From the Shadow to the Map:
Visualizing Rio de Janeiro's Favelas

Film Review Essay by Débora Póvoa

– *In the Shadow of the Hill*, by Dan Jackson. Future Paradigm Pictures, 2016.
– *Fighting for Peace,* by Joost van der Valk and Mags Gavan. Red Rebel Films, 2015.
– *City of God: 10 Years Later*, by Cavi Borges and Luciano Vidigal. Brazil: Berny Filmes / Canal Brasil / Cavideo Produções / Cinema Nosso / Link Digital / Nós do Morro, 2013.
– *Beyond the Map,* https://beyondthemap.withgoogle.com/. Collaboration between Google Arts & Culture and AfroReggae, 2016.

'I have the right to come here, but only to work', says Luciana, one of the characters of the documentary *Fighting for Peace*, when she arrives at one of the richest neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro. Luciana commutes every day from her home in the favela Complexo da Maré to her work as a cleaner in Leblon. When arriving in the 'asphalt' – as Rio's residents refer to the zones that lay at the foot of the hills – she feels that she does not belong to this part of the city. 'The people are afraid of us here', she adds. Like many other slum dwellers, Luciana feels disenfranchised from the 'formal' areas of Rio. In spite of recent political attempts to reconnect the 'divided city' (as journalist Zuenir Ventura once characterized it),[1] her feelings of unease and exclusion reflect the persistence of a historical negligence, both from Rio's government and from part of Rio's population, towards these territories and its residents – an issue that is the starting point for all four documentaries under review here in this essay: *In the Shadow of the Hill*, *Fighting for Peace*, *City of God: 10 Years Later* and *Beyond the Map*.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century the favelas were deemed to be a social, architectural and sanitary problem: an 'aesthetic leprosy', as one of the eradication campaigns promoted in the city during the 1920s claimed (Val-

ladares, 2000). Carrying this social stigma, the slums have experienced waves of forceful repression, when police brutality and forced evictions abounded.[2] Intertwined were brief moments of hope, when governmental initiatives seemed to give these places and peoples the rights they deserved. Although some politicians, such as governor Leonel Brizola in the 1980s, attempted to create broader public policies regarding infrastructural improvements and civil rights (Freire-Medeiros, 2013), the shift in attitude towards these places has never been fully accomplished, especially after they became the headquarters of the drug factions that arose in the 1970s.

The introduction of the drug trade marked these territories as sources of crime and violence in Rio, and made 'several segments of Brazilian society … evaluate all sorts of arbitrary measures against the favelas to be not only legitimate but also most desirable' (Freire-Medeiros, 2013, p. 63). The criminal activities carried out by drug dealers seemed to be extended to the favela dwellers as a whole, turning them all into potential delinquents – especially young black men, who became frequent victims of racial profiling and homicide.[3]

The divide between 'asphalt' and favela, and the long-lasting mistrust of favela residents towards the government and its institutions more generally, seemed to end with the installation of the Pacifying Police Units (UPP) in 38 communities between 2008 and 2014. Created as a way to contain violence due to the World Cup and Olympic Games in Rio (Oosterbaan & van Wijk, 2015; Steinbrink, 2013), the UPPs promised to re-establish state control over these communities, and to reintegrate these territories and their populations into the formal city. However, nowadays the Pacification can be considered a failed project. Academic and journalistic reports attest that police brutality and infringements of favela residents' civil rights keep happening on a daily basis (Livingstone, 2014; Prouse, 2012). In 2014 and 2015, the index of violent deaths in the UPPs started rising again, with the case of Amarildo – the main theme of the documentary *In the Shadow of the Hill* – being considered a symbol of the perpetuation of violent practices against the slums (Azevedo, 2017).

Corralled between the brutality of both policemen and drug dealers, favela residents, especially children, are incidentally offered possibilities to overcome poverty and wrongdoing by public, private and non-profit initiatives. Sport, often regarded as 'a vehicle for the empowerment and social connection of "vulnerable" young people living in underprivileged urban neighbourhoods' (Spaaij, 2010, p. 1), is one of these options. As a result, there has been a proliferation of sportive programmes in the favelas trying to give professional alternatives to the local youngsters (Ramos, 2007). Additionally, cultural groups also try to dispute the favela's youth with the traffic by 'exerting a seduction connected to the art's glamour, visibility and success' (Ramos, 2007, p. 1306 [my translation]). At other times, the will to empower these communities comes from within, with popular mobilizations resisting and denouncing perni-

cious practices of public institutions, from the abusive authority of policemen to forced evictions of slum dwellers (Bautès, Fernandes & Burgos, 2013).

The four documentaries under review here attest for these forms of citizenship-building: all of them show how favela residents fight poverty and social invisibility, among other problems, with individual or community action. These narratives try to humanize and give voice to their characters, bringing to the fore their daily struggles to conquer the rights that have been, for decades now, denied to them.

Demonstrating visibility

In his debut documentary *In the Shadow of the Hill*, Australian filmmaker Dan Jackson intertwines the stories of three residents of Rocinha, Rio's largest slum. In doing so, he reveals the tensions between favela dwellers and the pacification police he observed during the year he lived in the community. The movie mainly focuses on the case of Amarildo, a bricklayer who disappeared on 14 July 2013, after being arrested and taken to the local pacification base. The tragic story received national and international attention and gave rise to several protests across the city. Nevertheless, it only got closure in February 2016, when Major Edson, the officer in charge of Rocinha, and other twelve policemen were found guilty of his torture and murder. In spite of the family's restless pursuit, Amarildo's body, however, is yet to be found.

Amarildo became a statistic, adding up to the 6,034 disappearances in the state of Rio de Janeiro between November 2012 and October 2013 (Carpes, 2014). More than this, his story became a symbol of the failure of the pacification project. As his own niece, Michelle, sums up in the documentary: 'It failed the first time I looked out of my window and saw a group of police officers beating the shit out of my neighbour. One of them looks up, points his assault rifle at me, and orders me inside: "Get out of here, you slut!"'. Michelle's declaration, along with many others registered in the film, indicates how poor people are still targets of moral and physical aggression by governmental institutions despite living in a 'pacified' favela.

The other two characters presented in *In the Shadow of the Hill* corroborate this argument. Maria Clara saw her house in Rocinha, allegedly built improperly, being demolished by the municipality of Rio. With nowhere to go, she started a new life by impersonating the comic/musical character Lady Passionfruit, and now performs in TV programmes and children's parties. Aurelio is the organizer of the theatrical play *Via Sacra*, in which residents of Rocinha stage the Passion of Jesus Christ in the community's streets and are, to use his words, 'for one day in their life… the protagonists of something'. It is also a tool to denounce political and social circumstances that fall upon the community, such as the pacification itself. 'We keep the message hidden', says Aurelio, 'so that the police watching the show don't come to my house and shoot me'. Together with Amarildo, Maria Clara and Aurelio are metonyms for many oth-

er favela dwellers who try to find dignified ways of living, but still are treated as a 'sub-race' by a police that 'commit[s] more barbaric crimes than the criminals', as João Tancredo, the lawyer hired by Amarildo's family, affirms.

After portraying a scenario of invisibility, prejudice and violence in the favelas, the documentary ends on a (somewhat too) hopeful tone. In its last 15 minutes, it shows people marching in protest, with demonstrators affirming that, because of the social commotion Amarildo's case generated, 'next time the police will have to think ten times before murdering and disappearing with another poor person'. However, recent statistics prove that not much has changed since then – for example, in 2016, a total of 6,000 people went missing in the state of Rio de Janeiro (Bom Dia Rio, 2017). Undoubtedly, Amarildo was an emblematic story that achieved enormous societal and media repercussion. Nevertheless, there are thousands of other, anonymous 'Amarildos' out there, whose stories will never be told, and whose bodies, unfortunately, will never be found.

Fighting and acting for change

Similar to *In the Shadow of the Hill,* the second documentary under review here, *Fighting for Peace*, also brings to the fore the effort of slum dwellers to live an honest life. Specialized in current affairs documentaries, the award-winning Dutch filmmaking duo Joost van der Valk and Mags Gavan follow two teenagers from the favela Complexo da Maré in their trajectory to become professional boxers. Douglas and Sugar train at Luta pela Paz, a project created in 2000 by the British anthropologist Luke Dowdney to teach martial arts to children from Rio's favelas and offer them a 'way out' of delinquency. Dowdney, an amateur boxer himself, believes that boxing is a means to 'access young people [and] start a dialog'. However, while using this idea as its core argument, *Fighting for Peace* shows that sometimes only sport is not enough to protect kids from the hardship in the favelas.

Fighting for Peace contraposes two plots. On the one hand, it registers the training routine of Douglas and Sugar in their preparation for the National Youth Championships. The two boys are portrayed as local heroes, who earn their own money by winning competitions and dream of providing a better future for their families. Parallel to this, the film shows the other side of their stories: Sugar's precarious housing conditions, sharing a two-room shack with six other people, and Douglas' family drama, with his sister Suelen and his brother Rafael both addicted to drugs. With this contrast, the documentary illustrates the complex dynamics at work within many poor families in Rio's favelas: the children frequently standing in for the parents, the fight against drug addiction of close family members, and on top of that a scenario of extreme poverty that makes one's talent in sport be seen as an exceptional – if not the only – opportunity to improve one's life.

Still, despite its genuine effort to provide a panorama of the daily struggles of favela's residents, *Fighting for Peace* often appeals to voyeurism. Close-ups of cockroaches inhabiting Sugar's house, explicit shots of people buying drugs on the streets, and shocking interviews with drug addicts consuming crack appear to be quite unnecessary for the documentary's argument. At times, they create an aura of sensationalism towards the characters' precarious conditions, contradicting the film's implicit intent to humanize these people. Although not pervasive enough to stain the documentary's overall message, such strategies are pitfalls to keep in mind.

The third documentary under review here, *City of God: 10 Years Later*, follows a similar premise as *Fighting for Peace*: to show how fragile the future of young people in the favelas can be, even when they are given a promising chance – in this case, to be selected to play a part in the internationally acclaimed movie *City of God* (2002). Being friends with the cast of the movie, directors Cavi Borges and Luciano Vidigal interviewed eighteen actors. With this, the filmmakers managed not only to inform the audience about their disparate fates, but also debated, at least briefly, more of the universal dilemmas that affect young people from the favelas.

The documentary starts by setting the tone of the experience that the *City of God* teen actors had when the movie was released: 'All of a sudden, you get out of the favela, where everything was crazy, it was a crazy war, and … the world [is] at your feet, people worshiping you', as actress Roberta Rodrigues remembers. For her, such unforeseen success led to a solid career in Brazilian television, but for some of her colleagues it only caused frustration. This flipside is represented for example by the testimony of Rubens Sabino, who got arrested for theft after his participation in *City of God,* and today sells peanuts in Rio's buses for a living. Scenes of their daily routines reinforce such disparity: while Roberta is shown starring in *telenovelas* at Rede Globo, Brazil's major TV broadcaster, Rubens is filmed buying a bag of peanuts in the supermarket. One specific moment in the film is particularly powerful in representing these contrasts: the encounter between Seu Jorge and Felipe Silva, both actors in *City of God*. While staying at a luxurious hotel in Rio, Seu Jorge, who is currently one of the most successful singer-songwriters in Brazil, meets Felipe, who is now working as an apprentice at the same hotel. The symbolic meaning of their confrontation – the help catering for the superstar – altogether sums up the film's argument: that art is definitely not the ultimate solution for all the favelas' youth.

To some extent *City of God: 10 Years Later* is in itself proof of culture's potential for change: the documentary is a co-production between, amongst other partners, Cinema Nosso, a sociocultural institution created in 2000 by some of the actors of *City of God*, and Nós do Morro, a 30-year old community-based theatre company from the favela Vidigal. Still, *City of God: 10 Years Later* problematizes the recurrent discourse that deems art, in a similar fashion as sports, as a solution for poverty. Besides being underpaid for participating in

City of God, many actors felt they were being typecasted after its release. Lack of opportunities, career mismanagement by the actors' parents and involvement with drug trafficking are other reasons the documentary gives for such unequal fates. With this, *City of God: 10 Years Later* carefully shows that the transformative power of culture is rather limited: there are other, more complex circumstances in these kids' lives that make art an escape for only some of them.

The visible favela?

Beyond the Map, the fourth and last documentary being reviewed here, also calls attention to the discourse on the potential of the arts and sports to change society, albeit in a less critical way. The interactive web documentary is a collaboration between Google's Arts & Culture project, an online platform that provides public access to images of artworks in hundreds of museums around the world, and the local cultural group AfroReggae, which attempts to empower favela residents through theatre, dance and music. Combining photos, 360° videos and guided voiceovers, *Beyond the Map* takes the viewer to five favelas in Rio and presents, in each of them, local residents that found, either in dance, sports, music or academia, an alternative to poverty and criminality.

The characters in the documentary are Computer Sciences graduate Paloma, ballet dancer Luis, surf instructor Ricardo, music collective Morenas do Sol, and rapper Ramon. Their stories, presented as mini-documentaries, attest to the willpower of people living in the Brazilian slums. Having the intention to show a 'successful' favela, *Beyond the Map* uncritically supports the idea that arts and sports are universal answers for these people's futures, disregarding other issues that might interfere with their careers – as explored more thoroughly in *City of God: 10 Years Later.*

The most interesting aspect of *Beyond the Map* is Tá no Mapa!, a project strangely presented as an extra story that does not quite fit the sequence of personal narratives. Being another partnership between Google and AfroReggae, Tá no Mapa! is a digital platform created to map, for the first time, the more than 1,000 favelas in Rio and include them in Google Maps. The initiative aims at integrating these areas and their population, historically segregated, to the 'formal' city. By recognizing their spatial presence, Tá no Mapa! also grants citizenship to favela residents, 'because a big part of having an identity is having an address', as the documentary's narrator affirms. Despite being a valuable initiative, Tá no Mapa! actually seems to be more like Google's *mea culpa*, considering that the tech company has been highly criticized for removing the word 'favela' from its maps in 2013, acquiescing to Rio's municipality request (Bowater, 2013). At that time, the favelas would appear as blank spaces on the map, and searches would not provide any useful results (Southwick, 2016). Hopefully this time, Google's effort to recognize these places and peoples will not dance to the tune of political whims.

The four documentaries presented here deal with latent issues currently at stake in Rio's favelas and indicate that change is in play – either through technologies that give citizens a home, increased popular awareness caused by a tragic event, or incidental opportunities created by arts and sports. By telling these stories, the films fulfil their intent to show another, more human side of these communities. Nevertheless, while positive narratives like these are necessary to reinvent the common stereotype about the favelas, it is equally important to recognize that they are exceptional cases. How many Amarildos are still unknown? How many kids are still recruited by drug traffickers? Only when the exception becomes the rule, and all favela residents are given equal opportunities to make themselves visible, will they have, as the lawyer João Tancredo hopes, 'the same rights and dignity as anyone else'.

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Notes

1. In his bestseller *Cidade Partida* (1994), Ventura describes the contrasts between two sides of Rio de Janeiro: the favelas, where the State is absent and the drug lords rule, and the formal city, which benefits from the State's investments and attention.
2. Between 1968 and 1975, for instance, about 100,000 people were displaced from the favelas by the dictatorship and allocated housing in complexes, and about sixty favelas were dismantled (Burgos, 1998). Almost forty years later, similar practices still haunt Rio's urban poor: until May 2013, about 3,000 families had already been removed from their communities to give way to projects related to the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games (Barros, 2013).
3. Every year, 23,100 young black men between the ages of 15 and 29 are murdered in Brazil, either by the traffic or by the police (Escóssia, 2016).

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