

Brazilian Cinema and the International Dissemination of Historical Memory

Eunice Paiva's Story in *I'm Still Here* and the Human Rights Violations of the Brazilian Military Dictatorship

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on Walter Salles's film *I'm Still Here* (2024), adapted from Marcelo Rubens Paiva's autobiographical novel, this research examines the international reception of Eunice Paiva's fight for truth following the enforced disappearance of her husband during the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship (1964–1985). It asks whether the film's international acclaim and Academy Award recognition generated a quantitative surge in Western news coverage and a qualitative shift toward human-rights-centered, victim-oriented narratives. Utilizing Laurence Bardin's Content Analysis, the study evaluates journalistic coverage across major Western news outlets, comparing reporting patterns before and after the film's international release. The findings demonstrate that cinematic circulation can act as a powerful catalyst within the transnational public sphere, elevating issues of state accountability, enforced disappearance, and transitional justice.

Keywords: *I'm Still Here*; Brazilian military dictatorship; collective memory; media framing; human rights; public sphere; content analysis; Eunice Paiva

I. Introduction

The Brazilian civil-military dictatorship (1964–1985) was defined by systematic human rights violations, including arbitrary detentions, state-sponsored torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. While these crimes have been extensively documented domestically by historiography and the National Truth Commission, the memory of this period has historically struggled for sustained visibility in global human rights discourses. In 2024, Walter Salles's film *I'm Still Here* (*Ainda Estou Aqui*), based on Marcelo Rubens Paiva's autobiographical novel, emerged as a major cultural phenomenon, portraying Eunice Paiva's decades-long search for truth following the disappearance of her husband, former congressman Rubens Paiva. The film's international acclaim, culminating in the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, transformed an intimate family trajectory into a high-profile vehicle for the global circulation of Brazilian historical memory. Despite the global reach of contemporary cinema, peripheral historical narratives regarding Latin American authoritarianism often struggle to transcend regional boundaries or survive beyond immediate media cycles. While legal precedents, such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights decisions, and international journalistic coverage of figures like Vladimir Herzog previously brought international attention to state violence in Brazil, the collective memory of the Brazilian dictatorship has frequently been framed in Western public discourse through distant Cold War geopolitical lenses rather than human rights or transitional justice frameworks. Existing academic literature on *I'm Still Here* primarily focuses on its cinematic aesthetics, trauma representation, literary adaptation, or domestic political reception. Furthermore, studies on transitional justice often separate legal/institutional internationalization from mass media circulation. There is a significant empirical gap regarding how globally distributed filmic adaptations of state violence influence foreign media systems, specifically whether cultural circulation leads to quantitative increases and qualitative reframing of historical authoritarianism in Western news coverage. To address this gap, this research asks: To what extent and in what ways did the international release and Oscar recognition of *I'm Still Here* alter Western media coverage of the Brazilian military dictatorship and its associated human rights violations? Consequently, the objective of this study is to examine whether the global circulation of the film generated

a new cycle of international media visibility and shifted Western journalistic representations of the regime from traditional political-historical narratives toward human-rights-centered, victim-oriented frameworks. The working hypothesis posits that the international reception of *I'm Still Here* produced both a quantitative surge in Western media coverage of the Brazilian dictatorship and a qualitative shift in its narrative framing, elevating themes of enforced disappearance, state accountability, and transitional justice in the international public sphere. Methodologically, this exploratory and descriptive study employs Laurence Bardin's Content Analysis to evaluate pre- and post-release journalistic coverage across major Western media outlets (The New York Times, The Guardian, Le Monde, BBC, CNN International, The Washington Post, and El País). Specifically, Bardin's technique of thematic categorical analysis will be applied to code and compare publication frequencies, media framing, key terminology, and the prominence given to victims and human rights mechanisms before and after the film's global release. Investigating this circulation is particularly urgent in light of contemporary democratic vulnerabilities, political polarization, and authoritarian resurgence, exemplified by the attacks on Brazilian democratic institutions on January 8, 2023. By examining how cultural products re-activate historical memory, this study contributes to understanding how the global dissemination of past state violence serves as a critical defense against the normalization or denial of human rights violations in the present.

II. Literature Review

2.1 THE BRAZILIAN MILITARY DICTATORSHIP AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

The Brazilian civil-military dictatorship (1964–1985) was established through a military coup that overthrew President João Goulart, inaugurating a 21-year period of authoritarian rule marked by systematic human rights violations (Fico, 2008; Skidmore, 1988). The regime progressively institutionalized repression through legal and extra-legal mechanisms, most notably Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5) in 1968, which suspended constitutional guarantees, closed Congress, and authorized state-sponsored censorship, arbitrary detentions, torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings (Comissão Nacional da Verdade, 2014; Gaspari, 2014).

Unlike other South American dictatorships, the Brazilian transition to democracy was characterized by a gradual, state-managed process that prioritized political accommodation over accountability (Skidmore, 1988). A central pillar of this model was the passage of the Amnesty Law of 1979 (Law No. 6,683/1979), which granted political amnesty to opposition figures while simultaneously shielding state agents responsible for human rights abuses from criminal prosecution (Comissão Nacional da Verdade, 2014; Fico, 2008). This institutionalized impunity created significant obstacles for transitional justice, leaving state accountability incomplete even after the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution, which established a Democratic Rule of Law based on fundamental rights and popular sovereignty (Brasil, 1988).

Efforts to confront past state violence gained institutional momentum with the establishment of the National Truth Commission (CNV) in 2011, which published its Final Report in 2014, officially documenting 434 political killings and disappearances and identifying state structures responsible for grave violations (Comissão Nacional da Verdade, 2014). Internationally, accountability was further driven by regional human rights bodies, notably in the case of Gomes Lund et al. ("Guerrilha do Araguaia") v. Brazil (2010), in which the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that the 1979 Amnesty Law lacked legal effect regarding crimes against humanity (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2010). Similarly, the case of journalist Vladimir Herzog, who was tortured and killed at DOI-CODI in 1975, became a global symbol of state repression after the Inter-American Court condemned the Brazilian state in 2018 for failing to investigate his murder (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2018).

The incomplete resolution of transitional justice in Brazil has contemporary implications for democratic stability. As demonstrated by the political polarization culminating in the January 8, 2023 attacks on the headquarters of the three branches of government in Brasília, calls for military intervention reveal how authoritarian nostalgia and historical revisionism persist within political disputes (Senado Federal, 2023). In this context, historical memory serves not merely as a record of the past, but as a critical instrument for preserving democratic institutions against new threats of authoritarian rupture (Agamben, 2004; Arendt, 2012).

2.2 COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND HISTORICAL REMEMBRANCE

Understanding how historical state violence is remembered requires examining the social frameworks through which past experiences are constructed, transmitted, and contested. Maurice Halbwachs (2006) established that memory is not solely an individual cognitive process, but a collective construction shaped by social groups, institutions, and cultural practices. Individual experiences acquire social significance when shared within public frameworks, enabling personal trauma to become part of a collective historical consciousness (Halbwachs, 2006).

However, collective memory is inherently conflictual. Paul Ricoeur (2007) and Jacques Le Goff (2013) emphasize that the past is continuously subjected to interpretation, selection, and forgetting, turning historical narratives into territories of ongoing political dispute. Elizabeth Jelin (2002) further contends that memory is constructed by active "entrepreneurs of memory" who compete in the public sphere to define official interpretations of past atrocities. In Brazil, the memory of the dictatorship has remained a site of intense confrontation between state narrative control, denialist discourses, and demands for truth by victims and human rights advocates (Guedes, 2025; Jelin, 2002).

2.3 CINEMA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL MEMORY

Cinema serves as a powerful medium within these narrative disputes, capable of translating abstract historical data into affective, embodied experiences (Benjamin, 2012; Guedes, 2025). By centering historical narratives on human subjectivities, filmic representations can bridge the gap between documented historiography and public emotional engagement (Cremonese, 2018; Halbwachs, 2006). Walter Salles's film *I'm Still Here* (2024), adapted from Marcelo Rubens Paiva's (2015) autobiographical book, exemplifies this dynamic by portraying the military dictatorship through the private sphere of the Paiva family following the enforced disappearance of former congressman Rubens Paiva in 1971 (Mendes, 2024; Paiva, 2015).

By shifting the narrative focus to Eunice Paiva's decades-long legal and personal resistance against state denial, the film transforms a specific family tragedy into a universal symbol of human rights resilience (Ferreira et al., 2022; Mendes, 2024). Rather than depicting state violence exclusively through overt physical torture, the narrative emphasizes the prolonged trauma of state-enforced absence, bureaucratized silence, and the fight for

official recognition (Ferreira et al., 2022; Paiva, 2015). Through cinematic representation, individual biographical memory transcends its private origin, operating as a catalyst for collective historical remembrance (Halbwachs, 2006; Jelin, 2002).

2.4 HISTORICAL MEMORY IN THE INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The transition of historical memory from national contexts to international audiences involves complex communication processes within the global public sphere. Jürgen Habermas (2014)

conceptualizes the public sphere as a realm of social life where private individuals assemble to form public opinion through communicative action. When cultural products cross national boundaries, they enter an expanded transnational public sphere, allowing localized historical events to be reinterpreted by global media organizations and international audiences (Habermas, 2014; Ribeiro & Mazza, 2025).

Media organizations play a decisive role in shaping how historical events are perceived internationally through media framing (*enquadramento*). Framing refers to the process by which news media select, emphasize, and package specific aspects of reality while silencing others, thereby promoting particular interpretations, moral evaluations, and thematic connections (Bardin, 2016; Ribeiro & Mazza, 2025). Historically, Western media coverage of Latin American military regimes often framed political violence through Cold War geopolitical dynamics, ideological conflict, or regional instability, frequently downplaying the central dimension of human rights violations (Bobbio, 2004; Hobsbawm, 1995).

The global circulation and critical success of *I'm Still Here*, culminating in its Oscar win for Best International Feature Film, represented a significant cultural milestone that expanded the international reach of Brazilian historical memory (Ribeiro & Mazza, 2025). While legal internationalization, such as decisions by the Inter-American Court, operates within institutional and diplomatic circles, cinematic distribution paired with global mass media coverage engages broad public audiences (Ribeiro & Mazza, 2025; Santos, 2014). The film functioned as an amplifier, prompting international news outlets (*The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *El País*, among others) to revisit the history of the Brazilian military regime (Ribeiro & Mazza, 2025).

2.5 RESEARCH GAP

Despite growing academic interest in the film's artistic merits and domestic reception, a key empirical gap remains in the literature regarding whether this global cultural event caused a structural shift in Western news coverage. Specifically, there is a lack of comparative analysis examining whether foreign media altered their frequency of reporting and shifted their journalistic framing from traditional political-historical summaries toward human-rights-centered narratives focused on state accountability, enforced disappearances, and transitional justice (Bardin, 2016; Ribeiro & Mazza, 2025).

Addressing this gap is essential for understanding the capacity of cinema and global media to reactivate historical memory and counter authoritarian denialism in contemporary public discourse (Foucault, 2014; Santos, 2014).

III. Methodology

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research design based on bibliographic and documentary analysis. The exploratory nature of the investigation is justified by the need to examine an emerging phenomenon: the international circulation of historical memory through contemporary cultural products and its subsequent impact on global news media systems. By combining theoretical frameworks from collective memory, human rights, public sphere, and media framing, the research seeks to describe and interpret how the global release and reception of the film *I'm Still Here* (2024) influenced Western journalistic coverage of the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship (1964–1985).

3.2 CORPUS SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION

The empirical corpus of this research consists of journalistic materials, including news reports, opinion articles, editorials, film reviews, and interviews, published by major Western media organizations. The selected media outlets include *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in the United States, *The Guardian* and BBC in the United Kingdom, *Le Monde* in France, and *El País* in Spain. These publications were selected due to their international reach, agenda-setting capacity, and significant influence in shaping public discourse within the global public sphere. Data collection is

structured around a comparative temporal framework divided into two distinct periods. The first is the pre-release period, which encompasses journalistic coverage published prior to the film's international festival premiere and global theatrical distribution. The second is the post-release period, which includes journalistic coverage published following the film's international premiere, global campaign, and recognition at major international awards, including the Academy Awards. Documents are gathered using systematic keyword-based searches in digitized media archives and database indexers such as Factiva and LexisNexis, utilizing search strings that combine terms related to the historical regime ("Brazilian dictatorship", "Brazilian military regime", "1964 coup") and human rights categories ("human rights Brazil", "enforced disappearance Brazil", "Rubens Paiva", "Eunice Paiva", "Vladimir Herzog").

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS METHOD: CONTENT ANALYSIS

The collected data are evaluated using Laurence Bardin's Content Analysis methodology, specifically applying thematic categorical analysis. Content analysis allows for the systematic coding, categorization, and qualitative interpretation of textual materials, identifying both explicit messages and underlying narrative framings. Following Bardin's framework, the analytical process is conducted in three sequential phases. First, the pre-analysis phase involves the organization and floating reading of the collected journalistic texts to establish initial operational hypotheses, select final document samples, and define precise analysis indicators. Second, the exploration of the material phase consists of coding and unitizing the textual corpus into Registration Units and Context Units, categorizing the frequency of key terms, historical references, and specific thematic emphasis.

Third, the treatment of results and interpretation phase categorizes the coded data to evaluate shifts in media framing. The thematic categories established for comparative analysis evaluate the quantitative frequency and volume of publications mentioning the Brazilian dictatorship before and after the film's global release. They also analyze media framing to identify potential shifts in narrative perspective from traditional political-historical summaries or Cold War geopolitics toward human-rights-centered approaches. Furthermore, the analysis assesses the centrality of victims and human rights by examining the prominence given to victims, families of the disappeared, state accountability, and legal mechanisms of transitional jus-

tice, while tracking the explicit use of key terminology such as "enforced disappearance", "state terrorism", "torture", and "crimes against humanity".

3.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODOLOGY

This study acknowledges specific methodological limitations. First, the selection of media outlets is restricted to prominent Western news organizations, excluding non-Western public spheres and social media platforms where alternative discussions may occur. Second, the comparative temporal window captures immediate and medium-term media shifts following the film's release, requiring further longitudinal study to determine long-term narrative persistence. Despite these limitations, the research design provides a robust empirical foundation to evaluate the role of global cinematic circulation in reframing historical memories of state violence.

IV. Research Findings and Analysis

From a Brazilian Historical Trauma to an International Media Story

The findings of this research suggest that *I'm Still Here* contributed to transforming the memory of Brazil's military dictatorship from a predominantly historical and national subject into a narrative of renewed international visibility and contemporary political relevance. The dictatorship, therefore, does not function merely as the historical context of the film, but as a lens through which Brazil is once again interpreted, both nationally and internationally. The film's reception demonstrates how cultural production can create new entry points into histories of authoritarianism, human rights violations, and democratic resistance. This process was particularly significant because the story of Eunice and Rubens Paiva allowed international audiences to approach the dictatorship not simply as a political period in Brazilian history, but through its personal consequences: enforced disappearance, state violence, and the prolonged search for truth and justice, which the Paiva family was forced to endure for twenty years, as reported in the book *I'm Still Here*, written by the couple's son, Marcelo Rubens Paiva. International media also began to frame the film as a work connected to the memory of the disappeared and to the impunity resulting from human rights violations committed during Latin American dictatorships. This demonstrates that its reception went beyond the cinematographic sphere and reached broader debates on human rights, transforming generations

that, according to the intentions of the dictators, might otherwise have been expected to forget these events over time.

The internationalization of this memory can also be observed beyond cinema. Following the success of *I'm Still Here*, locations associated with Eunice Paiva's story and with the production of the film began to attract greater public and tourist interest. The house used as the Paiva family residence in the film, located in Urca and shown in Figure 1, in Rio de Janeiro, began to attract visitors interested in photographing the location following the growing impact of the production. Reports documented that the property became a tourist attraction associated with the film, receiving visitors who went to the address specifically because of its connection to the story portrayed in the production. This transformation of a private space into a site of memory demonstrates how the film contributed to materializing historical memory within the Brazilian landscape itself. The history thus moves beyond archives, books, or academic discussions and becomes something that can also be experienced through physical places. This phenomenon is relevant to the analysis because it demonstrates that the film's impact extended beyond movie theaters and reached material forms of public memory. The transformation of the house into a space open to visitors was announced after the film's Oscar victory, when the Rio de Janeiro City Government stated that the property would be transformed into a space dedicated to Brazilian cinema and to preserving the memory of Eunice Paiva and her family.

This process can also be understood through other visual symbols of the dictatorship, particularly the case of journalist Vladimir Herzog. His death demonstrates how images themselves were used as instruments in the dispute over the construction of historical memory. In 1975, the military regime officially presented Herzog's death as suicide and used a photograph of the scene to support this version, clearly displaying his body and signs of a constructed narrative intended to conceal the truth behind his death. Documentation from the São Paulo Truth Commission records that the image was produced to support the official claim of an alleged suicide and that the version disseminated by the Second Army Command stated that Herzog had hanged himself inside his cell at the DOI-CODI. The report of the National Truth Commission, in turn, identifies the image as part of a staged scene presenting a "simulated suicide" by the DOI-CODI/Second Army and emphasizes that the photograph itself demonstrated the incompatibility of the scene with the suicide version presented by the regime. Years later, it

was established that Herzog had been killed as a result of torture, negligence, and the systematic violence of the state, like many other groups and individuals who opposed the dictatorship and sought to contribute to the dismantling of an oppressive system that not only destroyed families but also censored, killed, and neglected the rights of its population.

The use of this photograph therefore had a political function that went beyond the simple recording of a death. In a context marked by censorship and control over information, the image helped sustain among the population the narrative constructed by the organs of repression, shifting responsibility for Herzog's death from the State to the victim himself. Official documentation demonstrates that the suicide version was subsequently dismantled: investigations concluded that Herzog died as a result of torture while he was under the custody of Brazilian state agents, and the National Truth Commission recorded that the suicide narrative disseminated at the time was false. Thus, Herzog's photograph became a particularly significant example of how the regime could use the production and circulation of images to conceal human rights violations and influence public perceptions of events occurring within its own repressive apparatus.

The continued presence of Herzog's photograph in collective memory reveals a fundamental characteristic of Brazil's relationship with the dictatorship: this past has not remained completely closed. Its images, victims, narratives, and unresolved questions continue to influence the way Brazilian society understands democracy in the present. *I'm Still Here* participates in this same process of reconstructing and disputing memory. By bringing Eunice Paiva's experience before a mass audience, the film reconnects a historical case of state violence with contemporary debates about memory, accountability, and democratic institutions, giving greater visibility to people who lost family members in this context of struggle. Music also played an important role in this process, with songs that became widely known and acquired coded meanings as a result of the censorship imposed under Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5), during the government of President Costa e Silva. In this way, the work does not simply remember the dictatorship, but demonstrates why remembering this period remains politically relevant. The film's international reception reinforced this dimension by presenting the story of Rubens and Eunice Paiva in connection with enforced disappearance, impunity, democracy, and human rights.

This contemporary relevance became even more evident in light of Brazil's recent political and electoral crises. The release and international re-

ception of *I'm Still Here* occurred in a context in which the legacy of authoritarianism once again occupied significant space in public debate. Following the 2022 presidential elections, Brazil faced an attempt to rupture the democratic order that culminated in the January 8, 2023 attacks on the headquarters of the three branches of government, as shown in Figure 2. In this context, the memory of the dictatorship began to directly engage with contemporary questions concerning the preservation of democracy. The film's international reception occurred precisely during a period in which Brazil was still confronting the political consequences of previous years and debating the relationship between historical memory, authoritarianism, and democracy. As of 2026, the country continues to experience intense political polarization and its various consequences, with many individuals being held accountable under Brazilian law. International media interpreted the success of the film within this political context, highlighting how the production reopened debates about the crimes of the dictatorship and the political divisions of contemporary Brazil.

The temporal coincidence between the reception of *I'm Still Here* and this political context therefore broadens the significance of the work. While the film presented audiences with a family that had been victimized by authoritarian repression, contemporary Brazil was once again confronting debates about the limits of democratic institutions and the possibility of a rupture of the constitutional order. Eunice Paiva's story consequently acquired a dimension that extends beyond her individual experience: it began to resonate with a society still discussing the consequences of its authoritarian past and the risks of its repetition. In this sense, the film functions as a bridge between past and present. International media itself emphasized that the work gained strength within a society marked by the political tensions that followed the Bolsonaro administration and by debates surrounding the memory of the dictatorship and historical revisionism, reinforcing why the past must never be forgotten in the construction not only of the present, but also of the future.

The victory of *I'm Still Here* at the Academy Awards further intensified this process. On March 2, 2025, the film became the first Brazilian production to win the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film. The recognition transformed a specifically Brazilian story of dictatorship, disappearance, and resistance into a cultural event with global reach. The Associated Press, in its coverage of the victory, emphasized that the film's international recognition brought the history of enforced disappearances and

impunity in Latin America to greater attention, connecting Rubens Paiva's story to the continued relevance of these issues in contemporary human rights debates. The award should therefore not be understood solely as a cinematic achievement. It also functioned as a new mechanism for the international circulation of the memory represented by the film, reaching audiences that might otherwise have had little or no previous contact with the history of Brazil's dictatorship.

Thus, the findings indicate that the international impact of *I'm Still Here* cannot be reduced to an increase in the number of people exposed to the history of the dictatorship. More importantly, the work contributed to changing the ways in which this past can be accessed and interpreted. Through cinema, sites of memory, historical images, international media coverage, the impact of the Academy Award, and the contemporary political and electoral context, the dictatorship became once again connected to discussions about human rights, historical memory, and democratic preservation. The film therefore functions as a bridge between past and present: it recovers a history of state violence and places it within an international cultural circulation while simultaneously demonstrating that the questions produced by this past remain relevant to understanding contemporary democratic Brazil and its processes of constitutional promulgation and enactment in the face of the country's dictatorial history. The cover highlights how the details surrounding the Oscar were valued and incorporated into its design. Among the cover elements, there is a photograph of the Oscar statuette, clearly identifying the award. The book was released on August 4, 2015.

The book became one of the most significant written references not only for the screenplay, but also for the production of the film and for raising awareness of this history. Since its publication in 2015, it has had a lasting impact on the public understanding of the events surrounding the dictatorship. The author, Marcelo Rubens Paiva, is the son of Rubens Paiva and experienced this history firsthand, including the consequences of his father's disappearance and the displacement experienced by his family. His family was deeply involved in the struggle against the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship, making the book not merely a historical account, but also a deeply personal testimony of his father's story and its lasting impact on his family.



Figure 1. The house in Urca, Rio de Janeiro

The house in Urca remains a tourist attraction in Rio de Janeiro to this day. According to *Estadão*, the house was purchased by the City of Rio de Janeiro with the aim of preserving the memory of the victims.

The house in Urca became a powerful symbol in the context of the dictatorship because, when Rubens Paiva was abducted, his family was held captive for approximately 24 hours. Rubens Paiva was taken away without any clear explanation, and no definitive information about his fate was initially provided. He was involved in groups that opposed the dictatorship and worked to support efforts to locate people who had been abducted by the military, with the aim of ensuring that they were either kept alive or, in cases where they had been killed, that their bodies could be identified and returned to their families.



Figure 2. January 8, 2023

The events of January 8, 2023, led many Brazilians to recall the existence of the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship and its characteristics, particularly in light of the attempted coup.

The main connection, as discussed throughout the text, lies in the revival of memories and narratives associated with the dictatorship. Political polarization plays a central role in perpetuating the resurgence of periods such as the dictatorship, often reducing complex political and historical issues to simplistic interpretations. This dynamic can lead society to engage with politics through superficial concepts, while overlooking fundamental legal, constitutional, and historical principles that are essential to developing a balanced and informed understanding of politics and its consequences. Ultimately, overcoming these polarized social bubbles is crucial to fostering a more nuanced, democratic, and reality-based political awareness.

4.1 THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS THROUGH EUNICE PAIVA'S STORY

Human rights, in their contemporary conception, were significantly consolidated with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on December 10, 1948. Its principles established a universal understanding of fundamental rights, including the right to life, liberty, security, and protection against arbitrary detention and torture. Within this historical context, the trajectory of Eunice Paiva represents a deeply personal example of how violations committed during the Brazilian civil-military dicta-

torship became connected to broader debates concerning human rights, state violence, memory, and transitional justice.

Eunice Paiva, who graduated in Literature in 1947 and subsequently obtained a degree in Law in 1979, lived through one of the most significant periods in Brazilian political history. Her legal education acquired particular relevance in light of the struggle she undertook following the abduction of her husband, Rubens Paiva, in 1971. After his arrest by DOI-CODI agents, Eunice was also detained and interrogated, while her family was subjected to intimidation and uncertainty regarding Rubens Paiva's fate. DOI-CODI played a central role in the repressive apparatus of the dictatorship, operating in the identification, interrogation, and repression of individuals considered political opponents or threats to the regime.

Rubens Paiva's political position and his involvement in networks that supported individuals persecuted by the dictatorship placed him within the broader context of political repression. His case also demonstrates that the regime's actions extended beyond the direct persecution of organized resistance groups. Families, journalists, politicians, intellectuals, and individuals suspected of assisting political opponents could also become targets of surveillance, detention, and intimidation. Thus, Rubens Paiva's disappearance became representative of a broader pattern of enforced disappearances and state violence that characterized the period.

Eunice's experience acquired particular significance because her struggle did not end with her husband's disappearance. For approximately two decades, she sought official recognition of Rubens Paiva's death and refused to accept the State's silence regarding his fate. Her pursuit of a death certificate was not merely a private attempt to obtain legal documentation. It represented a broader struggle for recognition, accountability, and historical truth. By demanding that the State acknowledge what had happened to her husband, Eunice challenged institutional mechanisms that had contributed to concealing and erasing evidence of political violence.

Her trajectory also demonstrates the relationship between individual and collective memory. The disappearance of Rubens Paiva was initially experienced as a family tragedy, but Eunice's persistence gradually transformed the case into a matter of public interest and historical significance. Her struggle contributed to keeping the case present within Brazilian collective memory, including during periods in which discussions concerning the crimes of the dictatorship remained politically sensitive. In this sense, her

actions demonstrate how victims and their families can become important agents in preserving historical memory and pursuing transitional justice.

Furthermore, Eunice's experience can be understood through the concept of enforced disappearance, a violation that extends beyond the immediate deprivation of liberty and life. The absence of a body, an official explanation, and definitive information regarding what occurred produces an ongoing violation against both the victim and their family. The uncertainty surrounding Rubens Paiva's fate consequently affected multiple dimensions of Eunice's life, including her privacy, her family, and her ability to obtain legal recognition of the truth, mentioned in figure 3.

The case also highlights the limitations faced by human rights discourse under authoritarian regimes. Although the principles established by the UDHR already provided an international framework for the protection of human dignity, the existence of these principles did not prevent systematic violations from occurring in Brazil. The gap between international human rights standards and their effective implementation at the national level became particularly evident in cases involving arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, and political persecution.

Eunice Paiva therefore became more than the wife of a disappeared politician. Her trajectory represents the transformation of personal suffering into a form of civic and legal resistance. Her legal education, completed in 1979 while Brazil was still under military rule, adds another dimension to her pursuit of recognition and justice. Her persistence challenged attempts to normalize political violence and contributed to preserving a historical narrative that the dictatorship had sought to silence.

The international relevance of Eunice Paiva's story was later expanded through the literary work of Marcelo Rubens Paiva and, decades later, through the film *I'm Still Here* (Salles, 2024). By transforming a personal and national history into a narrative accessible to international audiences, the film contributes to the circulation of Brazil's memory of dictatorship beyond its original social and political context. The story of one family thus becomes a vehicle through which international audiences can engage with broader issues concerning authoritarianism, enforced disappearance, state responsibility, transitional justice, and the protection of human rights.

In this sense, Eunice Paiva's story demonstrates how memory can function as a form of human rights advocacy. Remembering is not merely an act of preserving the past; it can also constitute a demand for recognition, accountability, and justice. The continued presence of the Rubens Paiva case

in public memory challenges historical erasure and reinforces the principle that violations committed by the State should not disappear simply through the passage of time. Through Eunice's struggle, individual memory becomes collective memory and, ultimately, part of a broader human rights narrative capable of crossing national borders, mentioned in figure 4.

Furthermore, this movement represented not only a form of social mobility, but also a significant movement of women. Many women from Brazilian families, exhausted by the circumstances surrounding them, remained resilient despite the suppression of popular voices and the restrictions imposed on freedom of expression. Women such as Eunice Paiva became symbols of resistance for many others, demonstrating how individual courage could develop into a broader form of collective female resistance, mentioned in Figure 5.



Figure 3. Paiva's Family after Forced disappearance of Rubens Paiva

The photograph depicts a news report published by unidentified *Jornal Popular do Rio*. The image was published in the context of the newspaper's efforts to disclose what was happening to the Paiva family and to denounce the actions of the dictatorship. However, many photographers also went to the location with the intention of portraying the Paiva family negatively. Despite this, the family members can still be seen smiling.

The photograph on the right is the recreation produced for the film, while the photograph on the left is the original historical image. The family

lost much of its privacy as a result of the intense media attention surrounding their case. Above all, Eunice became more than a mother and matriarch; she became a symbol of resistance within her own family. She sought to reassure and support her children, who, despite being very young, were forced to endure exceptionally difficult circumstances and experiences that were highly atypical for their age.

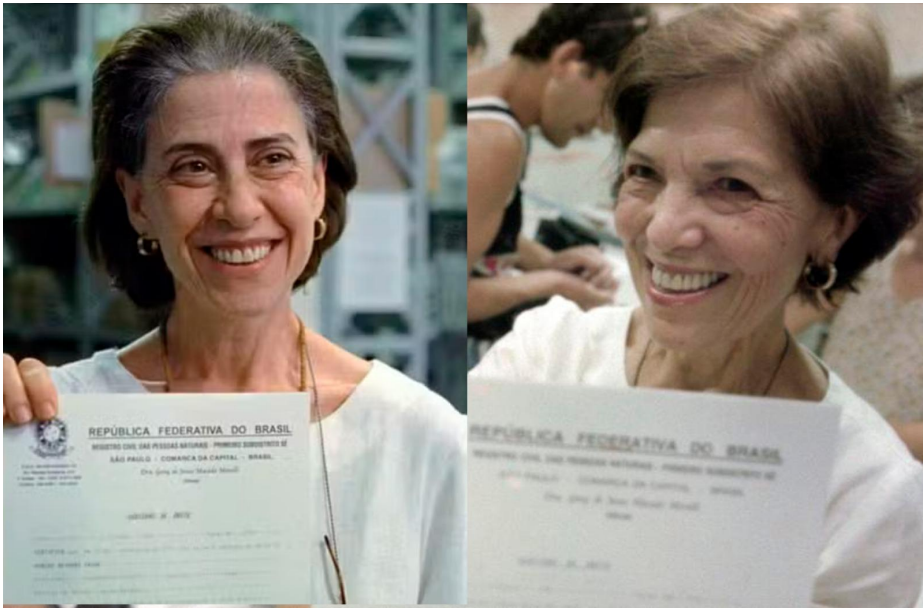


Figure 4. Eunice Paiva and the Issuance of Rubens Paiva's Death Certificate: Film Scene and Historical Photograph.

This photograph was taken after the end of the dictatorship, during a period in which the Brazilian legal system was being gradually reestablished. After completing her law degree, Eunice became a professor and persistently pursued legal recognition of her husband's death until she finally obtained Rubens Paiva's death certificate. The image on the right is the corresponding scene from the film, while the image on the left is a real historical photograph taken by Marcelo Rubens Paiva following the successful issuance of his father's death certificate.



Figure 5. Cover of the Brasil Mulher newspaper, 1975

According to the Memórias da Ditadura website, “the image shows the cover of the October 1975 issue of the newspaper Brasil Mulher, one of the landmarks of the feminist press and opposition to the dictatorship. Created and edited by women, the publication connected the feminist struggle, as expressed in “The Search for Lost Equality,” with the broader political struggle, as highlighted by the headline concerning the “Women’s Movement for Amnesty.” By placing a Black and impoverished woman at the center of its cover, the newspaper also affirmed its commitment to giving visibility and voice to the working classes, becoming an important vehicle of resistance.”

It is important to recognize how other women also became prominent figures for the civilian population, contributing to the questioning and problematization of the dictatorship and its practices. Among them, Eunice Paiva became a powerful symbol of resistance, representing the strength of women who challenged political repression and sought recognition, justice, and historical truth.

4.2 FROM DICTATORSHIP TO HISTORICAL MEMORY AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Understanding Brazil’s transition from dictatorship to democracy requires an analysis of the political changes that occurred between 1964 and 1988, as well as the social and institutional consequences that remained even after the end of the authoritarian regime. The institutional structure of the dicta-

torship underwent significant transformations throughout this period. The 1967 Constitution was adopted under the authoritarian regime, while the Institutional Acts progressively expanded executive powers and restricted constitutional guarantees. This process reached a critical point with the enactment of Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5) in December 1968. The measure allowed the government to close Congress, suspend political rights, revoke political mandates, and restrict legal guarantees, including the suspension of habeas corpus in certain cases involving political crimes, further intensifying political repression, as demonstrated in Figure 6.

The consequences of this political environment can be observed through individual cases that later became central to the construction of Brazilian historical memory. The disappearance of Rubens Paiva and the death of journalist Vladimir Herzog constitute particularly significant examples. Their cases demonstrate how State violence extended beyond political institutions and directly affected families and civil society. In Herzog's case, subsequent investigations established that he died at the DOI-CODI facilities in São Paulo as a result of injuries caused by torture, contradicting the official version presented by the regime, which had attributed his death to suicide. The circulation of information about the case also demonstrated the importance of the press in constructing public memory of political repression. Figure 7 presents newspaper coverage related to Vladimir Herzog's death, allowing the case to be examined through the way the event was reported and subsequently challenged in the public sphere.

The persistence of these events and memories of repression became particularly relevant during the process of democratization. Political transition did not immediately eliminate the consequences left by the dictatorship. Families continued to seek information about disappeared relatives, legal recognition of victims, and clarification of the circumstances surrounding violations committed by the State. Thus, democratic reconstruction was accompanied by the need to confront historical questions that remained without definitive answers.

Within this context, the constitutional process that culminated in the Federal Constitution of 1988 represented a fundamental institutional transformation. The Constitution established a new democratic framework and strengthened the protection of fundamental rights, citizenship, and political participation. Its promulgation also became an important symbol of Brazil's democratic reconstruction after more than two decades of authoritarian rule. In this process, Ulysses Guimarães played a central role as President of

the National Constituent Assembly and as one of the principal political figures associated with the drafting and promulgation of the new constitutional text. During his promulgation speech, he referred to the Constitution as the “Citizen Constitution” and stated, “Traitor to the Constitution is a traitor to the Homeland,” emphasizing the importance of preserving constitutional democracy after years of authoritarianism.

The 1988 Constitution, therefore, represented not merely a legal transformation, but also a milestone in the reconstruction of the relationship between the State, society, and fundamental rights. Its drafting took place within a context of broad political and social mobilization, in which different sectors of society participated in debates concerning the rights and guarantees that should form part of the new democratic order. The Constitution thus came to represent an institutional break with previous authoritarian practices and established a legal foundation for the consolidation of Brazilian democracy.

However, the establishment of a new constitutional order did not eliminate the memories or consequences of the violations committed during the dictatorship. In this context, transitional justice provides a framework for understanding the relationship between the authoritarian past and the democratic present. It encompasses mechanisms and practices aimed at pursuing truth, preserving memory, recognizing victims, providing reparation, establishing accountability, and guaranteeing non-repetition. In Brazil, these processes developed gradually and remained connected to the demands of victims and their families, demonstrating that the transition from authoritarianism to democracy was not an isolated event, but an extended historical process.

The persistence of these issues also demonstrates that the memory of the dictatorship remains present in Brazilian society. It can be found in official documents, newspaper reports, photographs, family testimonies, legal proceedings, and cultural productions that revisit events from the period. In this way, events such as the disappearance of Rubens Paiva and the death of Vladimir Herzog transcend their individual dimensions and become part of a collective memory associated with State violence, resistance, and the pursuit of recognition and justice.

It is within this context that *I’m Still Here* (Salles, 2024) acquires contemporary relevance. By reconstructing Eunice Paiva’s trajectory and presenting her family’s experience to new generations and international audiences, the film transforms a family history into a broader narrative concerning

authoritarianism, human rights violations, memory, and democratic reconstruction. The film revisits events that had already been documented through books, newspapers, photographs, and legal records, while presenting them through a medium capable of reaching new audiences and establishing new forms of engagement with the past.

Cinema, therefore, becomes another means of transmitting historical memory. By representing the experiences of Eunice Paiva and her family, *I'm Still Here* contributes to keeping questions concerning the dictatorship, human rights violations, and the consequences of authoritarianism present within Brazilian society. The persistence of these narratives demonstrates that the legacy of the dictatorship does not belong exclusively to the past, but continues to be interpreted, discussed, and debated within Brazilian society, including by new generations and through cultural productions that allow this memory to circulate beyond national borders.

EDITADO O ATO 5

- 1) Congresso em recesso
- 2) Confisco de bens
- 3) Suspensos "habeas" políticos
- 4) Restabelecidas as cassações
- 5) Liquidada a vitaliciedade

É o seguinte o texto do Ato Institucional nº 5, ontem editado pelo Presidente da República:

CONSIDERANDO que todos devem estar perturbados da ordem são contrários aos atos e à constitucionalidade do Movimento de março de 1964, obrigando as que por de se responsabilizarem e juraram defendê-lo a adotarem as providências necessárias, que evitem sua destruição.

Resolve editar o seguinte:

ATO INSTITUCIONAL:

"Art. 1º — São mantidas a Constituição

II — suspensão do direito de votar e de ser votado nas eleições sindicais;

III — proibição de atividades ou manifestações, além aquelas de natureza política;

IV — aplicação, quando necessária, das seguintes medidas de segurança:

a) — liberdade vigilada;

b) — proibição de frequentar determinados lugares;

c) — domicílio determinado.

§ 1º — O ato que decretar a suspensão dos direitos políticos, poderá ser revogado no



ANO XLIV — Rio de Janeiro, sábado, 14 de dezembro de 1968 — Nº 12816

O GLOBO

FUNDAÇÃO DE IRINEU MARINHO

Aprovado de uma comissão de redação e revisão, o Ministro Luís Antônio do Gama e Silva, do Diário, encaminha a Nação, o texto de redação, em caráter de urgência, para que seja publicado no Diário, para que seja publicado no Diário, para que seja publicado no Diário.

Figure 6. O Globo newspaper during the constitutional transition concerning Brazil's Institutional Acts

This magazine page seeks to inform Brazilian society about the restrictions imposed by Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5) and the freedoms that were suppressed under the authoritarian regime. An important aspect of this historical context was the increasing repression of student movements and other forms of political opposition. In March 1968, the death of 18-year-old stu-

dent Edson Luís de Lima Souto, who was killed by the police during a student protest in Rio de Janeiro, intensified demonstrations against the dictatorship and provoked strong reactions among students, intellectuals, political figures, and different sectors of civil society.

The death of Edson Luís became one of the symbols of the growing conflict between civil society and the authoritarian State. His death contributed to the mobilization of large demonstrations, including the March of the One Hundred Thousand, and intensified demands for political and civil freedoms. However, it is important to distinguish this event from the immediate circumstances that led to the enactment of AI-5. In December 1968, the government used the political crisis involving Congressman Márcio Moreira Alves and the National Congress's refusal to authorize proceedings against him as the immediate justification for issuing AI-5. At the time, Congress was predominantly composed of members of ARENA, the government-supporting party established during the dictatorship.

The enactment of AI-5 represented a significant escalation of authoritarian repression. The measure concentrated extensive powers in the hands of the Executive Branch, allowing the government to close Congress, revoke political mandates, suspend political rights, restrict habeas corpus, and further intensify the repression of opposition. These measures affected not only political institutions, but also freedom of expression, the press, artistic production, and cultural life.

Censorship became particularly evident in music and other forms of artistic expression. Artists and intellectuals developed strategies to express criticism of the regime while attempting to circumvent censorship. In some cases, even pseudonyms were used to conceal the identities of authors and increase the possibility that critical works would be approved. A notable example is Chico Buarque, who used the pseudonym “Julinho da Adelaide” to release songs despite the intense censorship imposed on protest music. His song “Acorda Amor,” for example, used a fictional author to circumvent censorship while addressing arbitrary arrests and political repression.

This context reveals that the restrictions imposed by AI-5 extended far beyond formal political institutions. They affected the ability of Brazilian society to speak, organize, protest, publish, create, and openly criticize the government. The magazine page presented in this figure is significant because it documents this broader suppression of freedoms and helps demonstrate how the dictatorship affected everyday forms of political and cultural expression. Newspapers, magazines, music, photographs, and other cultur-

al materials therefore become essential for understanding not only the institutional history of the dictatorship, but also how Brazilian society experienced, resisted, and preserved the memory of authoritarian repression.



Figure 7. Announcement of Vladimir Herzog's Death by EX Journal

The death of journalist Vladimir Herzog, which occurred on October 25, 1975, during the Brazilian military dictatorship, later reached the international human rights protection system. However, it is legally important to emphasize that Herzog was Brazilian and that the Inter-American Court of Human Rights did not exercise criminal jurisdiction over those responsible for his death. What was submitted to the Court was the international responsibility of the Brazilian State for the failure to adequately investigate, prosecute, and punish those responsible for the journalist's torture and murder.

In its judgment of March 15, 2018, the Court found that the events occurred within a systematic and widespread context of attacks against the civilian population and recognized violations of the rights to judicial guarantees and judicial protection.

Under Brazilian Criminal Law, the general rule concerning territorial jurisdiction is established in Article 5 of the Brazilian Penal Code, according to which Brazilian criminal law applies to crimes committed within Brazilian territory, subject to conventions, treaties, and rules of international law. Article 6, in turn, establishes the territorial criterion for determining the place of the crime, considering the offense to have been committed both where the action or omission occurred and where the result was produced

or should have been produced. The extraterritorial application of Brazilian criminal law establishes circumstances in which Brazilian law may apply to crimes committed abroad. These include crimes that Brazil is obligated to prosecute under a treaty or convention, as well as crimes committed by Brazilian nationals. Under certain conditions, the provision also allows Brazilian law to apply to crimes committed abroad by a foreigner against a Brazilian national.

Therefore, in the Herzog case, the determining factor for the intervention of the Inter-American Court was not the journalist's nationality, but rather the international dimension of the human rights violations and the responsibility of the Brazilian State under the Inter-American human rights system. The internationalization of the case occurred because international human rights protection operates in a complementary manner to domestic jurisdiction, particularly in situations involving the alleged failure to effectively investigate and hold perpetrators accountable at the national level.

The Court also ordered Brazil to resume the appropriate investigation and criminal proceedings in order to identify, prosecute, and, where appropriate, punish those responsible for Herzog's torture and death. Following the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, resulting from the exercise of Original Constituent Power, a new legal order began to take shape in Brazil. Within this process, concepts related to the Judiciary, fundamental rights, and constitutional guarantees gradually acquired new meanings, accompanying the democratic reconstruction of the Brazilian State. The issue of amnesty also gained relevance within this context. Although the Amnesty Law had been enacted in 1979, during the military regime, its provisions were subsequently incorporated into the new constitutional order, with amnesty being reaffirmed by Constitutional Amendment No. 26 of 1985.

This process also contributed to a transformation in the understanding of the legal norm itself. The norm came to be understood not merely as a formal instrument of State authority, but within a constitutional order grounded in human dignity, fundamental rights, citizenship, and the Democratic Rule of Law. This transformation represented not only an institutional change, but also a reconstruction of the meaning of Law after years of authoritarianism. The 1988 Constitution thus inaugurated a new stage in Brazil's legal and democratic experience, in which the protection of fundamental rights became central to the relationship between the State, the individual, and society.

4.3 THE OSCAR EFFECT AND THE EXPANSION OF INTERNATIONAL VISIBILITY

The international trajectory of *I'm Still Here* gained a new dimension through its recognition at the Academy Awards. Before the ceremony, the film had already attracted attention in Brazil and at international film festivals. Its nomination and subsequent victory expanded the reach of the production, allowing the story of Eunice and Rubens Paiva to reach new audiences and generating greater international interest in the period of Brazil's military dictatorship.

This process has significance that extends beyond the cinematic field. The film's international circulation encouraged audiences from different backgrounds to engage with issues related to political repression, forced disappearance, torture, memory, and the pursuit of justice. The experience of the Paiva family thus became an entry point for understanding a period marked by human rights violations in Brazil.

The recognition received at the Oscars can be understood as an amplifier of historical visibility. The award did not initiate the internationalization of the memory of the Brazilian dictatorship; rather, it strengthened a process that had already been developing through the film's participation in festivals, media coverage, and the growing interest of international audiences. As the film gained greater visibility, issues surrounding the dictatorship entered new spaces within cultural and international discussions.

This reception also helped connect the film's narrative to contemporary debates on human rights, memory, and transitional justice. Eunice Paiva's story, initially presented through the experience of a family confronting Rubens Paiva's disappearance, began to engage with broader questions concerning state violence, accountability, and the preservation of historical memory.

In this way, the so-called "Oscar effect" can be understood as an expansion in the circulation of a historical narrative. The film's international recognition increased its ability to reach audiences across different societies and consequently created new spaces for Brazil's experience under the dictatorship to be known, discussed, and connected to international debates on human rights and collective memory. On March 2, 2025, *I'm Still Here* won the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, becoming the first Brazilian film to receive an Oscar.

When discussing the international impact of *I'm Still Here*, it is important to consider the film's historic achievement as the first Brazilian production to win an Academy Award. March 2025 became a significant moment not

only because of the international acclaim surrounding the film, but also because its victory generated different reactions and debates within Brazilian society.

The recognition of the film also brought renewed attention to the historical disputes surrounding Brazil's military dictatorship. While some groups and political actors have characterized narratives about the dictatorship as a form of "brainwashing" or ideological manipulation, the historical experiences represented in the film remain connected to concrete experiences of violence, loss, and the violation of fundamental rights. The story of the Paiva family, in particular, reflects the consequences of political repression through the disappearance of Rubens Paiva and the suffering experienced by those who remained.

Remembering this period therefore involves more than revisiting an event from the past. It involves examining the human consequences of state violence, the restrictions imposed through Institutional Acts, and the transformations that the dictatorship produced in Brazilian society and in the country's constitutional development. The recognition of *I'm Still Here* at the Oscars consequently created another opportunity for these historical experiences to reach international audiences and to stimulate discussions about memory, human rights, transitional justice, and democracy.

V. Conclusion

To conclude this research, it is important to emphasize Ecléa Bosi's understanding that "memory is a rough diamond that needs to be polished by the spirit." From this perspective, memory is not static. It is reconstructed, interpreted, and given new meaning as new generations come into contact with the past.

Remembering experiences of violence involves confronting the losses, rights violations, and consequences that continue to affect society. Addressing these experiences requires recognizing what occurred, listening to those who were silenced, and understanding how the past continues to influence the present.

For this reason, it is necessary to legally listen to a nation rather than restrict it. Brazilian history demonstrates the consequences of periods in which rights were suspended, voices were silenced, and institutions operated within structures of repression. The 1988 Federal Constitution represents a fundamental transformation in this trajectory by establishing fundamen-

tal rights and guarantees and strengthening a democratic order connected to international human rights mechanisms.

It is within this context that *I'm Still Here* becomes significant. The film recovers the family history of Rubens and Eunice Paiva while bringing part of Brazil's collective memory into contemporary public debate. Its national and international reception demonstrates how an individual experience can acquire a broader social dimension through circulation, recognition, and discussion.

March 2025 made this process particularly significant. By becoming the first Brazilian film to win an Academy Award, *I'm Still Here* placed the memory of the military dictatorship within an international space of cultural recognition. The film's reception and the debates surrounding its victory also demonstrate that interpretations of the dictatorship and disputes over how this period should be remembered remain present in Brazilian society.

The film's relevance also extends to human rights. The story of Rubens Paiva raises issues concerning enforced disappearance, torture, state violence, accountability, the right to truth, the right to memory, and transitional justice. Eunice Paiva's trajectory further demonstrates that violations committed against individuals can produce consequences for families and society across generations. Through its international circulation, the film connects this Brazilian experience to broader discussions on human dignity, democracy, and human rights protection.

In this sense, the thesis is consolidated by understanding this history as a cultural heritage of memory. This heritage remains active because the dictatorship continues to influence public debates, institutions, legislation, cultural production, and the ways in which Brazilian society interprets its own history.

I'm Still Here demonstrates this continuity by transforming a family history into a narrative that reaches national and international audiences. Its trajectory illustrates how cinema can transmit historical memory across generations and borders, allowing experiences that were once confined to the private sphere to become part of broader public discussions.

This study, however, has some limitations. Its analysis is primarily concerned with Western media coverage, which limits the extent to which its findings can represent the diversity of international perspectives on *I'm Still Here*. In addition, the relatively short temporal window examined makes it difficult to determine whether the changes in international media attention and framing represent a lasting transformation or a temporary response to

the film's release and international recognition. These limitations indicate the need for further research involving a broader range of countries, media systems, and longer periods of analysis.

The findings also have practical and policy implications. The international circulation of *I'm Still Here* demonstrates the potential of cinema and other cultural productions to contribute to historical memory, human rights education, and public discussions about state violence and democratic institutions. Supporting cultural initiatives that address historical violations, preserving access to historical records, and strengthening educational policies concerning memory and human rights can contribute to preventing the normalization or denial of authoritarian violence.

Thus, understanding Brazilian history requires recognizing that the past remains relevant through memory, institutional responsibility, and society's continued effort to interpret its own experiences. Memory does not close history; it preserves the possibility of understanding and questioning it. *I'm Still Here* demonstrates that the legacy of the dictatorship remains present and that the circulation of this history can contribute to the defense of memory, human rights, democracy, and dignity.

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