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## The Spectacle of Urban Violence in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema A Study of *Neighboring Sounds* and *Elite Squad: Enemy Within*

A recent study by an NGO reported that police in Brazil have killed over 11,000 people over the last 5 years. This amounts to approximately 6 killings per day or, to put things in a broader context, a bit more than police officers in the US have committed over a period of 30 years. With an economic rise that has brought a stronger middle class and expanded various urban areas of Brazil, the pressure has increased drastically on the country's favelas—Brazil's shantytowns. Filled with poverty and historically dominated by drug trafficking and warring gangs, the favela is also an endemic feature of Brazilian urban culture. In Brazil there is a resurgence of new, militarized police forces that work independently of local police organizations, and aim at forcefully eradicating corruption, drug trade, and gang warfare in favela communities. This is the tenet of a government under pressure both nationally, with broad economic expansions, and internationally, with the World Cup and the Olympics to work towards. Luxuries and securities that have recently become possible for many Brazilian people are intrinsically linked to this recent bloodshed. This is the stage for Brazilian drama today. Within this context it is not surprising that the urban cinema of Brazil has become fixated with representations of aggression and violence: elements that have taken over and now underwrite all popular narratives of contemporary Brazilian urban life.

Amidst this festival of violence comes *Neighboring Sounds*: a film about life in a middle class neighborhood in Recife where recently built up, stark, modern condos accommodate a new leisured class. *Neighboring Sounds* is a film without any onscreen deaths or a single gunshot. Crime and death, much like the film's working class characters, operate tensely off-screen. Directed by Brazilian film critic Kleber Mendonca, the film offers a counter-narrative and cinematic alternative to the spectacle of violence of the gritty urban genre exemplified by *City of God*, a landmark Brazilian feature. This genre, defined as an "aesthetic of reality" or "shock of the real" by Beatriz Jaguaribe, has become the major discursive mode for Brazilian narratives of urban life and inequality.

However, the cinematic context of *Neighboring Sounds* can be further understood by familiarizing oneself with a more contemporary landmark Brazilian film, and an undeniable successor to *City of God* in terms of style, *Elite Squad: The Enemy Within*. Released in 2010, *Enemy Within* is a sequel to the first *Elite Squad* and became the highest grossing Brazilian film in history. The film is based on a confessional book of the same name written by a Brazilian sociologist and two former members of BOPE, Rio de Janeiro's elite paramilitary police force. *Enemy Within* shows events literally torn from the headlines of Rio's recent history and attempts to leave no stone unturned in a violence-fueled condemnation that aims at all levels of Brazilian society—from militia warlords to corrupt politicians, and even police officers themselves.

*Elite Squad: The Enemy Within* moves in a quick, pseudo-documentary style. Much like in *City of God* its shots are often handheld, as it seamlessly moves from a favela shootout, to a meeting with the governor and president, to the set of a populist talk show. Its story is framed around the tension between Roberto Nascimento (Wagner Moura), a violent and uncompromising captain of the BOPE, and Diogo Fraga (Iranthir Santos), a human rights activist and politician. Situating the film at opposing political and moral ends, the characters circle around the underbelly of Rio de Janeiro's world of crime and corruption to meet somewhere in the middle and join forces by the end of the film. "O sistema", the system, is the name the film gives to the all-encompassing world of colluding influences and money that facilitates the film's various political and social foci: drug trafficking, police violence, media control, and political corruption. In its broad moralizing strokes, *The Enemy Within* leaves almost no one free of culpability.

The striking specificity of its political representations is alarming to the point of desperation, considering that many of the people depicted—and, at the very least, the system which spawned them—are still in full effect. *Elite Squad*'s director, José Padilha, chooses to fictionalize these accounts, beginning the film with a seemingly clear enough indication of its objective: "Though there are many coincidences

with reality, this film is a work of fiction,” but the film’s overarching tendency toward biography betrays the intent of its filmmaker. All of the characters are loosely based on real people. The real Captain Nascimento is an amalgamation of two captains of the BOPE police force who chose to write an account of their experiences, while Fraga, the left-leaning politician, is based on Marcelo Freixo, an anti-crime politician who has since become a political exile after receiving various death threats. The similarities are far from coincidental, Padilha’s efforts are concentrated on keeping the veils that separate these characters and their stories from reality as thin as possible. That space between reality and fiction is what this form of Brazilian urban realism is intent on exploring and blurring.

This tendency has a precedent in *City of God* (or *Cidade de Deus*) and comes with a certain style. Both films present violence that is palpable and ever present, though—as per mainstream convention—obscured at its most exploitative. In *The Enemy Within*, for example, a scene in which a kidnapped journalist is threatened with rape by corrupt militia officers cuts directly to the same officers ominously tearing off teeth from charred black skulls as bodies are burning behind them, presumably the next day. Not much later in the film, the leader of a slum gang is tortured and choked with a plastic bag by police officers looking for information that the audience knows he honestly cannot provide. These moments of violence follow incessantly one after another; their style is aggressive, the camera work is shaky, close-up and unrefined. The film’s violence is propelled forward by a compulsion to account for a sense of “reality”—to depict recent events in a raw manner, not shying away from crudeness or violence.

It is this same style and responsibility towards “genuine” representation that motivates the narrative *City of God*, also a massive economic success in its home country. The emphasis on “realism” is key here. Though its violence is over the top and its scope immense, the film proclaims that it represents a real aspect of contemporary Brazilian urban culture. The commercial success of both movies at least seem to signify this cinema resonates with many different people in Brazil. The intensity of its condemnation, by *The Enemy Within*’s end reaching even Brasilia, Brazil’s capital, marks the extent of widespread disillusionment with both urban living and government attempts at reducing violence. However, as Beatriz Jaguaribe notes, the “realist” form of these films, is deemed by some as merely a “cosmetic reality”.

The style and tendency towards blurred notions of realism as seen in both *City of God* and *The Enemy Within* undeniably borrow elements and tropes directly from mainstream Hollywood cinema. On top of the fact that *Elite Squad* is a franchise in itself, generating James Cameron-esque numbers in domestic revenue, the more essential narrative and cinematic elements of “realist” cinema also have an American character. Again, while certain aspects of *The Enemy Within* are taken from recent history and reality, telling elements of the narrative are fictionalized. Captain Nascimento of the BOPE and Diogo Fraga, the human rights advocate and politician, are placed on opposing sides of a domestic dispute. In the film, Fraga is depicted in an unlikely marriage to Nascimento’s divorced wife. This domestic melodrama feels tacked on to a story of far greater ambitions, but its necessity in a familiar Hollywood structure allows the film to conform to dominant narrative principles. Though this element has little purpose in the narrative, the sheer melodramatic absurdity of the overused Hollywood trope stands out in a film that poses itself as responsible towards a certain “reality”. The film itself acknowledges this tension in the first line spoken by Captain Nascimento; right after the title card announcing its closeness to real events, he states, “It might seem like a cliché from American Cinema but...” Shots of helicopters with armed police officers shooting down at Favela gunmen could be torn directly from *Apocalypse Now*, and scenes of quick witted police bickering and sudden double crossings share the pace of something like *The Departed*. The acknowledgement of Nascimento at the beginning of the movie holds a truth: American cinematic tropes and clichés have themselves been absorbed into the reality of Brazilian crime and police proceedings. While Nascimento acknowledges the cliché and its alien nature, he is unable to divorce it from a story that strives towards the most visceral reality.

This is the cinematic landscape into which *Neighbouring Sounds* is born and to which it responds. Rather than purposely unpolished, the film is highly visually constructed, with careful and deliberate camera work. The film centers around the lives of different characters in a middle class neighborhood of

apartments in the city of Recife. It is split into three chapters, each titled with alterations of the word guard: Guard Dog, Private Security, Security Guard. Guarding is an important notion in an essentially crime-free, socially gated neighborhood that happens to also be in a violent and unstable city

Depictions of violence, however, are entirely kept out of the film. The fast camera work and violent action of *Elite Squad* and *City of God* are exchanged for a stable camera and deliberate pace. Characters wake up and go through humdrum days. A single man in his 20s gives tours of cookie-cutter real estate condos with white washed walls and small, windowless rooms for maids. A flower wreath at the bottom of a building is the only indication of a dead body: a tenant's, we are told in passing, who killed herself recently. A stressed out mother struggles to overcome domestic boredom by drugging a dog whose barking bothers her, smoking pot with the help of a vacuum cleaner, and masturbating with her washing machine. Her quiet struggle aims to change the symbols of her domestic incarceration into tools of liberation. A group of apartment holders argue over firing a long-employed security guard. One of the tenants' son shows a film he's edited on his laptop, spying on the old man asleep, to the indignation of middle aged housewives, who thank the child for the great video. This is the camera used at its most exploitative, as a tool for a moralizing and classist condemnation. It is the kind of video that contrasts with Mendonça's project as a whole. His characters are petty and bourgeois, but fully fledged. He is equally intent on portraying their struggles and abuses as individuals as he is in demonstrating the repercussions of their social statuses and alienation.

What Kleber Mendonça achieves in *Neighbouring Sounds* by foregoing outright violence and intense pace in favor of a more meditative and symbolist filmmaking is a new sort of portrait of urban living in Brazil. Divorced from American influences of violent fantasy and spectacle, here violence in its quotidian form can be properly understood. As Mendoza said in an interview at the British Film Institute: "Crime is big deal in Brazil; however, I've never been mugged or assaulted. I know very few people who've ever been robbed." This ominous condition is prevalent throughout the film. Crime and menace, though offscreen, is ever present at the edges, threatening to break in. The portrait's admittedly narrow social focus does more towards realist representation by denying the fantastical, "realist" representations that have become ubiquitous with any portrayal of urban life in Brazil today.

The film depicts neighborhood life as grimly as one would expect it to be in the sheltered urban center of a city where inequalities separate all too cleanly the "dangerous" neighborhoods from the "safe" ones. A shot of one of its many protagonists looking over from the roof of one of the lifeless condos allows one to see the shanty towns in the distance, dwarfed and asphyxiated by the wealthy skyscrapers that surround them. "Architectures of oppression," Mendoza calls them. Characters struggle to find a place in these new, vacant environments, though a sense of historical continuity is expertly staged. Black and white photos of the same land's prior usage as a sugar plantation are shown at the beginning and end of the films. These sequences frame the world we experience within familiar and abusive labour relations. It conveys a deep disappointment towards the supposed opportunities of the modern city and democracy. Landowners still rule the day, their fields replaced with condos, their guns with private security groups.

*Neighbouring Sounds* achieves a telling representation of the plight of many Brazilians by what it keeps offscreen—a refreshing alternative to the condemnatory broad strokes of films like *Elite Squad*. This alternative acknowledges the strange elements and small rebellions of urban living in unequal societies—the children of maids watching TV and playing comfortably in their employer's house; rich, white kids entertaining themselves with stealing car radios and wearing 'gangster clothes'; private security guards sneaking into people's houses with maids to have quick sex. It manages to do this while also acknowledging the persistent forms of oppression that trap individuals, not in corrupt and morally decrepit action (as is the wont of mainstream "spectacle of violence" films), but in a languid stupor of inaction. Just as Mendoza describes, the violence that contemporary middle class Brazilians see onscreen is not a violence that is present to them in an immediate sense. Behind the chain link fences, just as behind the veneer of the World Cup and Olympics, one perceives the reality of urban Brazil through a different mode, not a gunshot in the head but a soft cry heard through the cracks. Overheard down the street. Pulsing through the air.