

AN ETHIC OF THE ESTHETIC: RACIAL REPRESENTATION IN BRAZILIAN CINEMA TODAY

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Described in the *New York Times* as an “irresistible [. . .] chronicle of crime,” the Academy Award nominated film *Cidade de Deus* [City of God] illuminated the interrelationship of poverty and crime in Brazil’s *favelas* (slums). Conditions there have led inevitably to crime—especially drug trafficking—giving rise to a growing army of dispossessed, among them many black and mixed-race citizens.¹ *City of God* (dir. Fernando de Meirelles, 2002), which was based on Paulo Lins’ novel, reflects a growing tendency in the Brazilian cultural scene: the representation of contemporary urban violence. Literature, cinema, and popular music—especially hip-hop—have been used as vehicles to reproduce Brazilian social realities and anxieties. The residents of poor communities, however, have been voicing an acute criticism of the new cinematic representations, which seek to promote social denunciation, but instead help to construct stereotyped perceptions of Afro-Brazilians.

In this paper, I compare and contrast films that (re)present the *favela* and its inhabitants (most of them black and poor), in order to question the dichotomy of race and crime. I propose that movies such as *Uma Onda no Ar* [The Air Wave] (dir. Helvécio Raton, 2002) and *De Passagem* [Passing By] (dir. Ricardo Elias, 2003) endeavor to build a more sensitive, and yet critical, perspective on these communities and their lived experiences. My main question, therefore, rests on determining whether there is an ethic in the esthetic of the diverse cinematic representations that forge the several discourses on the dichotomy of race and class in Brazilian society. First, I discuss the several controversies Meirelles’s *City of God* generated among Brazilian intellectuals, hip-hop artists, and the community itself regarding reinforcing stereotypical images of poor blacks. From inaugurating an “esthetic of violence” that does not reflect upon Brazil’s unequal social and economic structures, to stigmatizing the poor community’s social spaces, the movie ignited debates on the ideological nature of film-making, underscoring the symbolic power struggles among different agents in Brazilian society. Second, I compare and contrast *City of God* and *The Air Wave*, analyzing their esthetic strategies vis-à-vis the telling of analogous tales: the fictional representation of true-life stories in the *favela*. Finally, I study *Passing By* as a representational alternative to both *City of God* and *The Air Wave*. *Passing By* is a fictional film that entraps the viewer in the intricacies of race and class, creating a poignant plot in which parallel narratives of past and present intersect to ultimately promote reconciliation (with one’s social origin) and acceptance (of one’s identity).²

An Ethic of the Esthetic? Or the Challenges of Representing Poverty

The response to *City of God* immediately after its release was unprecedented in Brazilian cinema. More than 130,000 people saw the movie on the first weekend of exhibition, and it quickly became the fifth biggest box-office hit ever in national cinema. Such numbers are astonishing if one considers that cinema is far from being a popular entertainment in Brazil: the high price of a ticket (around R\$15.00, US\$7.50) makes cinema a recreation for the middle and upper classes. Internationally, *City of God* was also embraced with enthusiasm by the critics and the general public. Released in the United States and Great Britain in 2003, it achieved the third highest box-office receipts among foreign productions in England and received nominations for best foreign film in both the American Golden Globes and the Academy Awards. More than national and international revenue and regard, however, the movie spawned extraordinary debate in the Brazilian media and among intellectual circles about the representation of the *favelas* and their inhabitants.

Ivana Bentes, a professor of cinema at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, helped to foment the controversy surrounding the movie in coining the term “cosmetic of hunger,” in opposition to Glauber Rocha’s revolutionary “esthetic of hunger.” To Bentes, Brazilian cinema, especially the *Cinema Novo* movement, crystallized the *sertão* (the Brazilian backlands) and the *favela* as real and symbolic territories where primitive rebels and revolutionary characters emerged to disrupt and de-stabilize the social and political powers. Brazilian cinema of the 1990s, however, changed this radical discourse, transforming the *sertão* and the *favela* into “exotic territories” where characters no longer carry a revolutionary symbolism or discourse (“Da estética à cosmética da fome” 2).³

According to Bentes, Brazilian cinema today presents a superficial political perspective when compared to Glauber Rocha’s esthetically and politically radical ideas delineated in “An Esthetic of Hunger.” This vanguard manifesto, released by Rocha in 1965, gave hunger and poverty a positive and transformative connotation, forging a political discourse and a radical esthetic that expressed all the brutality of poverty. Rocha perceived hunger not only as an alarming symptom, but as the essence of Latin American society: “our originality is our hunger and our greatest misery is that this hunger is felt but not intellectually understood” (“An Esthetic of Hunger” 70). Ultimately, Rocha viewed violence as “a noble cultural manifestation of hunger,” a revolutionary strategy of action and transformation of the social conditions of the oppressed (70). The esthetic of hunger not only influenced the 1960s *Cinema Novo* movement, but also left an indelible mark on Third World Cinema that remains to this day.

Recovering Glauber Rocha’s notions, Ivana Bentes underlines the need for an intersection between ethic and esthetic in 1990s Brazilian cinema. To Bentes, the ethical question for Brazilian cinema today is how to represent the excluded without producing a stereotyped perception of the subaltern. And yet, esthetically, Bentes poses the following question: how can one create a new and meaningful mode of representation of poverty? (“Da estética à cosmética da fome” 2). Most important

to Bentes, Glauber inaugurated a true “pedagogy of violence,” of which the most pressing question was how to surpass social alienation and passivity and engage into resistance and struggle (“Terra de fome e sonho” 5).

Recent cinematic productions have come up short on responding positively to these problems, and *City of God* is the epitome of the new tendency Bentes names the “cosmetic of hunger.” In the movie, the esthetic of violence is reduced to video-clip action. The fast paced-narrative better relates to a “popular international cinema” or “a globalized cinema,” in which the formula for success would be developing local, historical, or traditional themes, but using an “international esthetic” (“Da estética à cosmética da fome” 5).

Cléber Eduardo, another cinema critic, also notes that in *City of God* the sociological synthesis of the evolution of violence in the *favela* breaks into a series of fragmented clips. Social inequality, therefore, emerges detached from any political and historical context—there is no reference to the military regime and the “economic miracle” that excluded whole populations from mainstream society. Whereas in the *Cinema Novo* the oppressed resisted and reacted, in *City of God* he is the object of curiosity, the “Other,” a “savage foreigner” (2).

In an open letter to the media, the popular Afro-Brazilian rapper MV Bill, a resident of the City of God, accused the directors of stigmatizing his community, promoting stereotypes of blacks, and exploiting children’s images. “They stereotyped our people and did not give us anything in return,” MV Bill charged. “If someday, someone transforms your life into a huge circus, demand your right to answer” (1-2). Cidade de Deus, the community, has, therefore, become a site of symbolic struggle, where different agents dispute the right over (re)defining its social meanings. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, “symbolic power is a power of constructing reality. [. . .] Symbols are the instruments *par excellence* of ‘social integration’: as instruments of knowledge and communication [. . .], they make it possible for there to be a *consensus* on the meaning of the social world, a consensus which contributes fundamentally to the reproduction of the social order” (*Language and Symbolic Power* 166, emphasis in the original). Symbolic power perpetrates symbolic violence, guaranteeing the dominance of one agent over another, and transforming, therefore, the subject into a mere (voiceless) object. Symbolic power, however, is not limited to the realm of the symbolic, but rather it produces an impact in concrete reality. In a 2003 interview with one of the major newspapers of São Paulo, the *Folha de São Paulo*, the inhabitants of the Cidade de Deus protested against the discrimination the movie generated. A local community leader, Jorge Vilela, affirmed that many youngsters who applied for a job were rejected after revealing they lived in the *favela*. Paulo, a college student, denounced the growth of racial profiling and repression by police forces. To the occupants, by focusing on drug dealers and thieves, the movie generalized the idea that all of the community’s inhabitants are potential criminals. Even those who enjoyed the movie said *City of God* provided an inadequate representation of the place where they live (Mena).

Still, symbolic power “is a power that can be exercised only if it is *recognized*, that is misrecognized as arbitrary” (Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* 170; emphasis in the original). In other words, it depends upon the relationship between “those who exercise power and those who submit to it” (170). By refusing to submit to dominant symbolic systems, marginalized populations are highlighting the complexities of race and class in Brazilian society: their social discourses resist the imposed representations and help to produce new (and more hopeful) meanings regarding poverty and exclusion.

In fact, the process of (re)creating symbolic meanings represents an updated, and yet radical, strategy of political action that contains a double movement of resisting dominant symbolic systems and producing the community’s collective identities. The construction of collective identities is crucial in order to orient social and political operations, since actors’ strategies are based on the intricate network of relationships that involves collective action (Escobar 73). Since identity formation takes place in practices of everyday life and collective action, the subordinate groups strive to gain control over the symbolic meanings of their lives, unmasking the dominant codes that produce cultural and political domination (75-76). Those groups either participate as the users and producers of their own cultural forms or have a critical relationship with the dominant cultural and political agenda, ultimately reinforcing the groups’ autonomy in relation to the same dominant forces. The shift from object-centered to subject-centered informs the political strategies of the social agents and leads to an increasing politicization of different spaces of social life.

In the next section, I consider how *City of God* and *The Air Wave* explore the same theme—the *favela*—using different esthetic strategies and forging distinct representational patterns of the *favela* and its inhabitants. The two movies also differ in reception and critical acclaim: whereas *City of God* was celebrated by critics and audiences alike, *The Air Wave* remained unknown to a large public and received very little critical attention.

Favela x 2 – Representing the Favela in Brazilian Cinema Today

The *favela* is not a new element in Brazilian cinema. *Cinema Novo* of the 1960s contrasted the optimism and enthusiasm of Juscelino Kubitschek’s developmentist period with a debate over important “national questions,” such as the country’s dispossessed in the rural and urban settings (Johnson 2). Borrowing from Italian neorealism, with use of location shooting and non-professional actors, Nelson Pereira do Santos’s *Rio 40 Graus* [Rio 40 Degrees], for instance, strove to denounce Brazil’s unequal social conditions. The movie is a kaleidoscope of the city, where characters from different social classes intersect in diverse urban spaces. But the *favela* and its inhabitants, especially the poor black children, seem to be the focal point of the movie. In this sense, one could find some resemblance between *Rio 40 Degrees* and *City of God*: the use of non-professional actors, the predominance of social themes, and the representation of life in the *favela*.

Nevertheless, Ruy Gardnier notes that *City of God* is a “bizarre movie,” not because it embellished misery and glamorized violence, provoking a series of controversies, but—and most important—because critics, filmmakers, and scholars were unable to trace its artistic affiliation within the Brazilian cinema tradition. In many of his interviews, Fernando Meirelles made several polemical statements, such as that he never considered himself as “a son of Brazilian cinema,” “never believed his movie maintained an esthetic dialogue with any other ever produced in Brazil,” and “considers himself an esthetic orphan within Brazilian cinema” (2). Has *City of God*, therefore, actually betrayed the *Cinema Novo*’s tradition? In fact, some critics suggest that instead of paying homage to the *Cinema Novo*’s agenda of social questioning and political positioning, *City of God* maintains a closer dialogue with the esthetic of violence inaugurated by American cinema, especially Quentin Tarantino’s stylized brutality (Gardnier 3).

Moreover, many critics stressed *City of God*’s *estética publicitária* [advertisement esthetic], drawn directly from the director’s previous experience as a director of TV commercials. To Xico Sá, Glauber Rocha’s “esthetic of hunger” exhibits conflicts and social dialectics, but cinematic productions such as *City of God* are schematic and esthetically influenced by publicity and television series, leading to a misrepresentation of Brazilian social reality (1).⁴ Layo Fernando Barros de Carvalho, however, observes that the predominance of this “advertisement esthetic” can be traced to international cinema: movies such as Tom Tukwer’s *Lola rennt* [Run Lola Run] and Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Amores Perros* [Love’s a Bitch] are representatives of this new cinematic genre. But, to Carvalho, the term “advertisement esthetic” is imprecise; an expression that could better describe these productions is “a postmodern esthetic.” Based on video and simulation games, music video stories, computerized accounts (blogs, Web pages, and the like), these movies usually offer a fast-paced montage, a fragmented narrative, and unconventional cinematography (2-3).

Carvalho notes that *City of God* opened a new cinematic trend in Brazilian cinema, generating controversy by the use of this “advertisement esthetic” in a movie that deals with social questions. *City of God*, therefore, revisits the *favela* and its inhabitants through a fast-paced rhythm and fragmented narrative. In the first images, a knife is being sharpened while a chicken runs for its life through the narrow streets of the *favela*. The sound of the sharpened knife rises while there are sequence cuts to scenes with the knife, the chicken, and the chicken’s pursuers. The opening scene works as a metaphor of the film itself: the knife will cut the film with precision, in a junction of violence and tense editing (Carvalho 11).

The camera stops at the protagonist, Buscapé, and rotates around him, bringing the narrative to the past. The same camera position and image fusion help to introduce the narrator, the same Buscapé, as a child playing soccer with friends (Carvalho 5). He starts telling the story of the community through the rise and fall of drug dealers who rule the *favela*. The opening sequence also registers one of the trademarks of the movie: the frame is frozen when presenting the characters, which indicates the “pictures” of the several stories that Buscapé, the boy turned photographer, will tell through his lenses.

The story is divided temporarily into three segments: the 1960s, the 1970s, and “the beginning of the end,” the final decay and death of Zé Pequeno, a sadistic and ambitious drug lord. But the narrative is not linear; on the contrary, the stories are narrated almost simultaneously, indicating temporal rupture and continuity, at the same time. For example, the story of the *Boca dos Apês*, the apartment where an old lady started selling drugs, is told through a similar framing and several images of the people who ruled the place are displayed and fused into a last scene in the present (Carvalho 5).

In Meirelles’s *City of God*, the *favela* appears as mere background scenery for the movie’s plot. By the end of the movie, almost all of the characters have died in the bloodshed of the drug war; on the other hand, Buscapé not only survives, but gets a position as a novice photographer in a newspaper. By emphasizing Buscapé as the protagonist who escapes the tragic fate of the *favelados*, death or misery, Meirelles’s movie ratifies an individual solution for social ascension. In the final scene, Buscapé walks with a friend and gradually distances himself from the *favela*.

City of God’s narrative structure can be esthetically revolutionary, but the film remains ethically questionable. According to MV Bill, more than 120,000 people live in the City of God, but it is estimated that less than 0.5 percent of them work for the drug traffic. To the rapper, the image that prevails, however, is one of the poor black as a social delinquent, a menace to mainstream society. Additionally, MV Bill maintains that the movie did not bring any positive gain to the community (1-2).

Helvécio Ratton’s *The Air Wave*, released in the same year as *City of God*, is also based on a true story and depicts life in the Comunidade da Serrinha, a *favela* in Belo Horizonte, capital of the state of Minas Gerais. The movie presents a more conventional esthetic language. Jorge, the protagonist, tells the story in flashback, and the narration follows a linear path. Four black friends (Jorge, Brau, Ezequiel, and Roque) live in the *favela* and try to forge their future by different means. Jorge has a scholarship to study at an elite private school, and his mother hopes he will graduate from college in the future. Ezequiel is a radio technician and Brau, an artist and poet who writes hip-hop songs. Roque is the only one of the group to turn to criminality, going from being a petty thief to a respected and feared drug lord. Jorge soon gives up school and finds his real vocation as a radio broadcaster, creating a radio program that debates community issues and helps to divulge the culture of the *favela*. Nevertheless, to operate a radio program in Brazil, one needs a special license from the federal government, which is generally granted only to powerful people already involved in the media business. As a result, the friends have to fight against financial difficulties and legal matters to be able to broadcast “the voice of the *favela*, the real voice of Brazil.”

The Air Wave and *City of God* have similar themes: the story of friends who come of age in the *favela*, their dreams transformed or shattered by unfair social structures. They also present the culture of the *favelas*, such as the Soul balls, crucial to Afro-Brazilian empowerment in the 1970s. In the two movies, important scenes of Soul balls change the course of the narrative. In the *City of God*, Bené, the “coolest hood” in the *favela*, is killed by mistake, as the shot was aimed at Zé Pequeno. In *The Air Wave*,

Roque fights with a man who later accidentally murders Brau as he stands between the shooter and Roque.

The Soul ball scene in the *City of God* presents a higher degree of esthetic complexity, with several parallel actions that culminate in Bené's death. The narrative cuts that present the various scenes correlate to the background music (Carvalho 12): strobe lighting accompanies the song "Hold Back the Water," released in 1974 by the Band BTO (Bachman-Turner Overdrive), and the pulsation of light and music builds the climax to the final scene, Bené's assassination. Not coincidentally, that song was chosen to complement and comment on the scene, as it was the song of protest and rage in many Soul balls in Brazil. The misheard lyrics acquired a new version in Portuguese: "Vou dar porrada, a vara vai entrar também" [I will beat them up, I will use the rod too]. Thus, the lyrics announce the rampant violence that sweeps the *favela* soon after Bené's death: the drug war between Cenoura and Zé Pequeno.

In contrast to the visual and sonorous intricacy of *City of God*, the ball scene in *The Air Wave* does not have the same visual impact: the narrative is not fragmented and temporal action follows a linear course. Still the esthetic quality of the movie does not guarantee the right to speak to those whom it seeks to represent. Helvécio Ratton, director of *The Air Wave*, affirms that the movie's script and narrative development were forged in dialogue with the real protagonists from Comunidade da Serrinha, the creators of the *Favela Radio*: Misael Santos, Nerimar, Hudson Carlos, and Misinha. Filmed in the same Comunidade da Serrinha, *The Air Wave* had the participation of many of its inhabitants, who were extras in the movie. Before being released in theaters, *The Air Wave* was shown in the *favela*, where more than 5,000 people watched the movie. Part of the box-office proceeds went to the *Fundação Educativa Comunitária Rádio Favela* [Community's Educational Foundation *Favela Radio*], an NGO that develops youth programs and strives to strengthen the culture of *favelados* (Ratton's interview).

When comparing *City of God* and *The Air Wave*, one finds they differ greatly as artistic and commercial products. *City of God* presented a problematic *favela*, (mis)representing misery, trivializing violence, and stereotyping race. And yet it captivated the public and mesmerized many national and international critics, who celebrated *City of God* as a true achievement in Brazilian cinema, a movie destined to influence subsequent national cinematic productions. In contrast, *The Air Wave* received very little attention from viewers and critics, alike. Thus, a question stands: is there a possible middle ground between esthetics and politics in Brazilian cinema today? In the final section of this paper, I examine some of the esthetic elements of *Passing By* vis-à-vis the movie's social and racial representations.

The Path to Reconciliation – Race, Class, and Criminality Revisited

Both *City of God* and *The Air Wave* are based on "true stories," but they form different representational patterns of the communities they seek to represent. Zé Pequeno reaffirms the perspective of the poor black as the social predator, whereas Jorge struggles to forge a sense of dignity for his community, giving voice to the voiceless (his *Favela Radio*, the "true voice of Brazil"). Yet another

movie, *Passing By*, effectively unites elegant esthetic strategies and critical social discourse in the construction of its cinematic narrative. A poignant and captivating fictional film, *Passing By* tells the story of three inseparable childhood friends—Jeferson, Washington, and Kennedy—who follow separate life paths.⁵ *Passing By* is a story of forgiveness, reconciliation with the past, and return to origins. Jeferson, the protagonist, is a complex character: born in a poor neighborhood in the periphery of São Paulo (known as *periferia*), a product of a biracial family, he “whitens” himself through education, turning his back on the community.

While studying at the military school in Rio de Janeiro, Jeferson has to return home to retrieve the body of Washington, his brother. At home, he finds Kennedy, his childhood friend. Both Kennedy and Washington used to work for the local drug lord, Márcio; but, while Washington disappears without a trace (and supposedly has the body disposed elsewhere), Kennedy quits criminal life and joins the local church.

In the opening scenes, when Jeferson gets off the bus, he sees his neighborhood from far away. Progressively, he makes his way into the well-known territory that is now very distant from him. Jeferson has to reinsert himself into that reality he so deeply wants to reject, and his shoes metaphorically mark this process of returning home. When he exits the bus, his shoes are clean; after he walks through the neighborhood, the shoes become covered with dust. The “dust,” the experience of poverty and exclusion, impregnates him again when he reenters the community to find his brother’s body. And his guide into this transformative journey is his childhood friend Kennedy, now estranged.

At this point, the movie splits into two parallel stories, two different trips. One is set in the past, when the three friends deliver a package of drugs for Márcio; the other, occurs in the present, when the two friends embark on a journey to recover Washington’s body. Whereas the first trip indicates a rupture, the loss of innocence in the children’s first direct contact with the drug lord, the second represents Jeferson’s reconciliation with the past and the (physical and metaphysical) return to his community.

At first, Jeferson renders a strong moral judgment on Washington’s and Kennedy’s characters. He says they turned into criminals because they were “good for nothing,” “never wanted to study,” or “didn’t wish to work hard enough.” It simply does not occur to Jeferson that there are very few options for survival or social ascension for the *favelas*’ inhabitants. Jeferson is the exception, not the rule. Raised to a higher social position by education, his promising military career makes him the object of admiration everywhere. He is even pursued by a pretty middle-class white girl in the subway, but, aware of his racial and social origins, he refrains from pursuing her.

In the final scenes, past and present interlace again. In the past, the three friends return home, and Washington wants to get the money for the drug delivery. Jeferson refuses to enter Márcio’s headquarters and is left out by Washington and Kennedy. There is a beautifully framed camera shot from behind a door that is soon closed while Jeferson remains outside. This scene marks the turning point for

the three friends: Jeferson enters military school and enjoys the benefits of mainstream society, while Kennedy and Washington turn to criminality, remaining at the social margins. However, in the present, after the two friends realize Washington staged his own death to be able to escape the criminal life, Jeferson finally reconciles with his origins, past, and community.

To Ricardo Elias, the director of *Passing By*, the movie tries to shatter the stigma that associates delinquency and the *periferia*, in order to show that criminality is one of the aspects within that space, but there are several others, as people have other dreams, wishes, and motivations. Most importantly, through the idea of movement—the several trips—Elias also wants to establish the *periferia* as an integral and participative part of the city, where people work, live, and have hope in the future (Elias's interview).

In conclusion, is there an ethic to the esthetic? Should esthetics have an ethic? Should Brazilian cinema today recant or recast the visual and ideological strategies of Glauber Rocha's "esthetic of hunger"? As social discourses not only describe but also (and most importantly) forge the subject, the issue of the right to representation is not purely rhetorical; on the contrary, a truly democratic and encompassing theory of agency must entail both an ethic and esthetic project for and from the marginalized.

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Notes

¹ This is an edited and expanded version of a paper presented in the “South by Midwest: International Conference Series on Latin America” at Washington University in St. Louis. I thank Dr. Mabel Moraña for the invitation and

the friends from Washington University (Derek Pardue, Selma Vital, and Andrew Brown), as well as all of the participants in the conference for a productive intellectual interchange. Also, I thank Robert Kelz, a Germanist by academic training but a Brazilianist at heart, for reading the essay and providing me with suggestions and comments.

² From this point on, I will refer to the movies using the English translation of the titles. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

³ For more information on Bentes' notion of "cosmetics of hunger" and a reading of the *sertão* and the *favela* in Brazilian cinema history, see also her article in English "The *Sertão* and the *Favela* in Contemporary Brazilian Film," in *The New Brazilian Cinema*.

⁴ Meirelles's production company, O2 Filmes, made a series of programs for TV Globo, the *Cidade dos Homens* [City of Men], using most of the same actors of *City of God*. One of the protagonists, Douglas Silva, the Acerola, played the role of Zé Pequeno as a child in *City of God*. *City of Men* had four episodes in 2002, five in 2003, five in 2004, and five in 2005, the show's last season. Another new successful filmmaker who directed commercials for television is Jorge Furtado. His first movie, *O homem que copiava* [The Man Who Copied], released in 2003, had actor Lázaro Ramos as the first black protagonist of Brazilian cinema in a comedic-suspense thriller movie with no direct reference to Afro-Brazilian culture.

⁵ The audience of *Passing By* totaled only 11,419, and the box office receipts amounted to R\$ 75,632.00 (about US\$ 35,200.00) (ANCINE), but in 2003 the movie won four Kikitos, the most prestigious cinema award in Brazil, at the Gramados Film Festival (best movie, director, actor in a supporting role, and original screenplay).