

Film Review

- *Tá rindo de quê? Humor e ditadura* [*What's so funny? Humour in dictatorship times*], directed by Claudio Manoel, Alvaro Campos, and Alê Braga. Brazil, 2019

The 84-minute documentary *Tá rindo de quê? Humor e ditadura* illuminates the challenges of the use of humour in popular media in Brazil during the country's 1964-1985 dictatorship. While the film's directors already presented a retrospective on Brazilian humour after 1985 in their previous documentary, *Rindo à toa: Humor sem limites* (*Laughing for nothing: Humour without limits*), in this more ambitious 'prequel' they dive deeper into the role of humour as political communication. More specifically, the film addresses the question: How does humour change according to the political conditions in which people live? In doing so, *Tá rindo de quê?* is also relevant for understanding Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2019-2022), whose nostalgia for, and acts of, authoritarianism have imposed or favoured constraints on freedom of expression in Brazil in the past four years.

Tá rindo de quê? combines archival footage and interviews with more than twenty renowned Brazilian comedians of the time and today, as well as Boni (José Bonifácio de Oliveira Sobrinho), the then-chief manager of Globo TV. This popular Brazilian television network was launched in 1965, one year after the coup d'état against left-wing president João Goulart and the establishment of the right-wing military dictatorship. Interestingly, Boni finds the initial support of mainstream media for the coup justified as they "were afraid of the establishment of a socialist republic in Brazil" that could revoke television "at any time by a simple signature." While echoing Cold War rhetoric (also taken up by Bolsonaro's presidential campaigns), Boni admits that he did not expect such a prolonged period of the military in power nor the consequent censorship that permeated Brazil from that moment onwards.

In the first part of the documentary, the interviewed comedians provide compelling testimonies on the unwanted outcomes of the military dictatorship in the cultural sphere. They explain how their work was popularized during this period, despite, and even because of, those outcomes. Using a mixture of entertainment and political criticism (e.g., by using word puns, ambiguities, and

caricatures), Brazilian comedians of the time tried to “punch people” with humour, as the late cartoonist and activist Henfil (Henrique de Souza Filho, 1944-1988) states in archival interview footage. The documentary creatively alternates interviews with anti-regime animations and citations of censorship materials of the time. For example, it revitalizes historic cartoons from the alternative newspaper *O Pasquim*, whose majority of journalists at the time got arrested without conviction. The film also shows the censors’ rating of the theatre play *Roda Viva*, an icon of political criticism, that was condemned as “degrading and even in a way subversive”. The alternation of the censors’ vetoes and the artists’ recollections of how they dealt with the censorship authorities is the highlight of the documentary. Cartoonist Chico Caruso, for example, remembers that he had to submit multiple versions of his critical cartoons to the censors, which led to various toned-down publications. At the same time, TV director Daniel Filho recalls that he presented the same script of a *telenovela* episode to the censors more than once in an attempt to keep some of the initially vetoed dialogues.

Unfortunately, the second part of the documentary loses much of its appeal, as it focuses less on the threats to freedom of expression and more on the legacies of the once-popular Brazilian comedians, largely concentrating on their contributions to Brazilian TV humour. At times, the film even comes across as a self-celebratory retrospective of humour on Globo TV. This impression is only reinforced by the fact that both the production and distribution of *Tá rindo de quê?* are related to three companies of the Globo Group (Globo Filmes, GloboNews, and Canal Brasil). Although a retrospective is welcome for its potential to introduce these comedians to younger audiences, it partially loses the focus on the use, role, and suppression of humour as political communication during Brazil’s military dictatorship.

Another limitation of the documentary is the lack of references to Brazilian theatre, a cultural arena where political humour played a major role. Although the film mentions one theatre group, i.e., Asdrúbal Trouxe o Trombone, more attention to what was happening in the field of theatre could have provided more insights into the role of humour during the dictatorship. In the 1960-1970s there was a widespread clash between so-called ‘politicized’ and ‘alienated’ artists, with the ‘politicized’ calling upon the ‘alienated’ to vocalize stronger public opposition to the military. A greater focus on theatre, where this clash very much played out, would have allowed the filmmakers to further explore the ‘politicized’ versus ‘alienated’ division and to illustrate the different forms and shapes of cultural resistance in that period.

Still, *Tá rindo de quê?* is worth the watch for its attention to the history of the 1964-1985 dictatorship and its effects on cultural production, notably censorship, an issue that is back on the Brazilian public agenda due to the country’s recent authoritarian rollback. While nostalgia for the dictatorship is on the rise in Brazil, the documentary could be seen as a warning of how oppression in the cultural sphere can take place after a regime transition. In fact, immedi-

ately after Bolsonaro took power in Brazil in 2019, a similar erosion of democratic principles and institutions took place, and his narrow defeat in the 2022 elections (49.1 per cent vs. 50.9 per cent for the leftist former president Lula) points to continuous widespread public support for such democratic backsliding. In this political landscape, documentaries like *Tá rindo de quê?* are useful reminders of the negative cultural effects of anti-democratic movements, including the restriction of artists' creations and citizens' laughter.

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