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Cinema da Retomada's Pastoral Trope: Contemporary Brazilian Cinematic Images of Country and City in a Transnational Frame

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In recent years, there has been a considerable amount of critical discussion on the new images of urban and rural spaces – the former usually embodied in the *favela* and the latter the *sertão* – in contemporary Brazilian cinema. Most of these discussions have focused primarily on the images of the *favela* and *sertão* as representing a shift from those of Cinema Novo. Perhaps most notable among these is Ivana Bentes's assessment of contemporary representations of the *sertão* and *favela* and her argument that these images, when compared to those of Cinema Novo, constitute a “move from the ‘aesthetics’ to the ‘cosmetics’ of hunger, from the ‘camera-in-hand and idea-in-mind’ ...to the steadicam” and to a

globalized cinematic aesthetic “dominated by conventional techniques and narratives” (124-25). Bentes suggests that the films of Cinema da Retomada have created the *sertão* and the *favela* as romanticized spaces and “storehouses of ‘typicality’” (121).

Departing somewhat from this approach, Lúcia Nagib has analyzed the contrasting representations of country and city in several contemporary films and their significance to utopian imaginaries. Nagib sees in the recent films *Central do Brasil* (1998), *O Primeiro Dia* (1998), and *Latitude Zero* (2000) an attempt to “reformulate utopian projects and reach a coveted state of ‘Brazilianness’” in reaction to the “negative period...[of] the late 1980s and early 1990s when the zero had made a return to express the ‘end of history’ and postmodern skepticism” (34). In these films, Nagib argues, the Brazilian backlands are imagined as a utopian fatherland in opposition to an urban space portrayed “as the concentration of all evil” (38-41). Although Nagib addresses the influence of international cinema on these films – particularly that of the attempts of European new waves to ‘start from zero’ – her analysis, like Bentes’s exploration of the shift from Cinema Novo, remains centered on questions of national cinema and national identity. While illuminating significant aspects of representations of the country and city, this focus on the national fails to take into account global economic power structures and the effects of the transnational circulation of discourses propagated by late capitalist globalization.

In this paper, I suggest that by examining the opposed images of country and city in the films of Cinema da Retomada within a transnational frame, there emerges a more complex picture of the country/city dichotomy in recent Brazilian cinema and its relationship to global socio-economic power structures and the circulation of globalized discourses on modernity and democracy. I argue that, in this context, the dichotomy between country and city can be understood as a reproduction of the pastoral trope in Western cultural production, a trope often employed within (neo)colonial discourse in the representation of Latin America. This reproduction is intricately connected with a failure to recognize the particular appropriation of globalized discourses on modernization and democracy in Brazil and to view Brazil as, to use James Holston's term, a 'disjunctive democracy' that must be understood, as Teresa Caldeira argues, in terms of its particular historical development and specific "ways of engaging the elements generally available in a common repertoire of modernity" (340). Thus, the pastoral dichotomy between country and city functions to reproduce a (neo)colonial imaginative geography of Brazil, and Latin America in general, as a space wherein successful or complete modernization becomes an impossibility. The image of the Brazilian city becomes emblematic of failed modernization – when measured against Eurocentric notions of modernity – that provides no hope for a different future. In the face of this failure, a return to a 'pre-modern' past represented in

romanticized images of the country becomes the only possibility for utopian imagining.

Taking the position that the pastoral trope can be seen as operating at an intertextual level within Cinema da Retomada, I explore the images of city and country in *Central do Brasil* (1998), *Eu Tu Eles* (2000), and *Tropa de Elite* (2007). While films that destabilize these images certainly do exist – for example in the inversion of the country/city binary in *O Caminho das Nuvens* (2003) or the politicized and deessentialized image of the global city in *O Homem do Ano* (2003) – the images of country and city constructed in *Central do Brasil*, *Eu Tu Eles*, and *Tropa de Elite* have, to a large extent, become hegemonic within Cinema da Retomada. I argue that these images produce a binary opposition between a corrupt, violent and hopeless urban space and a romanticized ‘pre-modern’ country and that this opposition is directly related to a failure to grasp the particular and disjointed appropriation of globalized discourses on modernity and democracy and to understand the complex social and economic processes that have created these spaces.

Modernity, ‘Disjunctive Democracy’, and Neoliberal Globalization

Following the ‘decolonization’ of the British and French empires in the middle of the 20th century and the post-WWII emergence of the United Nations and the corresponding notion of a global network of nation-states, Western discourses on

democracy, modernity and human rights have, as John Kelly and Martha Kaplan note, been increasingly circulated through the economic, cultural and political processes of late capitalist globalization (3-9). The end of the cold war further intensified the dissemination of these discourses, as it signaled the collapse of the last standing barrier to the apparent triumph of Western democracy and neoliberal capitalism. As Shannon Speed notes, however, global discourses are always appropriated and redeployed in highly specific ways by social actors at the local level, articulated in dialog with local and national experiences and in specific social situations (32-33). Thus, to understand the appropriation of globalized discourses of modernity and democracy in Brazil, it is essential to understand that, as Teresa Caldeira argues, "different societies have diverse ways of engaging the elements generally available in a common repertoire of modernity to create their specific nations, citizenries, and democracies" (340). For Caldeira, as for Holston, then, Brazil must be understood as a 'disjunctive democracy' characterized by "contradictory processes of simultaneous expansion and disrespect for citizenship rights" that entail a significant extension of political and social rights while civil rights continue to be violated (Caldeira 339).

Furthermore, for Brazil and Latin America (as for most of the postcolonial world), the economic forces of neoliberal globalization have served to intensify inequality in the distribution of wealth at both the national and global level. As David Harvey notes, despite its claim to provide a model for a more democratic

and equitable distribution of global wealth, neoliberalism has in practice meant the development of “the capacity of the US financial power as well as that of Europe and Japan, to exact tribute from the rest of the world” (93). Thus, Harvey suggests, neoliberalism has in fact been “increasingly impelled *through* mechanisms of uneven geographical developments” [emphasis original] (87). Within this context of uneven geographic development at the global level, neoliberal globalization has also strengthened pre-existing economic power structures in Brazil and other Latin American nations – structures that are themselves largely the product of capitalist expansion under colonialism – and thus has produced the conditions of socio-economic inequality and class conflict that have shaped both urban and rural spaces in Brazil and contributed to the perpetuation of urban crime and violence.

To attempt to apply globalized Western notions of democracy and modernity directly to Brazil (or other postcolonial nations) then, without taking these specific conditions into account, would, as Caldeira notes, inevitably result in “seeing [Brazilian modernity] as a failed or incomplete modernity” (340). This is precisely, I will suggest, why Cinema da Retomada's reproduction of the European pastoral trope is problematic, because it results in the implicit application of eurocentric notions of modernity to representations of modern Brazil without grasping Brazil's highly specific appropriation of globalized discourses and the complex social, economic and political processes that have

shaped both the Brazilian city and country. Thus, it constructs a dystopian image of the Brazilian city as the embodiment of failed modernity and offers a romanticized country as the only alternative to this failed modernity. Before turning to this argument, however, it is necessary to briefly trace the development of the pastoral trope from its deployment as a romantic anti-modernity trope in European literature to its reproduction in Western representations of Latin America as a space wherein successful modernization becomes an impossibility.

As Raymond Williams notes, the pastoral trope in European literature can be traced back almost endlessly, at least to ancient Greece, but became particularly prevalent in neo-classical and romantic literature of the 18th and 19th century where the country became associated with “a natural life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue” in contrast to the city, identified “as a place of noise, wordliness and ambition” (1). Williams argues that this opposition tended towards an essentialization that ignored specific economic developments that linked country and city and that elided agricultural class conflicts while also failing to recognize the potentialities represented in the city. Upon the inception of exploration of the New World, this pastoral trope was frequently transposed onto an understanding of the native Other. As Tzvetan Todorov has noted, the writing of European explorers on the indigenous peoples of Latin America evidenced an idealization of those dwelling in the forest or jungle, who were

seen as primitive and simple and, particularly by European missionaries, as ripe for conversion to Christianity. In contrast, those living in the urban centers of the indigenous empires were associated with a violent barbarism, embodied particularly in the practice of human sacrifice. Though this opposition did not function similarly in all contexts (it was primarily employed in accounts of the Mayan and Aztec), the pastoral trope was still important to the construction of the noble savage/violent barbarian opposition that epitomized what Homi Bhabha has termed the 'ambivalence of colonial discourse' – an ambivalence that nevertheless ensured the continued imagining of a primitive Other existing in some earlier historical era, temporally separated from Europe along the continuum of modernity.

The pastoral trope persisted in European representations of Latin America into the late imperial and postcolonial eras, in which, as Thomas Phillips notes, utopian images of Latin American peasants in the countryside in the novels of Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene, amongst others, existed in opposition to those of ruthless dictatorships centered in the urban capitals (18-23). With the rise of the environmental movement in Europe and the United States in recent years, and in particular concerns over the destruction of the Amazonian rain forests, the pastoral trope has reemerged notably in cinematic representations of Latin America in which the indigenous tribes of Amazonia or other jungle or rural regions are idealized as living in harmony with nature. Here the

idealization of the natural becomes a reaction to the ills of modernization and capitalism with the primitive Latin American Other representing an alternative and utopian mode of existence free of these problems. As Jean Franco notes, however, films like *The Mission* (1986) and *The Emerald Forest* (1985) that idealize the Amazonian indigenous tribes are problematic both in their essentializing representations of indigenous communities and their appropriation of historical narratives that fails to engage the complex reality of transnational capitalism in the present (82-83). Thus, these films, with their neo-indigenismo¹ ideological underpinnings, present a retreat into the 'pre-modern' past, represented in the image of the indigenous noble savage they reproduce, as the only possible reaction to the ills of modernity and transnational capitalism. This same tendency can be noted in Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* (2006), which has explicitly employed the pastoral dichotomy between country and city in its historical narrative about the decline of the Mayan empire on the eve of Spanish arrival in the Yucatan. Unlike *The Mission* and *The Emerald Forest*, which confine their representations to rural indigenous tribes, *Apocalypto* constructs an opposition between the jungle-dwelling tribes on the outskirts of the Mayan empire and the Mayans of the city in a way that ensures the reproduction of an image of Latin

¹ While neo-indigenismo refers primarily to an artistic and literary movement that has attempted to recapture 'primitive' forms of aesthetic expression, it has also, as Jean Franco points out, "acquired another facet because of the global *angst* over the environment and the destruction of the Amazon rain forests. All of a sudden, the tribal 'other' has become a model of survival, a natural ecologist." (82)

America as a space where successful modernization is impossible (Kolodny 25-26; Smith 3-4).

In employing this opposition of city and country, several recent Brazilian films have, I argue, reproduced this Western imagining of Latin America as a space wherein successful or complete modernization is an impossibility, presenting a retreat into an idealized 'pre-modern' pastoral past as the only possibility for utopian imagining. The failure to take into account the specific appropriation of globalized discourses of modernity and democracy in Brazil's 'disjunctive democracy' and the particular socio-economic conditions that have contributed to the violence and crime in Brazil's urban spaces leads these films to present the urban center as an image of failed modernity, and their reproduction of the European pastoral trope ensures that Brazilian attempts at modernization and democracy are measured against eurocentric standards.

Central do Brasil and 'Empty Utopia'

One of the most successful films to emerge from Cinema da Retomada has been Walter Salles' *Central do Brasil*. A critically acclaimed and popular film both in Brazil and in the U.S. and Europe, *Central do Brasil* follows the journey of Dora (Fernanda Montenegro), a middle-aged retired schoolteacher, and Josué (Vinícius de Oliveira), a young boy whom Dora takes in after his mother is run

over by a bus, as they travel from Rio to the town of Bom Jesus de Norte in the *sertão* in search of Josué's father.

Central do Brasil is also one of the few recent films to include both urban and rural settings². Thus, it allows for an exploration of the country/city dichotomy within a single film. The city in *Central do Brasil* is a place of corruption, separation and cold calculation devoid of any redeeming humanity. The decay and corruption of the city is not attributed to the inherent moral depravity of individual inhabitants nor is it connected to political or economic conditions or struggles. Rather, the city itself becomes essentialized as a force of decay to which individuals cannot help but to succumb to; the city brings out the worst in everyone. This is most evident in the character development of Dora throughout the film, as Dora's emotional and spiritual transformation is in direct correlation to the spatial movement from Rio to the heart of the *sertão*. In the beginning of the film, Dora appears as a cold-hearted and emotionally jaded woman who works at the train station charging illiterate individuals to write and send letters for them. We quickly discover, however, that Dora decides, in the manner of a demiurge, which letters to send and pockets the postage money provided for those (the vast majority) that she doesn't send. However, the further she journeys into the *sertão* and thus the longer she is away from the city, she becomes more emotionally connected to those around her and in particular

² This is most likely due to the relative lack in the popularity of the road movie genre in Brazil as compared with other Latin American nations.

to Josué. The extent of Dora's transformation is conveyed in a scene towards the end of the film in which she, with Josué's help, writes letters for people in Bom Jesus to earn money for her and Josué's return journey. However, unlike at the beginning of the film, Dora makes a point of finding a post office so that she can send all the letters.

The city in *Central do Brasil* is also constructed as a space characterized by exploitation and violence. However, these realities are again essentialized as characteristics of the lower classes within the urban space as they remain no more than vaguely connected to specific socio-economic forces, with instances of exploitation and violence primarily carried out by lower-class individuals against other lower-class individuals. The one exception is the character of Pedrão (Otávio Augusto), the lower middle-class head of security in the train station. In one scene, after a youngster steals a small item from one of the shops in the station, Pedrão chases him down and shoots him. The narrative development of the film is halted as the camera follows the chase out of the station and onto the train tracks, the sequence culminating with the shooting captured through an overhead shot. This framing serves to situate this act of violence as a constitutive and naturalized element of the urban landscape. The overhead camera angle also, through spatially flattening out the characters in this landscape, de-emphasizes the conflictive class relations inherent in the act and presents violence as perpetrated horizontally among members of the lower

classes as opposed to a product of vertical, hierarchical power relations between classes.

The *sertão*, in contrast to the corrupt, violent and exploitative city, becomes a utopian promised land, a repository of traditional values and peaceful community existence imbued with religious imagery and the promise of spiritual renewal. While the inhabitants of the *sertão* are shown as living in relative poverty, this poverty is not seen as the product of unequal economic conditions but is instead idealized as a simpler and purer way of life. This romanticization of the *sertão* represents a rejection, as Bentes suggests, of Cinema Novo's aim to "avoid turning misery into folklore" and instead propose "an ethics and an aesthetics for the images of pain and revolt" (124). Additionally, it serves to elide the reality of class conflict and capitalist exploitation of labor in the *sertão*. In particular, the cattle ranching and agricultural interests that own the vast majority of the land and perpetuate a semi-feudal/pre-capitalist economic system, as they most often present the only possibility for wage labor, are absent from the film's romanticized *sertão* of simple village people living in peace and harmony. The use of religious imagery and allegory serves to create the *sertão* specifically as an Edenic utopia³. As Bentes notes, this imagining of the *sertão* as a space endowed with religious imagery and spiritual significance is a common trope within recent Brazilian films (126-28). Josué's name and the names of his

³ The biblical imagery of Eden has, as Williams notes, been particularly significant for the pastoral trope of European literature.

brothers, Isaías (Matheus Nachtergaele) and Moisés (Caio Junqueira), hold particular biblical significance, and the figure of the absent father named Jesus who has promised to return to his children invokes the symbolism of the promised second coming of Christ and restoration of the promised land. Furthermore, Dora's transformation throughout the film is not only an emotional, but also a spiritual transformation, as it is a product of her interaction with the religious imagery and potency of the *sertão*. In particular, her trance in the shrine and the picture that her and Josué take with the cardboard figure of Father Cícero, which provides both Dora and Josué a keepsake through which to remember their journey together after they part ways at the end of the film, become images of the culmination of her spiritual development.

The opposition between city and country is further constructed through the film's visual style. The scenes in the city take place almost exclusively in interior locations framed in tight shots giving a sense of claustrophobia and entrapment. The mise-en-scène of the train station in particular is framed by the encroaching architecture of the station and filled with tightly packed crowds that engulf the camera. The city thus becomes a space that traps and suffocates, and alienates, its inhabitants. The portion of the film in the *sertão*, in contrast, is dominated by exterior locations and wide landscape shots, presenting the *sertão* as an open space of freedom and possibility. These wide-angle and overhead landscape shots also mimic Hollywood and European representations of

(neo)colonized landscapes that create a sense of spatial mastery and objectification of this scenery and contribute to the construction of a (neo)colonial imaginative geography.

Ultimately, the country/city dichotomy of *Central do Brasil* constructs the *sertão* as an 'empty utopia', as Nagib suggests, since it posits an impossible return to a mythic past. Nagib explains:

The drought and poverty of the northeastern homeland are shown as picturesque details that have no consequence for the lives of its inhabitants and require no intervention. Actually the film, as a typical example of its period, rather than retrieving the nation, makes clear, through its detached stance and citation structure, that the re-enactment of the national project is no longer possible. Utopia can only be realized as an absence, a hypothetical reunion with a father called Jesus who never materializes and is only conceivable as fiction or myth. (42)

This fictional or mythic fatherland thus becomes the only imaginable alternative to a failed modernity embodied by the dystopian urban space of the Rio train station and surrounding city in the film. The *sertão* becomes the "homeland...confirmed as the iconography of the past, exerting a pacifying influence on the present...[and] frozen in a utopian, archaic territory, immune to time and the ills of modernity, which have been left behind in central station" (44). This utopian vision is, I would argue, empty not only because it fails to

engage with the reality of modernity and posits a return to a 'pre-modern' past but also because this 'pre-modern' past suggests a 'pre-colonial' past that is untenable in a global society irreversibly shaped by the colonial encounter and the proceeding interconnection of global economic, communication and cultural networks. As Homi Bhabha suggests, any attempt to articulate a vision for political change from within a position constrained by a notion of a unitary and pure cultural identity rooted in a 'pre-colonial' national imaginary is futile as it fails to recognize the indeterminant and liminal position of the postcolonial nation (55). While *Central do Brasil* attempts to invoke a utopian image beholden to a 'pre-colonial' national imaginary, the film's reliance on (neo)colonial forms of knowledge and modes of representations, particularly in the opposition of country and city, ultimately belies the impossibility of any such return. Thus, its representation of the 'ills of modernity' signified by the violent and corrupt city actually emerges from the reproduction of a Eurocentric (neo)colonial discourse on Latin America in which the opposition of city and country operates to construct an image of Latin America as a space wherein successful modernization is an impossibility. The images in the film of Rio as emblematic of a failed modernization therefore become, rather than representations of the desire for a utopian imaginary in opposition to a postmodern 'end of history' – itself a Eurocentric construction, as the 'end of history' has only come for the West – reinscriptions of (neo)colonial representations of Latin America that have

served historically, and in the present, to legitimate Western intervention in the region.

The Sertão and Favela in Eu Tu Eles and Tropa de Elite

While *Central do Brasil* is one of the few films of Cinema da Retomada to cover both city and country, if we look at Cinema da Retomada as constituting an intertextual network that constructs, to borrow Williams's term, particular 'structures of feelings' related to the images of city and country, we can see this opposition functioning as part of a more expansive discourse that structures spatial and temporal imagining of Brazil. Within this intertextual network, the images of the *sertão* in Andrucha Waddington's *Eu Tu Eles* and the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro in José Padilha's *Tropa de Elite* present a particularly representative example of the pastoral trope's operation in Cinema da Retomada.

Eu Tu Eles narrates the true story of Darlene (Regina Casé), a woman living in a small village in the *sertão*, who after being stood up on her wedding day and leaving the village for a brief period, returns after her mother's death and accumulates three husbands, all living in the same house, who each, with the exception of Osias (Lima Duarte), provide her with a child and satisfy different needs for her. The *sertão* of *Eu Tu Eles* is not quite the 'empty utopia' of *Central do Brasil*; it does not become the image of a mythical return to a 'pre-modern' and 'pre-colonial' past. Rather, in *Eu Tu Eles*, the *sertão* is created as a limited and

contingent utopia where partial alternatives to the status quo of modern global society can be imagined and realized. The film does, as Luiz Zanin Oricchio suggests, seem to implicitly acknowledge the “hegemony and omnipresence of globalized capital” and its attendant “microphysics of exploitation” (156). However, the *sertão* is nevertheless still imagined as a space of reconciliation, personal transgression and liberation within these given conditions of possibility. In her relationship with her three different lovers, Darlene is able to alleviate the harsh conditions of life in the *sertão* and construct her own limited utopia within the constraints of her reality. In the process of depicting Darlene’s quest for individual fulfillment, the film is also able to subvert dominant patriarchal constructions of gender and thus destabilize to an extent the ‘microphysics of exploitation’ as they are manifested in gendered interpersonal relationships. Darlene, in going out to work in the fields while Osias remains at home, assumes the ‘masculine’ role of the family breadwinner, and Osias, through his approval of this arrangement, tacitly accepts this reversal of gender roles. Zezinho (Stênio Garcia), Osias’s brother and Darlene’s second husband, meanwhile, takes on the responsibilities of the homemaker usually constructed as feminine: he cooks and cleans for Osias and Darlene and brings Darlene lunch at work. Darlene’s sexuality also takes on a ‘masculine’ character, as she is able to find purely physical pleasure in her sexual relations with her multiple male partners. While *Eu Tu Eles* does destabilize the microphysics of patriarchal oppression in these

important ways, the emphasis nevertheless remains solely on individual action. The film illustrates the way in which, as Bentes notes, the potential for collective action embodied by the inhabitants of the *sertão* in the films of Cinema Novo has disappeared in favor of an emphasis on the individual existential struggle for happiness and fulfillment (125-26). Ultimately, this focus on the individual pursuit of freedom and fulfillment reinscribes the neoliberal logic of the rational self-managing individual and thus fails to present possibilities for imagining alternatives outside of the neoliberal global order.

Also unlike *Central do Brasil*, in *Eu Tu Eles* we are exposed to the presence of the large landowners and the reality that for inhabitants of the *sertão* working for the landowners often presents the only viable option for economic survival. This reality is presented as Osias sends Darlene out to work in the fields to support the family. Darlene's work, however, becomes a space of freedom and liberation, rather than oppression. As noted above, the ability to work allows Darlene to transgress traditional gender roles. The fields also provide a central rendezvous point for Darlene and Zezinho, who brings her there the lunch he makes for her every day. Darlene also meets the young and handsome Ciro (Luiz Carlos Vasconcelos), her third husband, while working and the fields provide the space for the two of them to begin their love affair. This presentation of labor in the *sertão* as a potential space of freedom, however, elides the economic exploitation that characterizes the power relations between landowner

and worker in the region. Thus, despite its acknowledgment of certain social and economic realities absent from the 'pre-modern' and 'pre-colonial' utopian *sertão* of *Central do Brasil*, *Eu Tu Eles* replicates *Central do Brasil's* romanticization of poverty in the backcountry through its imagining of the *sertão* as a space of freedom and reconciliation as opposed to inequality and oppression.

Presenting a stark contrast to this romanticized *sertão* of *Eu Tu Eles* are the corrupt, crime-ridden and violent *favelas* of Rio in Padilha's *Tropa de Elite*. One of the most popular and commercially successful films to emerge from Cinema da Retomada, *Tropa de Elite* focuses on the attempts of Rio's BOPE squad to eliminate crime in the *favelas* in advance of the Pope's visit to the city in 1997. The film centers on BOPE officer Capitão Nascimento (Wagner Moura), an expectant father who is searching for a replacement so that he can retire to spend time with his family, and André Matias (André Ramiro) and Neto (Caio Junqueira), Nascimento's two potential replacements who find themselves fighting corruption within the police force. *Tropa de Elite* is particularly significant in that it provides an excellent illustration of the way in which the imagining of the city as emblematic of a failed or incomplete modernity fails to take into account Brazil's specific appropriation of globalized discourses. As Caldeira notes, the appropriation of the globalized discourse of human rights in Brazil has often meant the acceptance of these rights for the middle-class, particularly when they are the victims of political oppression as during the

military dictatorship, while denying these rights to the poor. Human rights are thus often vehemently opposed by the middle-class when they are invoked to defend the rights of prisoners or the poor (339-42). In its representation of urban crime and violence, *Tropa de Elite* reinscribes this ideological configuration and thus fails to recognize the role of the underdevelopment of civil rights (as opposed to political rights) in contributing to the persistence of crime and violence in the city that it portrays. The violation of human rights in the actions of BOPE thus becomes, instead of a contributive factor to the violence, the only way to maintain any kind of order in a decaying urban space. Of particular importance in this context is the fact that the acts of torture and violence committed by BOPE are inevitably validated by the film's narrative development; torture is always successful in producing the information the officers are trying to obtain.

Thus, the city in *Tropa de Elite* is imagined as an essentialized and static space of violence and corruption, and the complexity of the situations depicted in the film is flattened out into a Manichean understanding of the conflict between BOPE and the dealers as a battle between good and evil. This is largely accomplished through the dehumanization, or at least the one-dimensional construction, of all the characters in the film other than the BOPE officers. The dealers in the *favela* are shown only as violent and irredeemable criminals, denied any background story that might shed light on the forces that have led

them to their present situation. Furthermore, we are not introduced to any lower-class characters other than the criminals. Matias's classmates at the university are portrayed as sheltered middle-class students who are either oblivious to the effects of their actions or are too selfish to care, and Matias and Neto's fellow police officers are stale caricatures of corrupt and ineffectual cops, negating any need to explore the motivations behind their actions. While the middle-class is implicated as being complicit in the cycle of crime and violence, this complicity is not presented as being due to structures of economic inequality but rather to the elitism of the middle-class college students and their failure to comprehend that their drug use perpetuates this violent cycle. The essentialized image of the city as a hopeless dystopian space is further conveyed through the film's visual elements. In the scenes taking place in the *favelas*, the coupling of tight framing and a chaotic and crowded mise-en-scène creates a sense of claustrophobia, giving the impression of a labyrinthine urban environment that traps not only its inhabitants but also anyone else who enters into it. This presentation of the urban space is naturalized through the use of dark tones and high-contrast lighting that gives the film a grainy documentary-like appearance, contributing to a heightened sense of realism.

Although there is some attempt to frame the events of the film within a social scientific perspective – particularly in the classroom discussion of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, in which the professor and students suggest the

conceptualization of the operation of the police in Rio within Foucault's discussion of modern disciplinary regimes, and in the Stanley Milgram quote in the opening frame ("The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson: often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act") – our identification with Nascimento and Matias largely precludes interpretations of the situation other than theirs. Nascimento and Matias provide the two centers of narrative identification in the film, and Nascimento's voiceovers in particular are essential to aligning spectator identification with the BOPE officer. In his voiceovers, Nascimento justifies his actions and those of his compatriots through dehumanizing the victims of their repression and representing violence as necessary to eliminate those who represent a threat to the safety and security of the middle and upper class city. As we see Baiano (Fábio Lago), the head dealer, and the college students in the *favela* exchanging merchandise and doing cocaine, Nascimento tells the viewer that "there's no excuse" for their actions. This statement not only ignores the structural causes of crime and violence in Brazil; it also reduces the problem of the drug trade to individual choices – it is significant here that earlier in the film Nascimento remarks that Matias 'chose' to attend law school despite the lack of opportunities for poor black men – and thus seeks to legitimate the violence of the police through an individualizing of the dealers' responsibility for their actions. Unlike Padilha's documentary *Bus 174*, which

provided multiple perspectives on the events of the 2000 Rio de Janeiro bus hijacking and allowed for the construction of an explanatory narrative that held a system of socio-economic inequality culpable in the existence of lower-class crime, *Tropa de Elite* only gives us one perspective, that of the police. Even the arguably valid points made in the classroom discussion are devalued through the association of the university students with an out of touch middle-class that perpetuates the cycle of violence in the *favelas* through their drug use.

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