

POVERTY AND CRIME AS ATTRACTION: HOW DID THE FILM “CITY OF GOD” SHAPE THE TOURIST IMAGE OF BRAZILIAN FAVELAS?

POBREZA E CRIME COMO ATRAÇÃO: COMO O FILME “CIDADE DE DEUS” MOLDOU A IMAGEM TURÍSTICA DAS FAVELAS BRASILEIRAS?

POBREZA Y CRIMEN COMO ATRACCIÓN: ¿CÓMO LA PELÍCULA “CIUDAD DE DIOS” MOLDEÓ LA IMAGEN TURÍSTICA DE LAS FAVELAS BRASILEÑAS?

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ABSTRACT: The study aims to analyze the regime of representation established by the film "City of God" and its role in constructing a tourist imaginary about Brazilian favelas. The film "City of God" achieved significant international recognition and drew global attention to the social dynamics inherent to these areas. The research highlighted that the depiction of favelas, while evoking repulsion, also transforms these "territories" into fascinating and attractive places for a particular figure: the tourist. The methodology employed to fulfill the research objectives involved the development of a study based on qualitative analysis, gathering data through the examination of the film "City of God" and journalistic materials. The data generated from the journalistic texts were coded and processed using the IRAMUTEQ software. As concluding remarks, the study found that films serve as cultural products that shape favelas as objects of both repulsion and fascination. Consequently, they play a significant role in constituting the favela as a tourist attraction.

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Keywords: Tourism. Slum. Representation Regime.

RESUMO: O estudo tem o objetivo de analisar o regime de representação instituído pelo filme “Cidade de Deus” e seu papel na construção de um imaginário turístico a respeito das favelas brasileiras. O filme “Cidade de Deus” teve grande repercussão internacional e despertou a atenção de pessoas do mundo sobre as dinâmicas sociais inerentes a essas localidades. A pesquisa destacou que a representação da favela ao mesmo tempo em que gera repulsa, também faz com esse “território” seja um lugar fascinante e atraente para uma figura curiosa: o turista. A metodologia utilizada para que os propósitos da pesquisa pudessem ser cumpridos consistiram na elaboração de um estudo baseado na análise qualitativa, obtendo dados por meio da análise do filme “Cidade de Deus” e matérias jornalísticas. Os dados gerados pelos textos jornalísticos foram codificados e processados por meio do software IRAMUTEQ. Como considerações finais, foi possível constatar que os filmes se constituem como um produto cultural que configura a favela enquanto objeto de repulsa e fascínio, assim, possuem um papel significativo na constituição da favela como atrativo turístico.

Palavras-chave: Turismo. Favela. Regime de Representação.

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RESUMEN: El estudio tiene como objetivo analizar el régimen de representación establecido por la película “Ciudad de Dios” y su papel en la construcción de un imaginario turístico sobre las favelas brasileñas. La película “Ciudad de Dios” tuvo gran repercusión internacional y llamó la atención de personas de todo el mundo sobre las dinámicas sociales inherentes a estos lugares. La investigación destacó que la representación de la favela, si bien genera repulsión, también hace de este “territorio” un lugar fascinante y atractivo para una figura curiosa: el turista. La metodología utilizada para que se pudieran cumplir los propósitos de la investigación consistió en elaborar un estudio basado en análisis cualitativo, obteniendo datos a través del análisis de la película “Ciudad de Dios” y artículos periodísticos. Los datos generados por los textos periodísticos fueron codificados y procesados mediante el software IRAMUTEQ. Como consideraciones finales, se pudo verificar que las películas constituyen un producto cultural que configura la favela como objeto de repulsión y fascinación, por lo que juegan un papel significativo en la constitución de la favela como atractivo turístico.

Palabras clave: Turismo. Favela. Régimen de Representación.

INTRODUCTION

The image is considered one of the variables that influence tourist flows toward a specific place. Thus, the tourist image of a destination can spark tourists' desire to visit it (Kajihara, 2010). Hall (2016) argues that representation is the process through which meanings are assigned to images, symbols, words, and other signs. In this sense, representation does not constitute a direct reflection of reality but rather a cultural and discursive construction mediated by ideologies, social contexts, and historical frameworks.

Analyzing the cultural and discursive construction of Brazilian favelas, particularly those in Rio de Janeiro, reveals that their representation as synonymous with poverty, deprivation, and marginalization is deeply rooted in Brazilian society. This perspective produces a reductionist interpretation of these "territories": illegal occupations on hillsides, the absence of law and order, underserved spaces, and areas concentrated with poor, illiterate, and criminal populations. Consequently, little distinction is made between various favelas, and their paradigmatic axis is linked to what they supposedly lack when compared to an idealized model of a city (Raposo, 2012).

However, according to Tommasi and Velasco (2013), the representation of favelas is ambiguous. While negative perceptions about these "territories of poverty" are disseminated, positive images are also shared through media, particularly digital platforms, which serve as privileged spaces for the work of NGOs and governments. These institutional actors have redefined favelas, no longer portraying them solely as hubs of drug trafficking, violence, danger, and fear. Instead, they emphasize solidarity, cultural, artistic, and aesthetic richness,

constructing a narrative that celebrates the entrepreneurial and creative potential of local populations (Tommasi and Velasco, 2013, p.20).

Amidst this ambiguity, cultural products such as films have significantly influenced the perception of favelas. While often highlighting highly violent aspects of these areas, they simultaneously spark tourist interest among specific groups. The international success of the film "City of God" served as a "window" through which many foreigners viewed Brazil, particularly its favelas.

From this perspective, analyzing the representation system surrounding Rio de Janeiro's favelas raises several questions: How are the places inhabited by people considered different from hegemonic groups represented in the media? What is the secret behind the repulsion and fascination that favelas evoke? What role do films play in constructing favelas as tourist attractions?

The study aims to analyze the regime of representation established by the film "City of God" and its role in constructing a tourist imaginary about Brazilian favelas. Through this analysis, it was possible to understand that the way favelas are represented in the media and popular culture, to some extent, motivates many tourists to visit "territories" characterized by significant levels of poverty and violence.

METHODOLOGY

The study is grounded in qualitative research, which focuses on understanding social and cultural phenomena, aiming to identify the various meanings of human action (Gibbs, 2009). To provide a solid foundation for the project, a bibliographic research was conducted, addressing the following topics: representation, meanings, stereotypes, and tourism in favelas. As the main core bibliography, the study follows the research line of Stuart Hall (2016), who emphasizes that representation refers to a central concept in cultural studies and is configured as an active process of meaning-making.

To understand the regime of representation of the favela and its reverberations in the development of community-based tourism in Rio de Janeiro, the study focused its analysis on the film "City of God". In this regard, the study examined the discourses produced about the film "City of God" through the selection of 10 journalistic articles about the movie (see Table 1). The criteria for selection were: language, international prestige, and access to the full text.

Table 1. List of Newspapers and Magazines

Newspapers and Magazines	Title
New York Times	Boys Soldiering in an Army of Crime
The Guardian	Citty of God: The Rages on review
Washington Post	City of God': A vivid walk with the devil
BCC	City of God, 10 years on
Rolling Stones	City of God
Atlantic	The Movie Review: 'City of God'
Slant Magazine	Review: City of God
Hollywood Reporter	City of God: The fight rages on' review
Al Jazeera	City of God, 20 years on
Los Angeles Times	City of God' an awakening for Brazil

Source: Prepared by the author

The texts underwent a coding process and were analyzed with the aid of the IRAMUTEQ software (Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires). This software is developed in the Python language and uses features provided by the R statistical software and allows for various possibilities for processing qualitative data (Souza et al., 2018). Thus, through this tool, the study obtained similarity graphs and the dendrogram, which were analyzed according to Stuart Hall's theoretical framework.

Regarding ethical considerations, it is stated that the study was developed through bibliographic and documentary research, and therefore, did not involve interaction with human subjects. As such, it did not require approval from research ethics committees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Regime of Representation and the Construction of the “Other”

Representation is a process through which members of a culture use language – broadly defined as any system of signs and signifiers – to produce meaning. This definition carries the important premise that objects, people, and events in the world do not inherently possess fixed meaning, final significance, or truth. Thus, it is society, through culture, that is responsible for making things mean what they mean. In this sense, meanings will always change from one culture or period to another (Hall, 2010).

Stuart Hall (2013) distinguishes between three different approaches to representations: the reflective, the intentional, and the constructionist. The latter perspective receives more attention from the author because it has had a strong impact on the formation of cultural studies. From a constructionist perspective, representation involves the creation of meaning, forging connections between three different realms of things: what is broadly called the world of things, people, events, and experiences; the conceptual world, the mental concepts that each individual carries with them; and finally, the signs organized in language, which represent or communicate these concepts.

Thus, there is no guarantee that every object in a given culture will have an equivalent meaning in another, precisely because cultures sometimes differ radically from one another: in their codes, the ways they divide, classify, and assign meaning in the world. A relevant idea about representation is the acceptance of a degree of relativism between cultures, certain gaps in equivalence, and therefore the need to translate how meanings move within the conceptual universe of a culture.

Hall (2013) argues that, for Foucault, representation does not refer to a reflection or imitation of reality. Although representation is visible, understanding its meaning depends on how the individual perceives it, being constructed from indications of what you can see and what you cannot see. Thus, representation corresponds to a complex interplay between presence (what you see, the visible) and absence (what cannot be seen). The meaning of

representation is always something in the process of emerging, where the revelation of final meaning is constantly delayed.

One of the byproducts of the system of representation refers to the stereotype. Stuart Hall (2016) highlights the importance of elucidating this representational practice that affects subaltern groups, as it has essentializing, reductionist, and naturalizing effects. The stereotype, therefore, synthesizes people into essential characteristics, which are then represented as fixed by nature. The author specifically examines four main aspects related to this term: a) the construction of otherness and exclusion; b) stereotype and power; c) the role of fantasy; and d) fetishism.

First and foremost, Hall (2010) emphasizes that it is important to distinguish between simple typification and the representational practice known as the stereotype. While typification involves the categorization of the world, without which it would not be possible to code things, the latter term involves a form of “exclusion of everything” that does not fit into hegemonic circuits; that is, what is different – thus treating it as a mechanism that marks boundaries. In other words, the stereotype is part of what maintains the social system and its symbolic order. It produces the boundary between what is considered normal and deviant, normal and pathological, acceptable and unacceptable, and finally, the included and the outsiders.

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A key point is that stereotypes tend to occur where there is extreme inequality in power relations. Power is often directed against subordinated or excluded groups. The stereotype would be what Foucault referred to as knowledge/power, which classifies people according to the norm and constructs the excluded as the “Other”.

In the next section, Stuart Hall’s theoretical propositions will be appropriated by the study to analyze how the favela and its inhabitants have been historically constructed as the “Other”, thus being simultaneously shaped as objects of both repulsion and fascination.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will analyze the devices used to mark difference – class, territory, gender, and race – and to signify the “Other from the favela” in Brazilian popular culture, using Brazilian cinematic production for this purpose.

In 2002, the release of “City of God”, the most successful film in Brazilian cinematography, stands out. The film, which achieved international success, portrays the violent everyday life of the favela, highlighting the bloody conflict between Zé Pequeno, Cenoura, and Mané Galinha over control of the drug trade in City of God. The images of the film are filled with black boys, actors who would likely not have had the opportunity to play roles not focused on poverty and violence in Rio de Janeiro. The black adolescents are always shown with weapons. In one scene, a group of young men intercepts a gas truck, allowing all the residents – also Black – to steal the entire cargo.

The film also criticizes the Rio de Janeiro government for treating “City of God” as a “human dump”, where all the unwanted people of the city are placed without any infrastructure. In one of the scenes, the character Paraíba – from the Northeast – catches his wife cheating and kills her with masonry trowel blows, burying her in the house afterward. The main character, Zé Pequeno, is portrayed as a bloodthirsty drug dealer who, out of sadism, kills a series of people.

Furthermore, the film emphasizes that drug trafficking has its own organization and a career plan: a) “aviãozinho” (little plane): boys who buy things for the drug dealers and deliver messages to them; b) “olheiro” (lookout): boys who fly kites and bring them down when the police arrive (thus creating a kind of signal), and from lookout, the boy becomes a “vapor” (runner) and can sell drugs in the favela; and c) “soldado” (soldier): boys who stay armed and act as sentinels. However, if one is good at this role, they may become a “gerente” (manager), the right-hand person of the drug dealer. Meanwhile, the police are depicted as violent and corrupt.

In the film, when the drug dealers start making a lot of money, they tend to seek a new identity. To do so, the character Benê – who is Black – asks a white (middle-class) boy to buy him “cool clothes”, suggesting that despite having money, he lacks enough cultural capital to choose fashionable clothes. Benê’s new identity as a wealthy drug dealer also includes changing his hair color, bleaching it.

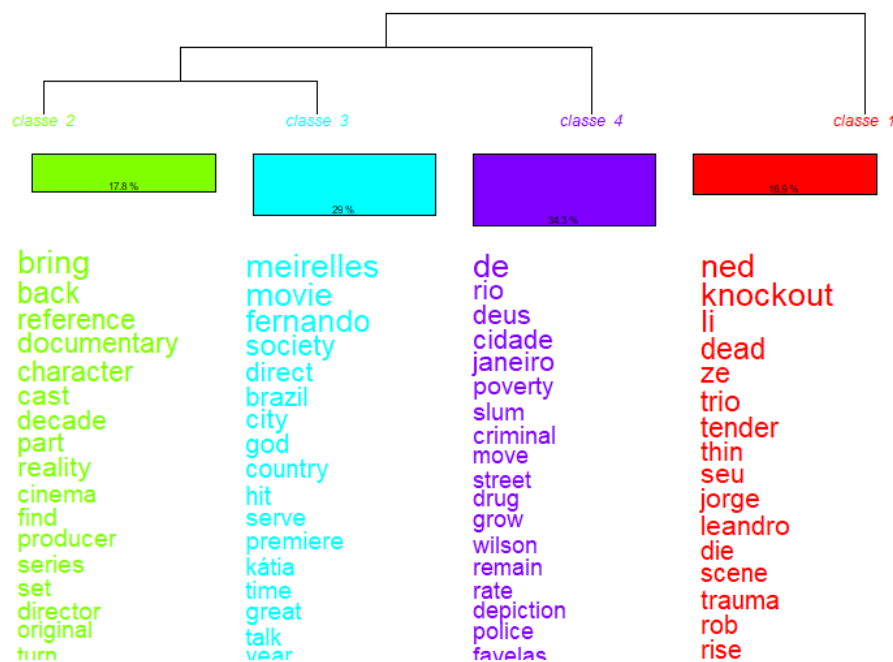
As the film progresses, both Zé Pequeno and Mané Galinha lose their humanity. The former was a child with some innocence who eventually becomes a tyrant, while the latter joins Cenoura’s gang after his girlfriend is raped and his uncle and brother are killed in a shootout.

struggles of those living in the favelas. These themes are central to the representation in “City of God”, where violence is not just a backdrop; it is an element that structures the characters' lives and shapes their identities.

The proximity of terms such as "poverty", "favela", "police", "gang" with Brazil reflects an identity construction that links the favela and criminality to the Brazilian context. Stuart Hall (2016) points out that these elements help reinforce certain stereotypes in the global imagination, where Brazil is often associated with urban violence and conflict.

Terms like "life" and "youth" close to "gang" and "violence" highlight how the film portrays the youth of the favela immersed in a cycle of criminality. This aligns with Hall's (2016) concept of representation, where images and narratives about marginalized groups, such as the youth from the favelas, are often laden with specific, and potentially reductive, meanings (see Figure 02).

Figure 02. Dendrogram Graph – “City of God” Film



Source: Prepared by the author using the IRAMUTEQ software.

The graph generated by IRAMUTEQ groups the words into different classes that reflect thematic and discursive aspects of the film:

- Class 2 (green): Words such as "documentary", "reference", and "reality" suggest that

this class addresses the documentary nature and verisimilitude of the film. According to Hall (2016), the representation of reality is a construct, and this class seems to indicate that “City of God” is seen as a realistic portrayal of life in the favela, creating a perception of authenticity.

- Class 3 (blue): Terms such as "movie", "Fernando Meirelles", and "Brazil" refer to the production, direction, and cultural reception context. Hall (2016) discusses that representation is not neutral; the focus on Fernando Meirelles and Brazil reveals how national identity and views of society are articulated by a social agent.
- Class 4 (purple): Words like "Rio", "poverty", "criminal", and "favela" highlight themes related to urban violence and criminality. According to Hall (2016), these terms evoke shared meanings that reinforce stereotypical representations. This class reflects the construction of a violent, criminalized, and impoverished “City of God”, which, in Hall’s view, may reinforce negative stereotypes about marginalized communities.
- Class 1 (red): Terms such as "dead", "knockout", and "trauma" refer to specific characters and events in the film, connecting them to violence and suffering.

According to Mina and Lima (2013), by portraying the favela as a place where various inhumane practices manifest, the film contributed to reinforcing the image of Brazil as an extremely violent place marked by profound inequalities. The film’s impact was indeed global. The New York Times publication on the work highlights that “City of God” is "one of the most powerful examples exhibited in recent times that makes people remember that the ‘civilized society’ we’ve become can be considered a luxury" (New York Times, 2016). The article emphasized that the panoramic scenes of “City of God” reminded viewers of the film “Gangs of New York”, and it also highlighted the shock the film caused among American audiences due to its numerous death scenes—particularly involving children, whether as shooters or victims.

Velazco and Tommasi (2013), while conducting research in City of God, pointed out that Fernando Meirelles' film provoked great indignation among the community. The authors argue that the fact that the residents were identified as inhabitants of a place emblematic of violence and drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro disturbed their lives, as many of them were seen by outsiders as criminals. The residents also expressed their displeasure with the way violence was portrayed.

The film employed the typical elements of a more contemporary era: the use of modern and heavy weapons, as well as the involvement of children in the drug trade. However, local residents reported to the authors that during the period depicted in the film, the firearms circulating were homemade, and traffickers did not allow children to be involved. Thus, the fusion of historical times, realism, and fiction provoked significant indignation among the residents due to the stigmatization that the City of God community suffered.

Freire-Medeiros (2009) argues that favelas and their inhabitants are, for those who do not live in these places, the representation of poverty and exoticism. These types of places simultaneously evoke fear and curiosity. It is precisely this curiosity about the "Other" that stimulates tourism in the favelas, with violence serving as an attraction, according to the author.

The film "City of God" presents the favela as a primitive place, outside of civilized order. Edward Said (2007) argues that Orientalism is a discursive process that constructs and represents "Eastern" cultures as exotic, primitive, and often dangerous, in contrast to the "West", which is seen as civilized and rational. In this way, the Brazilian favela becomes an "internal otherness", an "Other" within the country itself, with characteristics that reinforce stereotypes of danger and violence.

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For the organization of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, a security system was created in which police continuously monitored the favela. Thus, in each area, there was a Pacifying Police Unit (UPP). The armed occupation and its authoritarian imposition over the "territories of violence" fascinated tourists, who took photos with police officers and in front of military tanks, as in the case of the Complexo do Alemão during its occupation by the "pacification forces" (see Figure 03).

Figure 03. "Wartime Atmosphere" as a Tourist Attraction in Complexo do Alemão



On the left, an image shows a tourist taking photos alongside a UPP Fazendinha police officer, in an area located within the Complexo do Alemão. On the right, an image features a family of tourists posing for photos in front of a war tank during the period when the Alemão was under occupation by the "pacification forces".

Source: Uol (2018).

According to Fagerlande (2017), the favelas with the highest levels of tourism activity are those located near traditional tourist neighborhoods by the beaches, as well as those where the communities themselves have implemented more effective organization to establish tourism. These areas often feature infrastructure related to the development of commercial ventures, hostels, bars, and restaurants.

It is evident, therefore, that representations play an important role in constructing the notion of the "Other," who, in this context, is perceived as disorderly and uncivilized. Consequently, the repression of this social group by the fearsome "forces of the State" becomes deemed essential. On the other hand, the representation of favelas in the media has contributed to framing them as tourist attractions.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the study, it becomes evident that the representation of Brazilian favelas, particularly those in Rio de Janeiro, reveals a complex ambiguity in the imagery circulating in the media. On one hand, favelas are often depicted as spaces of misery, violence, and marginalization, reinforcing stereotypes that associate these areas with extreme poverty and the absence of state intervention. On the other hand, a new narrative has emerged, portraying favelas as places of cultural richness, solidarity, and creativity, particularly through digital platforms and institutional projects. This dual representation creates a tension between negative stigma and touristic fascination, paradoxically attracting visitors who are drawn both to the harsh realities and to the cultural and human potential these spaces offer.

It is noteworthy that the representation regime of contemporary film productions has sought to frame favelas through the lens of stereotypes. Within this perspective, the perception of the favela and its inhabitants — the "favelados"— is reduced and essentialized. This occurs because representations of these territories often establish a connection between poverty and criminality, leading to the reductive assumption that all individuals born or living in favelas

are criminals. Consequently, the "Other" becomes firmly associated with violence. However, the underrepresentation inherent in stereotypes carries ambivalences: while it can provoke aversion to the "Other", it also stimulates the formulation of fantasies, turning the "Other" into something alluring.

In general, tourists visiting favelas aim to "consume" the culture of these communities, relying on the representations typically evoked about these territories. The quest for an "other world" within Rio de Janeiro is underpinned by a racialized otherness that symbolizes the "authentic Brazilian culture". The process of framing the favela as a place to be fantasized about embodies the radical structure of the stereotype.

“The crucial point is that stereotypes relate as much to what is imagined and fantasized as to what is perceived as real, and visual reproductions of representational practices tell only half the story” (Hall, 2016, p. 200). Many tourists who visit favelas construct their own imaginary version of the favela based on representations. Films like “City of God” have the power to captivate viewers, and after this initial visual contact, tourists begin to fantasize about the "Other", visiting a socially conflicted field to fulfill their own fantasies.

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