Girls’ and boys’ favela: Antonia and City of God

In the last ten years there has been a surge in films about Brazilian favelas for domestic and international markets, led by Katia Lund’s and Fernando Meirelles’s blockbuster City of God (Cidade de Deus, 2002). Most of those films focus on the violence generated by the drug traffic: this is most famously the case with City of God, but it also true of José Padilha’s Elite Squad (Tropa de Elite, 2007) and Elite Squad 2 (2010), which offer an implicit response to City of God by showing the drug war from the the point of view of the police; and MV Bill’s and Celso Athayde’s documentary Falcão: Meninos do Tráfico (2006), which also responds to City of God by presenting a view from within the favela. Others works, such as Matt Mochary’s and Jeff Zimbalist’s documentary Favela Rising (2005), concentrate on youth music and social initiatives that are presented as alternatives to drug traffic - that is, films that without focusing on drug violence per se, have it as the motivation for the artistic endeavours they document. An exception to this violence-centered cinematic view of favelas is Tata Amaral’s Antonia (2006), where the violence caused by the traffic of drugs and illegal weapons is simply not present. Yet, the favela where the action of Antonia takes place, Vila Brasiliândia, in the North side of São Paulo, is, like Cidade de Deus in Rio, notorious for being a violent, drug-ridden place that has seen many prolonged shoot-outs between the PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital)¹ and the police. This paper will examine how the favela of Vila Brasiliândia is depicted in Antonia. It will argue that Amaral’s drug-free portrait of the favela functions as the other side of the coin of the Meirellean favela. In other words, Antonia’s favela becomes more comprehensible when seen as a response to the favela in City of God.

The fact that City of God should elicit so many cinematic responses should come as no surprise. For domestic and international audiences alike, City of God has become the most recognizable screen image of what Paulo Lins, the author of the homonymous novel that inspired the film, has described as the “neofavela”, i.e., the favela of the 1980s and 1990s. In the words of Freire-Medeiros:

> Although the favela and its inhabitants (favelados) had been presented to international audiences before (...), no other film before City of God had exposed them to so many viewers nor directly inspired such a large number of narratives about their lives within the transnational cultural industry. Furthermore, according to all whom I interviewed during a three-year-long socio-ethnographic research project, no other cultural product has ever had such a dramatic impact on how the favela is orchestrated, performed and consumed as a tourist attraction. (22-23)

There are many points of contact between Antonia and City of God. The post-production of Antonia was carried out by the same company that produced City of God: O2, owned by Fernando Meirelles. While City of God was followed by a very successful television series, Cidade dos Homens, featuring some of the main characters in the film, Antonia’s showing in Brazilian cinemas was delayed so that it could be preceded by a homonym television series also featuring the same characters of the film. Both series were aired by Globo, the most popular television channel in Brazil. Antonia’s casting shows Tata Amaral’s commitment to the same realist techniques developed by Lund and Meirelles in City of God: the majority of its actors are non-professionals from poor areas of São Paulo, and were chosen and trained through actors’ workshops in the favela.

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¹ PCC, or Primeiro Comando da Capital is a crime organization formed by prison inmates in the 1990s. They have staged various violent acts in São Paulo and other cities in the last decade, and are involved in the traffic of drugs and illegal weapons. They feature in a couple of recent films about urban violence, such as Sérgio Bianchi’s The Tenants (Os Inquilinos, 2009), and Sérgio Rezende’s Time of Fear (Salve Geral: o dia em que São Paulo parou, 2009).
of Vila Brasilândia. As in City of God, the characters in Antonia are young and part of periferia youth culture. But perhaps the most striking similarity between the two films is the fact that both are committed to a single-gendered view of the favela: if City of God is about the boys' favela, Antonia is about the girls' favela.

In an analysis of Paulo Lins's novel City of God, Marta Peixoto called it “relentless male” (173) - a description that could also be applied to the film. One of the most obvious signs of its maleness is the almost complete absence of mothers: the exceptions are all minor and include the mother of Berenice, Shaggy's girlfriend, who appears briefly helping Shaggy to escape; Berenice herself, who is possibly pregnant as she tries to flee the favela; Knockout Ned's mother, who makes a brief appearance after their house is attacked by Li'l Zé's gang; and Rocket's mother, glimpsed on a nearly still image of the family when the police invades their house - in fact, up to that point the viewer could be forgiven for thinking that Rocket belonged to a single-parent home led by his fishmonger father. In a film set in the world of the Brazilian periferia, where most families are run by single mothers, such maternal absence is particularly striking. There are no mothers crying when young corpses appear on the roads; no mothers calling their boys in when danger arises; no mothers trying to get their sons out of drugs - in other words no mothers doing what mothers do everyday in favelas and periferias of all Brazilian cities. The point is not to accuse City of God of presenting an unrealistic portrait of the favelas through the erasure of maternal and female presence, but to understand the meaning of such erasure. Commenting on Paulo Lins's novel, Roberto Schwarz reminds us that it omits the higher spheres of drug traffic that operate beyond the favelas, the political corruption that protects them, as well as economic processes, such as real-state speculation, that ensure that the favela remains segregated. Yet, as Schwarz says: “This limited compass, functions as a strength in literary terms, dramatizing the blindness and segmentation of the social process” (2).

The same could be said about how gender operates in the film. Research on violent death in the last three decades in Brazil has shown that young males in urban centers are more than ten times likely to die of violent death than women, and the majority of those deaths are related directly or indirectly to the traffic of drugs and illegal weapons. The perpetrators of those deaths are also, in the almost totality, young males, confirming that the drug war in the favelas and urban centers in Brazil is indeed gender defined. As Alba Zaluar pointed out in her research in the favela of Cidade de Deus, the drug traffic in Brazil is controlled by rival groups who wage perpetual wars against each other. Notions of virility and masculinity are an integral part of such wars, and are mostly expressed through violence and “the drive and the capacity to destroy the rival groups” (Zaluar 49).

By giving us an all-male and male-centered view of drug violence in the favela, City of God (both the novel and the film) make us experience the world, as it were, from the point of view of the young men involved in the traffic. And since we are shown no mothers crying for their dying sons, no pathos is associated with the killings, which are mostly not cried for, or are only cried for by people also involved in the crime world, like Berenice, Shaggy’s girlfriend. There are, of course, a few exceptions, the most important being the death of Benny as he is about to leave the drug world: at the side of his open-armed, Christ-like dead body we witness the weeping of girlfriend Angelica, one of the film’s rare moments of true pathos. Another of such moments is the scene in which Li'l Zé shoots the foot of a member of the runts' gang, making the very young boy cry like a vulnerable child. The use of such a young-looking child-actor helps, in this scene, to compensate for the absence of mothers, as the audience can feel maternal empathy for the boy. For the most part

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2 Periferia (literally “periphery”) is a term generally used to refer to the poorer areas in the outskirts of cities, in Brazil.

3 See Guimarães, 2. For excellent studies on masculinity and violent death see Zaluar, and Souza.
however, the absence of mothers turns the boys into originators of their own world: they are mere killing machines. The numbness provoked by our exposure to so many killings mimics the numbness supposedly felt by the inhabitants of Cidade de Deus, surrounded as they are everyday by so many deaths. In other words, although the absence of mothers and the limited role played by women in *City of God* can be described as completely unrealistic when compared to the actual everyday life in Brazilian *favelas*, they are effective techniques when it comes to giving a sense of the enclosed, all-male world of the drug dealers. As Xavier puts it: “Na tela, a regra não é o realismo, mas a rentabilização da lógica de guerra” (“Corrosão” 142). The limited scope of the film’s world-view works as a strength: as Antonio Candido says in the opening sentence of an article that deals with the relationship between literature and social-historical reality, “The best way to call attention to a truth is to exaggerate it” (3).

It is thus no surprise that, although described by Meirelles as the film’s “central character” (13), the *favela* in *City of God* is mostly a space whose function it to facilitate the action. The film was shot not in the real City of God, considered by the producers to be too dangerous and ugly to feature in the film, but in Nova Sapetiba and the outside alleys of Morro Santa Marta *favela* (Oppenheimer 29). The first part, set in the 1960s, shows not a *favela* proper but a new housing project in a semi-rural location. It is a space still marked by what Ismail Xavier called points of normality (“Corrosão” 142): clothes lines, children playing football and swimming, beautiful sunrises. The indoor spaces show crochet curtains, kitchens full of aluminium utensils, women washing dishes, etc. As the film progresses most internal scenes are shot in the flats of Li’l Zé or Carrot: studio recreations of homes that are too big to resemble *favela* dwellings or low-income flats. And they are big because they need to be able to fit the action scenes, i.e. the shoot-outs and changes of power between the rival groups. The emphasis is on the drug dealers’ barbarity (Xavier “Humanisers” 97): the fridge in one of the flats has no doors, the walls in both flats are semi-destroyed, tables that apparently would serve normal purposes (like eating) in closer look are being used for factory-like preparation of drugs. The barbarity represented by the drug dealers is opposed in the film by the narrator Rocket who is brought to Li’l Zé’s flat in order to show the hoodlums how to operate a camera: in the words of Xavier, *City of God’s* central conflict is “violence or photography” (“Humanisers” 99). The studio feel of the flats derives in part from the strong colors of the semi-destroyed and extremely dirty walls, and from the improbable absence of women (no woman hired to clean? no girlfriends, lovers?) which emphasizes the hyper-masculine space of barbarity.

The exterior spaces are marked by the same functionality, i.e., the space is created to serve the action. The housing project in the first part of the film is set on a flat landscape, with identical houses projecting themselves apparently to infinity, bordered by the stunning mountains of Rio in the distance. The relatively naive criminality of Trio Ternura happens in these flat streets - a mis-en-scene that, as Oppenheimer observed, is reminiscent of Western movies (27). In the last part, by contrast, most action happens between narrow alleys and stairways whose connection to the space of the first part is never very clear. In other words, the geography is confusing and not meant to be understood by the viewers, as characters move to and fro between places that relate oddly to each other, so that the *favela* as a space remains impenetrable. The stairs, walls and high gates do not serve as obstacles for the characters as they climb and jump over them, running up and down

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4 In fact the first sentence of Candido’s article refers to changes in theoretical trends. However, the use of such a sentence to open an article focused on the relationship between sociology and literature is obviously not casual. My choice of this particular article has to do with its beautiful conciseness, and although it deals with literature, not film, its analysis can be generalized, in my view, to encompass, more broadly, the relationship between art and social reality. In spite of citing Becker’s excellent English edition, I have adapted the translation of the first sentence, making it closer to the original.
chasing each other. Furthermore, the stairs and alleys help to reinforce the feeling of instability and chaos that predominates in the latter parts of the film. The emphasis is not on the favela itself but on the action or, rather, the favela is the action.

As it has been pointed out by critics, several cinematographic aspects of City of God confirm a point of view from within the drug world (Nagib, “Talking”: 39, Opphenheimer 28). The dark scenes that predominate in the last part, for instance, mimic the sombre and chaotic mood that dominated the favela during the war, in the same way as the frantic editing expresses the pace of the war. The increasing feeling of claustrophobia given by the profusion of dark scenes shot in alleys and flats emphasize the fact that the favela and the city are, according to the film, worlds apart. This is reinforced by the absence of any so-called postcard views of Rio de Janeiro - the only exception being the beach where Rocket and his middle class friends spend time (even so, it is not one of the more readily recognizable beaches of Rio); and by the fact that most characters, with the notable exception of Rocket, his middle-class friend Tiago, and, to a lesser degree Knockout Ned, do not seem to interact with the world outside. Again, this is an exaggeration, to use Candido’s term, of the “divided city” trope often used to describe Rio. As an exaggeration, it wants to call attention to the truth of social inequality. Most inhabitants of favelas, including those living in Cidade de Deus, have jobs outside, and drug dealers like Carrot or Li’l Zé normally work for or are protected by bigger bosses, since the drug economy is, as we know, a global economy. The same can be said about the hyper-masculinization of the favela in the film, as it presents us with the myopic, male-centred view of the drug traffic. The film’s liberty, Candido would say, “even within the documentary orientation, belongs to phantasy, which at times needs to modify the world’d order exactly to make it more expressive, in such a way that the feeling of truth constitutes itself in the reader thanks to this methodical treachery”. (149)

It is also important to remember that this supposed insider’s view of the drug world depends on the voice-over of the character Rocket, who serves as a mediator between the favela and the implied middle-class viewers (Nagib, “Talking”: 41; Xavier, “Corrosão”: 141). As Lúcia Nagib points out, Rocket makes the narrative’s constant shifts between different periods understandable, and he also translates the criminals’ language, making it intelligible to us (“Talking” 41). But Rocket is not a criminal, therefore the “insider’s view” that the film relies so much on is necessarily compromised by his role as mediator. This is a point where the film differs considerably from the novel, as in the latter, the multiplicity of voices makes the narrative less dependent on a single mediator, and the “insider’s view” more convincing. In spite of some critics calling him a malandro (Line), Rocket does not quite fit the low-life petty crime and trickster life style associated with malandragem: we often see him, in fact, wearing school uniform or working in a supermarket or as a newspaper delivery boy. His attempts at becoming a criminal only serve to emphasize his lack of affinity with criminality, as his empathy with the victims show. As viewers, we know from the beginning that Rocket is never going to join the criminal world, and we learn to trust him precisely because he is one of us, not one of them. So, if the cinematography, the plot, and the language emphasize an insider’s view, the narrator’s voice remind us that this claustrophobic account from within the drug world is actually the result of a good boy’s observations and imagination.

This does not differ, in essence, from the most acclaimed realistic technique employed in City of God: the use of non-actors from Rio’s favelas. As Lúcia Nagib pointed out, the acting of the film only came to be so convincing thanks to months of painstaking rehearsals in workshops (“Talking”, 38). In other words, the “natural” improvisation by actors in the film was only achieved through immense artifice. Needless to say, there is nothing wrong with this process, but it confirms the film’s reliance on the good boys’ view of the criminal world. That is, the same assumption that guides the actor’s workshops also guides the choice of Rocket as a narrator: any good boy from the
*Favela* is able to tell us what the criminal world is like. Taken one step further, the assumption seems to rely on the fact that potentially anyone in the *favela* can represent the criminal world.

Let’s now move on to *Antonia*, which, in contrast to *City of God*, was actually filmed in Vila Brasilândia, in the north side of São Paulo. As Tata Amaral’s third feature film, it continues the focus of the previous ones, *Um céu de estrelas* (1996), and *Do outro lado da rua* (2004), on women living in the periphery of São Paulo. It is, according to Amaral, the last film in a trilogy about woman archetypes, featuring what the director calls “the virginal woman” – that is, a woman that “remains true to herself” (http://antoniaofilme.globo.com/english/html/press/index_press.asp). It tells the story of four black young characters from Brasilândia who are trying to make it in the world of hip-hop. At the beginning of the film they sing as back-vocals for a black male hip-hop band. Just after they get their first gig as a group called Antonia, and attract the interest of an agent, they lose their first member, Mayah, because of an argument with Preta, the leader of the group.

After another gig in a richer area of the city, the group loses the second member, Lena, who gets pregnant and is told by her boyfriend that he will only assume paternity of the child if she stops singing on stage. Soon after that, Barbara and Preta, the only two remaining members of the group, are returning home from a successful gig in a nightclub in a richer area of the city, when Barbara, who is trained in kung-fu martial arts, gets into a fight with a young boy from the *favela* and unintentionally kills him. Barbara is taken to prison and Preta is left singing solo and having to find other jobs. The film, however, has a somewhat happy ending, as Preta makes up with Mayah, Lena defies her partner and goes back to the group, and the four are able to sing together again, even if in a most unglamorous venue: Barbara’s prison. The story of the fictional music group is intercalated with musical scenes - the gigs of the four women, the hip-hop singing of the young men with whom they initially perform, and Preta’s mother singing in the sitting room with a group of evangelic Christians. As Valente correctly points out, the musical scenes provide the film with “flashes of exuberance”. Yet, the film is not a musical in the most conventional way, as the songs do not help us understand or follow the plot - except, perhaps, for the group’s title song, which works as a call for arms, in the hip-hop sense: “I am not going to give up, nobody is going to stop me”.

In contrast to *City of God*, *Antonia* is filmed predominantly in sequence-shots, a technique traditionally associated with cinematic realism, most famously by Bazin. Nocturnal shots of the young women arriving in the *favela* after gigs are alternated with natural-light shots of them talking to each other in their houses, or walking on the streets of Vila Brasilândia. The camera usually follows the young women as they walk to and from their houses, to and from gigs, to other people’s houses, and so on. There are basically no shots from unusual or fancy angles, and although the camera is mostly hand-held, it is never jittery as it often is in *City of God*. In fact, in most respects *Antonia* is a less complex film than *City of God*: the plot is extremely simple and the cinematography is quite conventional. We often see the women from the back as the camera shadows them - a technique much used in cinema-verité or documentary filming. The point of view comes mostly from this hidden camera, which a few times takes a position from above the women. Within the plot, however, the story is told from the point of view of the two main young women - Preta and Barbara. The film, in fact, starts with the voice-over of Barbara remembering how the group got their first gig. The voice-over is actually a letter that Barbara wrote from prison and is now being read by Preta, but we only learn this towards the end of the film, when we see alternate scenes of Barbara writing and Preta reading the missive. In other words, the voice-over/letter leads the narrative, takes it from the present (Preta reading the letter) to the memories of how the group started and how it melted down, leaving Preta as a solo singer. Although we are not explicitly told

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5 On editing and sequence-shots in connection to *City of God*, see Nagib 38. See also her *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* for further discussions about realism in film.
so, it is after reading the letter that the group re-organizes and is able to sing in the prison. The letter is thus at the centre of the narrative, and it determines the perspective from which the story is being told. In other words, the point of view of the film originates in the act of writing (Barbarah) and reading (Preta): it is an act of communication between the two women. Indeed, there are no scenes in the film in which neither Preta nor Barbarah are present, except for a few flash-backs in which someone else (Lena, or the boy who is killed by Barbarah) tells Barbarah and/or Preta something that happened to them. This is an important difference between Antonia and City of God: at least at the level of plot, Antonia is told from the point of view of insider characters (the musicians themselves) and not from the point of view of a mediator. Moreover, if the actors in City of God were mostly young men from the favelas who were asked to perform a world they actually did not belong to (the criminal world), most actors in Antonia belong to the world about which they perform in the film: the musical world of periferia. This includes the four protagonists (all singers and/or rappers with careers of their own6), Preta’s mother, acted in the film by the well-known funk artist Sandra de Sá, Preta’s father, acted by a sambista (Thobias da Vai Vai) and the girls’ agent, Marcelo Diamante, acted by the hip-hop maverick Thaide. Thus, if it is true that Antonia and City of God appealed to the same casting technique - training non-actors from the favelas to perform - Antonia took it one step further, by choosing actors to act-out their own world. This is reinforced by the use of improvisation (also employed in City of God) since most dialogues were not pre-defined, and actors were only given situations to work from.

It is mostly through the characters, then, that we see the favela of Vila Brasilândia. Rather than having an impenetrable and incomprehensible geography, the favela in Antonia becomes increasingly domesticated for the viewer as the film progresses. In the first scene, the camera lowers from the sky into a panoramic view of the favela, which, although quite photogenic, also looks daunting with its apparently infinite number of small houses piled on top of each other. The four girls come onto the scene from under the hill, walking together in the middle of the street, and talking animatedly about clothes and performance, with the panoramic shot of the favela still in the background. This opening scene gives us a concise preview of what the film will be about, with the superimposition of the individuals (the young women) over the collective, socio-geographic favela. The location of the young women dominating the road, their dis-preoccupied laughter, and the affectionate voice-over of Barbarah indicate that the portrait of the favela that we are about to see will be radically different from the one in City of God.

Throughout the film, we see the girls repeat certain movements and trajectory: they are usually left by whoever gives them a lift (the male rappers in the beginning, and Marcelo Diamante throughout the rest of the film) at the top of the street and make their way down to their houses. Before doing so they often change their shoes, from the shiny high-heels that they wear for their performances, to the walking shoes that they have to wear in order to negotiate their way through the irregularly paved and steep streets of the favela. The repeated action works as a ritual that marks their descent from the city and (relative) shine and glamour of the performance world to the difficulties of everyday life in the favela. Indeed, this visual trope corresponds to the narrative structure, as almost every time they descend into the favela there will be some kind of problem: the break up between Preta and Mayah (discussed by Preta and Barbarah as they get back home after their first gig), the finding of Barbarah’s brother Duda and his partner lying on the street, the news that Lena was leaving the group, the killing of the boy who attacked Duda, and so on. Some of these troubles are relatively mundane while others are dangerous and even life-threatening, but none of them compares to the cruel and often sadistic deaths related to drug traffic in City of God.

6 Preta is played by Negra Li, a rapper from Brasilândia; Barbarah is played by black-music singer Leilah Moreno; Leilah is played by actress, MC and free-styleer Cindy; and Mayah is played by rapper and dancer Quelynah.
Above all, they are troubles over which the characters retain some kind of decision-power or responsibility. In the beginning of the film, for instance, Preta’s husband has failed to show up for one week, not taking responsibility for their daughter, and Preta decides to abandon him. Lena has to deal with a jealous and violent boyfriend, and when she becomes pregnant and wants to have the baby, he wants to force her to have an abortion. She agrees to abandon the group to live with him, but later reverts her decision in order to regain her freedom. Duda is beaten and his partner is assassinated in a homophobic revenge attack by a young boy who had been expelled by Duda from a football match. Confronted by the perpetrator of the action, Barbarah kills him and hands herself in to the police. Although the lives of these young characters are marked by extreme difficulties, even death, they go on fighting, as we can see, and being responsible for their acts. They are not trapped inside a killing machinery, as it is the case with almost all favela characters in City of God.

Moreover, if the favela is indeed a space full of troubles, it is also home, and the space per se becomes more and more familiar to us as we repeatedly follow the characters in a route that takes us down the streets and up the complicated set of stairs that climbs to the house that Preta and her daughter share with Barbarah and Duda. The troubles faced by the characters are matched by the support of friends and family, and the latter particularly in the case of Preta, and by simple everyday pleasures such as talking to and dancing with children, making and eating chocolate cake, eating hotdogs on the street, and above all singing. Singing is an everyday activity for these women: they are often portrayed humming in the house, and in one of the best scenes in the film they start singing as they wait for a train, inspired by a sentence said by one of them as they talk about contact lenses and makeup. What makes this scene particularly enjoyable is its spontaneity and freshness, combined with the young women’s actual talent as singers. There is religious singing in Preta’s mother’s house, and occasional music from radio is heard in several shots. Singing also provides the protagonists with a dream of success, of becoming stars (as Preta says to her daughter), but it is at the same time a hard profession that can be quite alienating. This is clearly the case when Preta and Barbarah sing a sertaneja (country) song entirely from the point of view of male eroticism in a middle class nightclub. Motherhood, too, is a source of immense pleasure for Preta, but it is also a problem for her career, particularly because she has to depend on her mother for childcare. It is also a reason for concern for Lena when she decides to become a mother against her partner. These are, as we can see, women problems. They lack the epic, territorial dimension of the disputes in City of God, but they also lack the latter’s senselessness. The simple, formulaic structure of Antonia, which some critics have objected to (Valente) proves to be well suited to convey the film’s sense of connection with ordinary life in the periferia. If it is true that for most of us life is organized according to the same formula we see in Antonia (go to work, come back from work), in the periferias and favelas of Brazilian cities this formula is compounded by higher degrees of uncertainty and lack of infrastructure, which make even simple acts like walking on the streets more difficult and dangerous.

That is why the favela in Antonia is not only important as setting for the action, but as space itself. While in City of God we have very few panoramic shots, nearly all of them from the housing project featured in the first part of the film, in Antonia the panoramic shots are a constant feature, and often include the protagonists. In other words, the favela landscape often appears in the film with the mediation of the protagonists, who are shown as part of it, immersed in it, and often contemplating it. In City of God, by contrast, the characters have no time to contemplate their surroundings, and any observing activity is related to territorial policing and control by the different gangs or the police. The laje, i.e., the concrete roof where the contemplation often happens in Antonia, plays an important role in the film, and is also an architectural feature of the periferia of Brazilian and Latin American cities. A posting in a neighborhood website from Capão Redondo, one of the most violent bairros in São Paulo, makes an eloquent homage to the humble laje:
A laje é uma forma de acabamento mais barato e, que a qualquer momento está preparada para receber o telhado quando o orçamento deixar. A laje cobre o imóvel das intempéries do tempo e isso em um primeiro momento já é suficiente para se poder habitar esses imóveis. Pois como se vê, a laje é algo provisório que remedia uma situação de precariedade econômica. Em segundo lugar, as lajes das residências são nas regiões periféricas um lugar de sociabilidade pois, a sua construção já se inicia em mutirão, quase sempre em uma manhã ensolarada de domingo, onde se reúne (sic) os amigos, parentes e vizinhos tendo a missão de "bater a laje", ajudando o novo inquilino em sua nova moradia, que (sic) de outro modo o proprietário não teria condições de contratar pedreiros para essa tarefa. São (sic) nas lajes que os meninos empinam suas pipas, as mães pindoram (sic) as roupas para secarem, as meninas se espreguiçam ao sol para pegarem uma cor, onde são preparados os churrascos de fim-de-semana, onde as caixas de som ecoam em alto volume as músicas de rap, sertanejo e pagode e, onde do alto se descortinha a rua lá em baixo, com visão de toda a vizinhança. As lajes são antes de tudo uma instituição cultural das periferias que não servem só para cobrirem os cômodos das casas mas tem funções várias. (Valentim)

Some scenes are shot from the laje at sunrise in tones of pink and blue, with characters in the foreground. These shots appeal to the favela as a beautiful landscape in a conventional sense, i.e., a space that rather than being at odds with the individual, serves as her confident, following a cultural trope that goes back at least to Romantic literature. The favela is also shown panoramically at night, with the stars and the moon appearing to be part of the myriad of electric lights that shine in the houses. That is, as an urban landscape, the favela in Antonia is not necessarily in conflict with nature. It is a human settlement in the deep sense of the word: it is part of the natural world and it is human culture. In one of the laje scenes at the beginning of the film, for instance, we see Barbarah practicing kung fu against the daylight background of a favela that seems at once harsh and oddly beautiful: she is a warrior dominating her environment. This scene also poses an interesting question about point of view in the film: as it is shot from above, it may be simply betraying the perspective of the director/filming crew, i.e., a point of view of someone external to the favela who has access to a higher, bird’s eye perspective, and who may be projecting her own ideas of beauty onto the neighborhood. At the same time, given the architecture of Vila Brasília, where houses hang above each other in the most unexpected places, we can easily imagine that the view from above may be an indication that at that place, any time of day, Barbarah may be observed by someone else in Brasília in the same way that she observes others from her laje. In this case, someone/anyone else in Brasília may be also enjoying the view of this photogenic favela. In any case, it is important to recall that, beautiful or not, the favela is never portrayed in Antonia as a space free of troubles: as we saw before, the young women’s arrival in their neighborhood is always marked ritually by the changing of shoes, which signals the difficult, harsh reality of their environment.

The best example of how these two ways of looking at the favela come together is the scene in which Barbarah, Preta and Lena help Duda go up to the house after he comes out of hospital with his leg broken. The scene starts with Lena playing with Preta’s daughter Emilía, at the gate, as the natural light emphasizes the texture of the wall made of unpainted clay bricks and cement. This kind of construction has been a familiar sight in favelas since the 1980s, being home to millions of people throughout Brazil. Yet it is still seen by the upper and middle classes as an impermanent and dangerous eyesore. Amaral’s sympathetic filming of the favela buildings - the well-dressed young woman and child dancing calmly at the gate, and the attention to the texture of the walls - makes us see these constructions as evidence of human labour, i.e. as a process of building where no money can be spared on the cosmetic covering of walls, so that bricks, cement, and the different layers of labour are nakedly shown to the eyes. Lena tries to get Duda’s friend Barão to help, but he refuses
to do it on the grounds that Duda had been a *traíra*, that is, had betrayed their childhood friendship by not revealing he was gay. The women then have to carry Duda upstairs, and their effort, filmed as the camera accompanies them through the different levels, brings light to the difficulties of everyday life in the *favela*, particularly for women. A documentary film might have shown the flights of stairs as they were being used by people in their everyday life, and/or might have had a narrator, someone who did not live there, go up the stairs to experience how hard it is to climb them. Here, a fictional situation is created by the plot, according to which a strong young man has to be carried by women upstairs. No narrator ever tells us that the stairs are hard to climb, but the fictional artifice is very eloquent in showing that they are, particularly because, due to of our identification with the protagonists, we “climb” the stairs with them, as it were. Moreover, the Portuguese expression “carregar nas costas” (carry on the back) means to support in the financial sense, or to carry alone a load that should be shared by two or more people. Thus, the scene also has the symbolic meaning of *favela* women doing all the work, i.e., carrying alone a load that should be shared with the opposite sex - a reality for a large proportion of households in Brazilian *periferias*. And far from the situation in *City of God* where we see strong young men leaping up and down stairs chasing each other, and where stairs and walls do not represent any major obstacle, here the stairs themselves, i.e. the architecture and fabric of the *favela*, become a theme. Overcoming the difficulties created by this architecture is an adventure in itself.

At the same time, as the group goes up we are able to appreciate the ingenuity of this architecture on the make, in which changes in family life create endless new rooms, new quarters, new levels. Different types of music come out of different family houses, and when the group finally reach the top, they are greeted by the chocolate cake made by Lena and the child: the conditions are harsh, but this is definitely a place to call home, a place to arrive at. Again, different from the large rooms that had to accommodate gun fights in *City of God*, these scenes are filmed in real people’s houses, in small rooms that nevertheless are in evident touch with modernity, and where a lot of effort was put to make them look like a home, as it is made evident by the flowers, magnets, table cloths. If for these young women life in the *favela* is harsh and far from ideal, it is still their home, with all the pleasures, loves and pains that this word implies.

Finally, the *favela in Antonia* is not an isolated space. The young women move constantly in and out, and great emphasis is given to modes of transport in the film. In the beginning, for instance, it is in a car that they ask the male rappers for the chance to sing their own song. We then see them waiting for a train and getting on to it - in fact the opening title of the film is a still image from this scene, showing the four young women in the train. They often talk with Marcelo Diamante in his car, and when Preta at some time point has to find a job, it is not surprising that she ends up helping Barão with his van service, using her strong voice to announce destinations. Spatial mobility is in fact a theme of the film, and if it is true that the trope of changing shoes is used to emphasize the difference between the two spaces - the city/music world, and the *favela* - it also points to the fact that the women protagonists are able to inhabit both of them. A very poignant moment in the film is precisely the first gig arranged by Marcelo, in which they are asked to sing at a rich person’s Birthday party. At first, the white upper middle class guests are indifferent to the girls, who look clearly out of place singing their own composition (the melodic rap that functions as theme-song of the film). However, when the owner of the party comes onto the stage to sing Roberta Flack’s “Killing me softly” for his partner, the young women take over, singing it much more beautifully, and in better English. Education and art were the only means through which Rocket, the mediator in *City of God*, could come out of the *favela*. Here, the young women are out, at the same time they are still in. Their knowledge of black music, which is part of the dynamic cultural world of *periferia*, puts them in contact with a globalized culture that gives them an advantage, at that particular moment, over their richer employers.
At the same time, singing can also be, as we have seen, as hard and alienating as any other job. And while a conventional Hollywood film about the music world would have the women make it (i.e., become celebrated stars), in the case of Antonia success comes only in the dreamy, visionary thoughts of their agent, Marcelo Diamante. Marcelo is the closest we get in Antonia to the role of mediator: strictly speaking the young women need no mediators, as they move, as we just saw, between various social spaces. But Marcelo works as an agent, in other words, he is a professional mediator, who approaches the women after their first gig offering to introduce them to people he knows. Later, Preta, Barbarah, and Lena meet with him to discuss the terms of their contract, and he secures them their first gig in the upper-class party just mentioned. After Lena leaves the group, Marcelo manages to get Preta and Barbarah to perform in a middle-class nightclub, and later he convinces Preta to sing on her own. It is also Marcelo who guarantees their final appearance in the prison. In a masterful interpretation by the rapper Thaide, Marcelo, although apparently straight in his dealings with the young women, has something quite untrustworthy about him - a critic actually described him as having a “canalha” (rascal) face. He also speaks in malandro language, using the third person to refer to himself, and resorting frequently to ditados (popular sayings), puns and rhymes. Moreover, Marcelo is seen by the girls as a dreamer, a fantasist whose optimism cannot be trusted. At the end of the film, Marcelo indeed assumes the role of mediator between the viewers and the story: while the girls are performing for the inmates in Barbarah’s detention centre, he addresses the viewer directly, saying “This maybe the end [of the film] for you, but for me it is just the beginning”. He then rubs his hands in a characteristic gesture that means he is counting on the girl’s success, at the same time that the girls, still singing the same song, appear not to be performing for the inmates anymore, but for a large youthful audience of fans in a stadium or nightclub. The success story remains, at the end of the film, ambiguous: a vague, even unlikely possibility seen only in the dreams of a somewhat unreliable mediator.

In sum, Antonia presents us with a favela that is entirely dominated by what Ismail Xavier, referring to City of God, called points of normality: everyday life, everyday objects, conversations, activities. It is a place built by real people and inhabited by women and men who find life worth living, in spite of the immense difficulties they have to endure. The violence and hardships faced by the protagonists are always gender related, including the homophobic attack that incapacitates Barbarah’s brother and kills his partner. It can be a beautiful looking favela, where women’s issues and concerns are at the centre. Art and performance, in the form of music, replace violence and drugs - not differently from the proposals of many NGOs (Xavier: “Corrosão”, 99). But music is presented in the film not as redemption, nor as a clear path to success: it is hard work and at times alienating. Through their music, the clothes they wear, and their movements, the young women in Antonia are definitely part of modernity.

This is the greatest achievement of Tata Amaral’s film: to present us with a favela that is at the same time beautiful and harsh, with protagonists that are empowered and capable of following their dreams without giving up, even though they are constantly brought down by the difficulties of their environment. Antonia refuses both the romanticized success-story of Hollywood musicals, and the depressed fatalism of certain trends of neo-realism. Thus, even the most tragic events (killing someone or going to prison), or the most desired ones (singing to a large audience), are presented as facts of life.

And yet for all its successful use of of realist techniques to give us a convincing portrait of young women’s life in the favela, Antonia cannot avoid its own share of “methodical treachery”, to use Candido’s words. Except for Preta, whose evangelic mother is not supportive of her choice of career, none of the girls in the film have to deal with complications brought up by parents of siblings; in other words, we don’t know anything about their families or their origins. Why, for instance, do Barbarah and Duda live alone, even though we know they have been in the
neighborhood since they were children? Are they orphans? Community life is reduced to the friendship with Barão, the hip-hop concert/party in the beginning of the film, and to the football match during which Duda falls out with the boy later killed by Barbarah. Visual media is also absent: we see no television sets in the houses, in spite of their central importance in actual Brazilian homes. But perhaps the most obvious absence in this woman-centered favela is precisely what takes central stage in City of God. By showing us the other side of the coin of favela life - every day life and the feminine points of normality, Antonia is completely silent about drugs, drug traffic, and the violence it generates. There is no police brutality either, nor the presence of PCC. If we are to believe the news, that drug violence is - along with singing girls, pregnancy, friendship, children, hot-dogs and chocolate cake - part of the daily life of the favelas, then the sanitized view presented by Antonia ironically reinforces the point made by City of God: that the so-called normal life is not compatible with drug traffic. Since this is clearly not true for most people who live in the favelas, we have to wait until a fictional feature film brings boys and girls together on the same screen to begin to have a better grasp of the social and cultural complexity of Brazilian favelas. In the meantime, we can enjoy the exaggerated truths of these two very distinct films.

Lúcia Sá, University of Manchester

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