

O MORRO (THE HILL): Problems in Representation of the Favela Daniel Perlin

In recent years, the favela ¹ has come to the fore as a central force in the discourses of film, architecture and urbanism. The purpose of this essay is to look critically at the plane of representation of the favela within Brazilian cinema to help unpack local specificities and to situate them within local, national and international media and social contexts. The question posed is: “Who is benefitting from the new export economy of the contemporary image of the favela.”

For films such as *City of God* (Katia Lund and Fernando Mierelles co-directors (2001)), for theorists such as Mike Davis ² and architects like Rem Koolhaas, ³ the distance between the favela and shantytown, from Lagos to Rio de Janeiro, collapses. This gaze from afar, at times specular, often exoticizing, appears designed for the international media-spheres. Slums represent both the harsh realities of everyday life reproduced by capitalism’s combined and uneven development in the era of expanding multinational and transnational industries, and as a symbol of the future of the global city. One byproduct of this export economy is the reduction of the spectacle of the favela to the fungible products flattening difference between forms and locations. In these cases, the specificities of social and economic conditions of individual Brazilian favelas are glossed in favor of statistics, dramatic headlines, and generalizations. This tendency towards generality is a pitfall that can only lead to misunderstanding, both between borders and intra-nationally.

Within the tradition of Brazilian cinema, there has been a long and fruitful struggle to find the effective strategies and tactics in representation of the favela. In *Cinco Vezes Favela* (Favela Five (1962)), produced by the Centers for Popular Culture of the National Students’ Union, we see narrative perspectives of five of the greatest Cinema Novo filmmakers working collectively to produce once a populist, and yet simultaneously radical, approach towards the relationships between practice and Brazilian life. Split into five short films, each episode blurs the formal divisions between narrative and documentary film, utilizing hand held camera-work and non-professional actors. It portrays the favela as a central narrative character, suggesting diverse, at times didactic, strategies of representation of the social conditions that create and are created by the favela.

The formal and narrative debate spurred by Cinema Novo and *Five Times Favela* acted as a catalyst for the director Glauber Rocha’s 1965 manifesto *Estética de Fome* (Aesthetic of Hunger).⁴ In this seminal text, Rocha called for a radical anti-imperialist Latin American style, as “only a cul-

¹ The favela is often called *o morro*, which means hill. One popular claim is that favela is a leaf that grows on a mountainside, and early residents in Rio used it as a geographic marker.

² *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis, Verso, 2006

³ “See Harvard Project on the City” in *Mutations*, Actar, 2001 and *Content*, Taschen, 2004, both by Koolhaas et. al

⁴ Report on Cinema Latino-Americano in Geneva, Switzerland, 1965. His post-colonial critiques led him to state of his own work that ‘The feast of metaphors, allegories and symbols is no carnival of subjectivity; it is the refusal to analyze rationally a reality that has been stifled by European culture and American imperialism. I am making films that resist the classification of colonial anthropology...’ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) 08/27/1981

hunger, looking at its own structure, can rise above itself, qualitatively speaking: it's the manifestation of cultural hunger and violence." His films such as *Antonio das Mortes*, *Terra em* and *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* formed an aggressive, violent, yet challenging filmic strategy that remained pervasive from the 1960s and through the mid 1970's in avant-garde Brazilian cinema. Rocha, as well as directors such as Joaquim Pedro de Andrade (*Macunaíma* (1969)), Ruy Guerra (*Fuzis* (1964)) and others carved out complex spaces for a national discourse focused on migration, Brazilian messianism and the audio-visual language of struggle.

These films were exemplified by 16mm hand-held camerawork, challenging national subject-Eisensteinian montage, complex dialogue, and a call to fight the "the paternalism of the EU against the Third World." Like Godard and the French New Wave, these directors were a challenging and refiguring cinematic tropes, turning their gaze inwards towards self-reflexive cinema. However, critically, their work was for the creation of a Latin cinema, specifically, serving to question constitutive features of the nation-state and Brazilian citizen.

From the mid 1970's to the mid 1990's Brazil's film and cultural production was stifled, though means destroyed, by 25 years of military dictatorship and 10 years of hyperinflation. In the first half of the 1990's, feature film production had dropped into the teens. However, between 1995 and 2000 features were produced, partly due to the audiovisual law (*Lei do audiovisual*), a government incentive created to stimulate national cultural production. Since the mid 1990's, Brazilian film has seen a large increase in both production and audience attendance. Many filmmakers and critics have taken advantage of this explosion of attention and have focused works and critiques on the complex problems of radical inequality of race, class, gender, and geographies within Brazil.

Following this drive towards social transformation, Brazilian documentary has become a powerful force within the national media-sphere. When watching *Noticias de Uma Guerra Particular* (News from a Personal War) (1999), directed by João Salles and Katia Lund, the resounding themes of corrupt subject poverty and violence overshadow much of the film, and the sensation one is left with is a combination of hopeful hopelessness and shock. This devastating examination of Rio de Janeiro favelas, specifically the narco-traffic economy and the hidden war fought by heavily armed young men, often corrupt police, set off a flurry of debate and nearly landed the directors in jail. Often considered the inspiration for *City of God*, this documentary pries at the large gaps and fissures between narrative film and documentary within Brazilian cinema. After experiencing the stark and frank nature of this film, one wonders if the pressures and influences of contemporary narrative film budgets beg a certain spectacle that documentary can avoid. *Noticias* represents a watershed in documentary film in Brazil; brazen and sensitive, it's 54 minutes helped bring the word "war" out from the hills into a popular debate.

But what then, drives this shift, from the self-reflexive, critical gaze of the 1960's "Aesthetic of Hunger" to the spectacle-driven style of *City of Gods*?

The film critic Ivana Bentes has coined a phrase that may apply to the new condition of the favela popular discourse: she has stated that *City of Gods* transformed the "Aesthetic of Hunger" into a "Cosmetic of Hunger."⁵ This shift, it seems to me, can be seen in new generation of films, such as *City of Gods*, *Amores Perros*, *Favela Rising* and others, and are typified by hyperviolence, MTV-style

⁵ "Interseções: Revista de Estudos interdisciplinares" Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências Sociais –UERJ ANO 5 número 1 – 2003 pg. 217-237. Rio de Janeiro. 2003

and colorization, Hollywood sound design, and a paternalist approach towards both race and p Furthermore, *City of God* in particular takes an isolated view of the location of the favela with socio-geography of the city, cutting off the resident from the “asphalt”, relegating the action of t almost exclusively to the favela itself. For Bentes, the formal moves towards high production valu a fetishization of the exotic dweller has shifted the plane of representation of the favela fr national “aesthetic of hunger” towards this glossy, international steady-cam driven “cosmetic of h The results are films and media produced not only for a specific national debate, but also international market. And the product is selling.

The question again arises: Who is benefitting from this new national-cultural product? Is the fav product yet another example of an export economy destined for exploitation by the multir corporate interests of the media oligopolies?

Partially in response to these questions, and to the spectacular nature of *City of God*, the B media giant Globo created the 4 season television program *Cidade dos Homens* (City of Men)(21 By focusing on the specifics of one favela, the *morro do Cabuçu* in Rio de Janeiro, the p television series scratched and dug at the superifice of the general. This series, viewed by more t million Brazilians, formally and narratively challenged simplistic readings of favelas as inherently corrupt and the home of the “Other,” wielding instead the weapons of the camera and sound rec capture pieces of the everyday struggles of individuals within the favelas *and* on the “asphalt” and São Paulo. *City of Men* was directed by numerous directors including Lund, Mierelles, a writer Paulo Lins from *City of Gods*, and approaches diverse narratives within Rio’s favelas s race, crime, poverty, pregnancy, baile funk, drug traffic, sex, corruption, humor and love from c and at times problematic angles, consistently emphasizing the struggle of the two inc protagonists who often face insurmountable odds.

We see this tendency towards representation of the individual narrative as a trend within the documentary as well. *Ônibus 174* (Bus 174 (2002)) follows and unpacks the life of San Nascimento, a former street child, as he holds a bus hostage in the wealthy southern zone of Ri film’s strength stems from the story of the individual, Sandro, who, out of frustration and despe tries to attack head-on the corrupt hegemonies that overdetermine everyday politics in the government and media within Rio and Brazil. In a sense, the true power of the film resides relentless and responsible investigative force of its directors José Padilha and Felipe Lacerd simultaneously articulate the radical specificity of the life of Sandro, while situating his case wit class, race and power struggles in Rio de Janeiro and Brazil. Ultimately, it attempts to demys media spectacle that surrounds is character, and produces a touching and poignant portrait marginalized individual in Rio.

Bus 174 forms part of a new constellation of production that has arisen since 2001. Partly response to the spectacular style of *City of Gods*, recent tactics for such productions have focu the specific local challenges of the individual in relation to the complex webs of relations that con urban cultures in Rio, São Paulo and other Brazilian cities.

One such approach I will call the “positive tactic”. One example is the work of Hermano Vian Regina Casé, whose television program *Central de Periferia* (Center of the Periphery) was produ Globo in 2007. This globe trotting program features reports on local, progressive approaches t the global slum, dedicating each episode to a new city. The show is humorous and warm, travelir Haiti to Mexico to Brazil and beyond, looking to practical, local solutions to global issues. One e begins with Mike Davis being interviewed for an overview of the status of the global slum. features a community in Niteroi where all the children know the names of the police that patrol a

in the Favela. There, violent crime has been nearly eliminated, and the show claims that the residents are considered “normal citizens” like those who live on the asphalt streets.

This particular and positive approach towards reportage can also be seen in the work of the documentary filmmaker Eduardo Coutinho, whose *Santo Forte* can be regarded as one of the most significant documents of favela life in Rio produced in the past 20 years. This feature film focuses not on popular subjects of corruption, violence and drug dealing, but on the religious views of the residents of the favela. We are given a unique, personalized and self-reflexive view of residents’ pride in their homes, in their communities and their beliefs.

Another tactic, extending as counterpoint from the spectacular style, can be called “the individualistic.” Like Sandro, from *Bus 174*, narrative films such as Jose Padilha’s *Tropa de Elite* (*Elite* (2007)) focus on an individual’s struggle to rise above his current socio-economic condition. In contrast to the cues from the quasi-apocalyptic tone that predominates in the “cosmetic of hunger,” this film offers a close, often intimate, portraits of the unique challenges of the contemporary Brazilian urban reality. *Tropa de Elite* illuminates and humanizes the special police force in Rio dedicated to the favela. Formally, Lula Carvalho’s camerawork refigures many of the hyperstylized techniques found in *City of Gods*, with frank, handheld work leaning more towards documentary than a color-treated fast MTM. Driven by testimonials of an ex-BOPE officer, we can see flickers of hope provided by speaking the truth to power.

In a sense, the two tactics, the positive and the individualistic, attempt to address the statistics that so often overshadow even remote glimmers of hope. Instead, these tactics emphasize contemporary conditions and offer a glimmer of possibility to rise above the nearly impossible racial and economic odds that predominate in Brazilian society. They unpack these generalizations by maintaining a direct and local approach in tackling the forces that reproduce such combined and uneven development. These tactics may be seen in an attempt to humanize and articulate the local complexities in specific favelas, disabling many of the reductive tendencies found in such texts as *City of Slums*. In this sense, they add greater urgency to the following national census data:

80% of Brazil’s 186 million residents live in urban areas. 28.5% of the urban population (15.3 million people nationwide) lacks full access to public water, sewage, and garbage collection.

The top 10% of the population earns 50 percent of the national income. 34% live below the poverty line. It is estimated that 20% of Brazilians currently live in favelas,

According to a 2007 United Nations Report on drugs and crime, narco-traffic in Brazil is responsible for employing at least 20,000 people. Most are minors between the ages of 16 and 25, making between US\$ 300 and US\$ 500 dollars monthly.

Rio de Janeiro is one of the wealthiest states of Brazil. It’s main income from oil represents billions of dollars yearly. Less than 1% of this money is invested in social programs.⁶

With these numbers in mind, the material benefits of the *favela-as-product* takes on a new light. Global fascination has produced a number of new export products: *Favela-as-product* has paved the way for a fetishization of its “informal” architecture, favela-tourism,⁷ the international craze of bai

⁶ Brazil's Institute of Applied Economic Research (Ipea), from agencia brazil report, <http://www.brazzilmag.com/content/view/2641/49/>

⁷ See ReVista, Harvard Review of Latin America: Tourism in the Americas Development Culture and Identity, Winter 2002

music, favela filmmaking industries and the creation of countless books, magazines and websites: then, can this *favela-as-product* avoid the pitfalls of multinational exploitation? It seems to me avoid the reproduction of a “cosmetic of hunger”, a case-by-case critical examination of each product is needed, perhaps looking towards the new positive and individual tactics as cons features of a new national strategy of representation.

Clearly, as Brazilian cinema continues to grow its narratives continue to directly negotiate the sw and generalizing statistics of the UN and the North. Working against the grain of the overwh power of this data, some contemporary Brazilian films are focusing their lenses upon the struggl triumphs of the individual and local communities of the ever-expanding favelas. There is a lon ahead towards transforming the extreme social and economic disparity between the wealthy ar both within Brazil around the world. However, it seems clear that we can certainly expect ne fresh approaches of representation of the favela to come from Brazil.

While supporting this trajectory of representation, I wonder, who is actually benefitting from e these works? While there certainly is no simple answer to this question, it seems that a critical could help shift production from a “cosmetic of hunger” to a new critical aesthetic of the particular favelas expand both their influence and size.