

Violence in The City of God: The Fantasy of the Omniscient Spectator

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"A picture 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." Kátia Lund and Fernando Meirelles' *City of God* offers a variety of explanations for the violence it depicts, but ultimately presents violence - within the city and within its characters - as something beyond representation, comprehension, or escape. Motives are suggested, but shown to be insufficient to account for the level and pervasiveness of violence. Alternatives to violence are articulated, only to be undermined. The formal strategies adopted by *City of God* are themselves violent, resisting easy synthesis or understanding. The film places the viewer in a removed spectatorship, suggesting a sense of omniscience and control which proves, in the end, false.

The Nature of the Violence

City of God is narrated by Rocket, a boy growing up in one of Rio's *favelas*, slum towns that exist outside the laws and popular image of Rio. Through a disjointed, redoubling, and multilayered narrative, Rocket tells his constructed version of the City of God, built around the stories of its gang leaders. Through constant acts of violence, of which Rocket is an observer and eventual participant, the youth of the *favela* are connected. While the plot is driven by acts of individual violence, the film evokes a range of violent forces, not confined to the corporeal violence of murder and gang assassination.

Brazil, and Rio in particular, suffers from particularly pervasive and institutionalized forms of violence: gang warfare, military brutality, and police corruption. Despite its natural resources, Brazil is one of the most economically divided countries in the world; a very small wealthy class exists quite separately from a large, poor, underclass. Race and class are equated, so that 'whiteness' has more to do with wealth and status than with colour. The country is still trying to overcome its colonial and militarized histories and to create a national identity, and national cinema, that represents a highly diverse population. Brazil's contemporary national cinema frequently deals with an "...urban reality that is centered in the concept of the 'taken for granted' violence that comes out of a predatory capitalism and so becomes a spectacle." (da Costa, 171) *City of God* is based on real events and figures; adapted from a largely biographical novel by Paulo Lins, the film uses mainly amateur actors, location shooting, and handheld camera work to convey a sense of realism. Meirelles has discussed the film as a criticism not only of Brazilian society, but global economic forces, saying that "no country is as unfair as the world itself." (Gonzales)

Since the Cinema Novo of the 1960s, following on Glauber Rocha's "aesthetic of hunger", violence in all its forms has driven and defined Brazilian cinema. *City of God* promotes no overt political agenda, but in its depiction of poverty and exclusion, refers to the economic and cultural violence of Brazilian society. This is effectively accomplished through the representation of the city as a

site of violence. As the title suggests, the film is as much about the geographical place, the *favela*, as any of its occupants. At the start, Rocket's voiceover explains the origin of the *favela*, created when flooding and unrest drove the poor out of Rio's inner city. Rocket also expresses the sense of abandonment and alienation of the residents: "For the powerful our problems didn't matter. We were too far removed." The sense of exclusion is reinforced by the way the film circumscribes the city. By showing all the stories of the *favela* to be interconnected, Meirelles conveys a self-enclosed community isolated from the outside world. The police are the only figures who enter and leave the *favela* at will. The journalists at Rocket's newspaper do not enter the place they write about; it is considered a no-go area for other Brazilians. When a tourist enters the community, he is lost and must be guided, protected and returned to his home. Similarly, the audience engages with the film as a tourist and Meirelles functions as the guide who both points out the sights and offers protection by keeping the spectator at a safe distance.

The *favela* is on one level a defined space with specific geography, straight rows of houses and repeated locations. On another level, it is a landscape with violent and incomprehensible qualities. In chase sequences, for example, camera angles are repeatedly reversed, confusing direction and space. The constantly moving handheld camera is combined with rapid editing to create a sense of disorientation. The dangers of the space are emphasized by seemingly unmotivated camera movements and unattached point of view shots. Shots through gaps and from under objects are reminiscent of war footage and position subjects as if sniper targets, particularly in the later segments of the film. By this time, the area has become a war zone: "you got used to living in Vietnam," narrates Rocket.

While the diegesis never really leaves the city, the hostile urban setting is set in opposition to a utopian rural life by the fantasies of the youth. Characters dream of escaping the *favela* for farmland, a desire which is never realized. The beach provides an isolated image of "picture postcard" Rio, and is a place of refuge for Rocket's teenage 'groovies', friends not (yet) involved in the gang violence. The swimming hole provides another respite from the violence of the city; even here, though, the camera work creates a feeling of surveillance and threat. As a very young Rocket speaks of his hopelessness about a future in the *favela* and his fear of getting shot, that fear is manifested in a long shot of Rocket's back, positioning him as if within a gun sight.

The City of God is plagued by economic as well as physical violence. Attempts by the poor to earn a living are obstructed by the system, as when Rocket is forced to abandon his fish, his family's livelihood, on the side of the road. Crime is, in the early segments of the film, shown as a direct response to poverty. In the first sequence, set in the 1960s, the 'Tender Trio' hold up a gas truck, Robin

Hood style, and give the gas to the poor of the neighbourhood; they also give money to the smaller boys and to their families. For these three, crime is viewed as a means of escape, and is treated humourously and sympathetically.

The *favela* is also a site of gendered violence. The City of God is represented as almost exclusively male, and women's bodies simply provide another site for the men to carry out violence against one another. Meirelles includes women primarily as victims, such as Shorty's wife. After her husband catches her with another man (who flees), he beats her with a shovel, and then buries her alive. The rape of Ned's girlfriend (also unnamed) is framed less as a complete act in itself, but as the instigation of violence, sparking off the full-scale gang war at the film's conclusion. The strongest women of the film, Angelica and Bernice, attempt to reverse this power equation by using their sexual hold over the men, encouraging them to leave the gangs; they are unsuccessful. Both lose the man as a result of his escape attempts, making them both indirect victims of the violence, and indirectly responsible for it.

The *favela* is regulated both by the official police and, more effectively, by the gangs. Under the powerful L'il Ze, the slum experiences a period of relative peace and security. L'il Ze's violence is used to control the passions and impulses of the society. In this way, the gang leader embodies the power of the state and its often brutal policies towards the underclass. In one scene, L'il Ze forces a stranger to strip in front of a crowd, engaging in a different sort of violence, one that evokes the use of authoritarian humiliation and sexual degradation for social control, and also makes a spectacle of the victim's pain. The official police, meanwhile, are shown to be corrupt; in every scene in which they appear, the police take bribes from, steal from, or kill the men of the City of God. In one scene, as two of the Tender Trio hide in the trees after a robbery, two officers argue over how to treat the criminals. One wants to steal the loot; after all, the youth are only "niggers and thieves"; the other wants simply to "exterminate" the men. This dialogue, coupled with the image of the men huddled primitively in the tree branches, calls attention to the way in which they have been dehumanized by the state and by the discourse of the media. There is no justice system within the *favela*; the police act apparently on impulse. Shaggy, a member of the Tender Trio, is pursued and killed on only the word of another criminal, who has just been arrested for the murder of his own wife. The systemic violence of the state, and the fatalism with which it is accepted, is most evident in the film's ending. Although Rocket takes incriminating photographs of the police, he doesn't use the photos, knowing that the paper wouldn't run them or that the repercussions would be too great.

Rocket and his camera represent yet another strain of violence that pervades the *City of God*: scopical violence. In her discussion of another Brazilian film, *A Grande Arte*, Maria Helena Braga e Vaz da Costa characterizes the photographer of that film as a passive figure, one who looks from afar rather than engaging: photography "keeps subject and spectator at a distance, it offers intimacy

without risk." (da Costa, 178) In da Costa's view, a photographer protagonist is only a spectator of the violence, comparable to the viewer, not a part of the spectacle. Rocket's use of the camera, though, is quite clearly equated with violence. As a teenager, Rocket uses his photographs the way his associates use their own weapons; to gain status within his 'gang of groovies' and to pursue his love interest, Angelica (who is interested not in Rocket, but in his ability to make her appear beautiful). Rocket uses the camera to obliterate his rival, Tiago, composing his pictures and directing his subjects so as to throw Tiago into shadow. Rocket's control over the image is literal. L'il Ze's gang cannot work the camera, and do not understand even that the film must be developed before it can be seen, emphasizing the gulf of understanding (and with understanding, power) between those who are photographed and those who do the photographing. His amateur photography becomes the proof of status that allows Rocket safe passage and a measure of respect; while the other characters are perpetually armed with conventional weaponry, Rocket is protected by his camera.

The camera/gun analogy is most explicit in the final standoff. Surrounded by L'il Ze's heavily armed gang and the police, Rocket stands frozen as the camera circles around him. The police leave and the gang clamours for a photo. The sound recedes and the camera continues to circle as Rocket is paralysed by indecision, perhaps considering the act of violence he is about to commit. Finally he points his own camera at the gang and, as the shutter clicks, blood spurts from the chest of a gang member. Off-screen, Ned's gang has arrived, and the gunfight begins. The editing of the sequence suggests not only that Rocket survives by 'shooting' the others, but that he is directly responsible for the deaths of those shot by real bullets. Rocket photographs the rest of the battle, largely filmed as though through the lens of his camera. The sound and dialogue add to the suggestion that Rocket is an active participant in the violence: gunfire accompanies his own shooting, and a voice shouts "Kill one of those faggots! Blast him!" as he focuses. Meanwhile, the erratic handheld camera reminds the audience of the presence of yet another photographer, the filmmaker. The violent use of Rocket's camera is of course analogous to the use of the camera by Meirelles, who is arguably engaging in violence himself by exploiting the lives of his subjects and glamourizing Rio's carnage. It is further analogous to the nature of media representation in general, and raises questions about media responsibility in the 'society of the spectacle'.

Understanding the Violence

The City of God is filled with violent characters; in fact, it is fair to say that the characters are defined by their relationship to violence. The film has multiple protagonists, and they remain psychologically under-developed. This should not be read as a failure of the film, but an intentional and successful effort to create a story that is about the nature of violence itself.

Rather than everything providing an excuse for war, Rocket tells us "war was an excuse for everything." As the gang war between L'il Ze and Knockout Ned escalates, boys come to the leaders asking for guns. Each has his own agenda and pretext for violence, be it revenge, protection, or a desire for respect. The montage - quickly edited medium close-ups of very young boys, each with a one-sentence request - presents a litany of justification, fading into a slow-motion sequence of distorted sound and images of random corpses.

Meirelles does not legitimize violence (by showing its necessity or efficacy, for instance, or by using it as a narrative solution to evil and disorder), but neither does he condemn violence. The film in fact suggests that violence defies not only representation, but also explanation. Motives are suggested - evilness, vengeance, territorialism, animal instinct, initiation, and self-definition - but none seem adequate to explain the omnipresence of violence in the *favela*. This in turn undermines the audience's ability to manage or account for what Gomel calls the "excess" of violence, that quality of violence which exceeds instrumentality and cannot be explained as a response, but only as a conscious action. (Gomel, xv)

City of God borrows certain conventions of the Western to suggest the theme of the frontier, and violence is, in part, framed by this frontier sensibility. The dusty, brown streets and buildings of the *favela* bring to mind the Western town. Those streets become the locus of shoot-outs framed as Western duels. The hold-up of the gas truck, already mentioned, is coded as a stagecoach robbery: the three men pull bandannas over their faces, wield pistols, and ambush the vehicle - all that is missing is the horses. It has been suggested that the new Brazilian cinema is characterized by a tension between barbarism and civilization, a tension historically located in the Western, and this characterization seems very applicable to *City of God*. The few women in the film (like a Western, this is primarily a film about men) are presented as a civilizing influence, encouraging the men to leave the barbarism behind and choose a farm and family. Here, barbarism wins out, and the women are removed from the narrative once they have failed in their civilizing attempts.

Western style vengeance is presented as a motivator for much of the film's violence. The cyclical nature of revenge is emphasized: each killing sparks another, almost to the point of narrative absurdity, and the connections are not always immediately explained. Vengeance is the justification that the characters themselves express, offering revenge as a moral absolute. Knockout Ned, who appears first as a potential role model who espouses "peace and love", is driven to an act of revenge by the rape of his girlfriend and the attack of his homestead and family. Audience expectations of the Western hero (like the 'good man' turned vigilante found in so many action films) may lead viewers to sympathize with Ned, judging his violence as less excessive than L'il Ze's. Meirelles problematizes this identification by showing the escalating nature of Ned's violence. At first, Ned is opposed to taking "innocent" lives; he insists that he is not a hoodlum, but a seeker of

vengeance. After a couple of 'necessary' killings during robberies, "the exception becomes the rule", as Rocket tells us, and Ned becomes indiscriminate in his killing. Apparently, Ned has found in violence not only an instrument, but a source of pleasure.

The film suggests that violence is also motivated by territorial instincts. Unlike the (flawed) Western ideal of land for the taking, territory in the *favela* is contested. One segment of the film, *The Story of the Apartment*, interrupts the ongoing narrative to detail the way the space has changed hands, each occupant being violently forced out by his or her successor. Benny's farewell party is an act of transgression, in that he brings together (unnaturally, it is suggested) groups from different areas of the *favela* as well as from different social groups: the religious, the samba followers, the jazz lovers, the hippies, and the rival gangs. Benny's attempt at blurring the rigid class and social divisions brings all Brazilians together in what at first seems a carnivalesque utopia, but instead ends tragically with his death. As L'il Ze cries over Benny's body, the crowds disappear, presumably returning to their own territory and isolated experiences.

The story of the apartment points to other aspects of the *favela*'s violence: its animalistic, generational qualities. In the society of the City of God, the young and strong displace the old(er) and weak(er). This is presented as an accepted way of life. One of the Runts, a prepubescent gang, complains about the natural order of the system: "...you have to wait for some older guy to croak before you can move up." The structure of the narrative mirrors this cycle of life; the Tender Trio of the 1960s are the subjects of the first segments; each is replaced by an analogous member of the next generation. The audience knows, for example, that Benny and Angelica will not escape to their farm as planned, because it has already seen their story unfold through the narrative of Shaggy and Bernice.

Violence defines manhood and initiates the young boys into adult life. As one of the Runts says, "I smoke, I snort. I've killed and robbed. I'm a man." (Later, this Runt is shot and killed himself.) One of the most emotionally compelling scenes in the film involves the ritualistic initiation of Steak'n'Fries, a Runt, into L'il Ze's gang. The boy is told to choose where two other children (not much more than toddlers) will be shot, in the hand or in the foot. Steak'n'Fries chooses the hand; the gunman disregards his decision and shoots each boy in the foot. Next, Steak'n'Fries is told to choose and kill one of the two children. His hesitation and distraught expression are at odds with the manner in which violent perpetrators are shown in the rest of the film: clearly, this killer is taking no pleasure in the act. Steak'n'Fries chooses to spare, incidentally, the child that shows no discernable emotion, and kills the one who sobs like a baby: this is only one example of the way in which the narrative punishes sentiment and implicitly advocates an emotional distance. The shooting of the children's feet is the only instance of graphic, causally linked gun violence in the film; the viewer actually sees the bullet, in close-up, enter the flesh. When Steak'n'Fries takes the gun, on the other hand, the shot is

filmed from over his shoulder, as an observer present might see it. The audience does not see the shooting, only the falling body. At the critical moment of the boy's transformation into killer and man, the spectator is deprived both of the spectacle of the body and the spectacle of the killer. The body is shown, poorly focused, in a long take as Steak'n'Fries is told "Now, you're one of us."

The uncertainty the film expresses towards the justification of violence is most profound in its treatment of L'il Ze. While a variety of instrumental motives are offered for the violence done by others, L'il Ze seems unique in his pure enjoyment of violence. A simple reading might suggest that L'il Ze uses violence to attain power and money (he is made rich by his first major act) or out of self-preservation (the elimination of his enemies), but Meirelles seems to be suggesting something more excessive. The child L'il Ze (then known as L'il Dice) accompanies the Tender Trio in a robbery, but escalates the violence into a slaughter; he does so not as an act of initiation (at first, the Trio doesn't even know he has done it, nor does the audience) but because he wants to. L'il Ze's renaming ceremony, in which he receives an amulet from an Umbanda priest, casts his violence as both primal and transcendent. L'il Ze is coded as "evil" in a way others are not; no socio-economic or developmental forces can account for the extremity and irrationality of his actions.

The film shifts between stories and perspectives; while Rocket narrates and orders the events of the film, the camera is not fixed in its orientation. At times, the camera will adopt the perspectives of other characters, or, more commonly, that of a distanced observer. The adoption of L'il Ze's perspective, at Benny's farewell party, is interesting in that it actually encourages a more sympathetic view of L'il Ze as "human", casting doubt on the mythological status the film has created around him. Perhaps, after all, he is not evil as we have been led to believe, but simply a youth driven by feelings of loneliness and exclusion. It is a problem that Meirelles never fully resolves. The violence that leads directly to Benny's murder is sparked by L'il Ze's 'human' emotions: a sense of betrayal at Benny's departure, fear of being alone, his own failure to attract a woman. The battle with Ned is explained in these terms by Rocket: "The problem was simple: L'il Ze was ugly, Ned was handsome."

These attempts at providing psychological explanations for L'il Ze's actions - coming more than halfway through the film - introduce a level of ambiguity. The viewer may want to accept these explanations, which seem to offer a framework for making sense of otherwise inexplicable horrors. On the other hand, these explanations remain unconvincing given the earlier characterization of L'il Ze and the nihilism of the film as a whole. This ambiguity not only provokes confusion about the nature of violence, it also points to the constructed nature of narrative, reminding the viewer that s/he is watching one version of events. The same events, had they been narrated by L'il Ze rather than by Rocket, would compose an entirely different story. The use of voice-over narration and an episodic narrative structure, rather than

encouraging the viewer to simply accept Rocket's perspective, is used to raise questions about the viewer's own relationship to the violence onscreen.

Complicity and silence surround the violence of the *favela*. The residents protect their own, though this seems due less to any loyalty than to a fear of repercussion. After the Tender Trio's brothel robbery, they are protected from the police first by the bar patrons who witness their escape and later by the entire community. Police raid begin, and Rocket claims that "Every day someone got beaten, someone was nailed. But no one talked." This silence also extends to the viewer, whose own complicity in the violence parallels that onscreen. Like the intimidated residents of the City of God, the viewer watches, and participates in the violence by watching, but does not intercede. The photographs Rocket provides to the newspaper are images of spectacle framed for those who are too afraid to experience the violence firsthand. Our own pleasure in framed images of violence is made suspect. The audience is reminded not only of the transgressive power of looking, but also of its complicity in creating the conditions of violence. In her book *Disappearing Acts*, Diana Taylor discusses the role of the spectator in another militarized Latin American nation, Argentina. Taylor discusses the notion of 'percepticide' and how violent spectacle can make "people pull back in fear, denial, and tacit complicity from the show of force. Therein lay its power." (Taylor, 123) Taylor also explains how being compelled to watch violence, while unable to prevent it, disempowers the viewer. Any sense that the viewer has control over the narrative of *City of God* is undermined by the film's reversals and restrictions; rather than godlike omniscience, the film engenders uncertainty, helplessness and complicity.

Alternatives to Violence

The film offers little comfort to viewers uncomfortable with their own complicity in the on-screen violence, or those seeking a 'ray of hope' in the narrative. Meirelles introduces alternatives to violence, only to then dismiss or disempower those alternatives. *City of God* breaks with audience expectations by presenting no viable moral choice. The allegory of the chicken's dilemma - "if you run away they get you and if you stay they get you too" - illustrates the film's fatalism, a fatalism that is not only ascribed to Rocket, but impressed upon the viewer throughout the film. The illusion of escape through sports, education, work, religion or even art is destroyed.

One of the earliest scenes in the film shows the boys playing football. As reviewer Kristian Lin points out, football has frequently represented a 'way out' for poor Brazilians. It is a huge part of both national identity and popular global image and the myth of the 'discovered' athlete is evoked by this sequence of the film. (Lin, 1) That myth is quickly discarded, however. One of the Tender Trio shoots the ball, ending the game and visually eliminating, with the freeze frame of the punctured ball, the dream of escape through athletic success. A similar myth holds that education can provide alternatives to violence. Throughout the film, in

fact, the boys are told (most often by their victims) to stop committing crimes and study. The story of Knockout Ned at first appears to be a moral tale on the power of education, but the tale unfolds very differently. Ned got an education, did military service, and holds a job. Yet he is not only unable to avoid being victimized, he ends up embracing violence as the chief rival to L'il Ze.

The story of the Tender Trio, the first episode of the film, can be read as a fatalistic commentary on the options for young men in the *favela*. The tale ends with the boys splitting up and choosing different paths. Goose chooses to go to work, taking a fishmonger job with his father. Hard work, though, is not the answer here either. Selling fish leads him to an affair which ultimately results in the woman's murder and Goose's own death at the hands of L'il Dice (later L'il Ze). Rocket himself concludes that "work is for suckers" when his own attempts at employment are thwarted by the ongoing violence of the gangs. Workers are presented as little more than targets in *City of God*; not only "suckers", but unlikely to survive, and the workplace is the constant target - both intentional and accidental - of robbery and gunfire. Ned refuses to give a gun to one youth who wishes to join the gang, saying that he is a worker and "won't last a week". The suggestion is that work will not protect one from violence, but expose one to victimization.

The second of the Trio, Shaggy, attempts a more literal form of escape. Shaggy, and later Benny, plan on dropping out of society to live on a farm, sleep with their girlfriends, and smoke dope. As Angelica says to Benny, "this violence sucks." Both Shaggy and Benny are killed on the verge of escaping, Shaggy by police and Benny by one of his own gang associates.

The final member of the Trio, Clipper, turns to religion after he has a bizarre vision. Reciting a prayer, Clipper walks right past the police who are looking for him; they immediately pursue and kill an innocent bystander instead. After this conversion and brush with the law, Clipper simply vanishes - whether disappearing from the narrative is the ultimate escape or the ultimate death is difficult to say. The vision itself is an idiosyncrasy, a single unexplained moment of surrealism in a film otherwise rooted in reality and hyper reality. There is some support for the notion of religion as an alternative to violence, although the film's failure to follow up on Clipper's story undermines this support. Too, there is another, darker and violent, aspect to religion. L'il Ze is a follower of Umbanda and his power and life-force are linked to an amulet. When L'il Ze ignores the advice of the Umbanda priest (raping a woman while wearing the amulet), he is killed, just as the priest warned. Carrot and Ned also call upon God to assist them - "There's a war on, let's start with a prayer" - and wear amulets (crucifixes) of their own. Over a montage of gunfire and weaponry, the gang recites the 'Our Father'. Religion is not, in these cases, an escape from but an aid to violence.

An optimistic viewer might assume that art will provide an alternative, that Rocket's photography will be his ticket out. To some extent this is true, as Rocket attains a job at the newspaper and so is able to leave the *favela* each day

(although even at the newspaper, his only interaction at first is with another exile from the City of God.) After his photos are accidentally placed in the newspaper, Rocket is accepted by others at the newspaper, and even has his first sexual experience with a journalist there. The newspaper is thrilled with Rocket's photographs, which bring the spectacle of the *favela* into the lives of other Brazilians. The cost of this (partial and problematic) 'arrival', however, is that Rocket now feels he cannot return to the City of God. Rocket assumes that his photographs are a death sentence, but in fact the gangsters are willing participants in the spectacle. L'il Ze recognizes the power of the media in creating his image as "Boss", and demands more photographs. Each side of the equation exploits the other, while Rocket, the maker and seller of images, exploits both. Ironically, though, Rocket's success comes from returning to the City of God. His ability to produce and frame its images for outsiders means that Rocket is dependent upon violence for his livelihood.

Controlling the Violence

Some critics of *City of God* have found fault with its approach to violence, particularly with the lack of empathy it generates for its characters and victims. Joanne Laurier, for instance, complains that the film treats its subjects with "too much detachment...the characters are for the most part seen as though from a distance...the all-dominating violence is all too passively presented...as a result, the film fails to generate much sympathy for its victims - not a minor weakness." (Laurier) This distance is not only an emotional affect, as Laurier observes, but a critical visual strategy. The use of long shots and off-screen space prevents the audience from seeing much of the violence, and deprives the viewer of the catharsis that may be produced by seeing a violent act carried to its conclusion. Much of the bodily violence in the film is implied. In an interview, Meirelles says that this was a conscious choice: "Every time I had an opportunity to show violence I tried to avoid showing it..." (Gonzalez) The effect can be equated to Brechtian distancing; rather than empathizing, the audience is asked to evaluate. Rather than trying to show the audience the reality, the audience is asked to imagine it. To further problematize viewer response, events are frequently presented from an opposing or uncertain point of view. The rape of Ned's girlfriend, for instance, is filmed not from Ned's perspective but from that of a bystander or observer looking over his shoulder. This positions the viewer not to identify with the subject, but outside the subject.

A typical sequence that employs the use of off-screen space to distance and unsettle the viewer is Shorty's murder of his wife. A long shot frames a view through the bedroom doorway; Shorty wields a shovel and attacks his wife, but the composition excludes the woman and the viewer must imagine the contact of the shovel to her body. In the next scene, the shot composition is the same, but now Shorty is seen digging; the hole (or grave) is still excluded from the composition. A similar technique is used in the sequence that reveals L'il Dice's murders at the motel. The audience has already seen the victims in an

earlier sequence (discussed below); now, they are not shown. Instead, the viewer sees only L'il Dice, his weapon, and his expression of ecstasy.

This strategy creates an unsettling effect. The viewer is constructed as not only complicit, but morally suspect, simultaneously wanting to see more and responding less. If the photographer of the images is committing an act of violence, so is the audience that looks at and demands those images.

In fact, bodies, the site of so much violence in *City of God*, are not dwelt upon. Throughout most of the film, they are treated with alternating casualness and calculation. The audience sees bodies falling, or lying on the ground, but the editing is rapid and generally cuts immediately away. The audience doesn't see the blood or tearing of flesh that we assume must accompany events. There are three scenes, however, which significantly reverse this technique, presenting and dwelling upon stylized tableaux of disfigured bodies. The first of these is the original scene of the motel massacre. The scene is silent as the camera slowly pans across rooms of bodies, arranged in stiff, unnatural positions; one woman hangs from a grill as though on a torture rack. In the second of these scenes, the montage that precedes the gang war, the bloody bodies of children slowly dissolve into other bodies, overlapped by distorted dialogue. In the final tableau, at the film's conclusion, the camera cuts from one dead gang member to another, close-ups showing the blood, brains and shattered bodies. This scene is also silent, slowing down and contrasting sharply with the chaotic and kinetic shootout that precedes it.

These reversals of tone, like the shifts from comedic to horrific, contribute to the violence of the film's form. Through its pervasiveness, violence in *City of God* becomes naturalized. Violence is not presented as a disruptive element in the social narrative but as a unifying motif that propels and connects the individual stories. Violence is the organizing principle of the film, which is full of interruptions, ruptures, and narrative reversals. This violence of form speaks to the film's tension between the hyper-real and the poetic, the postmodern and the radical. *City of God* possesses the markers of the postmodern film in its "disjointed narratives, rapid and chaotic camera, speedy flow of images, motifs of chaos... [and] dystopic scenarios". (Boggs, 361) But it also insists on being read as a (neo)neorealist and radical Brazilian text in the traditions of de Sica, Rocha and Brecht.

According to Baudrillard, the only means of resistance to the hyper-real is to refuse to resist, rather than claiming a subject position, "reflecting meaning without absorbing it". (Baudrillard, 85) *City of God* offers a subject position, that of the spectator who controls the gaze and the narrative, but challenges and erodes that position through violence, causing the spectator to question the nature of violence, image-making, and responsibility. ☺

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