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The “dialectic of marginality”: preliminary notes on Brazilian contemporary culture¹

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Abstract

In this working paper, I want to propose a different framework to cope with contemporary Brazilian society and, above all, Brazilian contemporary cultural production. It will be my contention that the “dialectic of malandroism,” as proposed in the seminal work of Antonio Candido, is being replaced by a “dialectic of marginality,” which is mainly based in the overcoming of social inequalities through confrontation instead of reconciliation, and through the exposition of violence instead of its concealment. Thus, whereas the “dialectic of malandroism” was represented by a joyful way of dealing with social inequalities as well as with everyday life, on the contrary, the “dialectic of marginality” presents itself through the exploration and exacerbation of violence, seen as a way of denouncing the social dilemma in Brazil. The confrontation of these two worldviews creates a “symbolic battle,” which I am trying to underscore.

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² Professor of Comparative Literature at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). I would like to thank Talia Guzman-Gonzalez and Andrew Joseph Jager for an invaluable collaboration concerning the translations of certain passages of this text. I also would like to especially thank Ross Forman for a careful editing of the current version of this essay. This paper has benefited from debates and seminars held at the Centre for Brazilian Studies, Oxford University. I would like to particularly thank Leslie Bethell, Sergio Paulo Rouanet, Barbara Freitag and Kurt von Mettenheim for posing questions and raising criticisms, which were deeply appreciated.

Resumo

Neste ensaio, proponho uma abordagem alternativa em relação à sociedade brasileira e, sobretudo, à cultura brasileira contemporânea. Talvez a "dialética da malandragem," tal como formulada por Antonio Candido num texto fundamental, esteja sendo substituída por uma "dialética da marginalidade." A "dialética da marginalidade" pretende superar a desigualdade social mediante o confronto, em lugar da conciliação - através da exposição da violência, em lugar de seu ocultamento. Portanto, se a "dialética da malandragem" supõe uma forma descontraída, jovial de lidar com a injustiça social e o cotidiano, a "dialética da marginalidade" impõe-se através da exploração e mesmo da exposição metódica da violência, a fim de explicitar o dilema da sociedade brasileira. O enfrentamento desses dois modos de compreender o país cria uma "batalha simbólica", que este ensaio almeja discutir.

“Till you see the people”

In the opening paragraph of a book rarely quoted these days, John dos Passos provides a synthetic illustration of the approach I want to call into question in this essay:

The Brazilians are great people for telling jokes about themselves. One story that was going the rounds a few years ago was about God and an archangel on the third day of creation. When the Lord Jehovah has finished making Brazil he can't help bragging a little to one of the archangels. He's planted the greatest forests and laid out the world's biggest river system and built a magnificent range of mountains with lovely bays and ocean beaches. He's filled the hills with topaz and aquamarine and sowed the rivers with gold dust and diamonds. He's arranged a climate free from hurricanes and earthquakes which will grow every conceivable kind of fruit.

“Is it fair, Lord,” asks the archangel, “to give so many benefits to just one country?”

“You wait,” says Lord Jehovah, “till you see the people I'm going to put there.”³

This joke relies on a paradox: it makes Brazil into a paradise on earth but, at the same time, diminishes its idyllic status by inhabiting it with a seemingly mediocre people who will not know how to profit from its bounty. The joke cuts deeper than it seems, for it keenly rewrites the Biblical account of the *Book of Genesis*. First, God creates the heavens and the earth and only then man is formed. God creates the Garden of Eden and puts Adam in it, “to work it and take care of it.”⁴ Therefore, there can be no Garden of Eden without a man to cultivate it. And exactly as in *Genesis*, the Brazilian people amplify the fall of Man, for they are not capable of turning the Garden of Eden into a fruitful domain. Nonetheless, the story has even darker undertones, for, if Adam was tempted by Eve, who had previously been seduced by the serpent, in the case of the Brazilian people, it is as if the fall is only natural; it did not demand any particular chain of events. After all, “You wait,” says Lord Jehovah, “till you see the people I'm going to put there.”

Of course, dos Passos immediately informs the reader that the logic of the joke is topsy-turvy. Most of the time, Brazil's exuberant tropical nature represents an obstacle to human settlement, and, therefore, social and economic development. Indeed, in the nineteenth century Henry Thomas Buckle had given what seemed the final verdict regarding the complex relationship between Man and Nature in the tropics: “(...) much is the flow and abundance of life by which Brazil is marked from all other countries on

³ John dos Passos. *Brazil on the Move*. New York: Doubleday, 1963, p. 1.

⁴ *Book of Genesis*, 2: 15.

earth. But amid all the pomp and splendour of Nature, no place is left for Man.”⁵ This trope became omnipresent and probably found its most eloquent endorsement in Euclides da Cunha. In his unfinished book on the Amazon region, he faithfully reproduces Buckle’s conclusion: “The dominant impression that I had, and maybe reflecting a positive truth, is this: there, man is an impertinent intruder.”⁶ As a matter of fact, in his masterpiece, *Os sertões* [*Rebellion in the Backlands*], the conflict between man and nature was already in the fore. If in the backlands man was not an intruder, he could never be more than a survivor. One always remembers that, according to Cunha’s incisive formula, “the sertanejo, or man of the backlands, is above all else a strong man.”⁷ However, one also cannot forget that the outcome of the war of Canudos signalled the sertanejo’s ultimate defeat. In Cunha’s poignant description of the last moments of the resistance:

Canudos did not surrender. The only case of its kind in history, it held out to the last man. Conquered inch by inch, in the literal meaning of the words, it fell on October 5, toward dusk – when its last defenders fell, dying, every man of them. There were only four of them left: an old man, two full-grown men, and a child, facing a furiously raging army of five thousand soldiers.⁸

In other words, things are not quite as they seemed at first glance. Tropical nature might be as inhospitable for the establishment of culture as it is exuberant in its appearance of abundance and fertility – as a matter of fact, this is a trope that dates back to Pero Vaz de Caminha’s 1500 Letter to King Manoel I.⁹ Then, if this initial understanding of Brazilian nature has to be called into question, what about the hardly flattering view of the Brazilian people as the ironic counterpoint to paradise on earth? John dos Passos did not miss the opportunity to repudiate the joke and dutifully asserts: “The chief asset of Brazil is the Brazilians.”¹⁰ However, he never informs the reader why this is the case. Elizabeth Bishop, though, offered a possible answer in the closing paragraph of a book that later she would disown, her 1962 book on Brazil written for *Life*’s World Library:

⁵ Henry Thomas Buckle. *The History of Civilization in England*. Vol. 2. London: John W. Parker, 1857, p. 95.
⁶ Euclides da Cunha. *À margem da história*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1999, p. 2. The original reads: “A impressão dominante que tive, e talvez correspondente a uma verdade positiva, é esta: o homem, ali, é ainda um intruso impertinente.”
⁷ Euclides da Cunha. *Rebellion in the Backlands*. Trans. Samuel Putnam. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 89.
⁸ *Idem*, p. 475.
⁹ In Caminha’s always-quoted words, “There is a great plenty, an infinitude of waters. The country is so well-favoured that if it were rightly cultivated it would yield everything, because of its waters.” *The Letter of Pero Vaz de Caminha*. E. Bradford Burns (ed.). *A Documentary History of Brazil*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965, p. 28.
¹⁰ John dos Passos. *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

Everyone who visits Brazil agrees that the ordinary, average Brazilians are a wonderful people, cheerful, sweet-tempered, witty and patient – incredibly patient. To see them standing in line for hours, literally for hours, in lines folded back on themselves two or three times the length of a city block, only to get aboard a broken-down, recklessly driven bus and return to their tiny suburban houses, where like as not these days the street has not been repaired, nor the garbage collected, and there may even be no water – to see this is to marvel at their patience. Other people undergoing the same trials would surely stage a revolution every month or so.¹¹

This quote gives us a different idea on the same people, or at least it justifies dos Passos's late enthusiasm for Brazilians. Nonetheless, it relies on the same basic structure of paradox, constructing a Janus-like image of Brazilians in which every positive remark conceals an underlying criticism. It is not so clear whether Bishop is solely praising the moderation of the people or whether she is also implying a critique of their resignation towards unbearable living standards. In this case, does patience mean wisdom or apathy?

In this essay, I suggest that a similar paradoxical structure has dominated the tradition of so-called "*pensamento social brasileiro*," ("Brazilian social thought") that is, the tradition of intellectual essays and scholarly books written on the historical formation of Brazilian society. Therefore, the structure of a double-bind definition of the country's history has been internalised from the well-known genre of the foreigner's travelogue into the tradition of the "Brazilian social thought," developed by Brazilian thinkers and social scientists. Let me be deliberately schematic in the presentation of its two most distinguished schools.

On one side, there is a school that considers the formation of Brazilian identity as fundamentally "incomplete," pointing out several instances in which basic social reforms were not accomplished, modernization of the economic sector was not satisfactorily implemented, and redistribution of wealth was not seriously attempted. This school focuses primarily on social inequalities and on the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of an elite who remain in key positions irrespective of political changes and social turmoil. According to this approach, Brazil is primarily seen through a concept of lack or failure. I call this approach "the archaeology of absence."¹² Of course, this method does not contribute to an anthropological understanding of the uniqueness of

¹¹ Elizabeth Bishop. *Brazil*. New York: Time Incorporated, 1962, p. 148.

¹² "This approach consists of an appraisal of cultural productions based upon the identification of the absence of this or that element, instead of focusing on the elements that truly define the cultural product under scrutiny." João Cezar de Castro Rocha. *Literatura e cordialidade. O público e o privado na cultura brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro: EdUERJ, 1998, p. 79.

Brazilian society. It should be emphasized, however, that noted scholars have already identified this impasse as well as have endeavoured to overcome it: “When we investigate Brazilian reality, we are rarely able to do so from within the framework of Brazilian social logic (...).”¹³

On the other side, there is a school that, on the contrary, values Brazilian formation as the emergence of a unique way of negotiating differences and controlling the agonistic element of its social system. Rather than mourning the incompleteness of the process of modernization, this approach praises Brazilians’ choice of a social universe whose peculiar logic is then acknowledged. This school, initially inspired by the work of Gilberto Freyre, focuses primarily on the social consequences of miscegenation, which is seen as the source of the hospitality and openness commonly attributed to Brazilian people, “the cheerful, sweet-tempered” folks that so impressed Elizabeth Bishop. Interpreted most favourably, this school understands Brazilian society as being fundamentally “hybrid” – a concept that has become increasingly popular these days. In a more sophisticated version, this school stresses Brazilians’ ability to avoid overt conflicts through the creation of mediations between the antagonistic poles in dispute. Of course, this method does not provide an adequate historical understanding of the dilemmas faced in contemporary Brazilian society.

As is obvious, both the critical and the apologetic viewpoints are unable to cope with the complexity of Brazilian social formation; after all they are a one-sided view of a fairly complex problem. In this essay, I am aiming to develop a new framework for the analysis of contemporary Brazilian culture. It is a framework that tries to encompass both approaches. It does not mean, however, that I am trying to reconcile them, but rather that I am attempting to fulfil their potential through the interrogation imposed by its opposite model.

Movies and novels

In 2004, in the 76th Annual Academy Awards, Brazilian cinema witnessed a historic moment with the unprecedented nomination of director Fernando Meirelles’s *Cidade de Deus* [*City of God*] for four Oscar Awards: Best Director, Best Adapted

¹³ Roberto DaMatta. “For an Anthropology of the Brazilian Tradition or ‘A Virtude está no Meio.’” David J. Hess and Roberto DaMatta (eds.) *The Brazilian Puzzle: Culture on the Borderlands of the Western World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 275.

Screenplay, Best Film Editing, and Best Cinematography.¹⁴ Without a doubt, the occasion should be celebrated, since it confirms the level of mastery achieved by national productions. Instead of simply awakening interest of international audiences through exotic landscapes and “unusual” social relations, Meirelles’s nominations acknowledge the high level of craftsmanship achieved by the Brazilian cinema. At the same time, in the saga of organized crime relentlessly described by Paulo Lins in the novel *Cidade de Deus*, Zé Pequeno’s [Li’l Zé] brutal violence also demonstrates that this violent characterization of contemporary Brazilian culture claims new modes of analysis, capable of stimulating another reading of the film as well as of its adaptation of Lins’s novel.¹⁵

Similarly, in 1962, Brazilian cinema witnessed another important moment of international recognition when Anselmo Duarte’s *O Pagador de Promessas* [*Payer of Promises*] won the “Palme D’Or” at the Cannes Festival. It was also nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Film that year. In the incisive play originally written by Dias Gomes, Zé do Burro’s naïve religious beliefs reveal, by a sharp contrast, the complexity of urban life, a topic that rose to prominence during the second half of the twentieth century, a moment when, for the first time, more than half of Brazilian population lived in urban centres. In the saga of the “pagador de promessas,” the dislocation from countryside to city is not only expressed through the death of Zé do Burro, but also through the attraction his wife, Rosa, feels for a typically urban character, the *malandro* (rogue), Bonitão.

These two films offer an intriguing parallel: from a social point of view, the distance separating Zé Pequeno and Zé do Burro could not be larger. On the one hand, we have the criminal and his brutality, terrorizing all viewers, as if the horror present in the movie could be found just around the corner, around the clock. Thus Zé Pequeno becomes an icon of contemporary urban violence. On the other hand, the peasant, and his simple faith, captivates viewers, precisely because of the anachronistic light in which he is characterized; as if the past has projected its melancholy shadow over the daily life of the city of Salvador. Thus Zé do Burro becomes a metaphor of the remembrance of

¹⁴ The nominees were: Directing Nomination, Fernando Meirelles; Screenplay Adaptation, Bráulio Mantovani; Film Editing, Daniel Rezende; Cinematography, Cesar Charlone.

¹⁵ The term *Cidade de Deus* designate three different but related objects: the actual community, created in 1962; the novel written by Paulo Lins; and the film directed by Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund. Therefore, I will use the following pattern hereupon: whenever referring to the community, I shall write *Cidade de Deus*, whereas I will write *Cidade de Deus* in order to identify the novel. Finally, I will refer to the film as *City of God*.

things past. How can we understand the distance between these two historical moments?

Before exploring that distance, let us remember a surprising connection between Zé do Burro and Zé Pequeno. This connection arises not via a fictional character, but via a poor woman who has become internationally known for her writings: Carolina Maria de Jesus, whose *Quarto de despejo* [*Beyond all Pity*], published in 1960, immediately catapulted her to an unexpected although short-lived moment of celebrity. Her personal story indeed has the flavour of a film: “She would sort waste paper by day, but at night, when she could, she would confront the blank pages of her notebook. (...) By day, sorting paper meant money: by night, writing on sheets of paper became a new form of survival.”¹⁶ Near the end of her diary, the reader finds a description of the set for a movie, which is being made at the Canindé *favela* (shantytown), in São Paulo, where Carolina de Jesus lived. The extract is long but worth noting:

What I have noticed is that nobody likes the *favela*, but they need it. I looked at the dread stamped on the faces of the *favelados*.

“They are filming the exploits of Promessinha. But Promessinha wasn’t from our *favela*.”

When the actors went to lunch, the *favelados* wanted to break in and take their food. If they only could! Chicken, meat pies, roasts, beer... I admired the elegance of the Vera Cruz artists. It is a national Brazilian movie company. It deserves special consideration. They stayed all day in the *favela*. The *favela* was overcrowded, and the neighbours from the brick houses were complaining that the intellectuals were favouring the *favelados*.

(...) The women cursed the artists:

“These tramps come here to dirty our door.”

People passing on Dutra Street, seeing the fire trucks, come in to see if there is a fire or someone drowning. The people are saying:

“They are filming Promessinha!”

But the title of the film is “Threatened City.”¹⁷

In 1960, Roberto Farias’s film *Cidade ameaçada* [*Threatened City*], won several awards in festivals in Brazil and was played at the Cannes Festival.¹⁸ Carolina de Jesus’s insightful yet paradoxical comment, that “nobody likes the *favela*, but they need it,” seems apt considering the international success of films such as Walter Salles’s *Central do Brasil* [*Central Station*] and Fernando Meirelles’s film *City of God*. Jesus’s remark raises an important although disturbing ethical problem, namely, how to return to these communities the profit derived from the exploitation of their image, as well as the

¹⁶ Felipe Fortuna. “An Autobiography of Wretchedness.” In Carolina Maria de Jesus. *Beyond all Pity*. Trans. David St. Clair. London: Souvenir Press, 2004, p. 7

¹⁷ Carolina Maria de Jesus. *Beyond all Pity*. Trans. David St. Clair. London: Souvenir Press, 2004, p. 189.

¹⁸ In 1960, the film received the following awards: Best Film and Best Director at the Marília Festival, Best Director Award, of State São Paulo; Best Director Award, of State Paraná.

exposition of their everyday hardships? Photographers, moviemakers, writers, anthropologists, literary critics, *we all* have our own stake in the wake of an international interest in the lives, hopes and dreams of the world's outcasts. But what about them, what about the actual excluded themselves?¹⁹ Have they improved their living standards because of this very exhibition? Of course, this is not simply a "Brazilian" issue. See, for instance, the harsh remark made by Joseph Brodsky, originally delivered as a paper in a workshop on the role of the intellectual in exile:

As we gather here, in this attractive and well-lit room, on this cold December evening, to discuss the plight of the writer in exile, let us pause for a minute and think of some of those who, quite naturally, didn't make it to this room. (...)

Whatever the proper name for this phenomenon is, whatever the motives, origins, and destinations of these people are, whatever their impact on the societies which they abandon and to which they come, one thing is absolutely clear: they make it very difficult to talk with a straight face about the plight of the writer in exile.²⁰

Thus, the ethical implications of speaking in the name of the ones who suffered, instead of providing them with conditions to voice their own stories, is an ethical dilemma that has become ever clearer these days. In a topic closely related to my own approach, let us see the review on Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family*, a chronicle of life in a New York ghetto. The author spent eleven years there, and her account is a poignant story of lives that seemingly have little to tell. The review concludes in a similar vein to Carolina de Jesus's observation:

But the tougher question is why the stories of poor people (...) are such valuable raw material, creating a frisson among the literary set and the buyers of books? Why are their lives and private griefs currency for just about anyone but themselves?²¹

However, a decisive change has started to become visible in communities throughout the world: there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the fact that the profits derived from their stories and from their images only return to them in homeopathic doses, so to

¹⁹ The sociologist Alba Zaluar has just published *Integração perversa: pobreza e tráfico de drogas* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 2005), proposing that we replace the concept of 'exclusion' for that of 'perverse integration'. In future works, I will take this distinction into account, but the present essay was already complete when her book appeared. Let me also mention the book by Luiz Eduardo Soares, MV Bill and Celso Athayde, *Cabeça de porco* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2005). Inspired in the seminal work by Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, the authors develop the dichotomy 'invisibility/recognition' in order to propose an anthropological understanding of the problem of urban violence.

²⁰ Joseph Brodsky. "The Condition we call Exile or Acorns Aweigh." *On Grief and Reasons. Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994, pp. 22-23. I owe to Henning Ritter this reference.

²¹ JoAn Wypijewski. "No Way Out." Review of Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble and Coming of Age in the Bronx*. *The Guardian Review*, 13/12/2003, p. 12.

speak. That is why, in this essay, I seek to identify a phenomenon that has been occurring over the last few years, whose consequences cannot yet be appraised fully, as it is still in full swing. This phenomenon should provoke a radical shift in the image of Brazilian culture abroad, as well as the self-image that Brazilians hold. I am referring to the transition from a “dialectic of malandroism,” as Antonio Candido has termed the social strategy of the *malandro*, to a “dialectic of marginality,” as I propose to christen the phenomenon.²² To be more precise, I am dealing with the collision between these two ways of understanding the country, since it is not a mechanical substitution of one for the other, but, on the contrary, a “war of narratives,” to borrow Nestor García Canclini’s expression.²³ Once more, my approach aims to avoid the pitfall implied in choosing either the apologetic or the critical model for analysing Brazilian social formation, as well as contemporary cultural production. Thus, I propose that contemporary Brazilian culture has become the stage for a (not always) subtle symbolic battle. On one side, an accurate critique of social inequality is advanced. This is the case with Paulo Lins’s novel *Cidade de Deus*, not to mention the music of Racionais MCs, Ferréz’s novels *Capão Pecado* [*Sin Capão*] and *Manual prático do ódio* [*Practical Guide to Hate*]. On the other side, albeit inadvertently, the belief in the old order of the conciliation of differences is upheld; such is the case of Meirelles’s film *City of God* and the Globo network TV spin off, *Cidade dos Homens* [*City of Men*].

Before exploring this symbolic battle, let us briefly return to the prize-winning year of Zé do Burro’s saga, whose mixture of obstinacy and submissiveness Elizabeth Bishop foreshadowed in the passage already quoted. Let us recall her surprising conclusion: “Other people undergoing the same trials would surely stage a revolution every month or so.”²⁴ Two years after her prophetic words, a military coup disguised itself as revolution and installed the dictatorship that would rule the country for the next two decades. Bishop got a very good glimpse of the target, but she believed too much in the proverbial Brazilian patience. If she could rewrite her passage today, she would probably abandon the characterization of a happy people, waiting for nothing. The worst is that for the disadvantaged social classes 1962 and 2005 are just different numbers. In a recent new edition of Carolina Maria de Jesus’s *Quarto de despejo*, a clear forerunner of what I call

²² I am indebted to Sergio Paulo Rouanet concerning the use of the term “dialectic” in what I propose to call “dialectic of marginality.” It should be seen under the light of Theodor Adorno’s negative dialectics, which does not entail the ultimate production of synthesis.

²³ Nestor García Canclini. *Imaginarios urbanos*. Buenos Aires: Editora Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1997, p. 78.

²⁴ Elizabeth Bishop. *Brazil*. New York: Time Incorporated, 1962, p. 148.

“dialectic of marginality,” Felipe Fortuna stresses this unwelcome continuity: “As I write this preface (...), the World Bank has just released figures revealing that poverty in Latin America has not seen any real change over the last 20 years. (...) I am rereading the latest news and the diary of Carolina de Jesus. There is everything still to do.”²⁵ In the end, violence replaced the celebrated patience of Brazilians. Undoubtedly, Zé Pequeno, the merciless criminal, has taken the place of Zé do Burro, the naïve believer.

For this reason, in the last few decades a growing sense of discomfort and insecurity has become part of everyday life in major Brazilian cities. Neighbourhoods with controlled access and highly protected houses are the reaction by the most privileged to the reality of increasing urban violence; of the neo-*favela* as the warehouses of international drug trafficking; the centre of organized crime, terrorizing middle and upper classes neighbourhoods as they have been terrorizing people for decades in peripheral areas. To some extent, the key to solving the problem lies in the elaboration of a new way of approaching Brazilian contemporary society. In the end, critical analysis will only achieve the level of contemporary cultural production if it is as innovative as the cultural production itself. It is in this sense that I propose the concept of dialectic of marginality as a way of describing the *partial* overcoming of the dialectic of malandroism – *partial* overcoming, for both dialectics are currently disputing the symbolic representation of the country. Through the acknowledgement of this symbolic battle, it should be possible to reveal the troubling Manichaeism of the film *City of God*, and, at the same time, allow for an alternative contemporary cultural production. But before doing so, let us revisit the previous model.

Dialectics in conflict²⁶

In 1970, Antonio Candido published one of his most acclaimed essays, “A dialética da malandragem.”²⁷ In it, he proposed a groundbreaking interpretation of Brazilian social formation through an innovative reading of Manuel Antonio de Almeida’s novel *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* [*Memoirs*

²⁵ Felipe Fortuna. “An Autobiography of Wretchedness.” Carolina Maria de Jesus. *Beyond all Pity*. Trans. David St. Clair. London: Souvenir Press, 2004, pp. 5 & 9.

²⁶ Some of the ideas sketched here were first developed in “Dialéticas em colisão: malandragem ou marginalidade? Notas iniciais sobre a cena cultural contemporânea.” *Revista de Cultura Vozes*. Petrópolis, 2003, pp. 52-59

²⁷ “A dialética da malandragem (Caracterização das *Memórias de um sargento de milícias*)”. Antonio Candido’s essay was originally published in *Revista dos Estudos Brasileiros*. Universidade do Estado de São Paulo, 1970, n° 8, pp. 67-89. An English translation appeared, “Dialectic of Malandroism,” *On Literature and Society*. Trans., ed., and introd. Howard S. Becker. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995, pp. 79-103. Almeida’s novel was first published in a newspaper (1852-1853), and then in a book form (1853-1854).

of a *Militia Sergeant*]. According to Candido, Brazilian social formation was based upon a productive negotiation between the poles of order and disorder – negotiation carried out mainly by the socially plastic figure of the *malandro* – a man of many faces and discourses, whose *gingado* (swing) competes with his ability for taking advantage in the most diverse, and adverse, situations. This special way of negotiating differences allows the coexistence of diverse codes within the same social space, in this way avoiding the emergence of social conflicts or at least rendering them more readily controllable.

Such transit between oppositional spheres represents the metaphor of a social formation consolidated by agreement rather than rupture; a social formation based on a pacifying attitude (“deixa-disso”) instead of conflict. In the end, the desire for co-option also defines the *malandro*. Deep inside, as Candido makes clear, the *malandro* awaits to be “finally absorbed by the conventionally positive pole.”²⁸ It actually happens with the protagonist of *Memórias de um sargento de milícias*: after living several adventures in the world of disorder, the *malandro* Leonardo is perfectly integrated in the pole of order through a favourable marriage and an unexpected promotion that makes him a militia sergeant. In this context, let us consider the precise definition given by Jorge Amado to the character “Gato,” a typical *malandro*. Let us open *Capitães da areia* [*Captains of the Sand*], published in 1937, probably the first Brazilian novel to voice the problem of children living in the streets: “He had the gift of malandrous elegance, that resides more in the beat of the step, the way of wearing a hat, the careless knot of a tie, than in the clothes themselves”.²⁹ After all, the clothes might be worn out, just as the country’s social forces might be cracked, ready to break. Better then to keep the gaze away from the clothes, in a gesture analogous to that of dominant groups who wish to forget the social unrest most blatantly symptomized in the irruption of violence into day-to-day life in urban centres.

In the important book *Carnavais, malandros e heróis* [*Carnival, Rogues, and Heroes*], released in 1979, Roberto DaMatta unfolded all the consequences of the “dialectic of malandroism,” proposed by Candido. DaMatta does so by suggesting that the Brazilian dilemma stemmed from the oscillation between the world of universal laws and the universe of personal relationships, between the rigid hierarchy of law and the smooth suppleness of everyday life. In his vocabulary, everyone in Brazil aspires to the

²⁸ *Idem*, p. 330. The original reads: “ser finalmente absorvido pelo pólo convencionalmente positivo.”

²⁹ The original reads: “Tinha o dom da elegância malandra, que está mais no jeito de andar, de colocar o chapéu e dar um laço despreocupado na gravata que na roupa propriamente.” Jorge Amado. *Capitães de areia*. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1995, p. 34. See the English translation, *Captains of the Sands*. Trans., Gregory Rabassa. New York: Avon Books, 1988.

status of “person” in detriment to the condition of the “individual”. The person has at his disposal a social network that allows him to bend the law at his convenience, whereas the individual has to bow to the perverse universality of rules, since his social network is very limited. All of this is conveyed in a proverb keenly studied by DaMatta: “For friends, everything; for enemies, the law” (“Aos amigos, tudo; aos inimigos, a lei”). Precisely the law that should protect all citizens equally becomes a twisted instrument for re-establishing hierarchies.

Therefore, according to DaMatta, what would “make Brazil, Brazil” is the constitution of a “relational order,” one that is grounded in “a basic social mechanism through which the society is formed by three spaces whose unity can thus be remade.”³⁰ These spaces – the everyday, the festive, and the official world – constitute a peculiar mosaic in which fracture gives way to unity. This social artifice, however, hides a concrete although predictable interest:

[...] there is at all levels the recurrent preoccupation with mediation and syncretism, in the synthesis that sooner or later comes to impede the open fight or the conflict for the naked and crude perception of the mechanisms of social and political exploitation.³¹

In Brazil, we like to perform Dona Flor’s very special choice, which has nothing to do with Sophie’s. According to the anthropologist, in his thought-provoking reading of Jorge Amado’s novel *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos* [*Dona Flora and Her Two Husbands*], when Dona Flor has to choose between the *malandro* but charming Vadinho, and the perfectly conventional but extremely boring husband Teodoro Madureira, Dona Flor simply performs the act that defines Brazilian social relations: she chooses not to choose!³² Instead of remaining faithful to only one love, she decides to be loyal to her own desires and becomes Dona Flor *and* her two husbands. Moreover, Vadinho is already a dead man, a deceased lover, so to speak. Thus, Dona Flora is able to bridge even the worlds of life and death. Seemingly, Dona Flor has managed to find a

³⁰ Roberto DaMatta. *A casa & a rua. Espaço, cidadania, mulher e morte no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Guanabara, 1987, p. 66. The expression “what makes Brazil, Brazil” can be found in the “introduction” of *Carnavais, malandros e heróis*: “Numa palavra, a questão desse livro é saber o que faz o Brasil, Brasil.” *Carnavais, malandros e heróis. Para uma sociologia do dilema brasileiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Guanabara, 1990 [1979], p. 15. See the English translation: *Carnival, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of Brazilian Dilemma*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991. Later, the same expression was used as the title of a collection of DaMatta’s essays: *O que faz o Brasil, Brasil?* Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1984.

³¹ The original reads: “[...] há em todos os níveis essa recorrente preocupação com a intermediação e com o sincretismo, na síntese que vem cedo ou tarde impedir a luta aberta ou o conflito pela percepção nua e crua dos mecanismos de exploração social e política.” In Roberto DaMatta. “A fábula das três raças.” *Relativizando. Uma introdução à antropologia social*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Vozes, 1981, p. 83.

³² Roberto DaMatta. “*Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*: um romance relacional.” *A casa & a rua. Espaço, cidadania, mulher e morte no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Guanabara, 1987, pp. 97-132.

way to have her cake and eat it too. Or she has listened carefully to Vadinho, when he finally convinces her of the advantages of having two instead of only one husband:

(...) He is your outward face, I your inner, the lover you don't know how and can't bear to evade. We are your two husbands, your two faces, your yes and your no. To be happy you need both of us. (...) Now you are Dona Flor, complete as you should be.³³

In the studies by Antonio Candido and Roberto DaMatta, violence is ultimately controlled by means of compensatory reconciliation, which, on a social scale, seems to favour the adoption of Dona Flor's choice not to choose. However, and in spite of being the first to acknowledge the importance of their studies, I want to propose a different framework to cope with contemporary Brazilian society and, above all, contemporary cultural production. Let me then reiterate my hypothesis: the "dialectic of malandroism" is being partially replaced or, to say the least, directly challenged by a "dialectic of marginality," which is mainly grounded in the principle of overcoming of social inequalities through confrontation instead of reconciliation, and through the exposure of violence instead of its concealment. In other words, I am interested in identifying cultural and symbolic representations of this conflict; therefore, I am not primarily concerned with empirical researches on the actual levels of violence and criminality in contemporary Brazilian society.

Indeed, Flora Süssekind has already remarked on the existence of a "poetic practice to the recent historical unfolding of a violent, segregating, authoritarian urban experience, such as that of Brazil."³⁴ I want to deepen Süssekind's hypothesis by extending it to the whole of Brazilian social relations as well as to contemporary cultural production. What I have coined "dialectic of marginality" underscores a new form of relationship between social classes. It no longer favours neglecting differences, but rather brings them to the fore, refusing the uncertain promise of social reconciliation. In this context, it is important to clarify that the term "marginal" does not have necessarily and exclusively a derogative meaning, representing above all (although not exclusively)

³³ Jorge Amado. *Dona Flora and Her Two Husbands*. Trans. Harriet de Onís. New York: Avon Books, 1998, p. 602.

³⁴ Flora Süssekind. "Deterritorialization and Literary Form: Brazilian Contemporary Literature and Urban Form." University of Oxford Centre for Brazilian Studies. Working Paper Series CBS-34-02, p. 26. Let me acknowledge, however, that Süssekind's approach is rather concerned with a critique of the literary manifestations of what I called "dialectic of marginality." See, for instance, the following passage: "The urban thematizations of the country's recent cultural production are not limited, however, to literary workings of ethnographic or criminal reterritorialization. Some defiguration and deterritorialization processes, which are structural to Brazilian contemporary poetry, function, thus, as particularly critical interlocutors of an urban experience of violence, instability and segregation." *Idem*, p. 9.

the majority of the population impoverished and excluded from the benefits of social progress. In the incisive definition proposed by Ferréz to define the movement of “marginal literature”: “(...) the culture of the periphery made by people from the periphery full stop.”³⁵

Thus, whereas the “dialectic of malandroism” represents a jovial way of dealing with social inequalities as well as with everyday life, on the contrary, the “dialectic of marginality” presents itself through the exploration and exacerbation of violence, seen as a way of repudiating the social dilemma of Brazilian society. In other words, violence seems not only to dominate everyday life, especially in urban centres such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, but it also prevails in the current cultural production. Therefore, I believe that the development of the concept of “dialectic of marginality” might enable us to understand the emergence of a contemporary cultural production centred around as well as focused on violence.

Have the dialectic of malandroism and relational order been substituted in part by their opposite, the dialectic of marginality and conflictive order? Such symbolic confrontation has profound consequences given that open conflict can no longer be hidden under the guise of carnivalizing camaraderie. The emergence of a dialectic of marginality helps to explain the common topic of a large number of recent productions that sketch a new image of the country – an image that is defined by violence. Indeed, it is worth repeating that violence has been transformed into the protagonist of novels, confessional texts, music lyrics, successful films, popular programmes and even TV series. Violence is the common denominator, but the way it is approached defines contradictory movements, determining the symbolic battle I am trying to make explicit.

Symbolic battles

The best way to expose this symbolic battle and to present a different reading of Fernando Meirelles’s film *City of God* consists in emphasizing the drastic, and hardly innocuous, shift of the narrator’s point of view in the transposition of Paulo Lins’s powerful novel *Cidade de Deus* to the screen. As we will see, the TV series *Cidade dos homens* further infantilise the problem of violence and drug trafficking initiated by the film. This process can be better appreciated by studying the narrative focus of both the novel and the film.

³⁵ Ferréz. “Contestação”. *Caros amigos*. Literatura marginal. April, 2004, p. 2. The original reads: “(...) cultura da periferia feita por gente da periferia e ponto final.”

Roberto Schwarz was right when he considered that, in the panorama of contemporary Brazilian literature, “Paulo Lins’s first novel, a tome of 550 pages on the expansion of criminality in the shantytown Cidade de Deus in Rio de Janeiro, deserves to be regarded as an event.”³⁶ However, after offering a sensitive reading of the structure of the novel, as well as of its critique of Brazilian social formation, Schwarz concludes his otherwise insightful analysis by circumscribing *Cidade de Deus* with an already consecrated model: “The ambivalence in the vocabulary translates the instability of the different points of view inserted into the action, a certain malandrous swing between order and disorder (to reuse, in another phase, the terminology of the “Dialectic of Malandroism”).”³⁷ Schwarz’s comment regarding the complexity of the narrator is important; nonetheless, the novel also expresses the impasses and limits of the dialectic of malandroism, at least according to the hypothesis I am describing.

Let me then emphasize the role of the novel’s narrator. It is a third-person narrator, whose vantage is not always clearly distinguishable. Sometimes it is the traditional omniscient narrator, a true lighthouse, who disciplines events, guiding the reader. Sometimes it is the echo of the author’s voice: not only was he an inhabitant of the actual Cidade de Deus, but he also worked as a research assistant to the sociologist Alba Zaluar, a leading specialist on urban violence in Rio de Janeiro’s shantytowns.³⁸ It is a narrator who seems to be engaged in the project of a poetic prose (before writing his first novel, Paulo Lins produced primarily poetry), as the epigraph as well as the first pages of the book attest sometimes. The epigraph is a poem by Paulo Leminski, which seems to inspire the author’s evocation of his particular muse:

(...) But the issue here is crime, that’s why I came here.
Poetry, my friend, illuminates men’s certainties and the colours of my words. I am risking prose even when bullets crisscross the phonemes. It is the verb, the one that is bigger than its own size, that says, does and achieves. Here it stumbles shot. (...) Massacred in a stomach full of rice and beans the quasi-word is shit out instead of being spoken.

³⁶ The original reads: “romance de estréia de Paulo Lins, um catatau de quinhentas e cinqüenta páginas sobre a expansão da criminalidade em Cidade de Deus, no Rio de Janeiro, merece ser saudado como um acontecimento”. Roberto Schwarz. “*Cidade de Deus*”. *Seqüências brasileiras. Ensaios*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999, p. 163.

³⁷ The original reads: “A ambivalência no vocabulário traduz a instabilidade dos pontos de vista embutidos na ação, um certo negaceio malandro entre ordem e desordem (para retomar, noutra etapa, a terminologia de “Dialética da malandragem”). *Idem* 164.

³⁸ In Roberto Schwarz’s apt summary: “(...) em *Cidade de Deus* os resultados de uma pesquisa ampla e muito relevante – o projeto da antropóloga Alba Zaluar sobre ‘Crime e criminalidade no Rio de Janeiro’ – foram ficcionalizados do ponto de vista de quem era o objeto de estudo, com a correspondente ativação de um ponto de vista de classe diferente (mas sem promoção de ilusões políticas no capítulo).” Roberto Schwarz. “*Cidade de Deus*”. *Seqüências brasileiras. Ensaios*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999, p. 168.

*Speech fails. The bullet speaks.*³⁹

Nonetheless, most of the time the narrator of the novel oscillates between several linguistic registers. In a nutshell, the novel presents the history of approximately 30 years of the shantytown Cidade de Deus, offering an x-ray of the structural transformations imposed on poor communities by the rise of international drug dealing, as well as by the abandonment of the country's authorities. Once again, Carolina de Jesus's *Quarto de despejo* reminds us of structural continuities:

(...) The politicians only show up here during election campaigns. Senhor Candido Sampaio, when he was city councilman in 1953, spent his Sundays here in the favela. He drank our coffee, drinking right out of our cups. He made us laugh with his jokes. He played with our children. He left a good impression here and when he was candidate for state deputy he won. But the Chamber of Deputies didn't do one thing for the favelados. He doesn't visit us any more.⁴⁰

The similarities could not be stronger: *Quarto de despejo* was released in the same decade in which the governor of Rio de Janeiro, Carlos Lacerda, mandated the creation of Cidade de Deus between 1962 and 1965. Cidade de Deus was originally conceived as a project that would house former inhabitants of a number of shantytowns in Rio de Janeiro, which had been destroyed by a storm in 1962. The name with which the project was christened is highly charged by the obvious but ultimately ironic association with Saint Augustine's *The City of God*; after all, shantytowns in Rio de Janeiro are more commonly considered to be authentic Hades. These similarities, however, should not conceal fundamental distinctions. Carolina de Jesus's diary cannot be easily compared with Paulo Lins's novel, not only because the genres are different, but above all because their authors had radically different aims. Jesus mainly (and legitimately) wanted to acquire a voice of her own in order to break the spell of the "social invisibility" of the inhabitants of the shantytowns in Brazil. As the translator of the English version of *Quarto de despejo* recalls, in a TV interview, Carolina de Jesus affirmed that she "has come back into human race and out of the Garbage Dump."⁴¹ Or as she writes with a candour that even today retains its strength: "I hope that 1960 will be better than 1959.

³⁹ Paulo Lins. *Cidade de Deus*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2002, pp. 20-21. My emphasis. The original reads: "(...) Mas o assunto aqui é o crime, eu vim aqui por isso... Poesia, minha tia, ilumine as certezas dos homens e os tons de minhas palavras. É que arrisco a prosa mesmo com balas atravessando os fonemas. É o verbo, aquele que é maior que o seu tamanho, que diz, faz e acontece. Aqui ele cambaleia baleado. (...) Massacrada no estômago com arroz e feijão a quase-palavra é defecada ao invés de falada. *Falha a fala. Fala a bala.*"

⁴⁰ Carolina Maria de Jesus. *Beyond all Pity*. Trans. David St. Clair. London: Souvenir Press, 2004, pp. 41-42.

⁴¹ David St. Clair. "Translator's Preface." Carolina Maria de Jesus. *Beyond all Pity*. Trans. David St. Clair. London: Souvenir Press, 2004, p. 20.

We suffered so much in 1959 (...).”⁴² However, the very first entry of the 1960 diary, on 1 January 1960, repeats a common motto that readers find throughout the book, establishing the rhythm of her everyday life: “I got up at 5 and went to get water.” Seemingly, 1960 has started as 1959 ended. It is true, however, that for a while Carolina de Jesus actually escaped from the “Garbage Dump.” Since its first edition, *Quarto de despejo* has been translated into thirteen languages, and Jesus later published another four books – *Casa de Alvenaria* (1961); *Pedaços de Fome* (1963); *Provérbios* (1963); and *Diário de Bitita* (1982), which was released posthumously.

By contrast, Paulo Lins’s project is to provide a fictional as well as a critical account of the transformations of Cidade de Deus through the story of its intrinsic relationship with the absence of official authorities and the flourishing of criminality in several historical moments in the (trans)formation of the community. Therefore, an important point to remember concerning the novel *Cidade de Deus* is the complexity and ambiguity of the narrator, who does not convey a particular viewpoint, but rather tries to embody the many layers, which comprise the social fabric of the shantytown itself. Lins’s text is not the expression of his particular voice, but rather the articulation of a social stratum, which implicates Brazilian society as a whole. Of course, I am not judging the “merit” of the two projects based on this distinction, but it is important to underlie, for one of the most important innovations of what I have called “dialectic of marginality” is precisely the collective nature of its endeavour.

Take Ferréz’s first novel, *Capão pecado*, named after his own neighbourhood, the peripheral Capão Redondo. The book is divided into four parts, and each one of them begins with a text signed by someone other than the author. For instance, the “first part” starts with a text by Mano Brown, one of the most important Brazilian rappers, leader of the band Racionais MC’s – a group deeply committed to what I have called dialectic of marginality. The book is illustrated with photographs of Capão Redondo and its inhabitants, and the author dedicates *Capão pecado*, “to those who are illiterate and, therefore, cannot read this work (...).”⁴³ In other words, the ones who cannot read at least will be able to see their everyday reality in the pictures. This collective vocation also explains the increasing importance of hip-hop and other forms of musical expression in

⁴² Carolina Maria de Jesus. *Beyond all Pity*. Trans. David St. Clair. London: Souvenir Press, 2004, p. 190.

⁴³ Ferréz. *Capão pecado*. São Paulo: Labortexto Editorial, 2000.

communities such as Capão Redondo or, for that matter, Cidade de Deus.⁴⁴ Take, for instance, Jocenir's bestseller *Diário de um detento: o livro* [*The Diary of an Inmate: The Book*]. The title specifies that *this is a book* because the greatest hit of Racionais Mc's was born out of one of Jocenir's poems, also entitled "Diário de um detento." At the end of the book, the poem is fully transcribed, while throughout the chapters several passages of the poem are scattered, composing a puzzle that the reader must decipher.⁴⁵ This intrinsic relationship between literature and music is one of the trademarks of "marginal literature," and Ferréz himself has also released a CD called *Determinação* [*Determination*]. Of course, music is an immediate form of bonding with the community, which, up to this date, faces serious problems of illiteracy. Thus, the use of orality as a structuring process of several of the literary texts under scrutiny in this essay has to be seen as a form of inclusion.

Moreover, Paulo Lins makes a troubling equivalence between *malandros*, "bandidos", "bichos-soltos" and "vagabundos"; in sum, between *malandros* and criminals. They all know how to take advantage of everything and everyone especially if they are common people unable to defend themselves. This is a fundamental gesture that has not yet been understood fully by readers of the novel. Instead of the usual idealization of the *malandro*, as we saw in Jorge Amado, Paulo Lins reveals the hidden side of the *malandro's* way of life, clarifying that the *malandro* can only survive by taking advantage of the *otário* – the "fool," or in its most violent meaning, "sucker." Even more, the *otário*, ordinarily, is someone from the *malandro's* own community, one of the innumerable excluded. After all, according to a common saying, "a true *malandro* doesn't spit into the wind." In other words, he does not go after powerful members of the privileged classes, who could easily return like for like. Let us recall this samba by Zeca Compositor, one of the characters of Paulo Lins's novel: "As long as there are *otários* in the world, / the *malandro* can wake up at noon".⁴⁶ In other words, the *malandro* only thinks about himself; thus, Lins's deconstruction of *malandragem* is a key moment towards the development of the "dialectic of marginality." Here is a representative passage that shows the equivalence between the *malandro* and the criminal:

⁴⁴ Concerning the role of music in *favelas* and communities, see the Ph.D. Dissertation by Paul Sneed, *Machine Gun Voices: Bandits, Favelas and Utopia in Brazilian Funk*, presented at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2003.

⁴⁵ Jocenir. *Diário de um detento: o livro*. São Paulo: Labortexto Editorial, 2001, 2^o edition. For the transcription of the poem, see pp. 175-180.

⁴⁶ The original reads: "Enquanto existir *otário* no mundo, / *malandro* acorda ao meio-dia." Paulo Lins. *Cidade de Deus*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2002, p. 258.

Tutuca was raised in the shantytown of Cachoeirinha. He wanted to be a *bandido* who is feared by everyone, just like the *bandidos* from where he lived. The *bichos-soltos* inspired so much awe that his scaredy-cat father did not even have the courage to look them in the eyes. He liked the way the *malandros* spoke, how they dressed.⁴⁷

Such equivalency can be maintained because Paulo Lins brings the structural relationship between the figures of the *malandro*, and the *otário* to the surface. It is a decisive critical moment. Thus, to celebrate *malandragem* is to forget that every Vadinho needs a Dona Flor to prey on, to take her money, hurt her when his wishes are not immediately met, and, since no one is made of stone, also to give her love. Not in that order, necessarily, since everything depends on the urgency of the *malandro's* business. In principle, love can always wait for later. It can even be posthumous, to say the least. After all, it is worth remembering that Vadinho's "generous" offer, which allows Dona Flor to have two husbands at once, was indeed generated out of his self-interest:

But don't ask me to be Vadinho and Teodoro at once and the same time, for I can't. I can only be Vadinho, and I have only love to give you. Everything else you need, he gives you: your own house, conjugal fidelity, respect, order, consideration, and security.⁴⁸

And certainly the *malandro* never considers anyone else's problem, as is the case of Bonitão in *O pagador de promessas*. He seizes the opportunity to seduce Rosa while her husband, Zé do Burro, is trying to pay the promise he had made. His situation becomes ever more precarious and more dangerous; indeed, at the end of the story, he is killed. However, this does not matter to Bonitão as long as he could take advantage of the situation in order to seduce Rosa. In Roberto DaMatta's terms, someone affirms oneself as a person only when an infinitely larger number of people see themselves reduced to the role of individuals. The *malandro* aspires to be a person regardless of the fact that his own community must remain in the uncertain role of individual.

Therein lies the importance of the narrative point of view in the novel. The absence of a clear plan for overcoming social inequalities thwarts the utopian promise of the inhabitants of the actual shantytown Cidade de Deus being "finally absorbed by the conventionally positive pole," as ideally would happen in the case of the *malandro*. Against his wish, and maybe without knowing it, the common inhabitant of the

⁴⁷ The original reads: "Tutuca foi criado no morro da Cachoeirinha. Quis ser *bandido* para ser temido por todos, assim como foram os *bandidos* do lugar onde morou. Os *bichos-soltos* botavam tanta moral que o medroso do seu pai não tinha coragem nem de olhar nos olhos deles. Gostava do jeito dos *malandros* falarem, como se vestiam." My emphasis. *Idem*, p. 26-27.

⁴⁸ Jorge Amado. *Dona Flora and Her Two Husbands*. Trans. Harriet de Onís. New York: Avon Books, 1998, p. 601.

shantytown is the *otário*, a simple ladder for the dubious ascent of the *malandro*. For instance, as we saw in Carolina de Jesus's diary, the suited politicians who go and seek votes and then forget the communities as soon as they are elected; the dominant groups in search of lost peace amidst everyday violence, but without being committed to making real changes in the unjust social structure.

What, then, is the narrative point of view taken by the movie *City of God*? In place of a diffuse and intentionally ambiguous narrator, the adolescent Buscapé (Rocket) is chosen as a first-person narrator. In the movie, he seems to have two main problems: losing his virginity and escaping the shantytown thanks to possible employment as a photographer. This extraordinary simplification of the plot has several objectives: making terror easier to swallow by injecting a dose of comedy; misplacing the idea of the genre of the coming of age narrative; and granting the spectator's wish to gaining distance from the actual shantytown in the form of the boy's desire to leave behind Cidade de Deus.

Therefore, the choice of the narrative focus is revealing. The perspective of Buscapé sets up a series of mediations between the viewer and the causes of the uncontrolled violence: the viewpoint of the photographer; the camera itself; Buscapé's desire to escape from the actual shantytown of Cidade de Deus. These several filters turn the unbearable reality of the drug-traffic dominated community into the material for a dynamic spectacle, undeniably entertaining and extremely well-crafted. If the narrative focus chosen had been that of Zé Pequeno, would the public have lauded the film *City of God*? How would we, middle and upper classes audiences, be able to identify with the viewpoint of the merciless criminal? The immediacy of Zé Pequeno's brutality recalls the hatred of the "collector" ("*cobrador*"), the namesake character of Rubem Fonseca's deservedly celebrated short story of the same title ("*O cobrador*"), which can be seen as a true precursor of the current dialectic of marginality. Antonio Candido has coined this genre "ferocious realism" ("*realismo feroz*"), in which "the brutality of the circumstance is conveyed by the brutality of its agent (character)."⁴⁹ Alfredo Bosi christened this tendency as representative of "brutalism."⁵⁰ In both cases, it is stressed the immediacy of the violence triggered by an equally violent day-to-day life in Brazilian urban centres. Let us see one of the most remarkable examples of this form of expression.

⁴⁹ Antonio Candido. "A nova narrativa." In *A educação pela noite e outros ensaios*. São Paulo: Ática, 1987, p. 212.

⁵⁰ See Alfredo Bosi. "Situação e formas do conto brasileiro contemporâneo." In *O conto brasileiro contemporâneo*. São Paulo: Cultrix, 1975, pp. 7-22.

In Fonseca's short story, "O cobrador," the collector decides to obtain by force all the commodities and comforts he has been systematically denied in his life. And he does so with tremendous and even sadistic violence. After being unable to see a dentist because he did not have enough money to pay for the treatment, the "cobrador" decides to react: "I will pay nothing more, I am tired of paying!, I shouted at him, now I only collect! I shot his knee. I should have murdered that son of bitch."⁵¹ At this point, he starts to collect wildly with increasing violence, until he meets Ana Palindrômica, who helps him to understand what should be his ultimate goal:

I read Ana what I wrote, our manifesto for Christmas, for the newspapers. I wouldn't kill randomly, without purpose. I didn't know what I wanted, I wasn't looking for a specific outcome, my hatred was being wasted. I was right in my impulses; my mistake was not knowing who the enemy was and why he was my enemy. Now I know it, Ana taught me. And my example must be followed by others, many others; only in this way we will change the world. This is the synthesis of our manifesto.⁵²

This promise of revolution played, in itself, an important role in the sombre atmosphere of the final years of the military dictatorship, but it also reveals the middle-class dream of engaging the worker classes in urban guerrilla; a dream that could never be fulfilled in the historical circumstances of the late 1960s and early 1970s and one that ultimately betrays the voluntarism underlying the promise. On the contrary, as Ferréz has clearly stated: "the goal of Marginal Literature is revolution without the r, so, my dears, let's evolve."⁵³ In Paulo Lins's formula, "*Speech fails. The bullet speaks.*" But we have to understand the metaphorical equivalence proposed between bullets and words, between bullets and works of art – this is a prevailing trope in the artistic manifestations of the dialectic of marginality. "Writing is a weapon that can become really powerful and everlasting," says Humberto Rodrigues, voicing a general belief.⁵⁴ "Revolution without r," does not mean resignation; rather, it signals a new comprehension of the role of culture

⁵¹ Rubem Fonseca. "O cobrador." *O cobrador*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989, p. 14. The book was originally published in 1979. The original reads: "Eu não pago mais nada, cansei de pagar!, gritei para ele, agora eu só cobro!" Dei um tiro no joelho dele. Devia ter matado aquele filho da puta."

⁵² Rubem Fonseca. "O cobrador." *O cobrador*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989, p. 29. The original reads: "Leio para Ana o que escrevi, nosso manifesto de Natal, para os jornais. Nada de sair matando a esmo, sem objetivo. Eu não sabia o que queria, não buscava um resultado prático, meu ódio estava sendo desperdiçado. Eu estava certo nos meus impulsos, meu erro era não saber quem era o inimigo e por que era inimigo. Agora eu sei, Ana me ensinou. E o meu exemplo deve ser seguido por outros, muitos outros, só assim mudaremos o mundo. É a síntese do nosso manifesto."

⁵³ Ferréz. "Contestação". *Caros amigos*. Literatura marginal. April, 2004, p. 2. The original reads: "(...) a parada da Literatura Marginal é a revolução sem r, então, meus queridos, vamos evoluir (...)."

⁵⁴ Humberto Rodrigues. *Vidas do Carandiru. Histórias reais*. São Paulo: Geração Editorial, 2002, p. 5.

as a powerful weapon in the organization of poor communities.⁵⁵ In the epigraph of *Sobrevivente (do Massacre do Carandiru)* [*Survivor (of the Massacre of Carandiru)*], André du Rap develops the notion: “I dedicate this book to the brother Natanael Valêncio, for the revolution and evolution within the *hip-hop* movement. Rest in peace.”⁵⁶ Constant allusions to former friends, already dead, are also common in this literature.

Will we, middle and upper classes audiences, be prepared to look in the mirror and admit our own indifference to the social inequality that haunts everyday Brazilian life? The mediations that allow for the rise of the voyeuristic consumption of violence stem from here. It is just like in a scene from *Carandiru*, the film inspired by Dráuzio Varela’s book and directed by Hector Babenco.⁵⁷ After finishing his rounds, the doctor observes the intimacy of the cells through the tiny holes in their doors, until he finds himself about to be forced to spend the night in the penitentiary, because changing of the guards has already occurred, and the new guards do not recognise him. After a brief moment of suspense, the prison gates are opened: the doctor breathes the air of freedom. Deep down, what we, middle and upper classes audiences, want is to witness the memories of imprisonment as well as the stories of the lives of the excluded – but we want to do this while remaining in the comfort of our bourgeois homes. And, then, naturally, sit at our desks in order to produce cutting edge reflections on the topic. Indeed, the voyeuristic consumption of violence is already present in Varela’s book. In the first pages of the book, he candidly acknowledges it:

When I was a little boy, I watched magnetised those black and white films set in penitentiaries. The inmates wore uniforms and planned breathtaking escapes. (...) When I entered [Carandiru] and the heavy door was closed behind me, I felt as excited as I used to be in the matinees of the movie theatre Rialto, in Brás.⁵⁸

Moreover, the movie *City of God* employs clichés, structuring the narrative around a dualism between good and evil that is difficult to accept. Zé Pequeno is transformed into the epitome of evil. He is the unquestionably cruel bandit, with no apparent possibility of

⁵⁵ “Hoje, o espaço cultural parece ser, de novo, o lugar priorizado por jovens, não tanto para explicitar seus projetos políticos, mas principalmente para fazer emergir a vida e suas exigências plurais.” Adair Rocha. *Cidade cerzada. A costura da cidadania no morro Santa Marta*. Rio de Janeiro: 2000, p. 91.

⁵⁶ André du Rap’s *Sobrevivente (do Massacre do Carandiru)*. Bruno Zeni (ed.). São Paulo: Labortexto Editorial, 2002, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Dráuzio Varela. *Estação Carandiru*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999. The film, directed by Hector Babenco, was released in 2003 and became a blockbuster in Brazil.

⁵⁸ Dráuzio Varela. *Estação Carandiru*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999, p. 9. The original reads: “Quando eu era pequeno, assistia eletrizado àqueles filmes de cadeia em branco e preto. Os prisioneiros vestiam uniforme e planejavam fugas de tirar o fôlego na cadeira do cinema. (...) Quando entrei e a porta pesada beteu atrás de mim, senti um aperto na garganta igual ao das matinês do Cine Rialto, no Brás.”

redemption: in short, a psychopath. His malice is reinforced by the “kindness” of his partner, Bené (Benny), as well as by the just revenge sought by Mané Galinha (Knockout Ned), whose fiancé was raped by the seemingly incorrigible Zé Pequeno. A fertile imagination is not necessary to recall the rhetoric of television programs such as *Cidade Alerta*, which reduce criminality to individual deviance.⁵⁹ The author of the novel could not refrain from explicitly voicing his disagreement concerning the development of the character Zé Pequeno in *City of God*: “he is kind of Lombrosian. (...) There was no reason to have made him so evil. This is the film. Not in the book.”⁶⁰

The process of infantilising the protagonists was taken even further by the television series *City of Men*. The basic production team from the television series is the same one that worked on the film, and the simplification of the narrative focus seems to have adapted itself to a primetime TV audience. In place of an adolescent, we now have two children, Laranjinha and Acerola – it is as if we are back to dos Passos’s ambiguous reference to Brazil as paradise on earth; this time in the image of children literally naturalised in a perverse Garden of Eden. However, instead of a teenager’s gaze, represented by Buscapé in the film *City of God*, we are offered in the TV spin off a child’s perspective, which apparently makes the violence even more palatable by rendering them blameless victims and denying them any subjectivity to alter their surroundings.⁶¹ In the series’s first year, typical difficulties of life in the shantytown were discussed, even if it was in a watered-down form. However, by 2003, in the second year, the amorous adventures of the protagonists took the front seat. Also, *Cidade dos homens* serves up clichés without scruples, including the representation of shantytown girls offering themselves up to foreigners with the “comic” flavour of making the girls speak a deliberately ridiculous mimicry of English. And, since the shantytown girls are seemingly fairly democratic in their taste, they also try to seduce the middle-class youth present at the beach, whose appearance promises potential economic benefits. This act has a name, and as far as is known, it represents one of the oldest professions... It is difficult to imagine the aim of these scenes in the structure of the series’s narration. It is equally difficult not to be bothered by such a stereotypical and offensive rendering. Or, might this represent a way to evade the excruciating problems of the drug-traffic dominated shantytowns, by rendering them exotic? The third year of the series, aired in 2004, has

⁵⁹ A Brazilian TV show, similar to *America’s Most Wanted*.

⁶⁰ Paulo Lins. “Sem medo de ser.” Interview given to magazine *Caros amigos*, May 2003, p. 35.

⁶¹ I am indebted to Ross Forman for this remark.

only stressed the stereotypes and enhanced the process of exoticism of the reality of the everyday life in Rio de Janeiro's shantytowns.

How exactly does the film and the TV series infantilise violence? Is not violence the main thread of the narrative? Without a doubt, but the project that underpins such choice poses another question: What is the aim of this growing infantilisation of the protagonists's narrative focus? By this means, the problems associated with the drug-traffic remain on the margins, and thus we re-encounter the "humanity" of relations "even" in a shantytown – the condescending tone is deliberate and should disturb the viewer, although it has not disturbed audiences so far. This infantilisation ends up creating an abstract shantytown, totally decontextualized – as if its privileged view, because of the common geographical locations of *favelas* on the hills overlooking Rio de Janeiro, was nothing more than a real estate bonus and all the shanties were luxury apartments. Of course, there is a carefully controlled, clear dividing line at the foot of the hill, which itself involuntarily replicates the traditional imagery of a journey into the underworld. In the second year of the series, the shantytown was indeed transformed into a paper-thin sensual scenario, a miniature of "exotic" Salvador in the midst of the hills of Rio. Apparently soon, *City of Men's* viewers will trade the crowded asphalt for a life of adventure in the shantytowns. After all, are we not all Brazilians; children of God in the so-called "Cidade Maravilhosa" ("Marvelous City")?

Paternal Assistance

Let me now suggest another response: this process of infantilisation counts on the possibility of a return to the model of the dialectic of malandroism. In other words, it proposes a principle of co-option instead of social disruption. The main characters of the TV series *City of Men*, *Laranjinha* and *Acerola*, are presented as aspiring to be *malandros*. It is important to keep in mind, however, the Latin etymology for "infant": *in-fans*, or he who neither can speak nor express himself and is therefore in need of parental assistance. In sharp contrast, authors like Paulo Lins and Ferréz, musical groups like Racionais MC's, documentaries like Felipe Lacerda's and José Padilha's *Ônibus 174* [*Bus 174*] or Evaldo Mocarzel's *À Margem da Imagem* [*At the Edge of the Image*], among other recent productions, paint a vastly different picture from the silence that the infantilisation of violence produces, as we will see in the final section of this essay. It is as if *Bus 174* represents the remake of the *City of God* with Zé Pequeno as the story's narrator. The result is explosive and as it was aptly summarized on a review

in *The New York Times*, the film produces “a sad portrait of a life shaped by the cruelty and indifference that seem endemic in urban Brazil.”⁶² Morcazel’s *À Margem da Imagem* brings to the fore the fundamental ethical discussion regarding the rights of the image of poor urban homeless. Everything starts when the internationally acclaimed photographer Sebastião Salgado is denied permission to photograph a group of homeless people in São Paulo. Why did that happen? The person in charge of helping the homeless explains readily: they were tired of seeing their image being sold without any concrete benefit for their own lives. Therefore, they were trying to regain control over their image. By the end of the documentary, the homeless people portrayed are invited to watch the film and then to comment on it. One of them challenges the director, asking him whether he would open the doors of his house if he pays an unexpected visit. The director does not give any answer, a fact that only speaks highly of the director’s understanding of the complex problem raised by the question underlying the documentary itself. This is the best practical definition of what I have called the dialectic of marginality, namely, voicing one’s own life and concerns, controlling the use of one’s own image.

In the context of this infantilisation of violence, a discussion about the film’s most violent scene takes on unprecedented power. Almost unanimously everyone considered this the scene in which one child has to choose whom he will murder in order to be accepted as a full member of Zé Pequeno’s gang. Unfortunately “Filé com fritas” (“Steak and Fries”),⁶³ the nickname of the character, cannot adopt Dona Flor’s choice of not choosing; rather he has to face his own Sophie’s choice: he has to shoot another child as a rite of passage, which will enable him to become a full-fledged criminal instead of a simple “assistant.” Naturally, the sequence is terrifying and the very fact that a child must make such choice only heightens the effect of the entire sequence.

In my view, however, the film’s most violent scene is the one in which Buscapé charges into the newsroom of the newspaper that has published his photograph of Zé Pequeno’s gang. As a result of the photo’s publication, he thinks he will be killed by the drug dealer; after all, this photograph identifies the criminal. Buscapé believes that he is already a dead man. Therefore, the apprentice photographer is visibly desperate and sees no other alternative but storming the office and trying to find some sympathy. What takes place in the newsroom at this time? A journalist responds in that well-known tone of “Do you know who you’re talking to?,” and infantilises the adolescent, that is, she

⁶² “The Sad Before and After of a Hostage Crisis in Rio.” *The New York Times*, 08/10/2003, B4.

⁶³ He is so nicknamed because his initial service to Zé Pequeno’s gang consisted in bringing to the group a steak and fries from a nearby restaurant.

silences him, thereby re-establishing social hierarchy in the newsroom.⁶⁴ As it has been aptly summarized by Kathryn Hochstetler, this strategy implies, “the importance of hierarchy and status in Brazilian politics, and presumed that those who heard the question would respond with silence and awe for their ‘superiors’.”⁶⁵ In his turn, the established photographer offers Buscapé a piece of more sophisticated equipment so that he can take more and better pictures. Of course, at this moment, Buscapé (as well as the spectator) cannot imagine that Zé Pequeno will be delighted by seeing his photograph in an important newspaper, instead of fearing the repercussions of his face being known. The spectator waits in vain: no one in the newsroom shows any real concern about Buscapé’s safety. The journalist takes him home, it is true, — but believe it if you can — that is where the boy finally loses his virginity. In other words, the journalist’s undeniable indifference about the entire situation is disguised by the supposed eroticism of the scene. To my mind, this moment of absolute lack of empathy and exploitation represents the film’s most violent moment. It is striking to find in Carolina de Jesus’s diary a similar situation, because it exposes the larger class violence that allows the shantytowns to exist in the first place. After having appeared in an important magazine, *O Cruzeiro*, she dreams of recognition when she is taken to the newsroom of a well-known newspaper:

At the newspaper I got choked with emotion. The boss Senhor Antonio was on the third floor. He gave me a magazine to read. Afterward he went to get lunch for me, steak, potatoes, and a salad. I was eating what I had dreamed about! I was in a pretty room.

Reality was much prettier than a dream.

Afterward we went into the offices and they photographed me. They promised me that I would appear in the *Diário da Noite* tomorrow. I am so happy! It feels as if my dirty life is now being washed.⁶⁶

This reading helps to clarify another disquieting sequence of the *City of God*. In a crucial moment, Buscapé has to choose between the stability of work as photographer, which could be achieved by publishing a photograph of Zé Pequeno’s corpse, and the risk involved in denouncing the corruption of the policemen in charge of the shantytown, but who coerce the community and extort money from the drug dealers. In the Brazilian context, his decision is so obvious that it seems to render any analysis pointless – he turns in the image of Zé Pequeno’s dead body. And yet, this scene is not so clear-cut.

⁶⁴ I am referring to the classic chapter, “Você sabe com quem está falando?” In Roberto DaMatta’s *Carnavais, malandros e heróis. Para uma sociologia do dilema brasileiro*.

⁶⁵ Kathryn Hochstetler. “Civil Society in Lula’s Brazil.” University of Oxford Centre for Brazilian Studies. Working Paper Series CBS-57-04, p. 24.

⁶⁶ Carolina Maria de Jesus. *Beyond all Pity*. Trans. David St. Clair. London: Souvenir Press, 2004, p. 174.

Why is it that Buscapé cannot dare to expose the policemen? Why is it that he has to content himself with a predictable shot, instead of a photograph that certainly might earn him maybe a prize as well as immediate recognition? After all, in the end of the film, Buscapé does not secure himself a job with the photograph of Zé Pequeno; he simply becomes an intern at the newspaper. Why is it that the film can turn “Filé com Fritas” as well as Buscapé’s choice (or lack of it) into a successful narrative in Brazil and abroad? And, finally, why is it that I can turn the film itself into an object of research? Can we see in this series of appropriations a disquieting metaphor of social inequality, now transferred to the level of production both of symbolic images and academic knowledge? In other words, *we all* still have to come to terms with the challenge implied in Wypijewski’s question concerning the artistic and academic renderings of the hardships of poor communities: “Why are their lives and private griefs currency for just about anyone but themselves?” Once more, as we saw in the uncompromising question posed by the homeless man to Evaldo Morcazel, the dialectic of marginality also means seizing control of one’s own image in order to redistribute to the community the profit derived from it. The dialectic of marginality is therefore the opposite of the infantilisation of the problem of violence because it enables the marginal to project his voice.

However, in the context of *City of God*, there can be no doubt that Buscapé does the right thing by not submitting the photo that would have exposed the police of Cidade de Deus caught red-handed in corruption, although he believes it might have won an award. Instead, as we know, he decides to submit a less shocking photo that might secure him a future position as photographer, but which also will secure his survival. After all, the journalist and photographer would hardly waste their precious time defending Buscapé from uniformed criminals, in other words, the corrupt police. Once again, let us face the hardest question: Might we find in these scenes an involuntary metaphor on the very process of the infantilisation of the narrative focus present in the film and TV series? Buscapé’s seemingly wise decision recalls the usual choice taken by the inhabitants of peripheral areas, whenever criminals confront them, as Lucio Kowarick observed:

The most rational [choice], because it is the least dangerous, lies in avoiding confrontation, which means moving from place to place, far from the space of

the criminals who have irreversibly penetrated the private circle of domestic life. And this can be called migration provoked by violence (...).⁶⁷

In the case of *City of God*, the circumstance is even more disturbing – the criminals are official authorities, who should protect people like Buscapé from the criminals themselves. The choice of a first-person narrator, thus, implies much more than a stylistic device. Rather, in the choice of teenager Buscapé as the film's narrator, the infantilisation of the issue is already foregrounded. Infantilisation that was deepened in the TV drama *Cidade dos homens*: in it, as we have seen, the narrators are children of no more than 12 years of age. From a complex third-person narrator, in Paulo Lins's novel, we pass to the viewpoint of children passing through the lenses of a teenager photographer. Although it should be obvious, I am not comparing the novel to the film and "judging" that the adaptation is not "faithful." Any adaptation has to be deliberately unfaithful; since we are dealing with different media, of course any question concerning "fidelity" tends to become a red herring. My criticism arises from the symbolic consequences of the infantilisation of the narrative viewpoint, which occurs both in the film and in the TV drama.

Steps towards a dialectic of marginality

Let me start this section by acknowledging that the theories of Candido and DaMatta clarify particular forms of social mediation, above all in personal contact and the universe of favour, which are hard currency in the very language of the dialectic of malandroism and the relational order. However, to what extent do these approaches represent a valid model of interpretation for contemporary Brazilian cultural production? It is true that the logic of favour rules the country's social life up to today. In this sense, their theories are still pertinent and continue to expose the Brazilian elite's capacity to hold on to political power with the aim of maintaining their privileges. However, they offer little help in understanding a significant aspect of contemporary cultural production. It is therefore important to insist that I am not suggesting that the dialectic of malandroism should simply vanish in the near future to be replaced by a triumphant dialectic of marginality. On the contrary, the dialectic of malandroism shows signs of vitality in Brasília as well as in every House of Representatives throughout Brazil. Instead, my approach consists in refuting the exclusive pattern of either the apologetic or the critical

⁶⁷ Lucio Kowarick. "Housing and Living Conditions in the Periphery of So Paulo: an Ethnographic and Sociological Study." University of Oxford Centre for Brazilian Studies. Working Paper Series CBS-58-04, p. 48.

model of analysis of Brazilian society. Rather, I am trying to show the agonistic nature of a social formation that was able to be reasonably inclusive as far as a technique of physical proximity of bodies is concerned and, at the same time, was fiercely determined to exclude a large percentage of the population from basic social and human rights. This is the reason I have proposed that contemporary Brazilian culture became the stage for a (not always) subtle symbolic battle. In other words, cultural critique should assimilate into its own methodology the conflictive nature of Brazilian everyday life.

On the other hand, the model of the dialectic of marginality puts forward a new form of relationship between the social classes. It is no longer a question of reconciling differences, but rather of pointing them out and refusing to accept the improbable promise of compromise between the tiny circle of the powerful and the expanding universe of the excluded. In this sense, first of all, the term “marginal” represents the uncertainty of a population that finds itself at the margins with respect to the most basic rights, but which, unlike the *malandro*, is without a clear perspective of absorption. We should, however, avoid repeating the naiveté of idealizing the marginal, anachronistically recuperating Hélio Oiticica’s slogan “Be marginal, be a hero,” or the so-called “marginal” poets’s movement of the 1970s. After all, during the repressive years of the military dictatorship, the celebration of the marginal could represent a form of opposition. On the contrary, in recent years, with the increasing violence imposed by the ruthless logic of the drug dealers, the employment of the notion of the marginal should emphasize over and over the ambiguity of the term: the marginal can equally be the excluded or the criminal, and can even be both at once. Ferréz is the author who has described the consequences of this ambiguity mostly deeply, and in his latest novel, *Manual Prático do Ódio*, the dialectic of marginality takes a qualitative leap.

In the first instance — very well defined by, among others, the music of Racionais MC’s, books like *Letras de Liberdade [Letters of Freedom]*⁶⁸ and André du Rap’s *Sobrevivente (do Massacre do Carandiru)* — the main impulse was to give testimony to survival in the most adverse conditions, whether in jail or on the urban periphery. In the clear voice of “Fórmula Mágica da Paz” [“Magic Formula for Peace”]: “Speaking here is Mano Brown, one more survivor, 27 years old and defying the statistics, got it, mano (bro)?”⁶⁹ A *poetics of survival* thus has been formed. This poetics has Carolina de Jesus

⁶⁸ This title refers to a collective work of prisoners. Several authors. *Letras de liberdade*. São Paulo: WB Editores, 2000.

⁶⁹ The original reads: “Aqui fala Mano Brown, mais um sobrevivente, 27 anos contrariando as estatísticas, morô mano?.”

as a legitimate forerunner; indeed Ferréz explicitly refers to her work in his presentation of the special issue of the magazine *Caros amigos* devoted to “Literatura Marginal” [“Marginal Literature”].⁷⁰

At a later point, the dialectic of marginality was more explicit in its exposure of the contradictions of the society, process initiated by Paulo Lins’s novel. However, it is not merely reflective of the contradictions of the dialectic of malandroism, but of the Brazilian social system itself, which acts as a perverse machine of exclusion, under the guise of the false promise of harmony, in the improbable “absorption in the conventionally positive pole” of the dwellers of the slums and urban peripheries. Thus *a photograph of inequality* begins to be developed. This photograph had an important precursor in the aesthetics but above all in the ethics of “Cinema Novo,” with the main difference being that whereas the moviemakers were sometimes obsessed with the rural world, the dialectic of marginality is primarily if not exclusively concerned with life in urban centres.

In *Manual Prático do Ódio*, Ferréz offers a blade, which is how the author himself defines his book. The cut is deep, and its base is the unexpected relationship between crime, drug trafficking and the official world of business. For Régis, a member of a group that is planning a robbery, it is a plan, as “what he applied in arms took all his capital, he had more complex dreams, an already-defined routine.”⁷¹ And in a series of events that unfold,

Régis felt like a hero, he was playing the game of capitalism right; the game was to collect capital at any cost; after all the examples that he saw inspired him even more: enemies embraced in the name of money at City Hall and in the Legislative Assembly, enemies embraced on the Sunday television program to sell their new CD.⁷²

This is the “profession of danger” (“profissão perigo”), but it still allows organized crime to be described as a peculiar type of career, with the dignified logic of a lucid banker; after all any action seems to be justifiable in both worlds as long as the outcome proves to be profitable:

⁷⁰ The cultural magazine *Cult* has also published an insightful report on marginal literature. See Luís Antônio Giron. “Pena de sangue.” *Revista Cult*, pp. 34-41. According to Giron: “Brazilian penitentiaries are overcrowded with writers. Hundreds of them are distributed among the 921 penitentiaries throughout the country, with 240.107 inmates.” *Idem*, p. 34.

⁷¹ Ferréz. *Manual prático do ódio*. Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2003, p. 13-14. The original reads: “o que aplicava em armas lhe tomava todo o capital, tinha sonhos mais complexos, uma rotina já definida.”

⁷² *Idem*, p. 154. The original reads: “Régis sentia-se um herói, estava jogando certo no jogo do capitalismo, o jogo era arrecadar capital a qualquer custo, afinal os exemplos que via o inspiravam ainda mais, inimigos se abraçavam em nome do dinheiro na Câmara Municipal e na Assembléia Legislativa, inimigos se abraçavam no programa de domingo pela vendagem do novo CD.”

(...) money, money was the reason for everything, he knew that no gig that he did would result in as much money as drug-trafficking, trafficking was continuous commerce, it was constantly flowing, crime was instable.⁷³

Lucio Kowarick developed the concept of “living at risk” in Brazil these days, describing the living conditions of poor communities in urban centres as well as the strategies created by the inhabitants of those areas to protect themselves.⁷⁴ We have already seen Buscapé’s choice of avoiding confrontation with the police. By contrast, Régis, the character of *Manual Prático do Ódio*, seemingly decides to transform the condition of “living at risk” into a profession: the “profissão perigo.” Are we returning to the model of Rubem Fonseca’s “collector?” Not exactly, after all, just as in Paulo Lins’s novel, those who become involved with either robbery or drug trafficking, end up either dead or behind bars. Could it be that in the end this is a certain manifestation of an unexpected moralising attitude? Certainly not. Paulo Lins and Ferréz give the dialectic of marginality the true qualitative leap, definitively overcoming the brutality of the “collector,” because violence only ends up reinforcing social inequality. In one way, it legitimises police repression, which already affects the population of the poorer areas on a daily basis. On the other hand, it energizes the most reactionary elements of civil society, perfectly represented on television programs such as *Cidade Alerta*, which always call for the death penalty and an increase in the repressive apparatus. It is as if the system benefited from violence and even counted on it in order to justify its own existence. The alternative, however, is to convert the daily violence into a symbolic force via cultural production, which is then seen as a model of organization for the community itself. The hatred of Rubem Fonseca’s “collector” was turned against individuals and, because of this, had a limited reach; even with the enlightenment engineered by Ana Palindrômica, the collector could hardly aspire to really change the world. The dialectic of marginality, on the other hand, has as its target the collective dilemma and is characterized by a serious attempt at highlighting the mechanisms of social exclusion, a project for the first time undertaken by the excluded themselves. In other words, Paulo Lins and Ferréz offered a definitive answer to Wypijewski’s disquieting question: instead of providing raw

⁷³ *Idem*, p. 207. The original reads: “(...) dinheiro, dinheiro era a razão de tudo, sabia que nenhuma fita que fizessem daria mais dinheiro do que o tráfico, o tráfico era um comércio contínuo, vivia fluindo, o crime era instável.”

⁷⁴ Lucio Kowarick. “Housing and Living Conditions in the Periphery of So Paulo: an Ethnographic and Sociological Study.” University of Oxford Centre for Brazilian Studies. Working Paper Series CBS-58-04. A reference to Capão Redondo, as one of the peripheral areas where the population is currently “living at risk,” can be found in page 16 of Kowarick’s working paper.

material for the further elaboration of social scientists and artists from outside the community, Lins accepted the challenge of fictionalising his understanding of the history of his own community, while Ferréz met the challenge of producing literature in the most adverse situations, seeing how his work might become a viable vehicle for promoting what he calls evolution instead of revolution. It is so obvious that traditional models of literary analysis are not able to encompass the innovations brought about by this sort of texts that I will not even dwell on this issue. Most of the time, literary critics who are dismissive about the manifestations of what I have called “dialectic of marginality” are simply repeating themselves, without realising that the actual texts produced by writers such as Paulo Lins and Ferréz demand the development of new analytical tools.⁷⁵

In *Capitães da Areia*, Jorge Amado could still believe in the utopia of class struggle, ending his novel with the enviable security of someone who believes that the revolution is as unavoidable as the passage of time. Pedro Bala, now a member of the Communist Party, manages to escape from jail, as he has become known as a dangerous agitator. His feat was received in a special way:

And the day he escaped, in numberless homes at the hour of their poor meal, faces lighted up when they heard the news. And in spite of the fact that the terror was out there, any one of those homes was a home that would be open for Pedro Bala, a fugitive from the police. Because the revolution is a homeland and a family.⁷⁶

But the revolution left everyone orphans, and the homeland treats the majority of its children like bastards. These days, the meal is ever skimpier, because, unless I am mistaken, we no longer have news capable of lighting up communities at once. Indeed, Jorge Amado invested in the model thoroughly studied by Eric Hobsbawm of the “social bandit,” seen as a revolutionary without ideology, so to speak. The social bandit is someone who acknowledges the social unrest as well as social injustices. He decides to take action and becomes an outlaw more as a sign of rebelliousness than as an attachment to criminal life per se. In chapter five of *Bandits*, “The Avengers,” as a matter of fact, the legendary Brazilian bandit Lampião is carefully analysed by Hobsbawm – the

⁷⁵ In this context, it is worth noting the recent publication edited by Ângela Maria Dias and Paula Glenadel (eds.). *Estéticas da crueldade*. Rio de Janeiro: Atlântica Editora, 2004. The authors aim to develop an innovative approach concerning the dominance of violence and cruelty in Brazilian contemporary discourse and artistic manifestations.

⁷⁶ Jorge Amado. *Op. cit.*, p. 256. The original reads: “E, no dia em que ele fugiu, em inúmeros lares, na hora pobre do jantar, rostos se iluminaram ao saber da notícia. E, apesar de que lá fora era o terror, qualquer daqueles lares era um lar que se abria para Pedro Bala, fugitivo da polícia. Porque a revolução é uma pátria e uma família.”

same bandit who is constantly referred to in Amado's novel as a symbol of resistance.⁷⁷ Amado's Pedro Bala as well as Fonseca's "o cobrador" are embedded within the framework of the "social bandit," and therefore cannot provide a convincing analytical model for contemporary literary productions.

This is why, in the exact moment that the movie *City of God* was competing for an Oscar, a significant transformation was taking place: in the urban peripheries and shantytowns, groups have been multiplying among themselves, producing a new phenomenon in Brazilian cultural history: the definition of their own image. In "Rapaz Comum" ["Common Guy"], the Racionais MC's suggest: "Look in the mirror and try to understand."⁷⁸ Many of the *manos* who insist on defying the statistics are taking this advice.

Therefore, if my hypothesis is sound, the near future is about to bring a fundamental shift in the perception Brazilians have of their own culture – a perception that has been determined mainly by the way Brazilians are seen abroad. Were Elizabeth Bishop to write her book today, she most likely would identify a subtle but decisive change in the attitude of the average Brazilian when subjected to interminable lines folded back on themselves: he has learned to grow impatient quickly. On 28 August 1958, Carolina de Jesus wrote down in her diary: "I went to get water. What a line! When I saw the line of cans I became depressed with life."⁷⁹ Even more important than simply becoming disheartened, the average Brazilian has learned to voice his impatience and, above all, he wants to express it with his own voice. This is the echo of what I have called "dialectic of marginality."

⁷⁷ Eric Hobsbawm. *Bandits*. New York: New Press, 2000, pp. 63-76.

⁷⁸ The original reads: "Olha no espelho e tenta entender."

⁷⁹ Carolina Maria de Jesus. *Beyond all Pity*. Trans. David St. Clair. London: Souvenir Press, 2004, p. 125.

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