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City of God and *Elite Squad*: From Fatalistic Violence to Agency

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<center>***City of God*** **and** ***Elite Squad***: From Fatalistic Violence to Agency</center>

Introduction

About 45 million people live in *favelas* (slums) in Brazilian cities. This amount

represents 26.9% of Brazil's urban population, according to UN data from 2009[1] (125). In Rio de

Janeiro, the binary asphalt and hill demarcates the cityscape. The distinction is not only in terms

of geography but also a sign of social segregation. In Brazil, *morro* (hill) has become perceived

as a derogatory term because these lands shelter favelas*:* precarious housing on unpaved

pathways, overcrowded places stigmatized as shelter for the poor and criminals.

By taking into account the reality of favelas in Brazil, the goal of this essay is to trace the

ways in which these urban spaces are depicted in cinema. The discussion analyzes the acclaimed

Brazilian films like *City of God*[2] (2002) and *Elite Squad*[3] (2007) because these two works have

contributed to putting Rio's favelas into the international spotlight*.* This essay argues that these

two films might be read with an eye toward the tension between fatalistic violence and agency.

The happy endings of both stories depend on the successful escape from the favelas of their

narrators, Rocket (in *City of God*) and Captain Nascimento (in *Elite Squad*), yet their ways out

are associated with two deaths, Li'l Zé's and Neto's, respectively. The analysis demonstrates

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[1] As favelas are a matter of political interest, it is worth noting that Brazil's government data

diverges significantly from United Nations' statistics. The 2010 Population Census accounts that

11.4 million people live in subnormal agglomerates such as favelas in Brazil (IBGE).

[2] The original title in Portuguese is *Cidade de Deus.*

[3] *Tropa de Elite*, in the Portuguese film's title.

how *City of God* and *Elite Squad* similarly brand favelas in terms of violence and perpetuate the image that these are not good places to live in or go to, although the implicit agency in their discourses also serves as a wake-up call for social change.

The Favela in Brazilian Cinema

Favelas are not a Brazilian exclusivity, and neither is the stigma attached to them. In *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis draws attention to the massive creation of slums around the world as a result of rapid urbanization associated with the incapacity of cities to sustain their growth (16-17). He states that "only the slum remains as a fully franchised solution to the problem of warehousing this century's surplus humanity" (200-201). The precarious infrastructure of living in favelas has added new meanings to these places as emblems of economic inequality. Baker points out that "[r]epresentations of the spatial divisions of cities are symbolic fault-lines of the social relations by which people come to think about the world through the built environment" (422). In fact, Brazilian favelas, thought of in terms of poverty and crime, become what Vieira calls "cityscapes of exclusion" (xiii). Taking into account that "[h]ow we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them" (Dyer 1), *City of God* and *Elite Squad* display violence to label favelas as dangerous spaces, as if almost justifying their marginalization.

The theme of the favela has a long tradition in Brazilian cinema. Key films during the *Cinema Novo*[4] movement in the 1950s and 1960s were located in places like the *sertão* (arid backlands) and the favelas (Bentes 121). Film researcher Ivana Bentes clarifies the interest: "They are both real and symbolic lands in crisis, where desperate or rebellious characters live or wander; they are signs of a revolution to come or of a failed modernity" (121). Indeed, these

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[4] New Cinema, in a literal translation.

settings seem suitable for a movement that has the revolutionary goal of "ultimately [making] the public aware of its own misery," as claimed by *Cinema Novo*'s most influential filmmaker, Glauber Rocha, in his celebrated manifesto *An Esthetics of Hunger* (71). After decades of crisis, the revival of the cinema industry in Brazil in the 1990s also brought back the *sertão* and favelas as settings of important films but under "different styles and approaches" (Bentes 122). As Beatriz Jaguaribe addresses (112), critics have used the expression "cosmetics of hunger" in opposition to Rocha's "aesthetics of hunger" to refer to films like *City of God*, which they regard as more oriented to an American tradition of entertainment rather than Brazil's social transformation.

City of God and *Elite Squad*

City of God and *Elite Squad* are both transnational and regionally-specific films. Their concerns of violence and social segregation speak beyond Brazil's boundaries. However, both films were clearly born out of an interest in documenting Brazil. In an interview, *City of God*'s director Fernando Meirelles[5] confirms: "Brazil needs to know itself. This was my motivation for this film.…The theme of urban exclusion and its violence is the forefront of Brazil's agenda [my translation]" (quoted in Moretz-Sohn). As for *Elite Squad*, the initial project of the director José Padilha[6] was to make a documentary about the *BOPE*[7], which is the elite unit of the Rio de

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[5] Meirelles was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director in 2004 for his work in *City of God*. He is also the director of films like *Maids* (2011), *The Constant Gardener* (2005) and *Blindness* (2008).

[6] *Elite Squad* is Padilha's first fictional film. His works include the documentary *Bus 174* (2002) and *Elite Squad: The Enemy Within* (a 2010 sequel of *Elite Squad*).

Janeiro Military Police, but his plan turned out to be unviable because "sincere cops were not willing to talk in front of the cameras, afraid of retaliations [my translation]" (Padilha quoted in Arantes). Both *City of God* and *Elite Squad* are not only inspired by real events but they also use voiceovers to give a sense of documentary: their fictional narrators— Rocket and Captain Nascimento, respectively—translate the world of Rio's favelas to the spectators while they recount their attempts to escape from these places.

City of God

City of God traces the evolution of crime and violence in a favela of the same name. It goes from amateur hoods in the 1960s to the "professionalization" of the drug business in the 1970s and, finally, to a gang war that transformed the favela into a no-go area. The film is based on the 1997 novel *City of God* by Paulo Lins, a native of the same favela. Rocket, the film's narrator, is a *favelado*[8] who dreams of becoming a professional photographer and leaving the favela's cycle of violence. As Rocket recalls, people went to the City of God "hoping to find Paradise [my translation]," but faced a reality shock: "The bigwigs in government did not joke around. Homeless? Off to City of God. There was no electricity, paved streets or transportation. But for the rich and powerful, our problems didn't matter. City of God was too far removed from picture postcards of Rio de Janeiro." In the 1980s, the bloody war between two gangs transformed life in the favela, according to Rocket's own words, into a "hell." That was the moment in which he realized he had to get out of the favela. Throughout the film, Rocket's discourse of exclusion and violence establishes the negative view of favela, but his ultimate

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[7] Acronym in Portuguese for *Batalhão de Operações Especiais* (Special Operations Squad, in English).

[8] Portuguese term for slum dweller.

decision of leaving also raises the question: do favelados even have this option? The answer then becomes a matter of agency, the "socially determined capability to act and make a difference" (Barker 496).

City of God's opening scene draws attention to Rocket's dilemma through the allegory of a runaway chicken. In a scene that is already a demonstration of violence, the film starts showing knives being sharpened in preparation for the slaughter of chickens. One of the chickens escapes and is chased by gangsters and their guns. At the same time, Rocket discusses his options: "A photograph could change my life, but in the City of God, if you run away, they get you, and if you stay, they get you too[9]. It has been that way since I was a kid." For Jennie Carlsten, the chicken's dilemma "illustrates the film's fatalism, a fatalism that is not only ascribed to Rocket, but impressed upon the viewer throughout the film." In fact, the representation of favela as a bad place supports the impression that favelados do not have opportunities. Barker explains that, "because agency is socially and differentially produced, some actors have more domains of action than others. Those persons whose acculturation has led them to be highly educated in a formal sense, or who have accrued wealth, may have more options for action than others" (241). *City of God* shows that Rocket does have options. He even flirts with armed robbery, but in the end he does not follow the criminal path. His happy ending, thanks to the sale of one of his photographs, also reinforces the favela as a place for agency. After all, even the runaway chicken has been forgotten in the middle of other events in the story.

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[9] Rocket uses a Brazilian expression: *Se correr o bicho pega, se ficar o bicho come*. The literal translation from Portuguese into English is "if you run away, the animal catches you; if you stay, the animal eats you."

The film's fatalism is more related to the fact that Rocket's ticket out from the violence of City of God comes at the cost of the same violence that he is running away from. Rocket obtains an internship in a newspaper after taking the picture of Li'l Zé's corpse. Marta Peixoto notes: "Photographic images of the worst that the favela has to offer become his ticket for getting out of it" (173). Russell Kilborun argues that *City of God* "reinforces the irony that the only escape from the favela—and thus the cycle of violence—is death," as all three sections of the story end with the death of a major character (86). Rocket's favela compatriots, Shaggy and Goose in the 1960s followed by Benny in the 1970s, were all leaving the slum when they were shot dead and Li'l Zé's murder near the end of the film is what gives Rocket a life-changing opportunity.

Elite Squad

The *Elite Squad* also represents the favela as a violent place from where Captain Nascimento, the film's narrator, needs to escape. The film depicts the war against crime in Rio's favelas based on the 2006 book *Elite Troop* written by the sociologist Luiz Eduardo Soares and former BOPE captains André Batista and Rodrigo Pimentel. *Elite Squad*'s Captain Nascimento does not live in a favela like *City of God*'s Rocket, but these places are also a main part of his life as the leader of BOPE's alpha team. The squad was trusted with Operation Holiness in 1997, a mission to clean up a favela near the house of Rio's archbishop because the Pope planned to stay there while visitng the city. Perpetuating a derogatory image of favela, Nascimento comments: "No politician wants the Pope to get shot in their city. If the Pope wants to stay near the favela, the governor would not take the risk of having a gunshot reach His Holiness. He would call the BOPE [my translation]."

Like *City of God*, *Elite Squad*'s opening scene is also symbolic. The film starts with images of a *baile funk* (a popular party in Rio), and background music lyrics that directly address the stigma attached to favelas:

> My Brazil is a tropical country, the land of funk, the land of the Carnival,
>
> And my Rio de Janeiro is its postcard
>
> But I am going to talk about a national problem
>
> Indeed, in this nation everyone says that favela is dangerous, a bad place to live in
>
> The favela is much criticized by the whole society
>
> But there is violence everywhere in the city
>
> Faith in God, DJ[10].

Next, Captain Nascimento, who guides the audience through the world of favelas, informs in voiceover: "My city has over 700 favelas. Most of them dominated by drug dealers, armed to the teeth." As a consequence, the film depicts the favela as an undesirable place from the beginning. The favela's depreciatory view is also perceived through Nascimento's urge to find a successor to lead his BOPE team so that he no longer has to visit the favelas. Nascimento is pressed by his pregnant wife, who complaints about his dangerous job: "I am always waiting for you then I get nervous, the baby feels it.…If I knew that you would not leave, I would not have gotten

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[10] From the Portuguese: "O meu Brasil é um país tropical, a terra do funk, a terra do Carnaval / Mas o meu Rio de Janeiro é um cartão postal / Mas eu vou falar de um problema nacional / Neste país todo mundo sabe falar que favela é perigosa, lugar ruim de se morar / Mas ela é muito criticada por toda a sociedade / Mas existe violência em todo o canto da cidade / Fé em Deus, DJ."

pregnant." In other words, going to favelas becomes something so noxious that it is destroying Nascimento's family.

Comparable to Rocket in *City of God*, Captain Nascimento's ticket out of the favela in *Elite Squad* is also found in a killing. Neto, a fellow member of the BOPE, was trapped and shot in the back by a drug lord who thought that he was in fact shooting Neto's friend, Matias. The fatality changes Matias, who until then has been divided between becoming a police officer or a lawyer. In voiceover, Nascimento confesses that he clearly took advantage of the situation: "Neto's death was a tragedy for Matias. They had been friends since they were little kids. I realized that I could use his pain to complete my mission." By revenging his friend's death and becoming what Nascimento regards as a "true cop," Matias turns into a perfect successor. Therefore, Nascimento could stop going to the war in Rio's favelas.

Constructing the Favela

Both *City of God* and *Elite Squad* socially construct favelas in terms of violence and then establish their spatial segregation. In *City of God*, journalists are surprised that Rocket took pictures of Li'l Zé in the favela because "no photographer has ever been able to go in there." Rocket achieves a career opportunity for having access to a place where outsiders do not go. In *Elite Squad*, the spatial demarcation is also evident. When Matias borrows Neto's car to go to the favela Morro dos Prazeres to meet some university classmates, Neto reacts: "Are you crazy? What are you going to do in the favela?" Neto emphasizes: "You are a cop. You can't go to the favela. They will kill you."

If *City of God* and *Elite Squad* similarly show favelas as undesirable places where outsiders do not go and insiders want to leave, it is worth wondering why tourism in favelas is so popular. Beatriz Freire-Medeiros suggests:

[T]he favela becomes capable of offering international visitors a most

interesting package: controlled risk combined with a deep sense of

adventure, the opportunity of acting as a concerned citizen (by supposedly

contributing to the economic development of a poor area) and, no less

important, a beautiful view of the city captured from above. (22)

Freire-Medeiros observes a similarity between poverty tourism and films depicting places of

poverty: both cause the same type of reaction, either awareness or voyeurism (29). Brazilians

may see the reading of *City of God* and *Elite Squad* as opportunities to learn more about places

that have much to say about their culture but where they do not have transit. This rejects the idea

of a mere voyeurism, because slum narratives highlight the need for social change. Jaguaribe is

correct: "It is the debate surrounding social exclusion, urban violence and security measures as

exemplified by the conflicts of the drug trade in favelas that are encouraging a plurality of voices

to emerge and discuss the outcome of Brazilian society" (117).

Although the violence employed in both *City of God* and *Elite Squad* disseminates a

negative view of favelas, this also prompts a constructive debate about agency. To construct a

vision of resistance, it is necessary to acknowledge the favela first. This is the significance of

putting representations of favelas in the spotlight. O'Reagan makes a good point: "The social

power of the cultural critic may be difficult to mobilize; but such figures may shape the public

agenda in ways that provide policy with valuable resources and arguments" (quoted in Baker

487). For this reason, I consider that the violence is not used in vain in these films because it

provides means to make the favela visible. According to Gerd Bayer, violence is aestheticized in

postcolonial films due to "aims to raise awareness for the political circumstances of those

suffering under the reality of violence" (44). Awareness is, indeed, crucial for social change.

Otherwise, Davis points out, "[a]s the Third World middle classes increasingly bunker themselves in their suburban theme parks and electrified 'security villages,' they lose moral and cultural insight into the urban badlands they have left behind" (202). This is why we need even more stories of favelas on screen: turning our backs on these landscapes will not solve the violence of economic inequalities, crime and segregation; on the contrary, it will only produce more fear of these urban spaces.

Conclusion

City of God and *Elite Squad* act as political texts that clearly engage in cultural criticism. These films are all about agency, as is the postcolonial project. Through the eyes of Rocket and Captain Nascimento, *City of God* and *Elite Squad* present the point of view of the bottom. The narrators of the films not only use words like "hell" and "war" to label favelas but are also urged to leave these urban places, attitudes that reinforce a negative view of favelas. Rocket's and Captain Nascimento's happy endings—in other words, their escape from the favela cycle—are direct results of crimes: Li'l Zé's death gives Rocket a picture that guarantees him an internship, and Neto's death gives Nascimento the perfect substitute. The fatalistic violence is then perpetuated within these films, but there is also room for agency. Cinematographic works like these two are crucial because they make Brazilians and foreign audiences rethink their understanding and views of favelas. Without doubt, *City of God* and *Elite Squad* have become manifestos for social change in Brazil.

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