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Slumploitation à The Favela on Film and TV

ByMelanie Gilligan

Brazil has long sold its sunny side to holiday makers, but since the blockbuster film *City of God* a flood of movies and TV shows have capitalised on the narrative potential of the country's plentiful favelas, adolescent drug soldiers and ultraviolence.

Melanie Gilligan explores the cinema of slums and asks is representation the answer to 'social exclusion' or one of the mechanisms of its reproduction?

The Brazilian documentary *Bus 174* by José Padilha opens as we swoop over Rio de Janeiro's favela covered hills. Dramatic aerial shots of Brazil's vast slum cities are a common gambit in the country's burgeoning output of films depicting its *favelas*, crime and poverty. These top-down vistas economically communicate an incalculably vast scale of privation. *Bus 174* chronicles the hijacking of a public bus in Rio in 2000 by one ill-fated resident of the slums. Broadcast live on TV, the hijacking achieved record viewing figures and ended when the police murdered its protagonist. This incident constituted the intersection of two major forces of daily life for Brazil's working and wageless classes: television and state violence.

Bus 174

Image: Bus 174, directed by José Padilha, 2002

The hijacker, Sandro, was a former street kid, and had survived the infamous Candelaria massacre in 1993 when police fired on 70 children sleeping rough in front of a church, killing eight. Throughout the hijacking, Sandro shouted at the police and media, reproaching them for the Candelaria massacre and the violent oppression in the *favelas*. The film presents the hijacking as Sandro's desperate plea for recognition from 'Brazilian society', a desire supposedly felt by the whole of the so-called invisible class living in the *favelas* and streets of Brazil.

The alleged renaissance of Brazilian cinema seems dedicated to answering Bus 174's plea that the country's disenfranchised be represented. Brazil's *favelas* have enjoyed 'increased visibility' with films like *City of God* and have played a lead role in the 'sudden stardom' of Third World slums in First World cinemas.[1] With its nearly unrivalled economic inequality and 51.[7] million *favela* inhabitants, the nation has ample material to feed a growing market for depictions of its poverty, crime and economic polarisation.[2]

While a decade ago Brazil's government rented New York museums and private galleries for exhibitions of Brazilian art in an effort to improve its international image, today Brazil's corporate media mine the entertainment value of its 'social problems' to produce popular film and television commodities for the domestic and global market.[3] Film and TV unabashedly portray the brutal results of the country's extreme disparities in wealth, sometimes indicting this situation through the mouths of their characters. However, they 'raise awareness' only to support the underlying economic conditions. At the same time Brazilian President Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva's culture minister, Gilberto Gil, promises to foster the creative industries, calling them the new motor for Brazil's 'developing' economy, and places the movie business atop his list of creative messiahs.

The internationally distributed Brazilian films we see today are products of increasingly commercial imperatives. All government-funded programmes supporting the Brazilian film industry were cut in 1991. Subsequently, the 'Audiovisual law' was created in 1993 to subsidise private investment in the film industry by granting Brazil's immensely wealthy corporations the right to invest up to 70 percent of their yearly income tax in film. The intention was to foster private investment in the film industry so that, when this initiative was phased out in 2003, corporations would continue financing films. The credits of internationally exported Brazilian film such as *Lower City* or *City of God* list some of Brazil's biggest multinationals, for example Petrobras, many banks, and of course the monolithic Globo, who run 60 percent of national media. Unsurprisingly, the pressure to deliver high returns on investments ushered in an era of increasingly mainstream Americanised film-making in Brazil.

City of God

Image: *City of God*, directed by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, 2002

City of God, directed by Fernando Meirelles and co-directed by Kátia Lund (2002), epitomises the manner in which Brazil's urban poverty is currently being projected. The film employs a style of fast cutting, abbreviated exposition, tinted colour palettes and perpetually moving handheld photography; techniques which have undeniably become a reified visual 'pre-set' for representing Latin American experience below subsistence level. *City of God* restages epochal class conflicts as a series of personal narratives, beginning in the 1960s when the military dictatorship 'cleaned up the city' for the rich by means of slum evictions and real estate development.[4] Adapting the technique of first person voice-over commentary deployed in Scorsese's crime epics *Casino* and *Goodfellas*, the film's narrator, Rocket, is a young (and like most *favela* residents, black) slum dweller relocated to the *City of God*, obscures the political significance of his eviction by giving the cause as flooding and 'acts of arson in the slums'. Passing over this primordial act of state violence, the film jumps forward to the spectacular gang warfare between the narco-traficantes who gained control of Rio's *favelas* in the '70s.

While *City of God* renders most of the substantive history in quick strokes, more detail about the political formation of Rio's gangs is given in the documentary that accompanies the DVD version of the film. Widespread arrests of political dissidents during the military dictatorship of the Medici administration 1969-74, landed insurgents in a maximum-security prison with so-called 'common criminals'. [5] According to popular legend, educated middle class political prisoners radicalised the working class inmates who then began a movement to self-organise against the systemic violence and deprivation imposed by the state, giving birth to Rio's powerful drug gang Comando Vermelho (Red Command). [6]

William da Silva Lima, one of Comando Vermelho's founders, said the group 'was not an organisation but, above all, a kind of behavior, a way of surviving in times of adversity.'⁷ Comando Vermelho, initially known as o coletivo, spread an ethos of collective organisation. This laid the basis for the contemporary gangs, which today form 'parallel polities' in the *favelas* and prisons, supplying people with essential resources withheld by the state. Soup kitchens, daycare centres, and money for medicines, as well as brutally enforced security, form part of this alternative welfare and justice system adopted by populations disdained and abused by the official state. By some accounts, the drug gangs are businesses, providing services in return for the support of the *favela* communities, 'accomplices of the bourgeois state' that couch their endeavours in politicised rhetoric while obstructing the possibility of organised working class political action.[8] It may be that gang strikes on the middle class areas of Rio have replaced, and contained, what previously manifested as direct working class antagonism – for instance the riots of the late 1980s in which residents of the slum Rocinha attacked a nearby wealthy district.[9] Furthermore, the Brazilian state is known to cooperate with the drug gangs which operate like mini-states within the borders of the larger nation. The police, for example, sell weapons to the gangs and engage in transactions involving contraband, though of

course they're ostensibly fighting trafficking. This symbiotic relationship goes far beyond individual police corruption and says a great deal about the dependence of the state and ruling classes on the continuation of the drug trade.

City of God's popularity in Brazil led to a TV drama spin-off called *City of Men*, attempting the same handheld documentary 'gritty realism' in a modern-day Rio *favela*. The first TV drama set in the *favelas*, it was shot in slums like Rocinha, Rio's largest, and watched by 35 million people in Brazil, spawning several other *favela* soaps. The protagonists amaze audiences with their resourcefulness and entrepreneurial zeal, getting themselves out of the tight spots and near death experiences that living in a community regulated by arbitrary police and gang violence creates. In other words, it celebrates the slum as a dangerous but creative place where people improvise solutions.

Critical moments do occur intermittently in *City of Men*. A protagonist leaves the *favela*, telling us he is crossing the frontier between two countries and the police are the border guards. Later he says, 'the playboys [i.e. middle class] watch the slums on TV and think it's better to live where they are. They only come here to buy drugs or make documentaries and films. They need drugs to live there with all the cameras and bars.' Yet one is struck by the way the programme mitigates the force of its own content. After focusing on the lives of *favela* kids for a few episodes, a middle class character is introduced as point of identification and reemployed in increasingly unlikely scenarios. Ostensibly focused on the lives of *favela* dwellers, the show incessantly revisits their relationship to the middle class. A day at the beach is loaded with race and class tensions, while another episode compares the lives of a young 'playboy' and the working class protagonist, finding the former gets a bit depressed, the latter starves, but the moral is that they both share the same existential angst.

In the guise of offering 'positive representation' to 'socially excluded' residents of the *favelas*, exposing the economic and racial segregation they experience, the show transparently attempts to manage class tensions and assuage middle class guilt. (One candidly propagandistic episode narrates the legend of Lula's working-class childhood, offering a 'working class' hero as point of identification for those viewers not feeling sufficiently 'represented' already). If any viewer doubts the importance of being portrayed on the channels of nation's most powerful TV monopoly, Globo, the recurrent shots of densely clustered satellite dishes atop *favela* shacks drive the point home.

City of God contains similar nods to the power and complicity of the Brazilian media. Gang members compete to get their photos in the newspapers, TV and news journalism intensify the conflict they chronicle. During the 1960s and '70s Brazil's military dictatorship fostered a powerful television dominated 'culture industry' as a means to cohere national identity, promoting consumerism and controlling the political sphere. Globo governed official public discourse in Brazil until the end of the dictatorship in 1984, and has been influencing political outcomes, electoral and otherwise, ever since. *City of Men* supplements its documentary aesthetic with mock TV news interviews, while a media circus is *Bus 174's* starting point for discussing life on the streets and in prison. The fascination with mediation in these films reflects more than just the spectacularisation of daily life. It indexes the self-consciousness of an industry that has long exploited the frisson of *favela* culture and violence. However, placing the interdependence of Brazil's official 'cultural' and 'informal' or illegitimate economies in plain sight could seem to cynically reinforce and normalise its inevitability.[10]

The monolithic media of Brazil presents a means for liberal audiences to reconcile themselves with the brutality of state repression against the working class. Despite the intention of exposing state violence which informs films like *Bus 174* and Hector Babenco's *Carandiru* (2000), these films' critical challenge to the brutality of the present order is blunted into a kind of empathic supplement to it. *Carandiru* tells the story of the infamous 1992 massacre in a Sao Paulo prison. Police, called to quell a riot, killed 111 unarmed prisoners. Numerous inmates were murdered execution-style, some several hours after the riot was suppressed. This extermination returned to haunt the gated 'communities' of Sao Paulo this May. The *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) gang, formed in response to the

massacre and sworn to avenge it, declared war on the state, starting 75 separate prison riots and attacking the stations, cars and homes of the police.[11]

Carandiru

Image: Carandiru, directed by Hector Babenco, 2003

Like the Comando Vermelho, the PCC constitute a parallel state controlling 90 percent of the prison system in the state of Sao Paulo and even funding their own electoral candidates. Each member swears to a manifesto-like list of statutes which pledge unceasing struggle against the injustices and oppression inside prisons, solidarity with all members, and to be the 'Terror of the Powerful oppressors' who run the prisons. The gang has 'reduced the level of violence (in prisons) ... won better visiting rights ... [and] defense lawyers for their members'. Although Comando Vermelho have been responsible for prison bloodbaths of their own, the PCC has now allied with them to strengthen their influence on the nation's prison system. 12 Rio gangs have conducted many similar attacks, but the scale of the PCC's actions this year and their unequivocal demands for prison reform suggest a more developed political agenda. When the PCC shut down the country's richest city, killing 40 police officers and threatening the heavily guarded safety of the ruling elite, the police responded as they had at Carandiru: by sending death squads through the *favelas* and assassinating random slum-dwellers. Suspiciously, the police revised the total civilian body count down from 109 to 79, of whom 34 are acknowledged to have been killed by death squads.[13]

Bus 174 also presents images of the prisons and the appalling conditions endured by the likes of Sandro, who was interned many times in the years prior to the hijacking. One of his cells was 40° C and so overcrowded that half the inmates had to stand so the other half could sit. In the documentary, prisoners in cramped cells denounce the state for its negligence, corruption and injustice. Once again the assumption is that Brazil's street kids and *favela* inhabitants want desperately to be represented and recognised in Brazilian society. This view is explicitly stated by Luis Eduardo Soares, Rio's former subsecretary of public security, in an interview that is interspersed throughout the film. Audaciously, Soares asserts that this need for acknowledgement is the biggest problem facing street kids today (not hunger or getting shot or brained with rocks while asleep). This position resonates with the strategy of City of Men and indeed, on a macro level, with Brazil's attempted conversion to a culture economy. In other words, represent the working class in the media and hopefully demands for economic parity will decrease.

The director claims that the film reopened debate about the hijacking, this time creating discussion about the reasons for Sandro's action, instead of vilifying him as a drugged-up hoodlum. However, without addressing the basic material needs of the population and curbing the murderous domination of the police-gang state repressive apparatus such debate is likely to remain sterile.

Brazilian culture minister Gilberto Gil points to the 1 trillion 300 billion US dollars in revenue generated by global 'creative industries' this year and proposes that increased production of cultural exports is the key to prosperity for Brazil.[14] Culture in the *favelas* has long been profitable. For instance, samba, once a central part of *favela* life, was turned into a mainstream commodity and official national culture. Today, samba's social function in the *favelas* is mostly fulfilled by 'Baile Funk', itself an increasingly popular cultural export. A recent investor-oriented Financial Times article spoke of the atmosphere in Rocinha as 'like stepping into the tempting chaos of a rock concert' indicating that Rio's *favelas* are gaining a reputation for edgy culture that could attract many more such capitalisations. Gil encourages Brazilians to become cultural producers. We hear the same message in *Favela Rising*, a documentary by American filmmakers Matt Mochary and Jeff Zimbalist, which zealously deploys the now formulaic MTV-povera aesthetic of *City of God* (etc). Once again, a collective story about community music group Afro Reggae becomes the tale of one man, Anderson

Sá, and his fight to improve life in the *favelas*. Interviews with Sá carry a clear message – he preaches the salvation of cultural work as the way to pull oneself out of the slums. Artists have long been able to transgress class barriers, but it is unlikely that all the kids Sá would like to save from the trenches of the drug wars can become middle class creative workers. The economic situation in Brazil would not allow for it. Incidentally, the message of *City of God* is quite similar – Rocket ‘gets out’ precisely because he is lucky enough to land a job as a photographer on the basis that he can get close to the gang action in the *favelas*. Thus the hypothetical lucky ones become cultural workers that subsist by documenting the lot or selling the culture of the unlucky.

Despite the creative economy line being fed by the Lula administration and the production of new rags-to-cultural-work-riches films (such as recent release *2 Filhos de Francisco*, the biggest hit at Brazilian box offices in 20 years), those living in *favelas* will continue to be portrayed in cultural commodities but are unlikely to benefit from their production. Furthermore, the box office and broadcast hits bringing *favela* life to middle class Brazilian and western audiences are taking place in a context of growing economic disparity and a ‘drastic diminution of the intersections between the lives of the rich and the poor’.[15] Sao Paulo’s 300 hundred gated communities, serviced by the world’s highest volume of civilian helicopter traffic, and the Rio government’s plan to build a 7 foot wall around several *favelas*, push the working class further out of sight.[16] As material segregations proliferate in the cities of Brazil, it seems unlikely that the new market for consumer-friendly representations of the *favelas* will lead to anything more than profits off the backs of those who are, so to speak, providing the content.

[1] Rana Dasgupta, ‘The Sudden Stardom of the Third-World City’, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0603/msg00031.html>

[2] The richest 10% of Brazil owns between 48% to over 50% of the nation’s wealth while the poorest 10% own 1%.

[3] Barry Schwabsky, ‘Art from Brazil in New York’, *Artforum*, Summer, 1995, <http://linkme2.net/9j>

[4] ‘Evoking the threat of a tiny urban foco of Marxist guerillas, the military razed 80 favelas and evicted almost 140,000 poor people from the hills overlooking Rio. With financial support from USAID, other favelas were later demolished to clear the way for industrial expansion or to “beautify” the borders of upper income areas. Although the authorities failed in their goal of eliminating all “slums within Rio within a decade”, the dictatorships ignited conflicts between bourgeois neighbourhoods and the favelas, and between the police and slum youth, which continue to rage three decades later.’ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, London, p. 108.

[5] In Brazil today ‘98% of prison inmates lived in poor or modest economic conditions prior to their arrest’. Marie-Eve Sylvestre, ‘Crime, Law & Society – Exploring the Relationship Between Crime, Punitive Practices, Poverty and Social Exclusion in Contemporary Societies’, Harvard Law School, http://www.law.harvard.edu/academics/graduate/sjd_candidates/marie-evesylvestre/syllabus.doc

[6] ‘Conditions in the prisons included systematic torture and no basic amenities (mattresses, linens, blankets, soap)’, Elizabeth Leeds, ‘Cocaine and Parallel Politics in the Brazilian Urban Periphery: Constraints on Local-Level Democratization’, *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 31, 1996, p.54.

Comando Vermelho orchestrated a series of attacks on Rio’s middle class neighbourhoods during the same week that *City of God* won the BAFTA for best editing. The gang told the press they were retaliating against ‘oppressive and cowardly’ policing in the slums and politicians’ violence against the

poor. Would this also qualify as a plea for recognition? 'Rio gangs cast violent shadow over carnival', *The Guardian*, <http://www.buzzle.com/editorials/2-25-2003-36272.asp>

[7] Elizabeth Leeds, op. cit., p.54.

[8] Hector Benoit, 'Brazil: The social contradictions underlying the violent eruption in Sao Paulo', World Socialist Web Site, May 2006, http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/may2006/braz-m18_prn.shtml

[9] Elizabeth Leeds, op. cit., p. 48-49.

[10] The treasure trove of eye-witness reports from the *favela* front lines have recently proven dangerous business. In 2002, celebrity reporter Tim Lopes, renowned for his undercover work, often in disguise, was dismembered with a samurai sword and burned during a *favela* *Brazzil Magazine*, June 2005, <http://www.brazzil.com/content/view/9297/79/> reconnaissance. Tom Phillips, 'Justice for One. In Brazil, Drug War Goes On',

[11] Gibby Zobel, 'Mayhem That left Sao Paolo in Shock', *Al Jazeera*, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/B0DB410F-55C4-4A73-8EAF-41475DD8CF7B.htm> and Pepe Escobar 'The accumulation of the wretched, a review of *Planet of Slums* by Mike Davis', http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Front_Page/HE20Aa01.html

[12] Tom Phillips, 'Jail riots kill up to 80 as gangs rebel', *Sunday Herald*, June 2004, <http://www.sundayherald.com/42704>

[13] 'Brazil: Death tally reaches 400 in the wake of attacks in Sao Paulo State', *Coav Newsroom*, <http://www.coav.org.br/publique/cgi/cgilua.exe/sys/start.htm?inoid=1956&tpl=printerview&sid=114> *Al Jazeera*, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/F418DB9E-5DEE-4B18-A9FE-F11A9FA76863.htm> and 'Brazil probes police role in gang riots',

[14] Tiffany Linton Page, 'Building a Creative Utopia in Brazil', Center for Latin American Studies, February 2005, <http://www.clas.berkeley.edu:7001/Events/spring2005/02-17-05-gil/index.html> and *Washington Post*,

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A42332-2002May31>

[15] Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, London, p. 119.

[16] Anthony Faiola, 'Brazil's Elites Fly Above Their Fears

Rich Try to Wall Off Urban Violence', *Washington Post*, May 31st 2002, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A42332-2002May31> and Daniel Howden, 'Bitter Divide over Plan to Wall in Rio's Slums', *Independent*, June 23, 2005, http://www.amren.com/mtnews/archives/2005/06/bitter_divide_o.php

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