet the filmmakers greatest disappointment was its modest box office performance. Two months after its release, only 860,000 tickets had been sold and the producer concluded that the film's success had been damaged by its politicization. If true, this might reflect the class bias that marks movie-going in Brazil where tickets are expensive, 70 out of 190 million live in counties without movie theaters, and those that do exist are usually distant from the neighborhoods where the majority of poor and

²⁶ Walkowitz, "Visual History," 57.

²⁷ Socha.

²⁸ Socha.

²⁹ "Lula Se Emociona ao Assistir Filme Sobre Sua Vida Em São Bernardo." Metalurgicos do ABC, 2009.

working class people live.³⁰ They had hoped to duplicate the success of a recent biopic “Francisco’s Two Sons” (*Os Dois Filhos de Francisco*), which was a story of upward mobility from rural poverty but one focused on two musicians rather than a politician, however beloved at the end of his second term. If a broad popular audience did exist for this biopic, the ubiquitous DVD piracy industry would likely have delivered the film at a cheap price although an impressionistic survey of street vendors suggests it is not in particularly high demand.

Yet deeper analytical insight into the film can only come from facing the challenge posed by a major historian of U.S. biopics. An historical film, Custen insists, “neither attempts nor pretends to speak with the values of the era in which the characters lived. Rather, its version of history is unabashedly linked with the values of the years in which the film was made.”³¹ Looked at in this way, the film’s shortcomings originate in the director’s desire to “emphasize the conciliatory side of Lula...In my opinion,” minister Bernardo wrote in the PT’s journal, “the film sees Lula with the eyes of today.”³² As Eduardo Socha suggests, it presents the Lula of the 1960s and 1970s through the lens of Lula as President: a conciliator, a man of dialogue with business, even the proponent of “peace and love” (a 2002 marketing campaign designed to reshape his image as a radical).³³ Zeroing in on the misrepresentation of Lula’s response to the 1963 strike scene, Bernardo emphasizes that Lula as a strike leader “was never a Communist but he *was* an incendiary” (emphasis added).³⁴

While retelling the hero’s past through a twenty-first century prism, the film’s individualistic approach also fails to engage adequately with the fact that—in the words of Sérgio Nobre, the current president of ABC’s metalworkers union—“the workers struggle is what produced the leadership of Lula,”³⁵ not the reverse. In the words of Maria Caetano in the

³⁰ Roberta Pennafort, “Lula Para O Público de Baixa Renda.” *O Estado de São Paulo*, 1 March 2010.

³¹ Custen, 158.

³² Paulo Bernardo, “Um Olhar de Hoje [*Lula: Filho do Brasil*]” *Teoria e Debate* 85, no. November-December (2009): 38.

³³ Socha.

³⁴ Bernardo, 38.

³⁵ Presidente do Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC, Sérgio Nobre, Fala Sobre O Filme Lula, O Filho do Brasil. Posted on the Blog do Planalto, 30

PT's journal, the film's protagonist is "so perfect that he got politicized magically. He came out of a *pelego* trade unionism...to the combative trade unionism of the great strikes in the ABC paulista, without the film letting us know how he got there."³⁶ This results in a political injustice—criticized by the PT as well as by Lula's former union in ABC³⁷—against Paulo Vidal, as well as an underplaying of the role of Lula's Communist brother as a vector of Lula's politicization. Less idealization would have also heightened the viewers interest in Lula's personal life since the film excludes the child that the widowed Lula had out of wedlock, a well known fact since 1989. The romance with his second wife involved a break with Miriam Cordeiro, six months pregnant, although he pulled it off and even legally recognized the child, Lurian, as his own from the time of birth.

Yet whatever its problems, *Lula, Son of Brazil* should be seen as widely as possible, especially outside of Brazil. As labor leader Nobre notes, "the Brazilian common people has produced a leadership [Lula] that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world," not even in the U.S. and Europe whose unions were the world's largest and most powerful in the 1970s. "For a country on the periphery of the capitalist system to produce a leadership of the substance of Lula is no small thing," he went on, and we should "valorize and divulge the personality that the struggle constructed" just like the South Africans do with Nelson Mandela.³⁸ Representing 100,000 metalworkers, Nobre praised *Lula, Son of Brazil* for bringing his story to

November 2009 [Http://Planalto.Blog.Br/Clone/Presidente-do-Sindicato-dos-Metalurgicos-do-ABC-Sergio-Nobre-Fala-Sobre-O-Filme-Lula-O-Filho-do-Brasil/](http://Planalto.Blog.Br/Clone/Presidente-do-Sindicato-dos-Metalurgicos-do-ABC-Sergio-Nobre-Fala-Sobre-O-Filme-Lula-O-Filho-do-Brasil/)." (2009).

³⁶ Maria do Rosário Caetano, "Um Melodrama Emocionante Ou Uma Hagiografia Despolitizada?" *Teoria e Debate* 85, no. November-December (2009): 39.

³⁷ The insulting treatment of Vidal in the film was criticized by two of the union's leaders from the strikes of the 1970s ("Paulo Vidal foi importante para o nosso Sindicato" http://www.smabc.org.br/smabc/materia.asp?id_CON=17344&id_SEC=12&busca=Filho); see also *O Estado de S.Paulo*, 30/11/2009 where Paulo Vidal referred to the movie as a "great lie."

³⁸ "Presidente do Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC, Sérgio Nobre, Fala Sobre O Filme Lula, O Filho do Brasil. Posted on the Blog do Planalto, 30 November 2009 [Http://Planalto.Blog.Br/Clone/Presidente-do-Sindicato-dos-Metalurgicos-do-ABC-Sergio-Nobre-Fala-Sobre-O-Filme-Lula-O-Filho-do-Brasil/](http://Planalto.Blog.Br/Clone/Presidente-do-Sindicato-dos-Metalurgicos-do-ABC-Sergio-Nobre-Fala-Sobre-O-Filme-Lula-O-Filho-do-Brasil/)." (2009)

the screen and insisted it had much to teach those who “want a world that is more just and balanced in the future.”³⁹

³⁹ “Presidente do Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC, Sérgio Nobre, Fala Sobre O Filme Lula, O Filho do Brasil. Posted on the Blog do Planalto, 30 November 2009 [Http://Planalto.Blog.Br/Clone/Presidente-do-Sindicato-dos-Metalurgicos-do-ABC-Sergio-Nobre-Fala-Sobre-O-Filme-Lula-O-Filho-do-Brasil/](http://Planalto.Blog.Br/Clone/Presidente-do-Sindicato-dos-Metalurgicos-do-ABC-Sergio-Nobre-Fala-Sobre-O-Filme-Lula-O-Filho-do-Brasil/).” (2009).