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City of God

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The film *City of God* opens amid a carnivalesque atmosphere, samba music is playing, the camera cuts from image to image, knives are being sharpened, chickens are slaughtered and grilled, huge amounts of hash and cocaine are being consumed… But then, all of a sudden, one chicken manages to escape the "party". The whole gang is now frantically chasing after the desperate runaway chicken, turning the chase itself into an instance of perverse enjoyment. Is the chicken going to manage to escape its fate of being slaughtered?

This hopeless chicken living on borrowed time is an allegory for the f(l)ight for survival depicted in *City of God*, Fernando Meirelles' film about Rio de Janeiro's most notorious favela, which resembles a space of absolute exclusion. *City of God* "has nothing to do with the Rio you see in the postcards". It is a 1960s style housing project that, in tandem with increasing drug dealing, became, already by the 1980s, one of the most dangerous places in Rio. It is a place abandoned by God and justice, where police hardly ever come and where residents' life expectancy does not considerably exceed the twenties. Physically it is close to, only 15 miles outside of, Rio de Janeiro. Socially, however, it is infinitely distant, almost "an independent country" (Karten 2003), or, a "wild zone" characterized by a collapsing civil society and weak "civilizing process" (see Lash and Urry 1994: 324). Hence the narrator of the film, an escapee, introduces *City of God* as a dumping ground: "this is where the politicians dump their garbage". As a "dumping ground" *City of God* is a necessary outcome of order-building processes and economic progress, through which modern society produces huge amounts of human waste, *homo sacer* (see Bauman 2003: 123-6). Hence human life is cheap; not only gangsters but also the police can kill without impunity in *City of God*. Consequently, the boundaries between the law and unlaw are unstable and the justice system is deligitimated (see Caldeira 2000: 157). The allusion to St. Augustine is therefore

interesting not because *City of God* is ironically a "city without God" but because it is a truly "sacred" place, provided that one recalls the originary meaning of the "sacred": a situation of being a*ban*doned, a state of being exempted from the domain of the law and ethical responsibility (Agamben 1998). *City of God* is, in other words, a "city without citizens" as well.
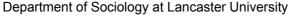
City of God is a labyrinth, a no-go-out area. As is the case with the runaway chicken, "you die if you escape and you die if you don't". Those who attempt to escape fail (and get killed as is the case with Hairy). Likewise, those who traverse the inside-outside divide through strategies of hybridization are denied existence (and get killed as is the case with Bene, the most charismatic figure in the film). There is though one exception to this paranoid closure: Rocket, who signifies the search for the outside, the only upwardly mobile character ("rocket") whose life miraculously changes on the basis of his artistic practice as photojournalist. Being both inside and outside, (both resident and an escapee, both the narrator and protagonist), Rocket is the exception that proves the rule: there is no outside if one is not, that is, a Michael Jordan or Eddie Murphy.

Three worlds of misery

"The story of *City of God* begins with the story of Trio Mortes", a three-man gang (one of whom is Rocket's elder brother) that robs gas trucks and distributes gas to residents in the 1960's, a time when *City of God* was "without electricity, without roads and without buses". This violence is not violence for the sake of violence which later becomes characteristic of *City of God*. As Rocket says, Trio Mortes consists merely of "amateurs"; even their relationship with the police is playful (when the police arrive in the favela, they can easily and cheerfully disappear into the crowd of football playing kids). This is the age of innocence of *City of God* and hence the use of golden colors and much light to depict a relaxed tempo, cozy houses, streets full of happy kids, and so on. The law and other father figures cannot fully assert their authority, but, despite being in crisis, they are nevertheless somehow respected. The same applies to the police; an older police officer, for instance, rejects an indecent proposal from another (and significantly younger) police officer.

In the second period colors get darker. The turning point comes when Trio Mortes arranges a big-scale burglary in a motel/brothel. Everything goes wrong and, "Kid", a would-be-gangster whom we meet later as "Ze", gives the event a bloody turn. To be taken more seriously by older boys in the hood and for the sake of enjoyment he shoots everybody in the motel left tied-up by the trio. Nobody suspects Kid. Instead, the trio becomes the target in the following police raid in *City of God*. Being held responsible for the massacre, the trio is chased, and quickly and violently ends up disintegrating. Their end is the beginning of Ze's gangster rule based on drug dealing and robbery. During this second period, crime and perversion increase, but communal ties continue to exist. Ze has a significant function in this context. His rule is perverse and despotic but he unites *City of God* by protecting it against kids' gangs who "do not respect the rules of the ghetto" and rob the local shops. With Ze, *City of God* gets a master. However, unlike Rocket, Ze is blind towards the outside of the favela; he is both the master and slave of the labyrinth. In a sense, therefore, he marks the demarcation line between the inside and outside of *City of God*. As sovereign, he establishes an order, which he is himself excepted from, and creates an internal cohesion, re-invoking the scandal of power: the "Law itself relies on its inherent transgression" (Žižek 1997: 77). Hence this second period, the 1970s, refers to a kind of "state of exception" depicted in gray colors. The favela becomes a zone of indistinction between law and unlaw, city and nature, peace and war. "In Rio de Janeiro we are and we aren't at war … [M]ore people died in Rio during the four-year siege of Sarajevo than in the city of Sarajevo itself" (João Moreira Salles quoted in Jaguaribe 2003: 23, f19).

When exception becomes the rule, *City of God* enters its third period. Now colors turn all gray and, ceasing to have any referent any longer, violence takes the form of a pure, naked violence; everybody becomes *homo sacer*. What triggers the emergence of this period is the ferocious drug war between two local gangs. In this war Ze arms street kids against the other gang. These two gangs by and large eliminate each other and the police catch their leaders. However, the police are corrupted; Ze is set free again. What escapes the police, though, does not escape the kids. In the end Ze is violently killed by the kids he had himself armed (in a way reminiscent of Kabila, the dictator of Zaire, who, after a cup against Mabitu, was killed

by one of his own child soldiers). After killing the last "father" in *City of God* the kids shout: "we are the masters"! Their violent transgression brings with it naked violence. In a post-Oedipal ecstasy, perversion becomes the rule and *City of God* regresses to the state of nature. Favela life becomes a life outside the city, civilization and normality, a life characterized by the lack of law, irrational violence, perversion and despotism.

To this effect *City of God* is Orientalized. Hence the favela reminds of the labyrinth-like Arabic casbah (inner city) and hence Ze resembles the Oriental despot with absolute disrespect for his obedient, massified subjects. In a scene, a police officer says "let them kill each other"; in another scene, Ze visits an occultist to ask him for help to gain absolute power; in yet another scene, women discuss anal sex and bananas, producing the Kamasutra of the ghetto, and so on: what is relevant in these scenes where the characters are predominantly black is a reference to the African dimension of the Brazilian favela. Via the Orientalist twist, the favela becomes a space of limitless enjoyment, transgression and perversion, or, in short, the Orientalized "other" of the city. No wonder that in the Brazilian popular imagination the favela is a "liminal space", housing not ordinary residents/citizens but "marginal … people who are not really from the city" (Caldeira 2000: 78-9). The image of the darkening is particularly significant in this respect. Indeed, the founding metaphors of Western metaphysics, as Derrida writes, was a photological one, that of light and dark: "The sensory sun, which rises in the East, becomes interiorized, in the evening of its journey, in the eye and the heart of the Westerner. He summarizes, assumes and achieves the essence of man, 'illuminated by the true light'" (Derrida 1986: 213). The "East" / the favela, on the other hand, gets darker and darker.

Following this, one could criticize *City of God* for arranging everything in clean-cut, dichotomous terms: the "city" versus the "liminal" favela, civilization versus gang violence, Rocket versus Ze, and last but not the least, shooting photographs versus shooting people. But such an anti-Orientalist critique, which focuses on the deconstruction of the dichotomies such as the self and the other, misses something essential, that something mediates between the two poles of the dichotomy, allowing for substitutions and metamorphoses. *City of God* is also about mediators that bridge the city and the favela, civilization and nature. In this respect *City of God* can be read together with Orientalist classics such as Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. Both are works organized around some mediators (e.g. Rocket's photographs and Montesquieu's letters), which introduce the favela/Orient to the outer world of rationality and reason.

Letters are deliberately excessive in style. Further, they are not merely about the Orient but also written in an "Oriental" style; their composition does not follow a linear logic but rather gives body to a polyphony of voices (McAlpin 2000: 55, 45). There is not one narrative or one topic, but many. The letters shift from serious political business to reflections on ways of dressing. Sometimes a moralistic tone is applied; sometimes letters are intended to be funny. Similarly, *City of God* is not a linear narration; it deliberately moves back and forth and de-centers the narration by split-screening the events. Although there is a single narrator, who himself is split, it has several stories to tell; its focus shifts from infrastructure to reflections on sexual enjoyment, combining moral tones with irony, and so on. The most important voice in *Letters* is Usbek, a rich man traveling to Europe to be enlightened. In the book we also meet another traveler from Persia, Rica. The two men are usually interpreted as the two sides of Montesquieu's own personality: Usbek is the curious man seeking enlightenment, while Rica, constrained by traditional ways of seeing, is the Orientalized figure (McAlpin 2000: 57). Taken together, their narratives offer a commentary on contemporary affairs and allow Montesquieu to contrast West and East. *City of God* achieves the same effect with juxtaposing Rocket and Ze.

The main focus of *Persian Letters* is a critique of the Orient: through the work of reason Usbek learns to appreciate knowledge, rationality and freedom. At the same time, however, an implicit critique of the abuse of privileges in France is offered. The emperor's abuse of government in France is claimed to mirror Oriental despotism (Betts 1973: 26-7; Grossrichard 1998: 26-7). In this context, religion, sex and politics enable the background against which distinctions are drawn between Islam and Christianity, perversion and heterosexuality, and between despotism and republicanism (Grosrichard 1998). Islam is represented as a fake religion based on a lack of inner conviction, Mahomet as an impostor giving birth to a religion of empty rituals (Ibid. 85-119; Joubin 2000: 197-217). The image of sexuality relates in this

respect to the eunuch, the harem and the fantasies of secret enjoyment: lesbian relationships (see letters 4 and 20 in Montesquieu 1973*)*, the unfulfilled sexual desires of the eunuchs, and so on (see letters 79 and 96. Ibid.). The Sultan himself is a pervert turning his seraglio into a house of lust: a brothel where all women (and men) exist only to please the Sultan. Finally, the Orient is a place where there is no separation of powers. Everything exists for and belongs to the Sultan; nothing has an independent existence (Grosrichard 1998). Most of these themes reappear in *City of God*. It criticizes violence in the favela, while, at the same time, offering a critique of Brazilian institutions (democracy, the police). Religious motives (talisman), sexual symbols (bananas) and political characterizations (Ze as the pervert/despot) portray the favela as a space of transgression. Further, like the letters, *City of God* is about the metamorphosis of the West and the East, of the city and the forest. The Orient/favela is neither outside nor inside but both, occupying a zone of indistinction, a utopia and a dystopia at once. Above all, however, what *Persian Letters* and *City of God* share in common is the description of the Orient/favela through a lack of form. Why?

City of God as a Zero-Institution

As is well known in cultural theory today, identity is not given through references to intrinsic qualities of objects, places, or people, but rather through a relational web of differences. Accordingly, the favela condenses what the city is *not*: a kind of negative photographic image, which operates through the logic of oppositional differences between normality and perversion, law and despotism, mind and body, reason and desire. Through a power-knowledge nexus, the Orient/favela is frozen in stereotypes, a context in which it becomes an "imperative to understand the ways in which anxiety, desire and fantasy enter into the production of imaginative geographies" (Gregory 2000: 313, 326). A symptomal reading strategy is thus helpful in deconstructing the spatial/ideological text by showing how the text organizes floating signifiers around certain nodal points, pushing other signifiers to the margin, and produces meaning through dichotomies and othering.

Despite its merits, though, such a reading in line with Said's *Orientalism* is not satisfactory; the relationship between the West and the Orient or the city and the favela is not merely that of a difference between two elements within the same space (see Grosrichard 1998). Rather, the Orient/favela signifies that which is prior to difference. Hence, despotism is not merely a political form as monarchy, tyranny, and democracy, but rather an a-political "formlessness", the lack of form as such (Grosrichard 1998 and Boer 1996: 46). Similarly, *City of God* is constituted as a space, in which the distinction between the social and the political does not hold. The favela ceases to belong to the socio-symbolic order, becoming a narration of what is prior to or beyond the symbolic.

In other words, the favela is constituted as a fantasy space that both conditions and escapes the "social". Fantasies create objects of desire, but they create these objects as being out of reach. The law, that is, the prohibition of transgression, creates a desire to transgress. The Orient/favela is a product of such a desire to transgress. Through the law, the fantasy of a beyond (the law) is made possible. Through fantasy, the object of desire is transposed to another space, "Orientalized", enabling it to remain sublime, that is, unreachable. Which is also to say that the social bond has two sides (Žižek 2001b: 93). Life within the domain of the law, that is, life organized by the separation of powers (the separation of the political and the domestic, male and female…) is sustained through fantasies of transgression. Such fantasies form the "downside" of the social bond that guarantees the strength of the upper-side. In this sense, Western rationality, reason, and morality (the upper side) and its dark, "Orientalised" downside, or the city and the favela, are parts of the same economy (Grosrichard 1998: 137-38). The downside however has to remain disavowed, "Orientalised", for the whole economy to be able to function. Hence one has to go further than a symptomal reading and aim "at extracting the kernel of enjoyment, at articulating the way in which – beyond the field of meaning but at the same time internal to it – an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy" (Žižek 1989: 125). The excluded voice is not merely "other", marginal, or repressed; it is also a fantasy behind which there is nothing, no truth, to be discovered. There is, for instance, no true Orient to be discovered in the margins of Orientalist texts. The favela, as such, does not exist.

The status of the favela as a fantasy space can be approached thorough Levi-Strauss' *Structural Anthropology*, where he describes the behavior of the members of the Winnebago tribe, a tribe that is divided into two subgroups, "moieties". Asked by an anthropologist to make a spatial representation of their town, the two groups draw different pictures. Whereas the first group perceives the city as a circle with a central house in the middle, the second divides it into two halves. Žižek (1994: 26) labels these two groups conservative-corporatists and revolutionary-antagonists. The temptation to be resisted here is the claim that the two representations are merely two positions within the same symbolic space. The two positions also express two ways of dealing with a fundamental deadlock, two attempts at symbolizing a traumatic kernel, or, two ways of covering a primordial, traumatic lack.

Lévi-Strauss' central point is that this example should in no way entice us into cultural relativism, according to which the perception of social space depends on the observer's group membership: the very splitting into the two 'relative' perceptions implies a hidden reference to a constant—not the objective, 'actual' disposition of buildings but a traumatic kernel, a fundamental antagonism the inhabitants of the village were unable to symbolize, to account for, to 'internalize', to come to terms with—an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing itself into a harmonious whole. The two perceptions of the ground plan are simply two mutually exclusive endeavors to cope with this traumatic antagonism, to heal its wound via the imposition of a balanced symbolic structure. (Žižek 1994: 26)

What brings the two groups together is what Levi-Strauss calls a "zero-institution": "a kind of institutional counterpart to the famous *mana*, the empty signifier with no determinate meaning, since it signifies only the presence of meaning as such" (Žižek 2000: 113). It is an institution characterized by a lack of difference, a fantasy of the pre-social, of what precedes difference, which allows the symbolic to be installed and differences to be represented. And here the *zero* should be taken literally. The Orient, for instance, functions as the number zero, as that which does not have an objective counterpart; it can only be represented as a lack, as a black hole, a desert (Ibid.). As such, however, it lays the foundation for all series of numbers, all series of differences. Yet, the zero-institution as the traumatic Real prior to difference can only be represented through the symbolic; hence, it becomes a zero-*institution*. Spatial fantasies should be analyzed as given in discursive practices in which signifiers are fixed; such operations are however only possible with reference to the more fundamental level at which fantasy is sustained through desire. The fantasy space represents a "beyond", the other space, in which there are no differences: a fiction, or, an imaginary simulacrum. The fantasy space is thus not an empirical space but a space constructed through the economy of desire. Yet, its stuff is material, e.g. signifiers (flows); differences are created by way of signifiers, and as such the fantasy space belongs to the symbolic register (compare to Lacan 1977: 146-78). In other words, fantasy has a double, spectral, structure (Žižek 1994). It is a discursive (symbolic) representation of a space beyond the symbolic. Hence, the only function of the fantasy space as a zero-institution:

is the purely negative one of signalling the presence and actuality of social institution as such, in opposition to its absence, to pre-social chaos. It is the reference to such a zero-institution that enables all members of the tribe to experience themselves as such, as members of the same tribe. Is not this zero-institution, then, *ideology* at its purest, that is, the direct embodiment of the ideological function of providing a neutral all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is obliterated, in which all members of society can recognize themselves? (Žižek 2000: 113)

Historically the city has been imagined as an enclosed space surrounded by "walls" demarcating the limits of inclusion and exclusion (see Virilio 1997). Enclosure establishes a distinction between the polis and (the state of) nature. Yet the transition from nature (the real) to the polis (the symbolic) is not clean-cut and it is here we must look for the pre-ideological kernel of fantasies that sustain urban reality. Urban reality is always structured through symbolic mechanisms, and because this symbolization always ultimately fails, leaving part of reality non-symbolized, the un-symbolized Real "returns in the guise of spectral apparitions" (Žižek 1994: 21). Urban reality presents itself via its failed symbolization and it can never be a Whole. It is precisely this (w)hole in the "urban" that is foreclosed through urban fantasies, and it is precisely through these fantasies that the Real returns in the form of an abject or object of desire (e.g. the favela as the site of perverse violence or of samba), constructing a scheme in which the lack in the urban "reality" (the symbolic order) can be filled and the city

can be experienced as an imaginary whole with fixed coordinates. Thanks to the favela, we can imagine a non-antagonistic, not chaotic city in harmony: as a fantasy space the favela gives the city a phantasmatic identity and thus it is the symptom of the postulated urban identity. Thus a radical position in the favela debate is to say that the favela does not exist: the city is always already politically antagonistic, the city *is* an antagonism, which can only be screened by fantasy scenes.

Inclusionary exclusion

"The main problem of this society", says Luhmann (1994: 4), "is indifference or neglect.... We will have, apparently, in the next century a large mass of, say, bodies which have to survive somehow on their own, and not so much as kind of parts, or kind of persons used for whatever purpose in function systems". One of the most dramatic consequences of this process is witnessed in the favela, in which "citizens" are excluded from autonomous function systems and reduced to *homo sacer*, to "bodies". To be sure, the favela emerges in a differentiated society, in which the difference between "inclusion" and "exclusion" can never be decided once and for all: persons can simultaneously belong to different systems, and as social hybrids, be included in some systems while being excluded by others. However, despite the fact that "even in favelas children are vaccinated to avoid illnesses" (Luhmann 2002: 136), what makes the favela an "extreme" case is its exclusion from most function systems at once. Hence Luhmann's metaphor "indifference" to characterize the way the function systems (fail to) observe the favela.

Other contemporary social theories, too, share this view of total exclusion. Castells (1997), for instance, perceives in the contemporary society two distinct and contradictory topologies, the "space of flows" and the "space of places", which "live by each other, but do not relate to each other" (Castells 1996: 476). The favela, that is, belongs to the space of places and "does not relate" to the space of flows.

However, there exist some "contact zones" which link the favela to the rest of the society through unequal exchanges or flows (see Jaguaribe 2003: 4, 5, 11). The favela is not unambiguously contained in a striated geographical space (in the "space of places") but also participates in the "space of flows", which is made possible by objects and subjects that act as mediators: drugs, guns and other commodities such as information (photos), and subjects such as Rocket. Such mediators, or, to use Latour's concept, "immutable mobiles", which can move and yet maintain their identity in movement, constitute the favela as a networked space (see Latour 1990: 27, 32). In this, they enter into different network relations in different periods.[1]

There is another serious problem with the idea of total exclusion, which relates to sovereignty. Importantly in this context, the reduction to "bodies" mentioned above is a process that takes place not outside but inside the function systems. Indeed, it is the most fundamental gesture of sovereignty. Power emerges not as an expression of the social bond but as an untying; the social bond itself has the form of exception (Agamben 1998: 90). The sovereign tie is more originary than inclusion in or exclusion from social systems. Hence, whenever the favela is depicted as an excluded space, as a "wild zone", one should be looking for the inclusive gesture that follows, which is part and parcel of the social bond between "us" and "them". For untying at once excludes bare life as outside and captures it within the realm of the law, the sovereign tie does not distinguish between inside and outside (Agamben 1998: 19). Favela is another name for the zone of indistinction, in which inclusion and exclusion become indistinct categories, in which one can only speak of inclusionary exclusions and exclusionary inclusions. The problem with the "horizontal" approaches to exclusion, then, is the

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[1] Drugs, for instance, are used in City of God as playful and relatively innocent objects of enjoyment and transgression in the first period, while in the second period they become totally commodified. As drugs come to mean money, parts of the favela are now re-organized like a (drug) factory. Attempts to expand the drug market follow. Those addicted increase in numbers; capitalism penetrates human bodies as flows of drugs, blood and money overlap. In the biopolitics of the third period, however, Eros and Thanos become indistinct. In this "post-industrial", period, drugs become an end in themselves, if not a pure relation to violence. Thus, rather than holding people together, it starts to obliterate them.

disappearance of the dimension of verticality (power), which results in a post-political depiction of the favela.

Regarding this missing link, the role of dominance relations in the production of exclusion, "vertical" theories of social space can be of help. Also in Bourdieu's approach, for instance, "society" consists of differentiated fields, or "spheres of play", which prescribe their particular values and possess their own regulative principles. In this sense *City of God* constitutes a field in which its residents compete with one another, practicing, at least to some degree, the same "game" whose rules are, at least until the third phase, clear ("ghetto rules"). However, despite relative autonomy of the fields, one can observe a range of functional and structural homologies across different fields. Because of these homologies (defined as "resemblance within a difference"), the struggles that go on in a single field are always "overdetermined" by the field of power (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 106). Thus, the field of power can be thought as a kind of "meta-field", characterizing the general structure of the social space (Wacquant 1992: 18). *City of God*, too, is hierarchically placed qua the field of power. Thus Ze, the local despot, is spectacularly powerless in relation to the weapon dealers who symbolize the outside of *City of God* and introduce a verticality to "exclusion", which, by the same token, "includes" *City of God* in a broader context, that of the capitalist economy. And of course exactly the same point can be made regarding the media (e.g. the gangsters' competition for the limelight). The question is: what is a favela without drugs, weapons, media images and so on? One is tempted to say that, contrary to its intention of making a case for total exclusion, *City of God* portrays a world totally penetrated by the commodity form, a world, in which human blood and money become one and the same thing. A world, in which, with the "real subsumption" of society under capital, the dialectic between inside and outside has come to an end (Hardt & Negri 2000: 188-9). Indeed, the spectral presence of capital is the figure of authority that remains operative in *City of God* when all other father figures disintegrate; it is indeed what directly causes this disintegration (see Žižek 1999: 354).

> But this is not all: players can play to increase or to conserve their capital, their number of tokens, in conformity with the tacit rules of the game and the prerequisites of the production of the game and its stakes; but they can also get in it to transform, partially or completely, the immanent rules of the game. They can, for instance, work to change the relative value of the tokens of different colours, the exchange rate between various species of capital, through strategies aimed at discrediting the form of capital upon which the force of their opponents rests ... and to valorize the species of capital they preferentially possess.... A good number of struggles within the field of power are of this type.... (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 99)

Although a field is not a product of deliberate action, and although players agree not through a contract but by the mere fact of playing and concurring in their belief (doxa) in the stakes of the game, players can escape and/or change the rules of the game. In *City of God*, only Rocket can change his social position and do so on the basis of his cultural and symbolic capital, his photographs, which become his most important asset vis-à-vis others within the field of power. It is telling in this context that the film portrays Rocket as a creative person who can avoid the habitual inertia of the favela. Shooting pictures instead of people, he finds redemption in art, and, in a society without fathers, he becomes his own father/creator (see Theweleit 1989 on this "male fantasy"). Indeed, all successful men in *City of God* seem are those who create themselves (e.g. by killing the father). Women never come to occupy central positions and merely function as exchange objects for men. It is equally telling that Snatcher, the only exception in this respect, and the only Trio Mortes member who stays alive, ends up as a monk-like religious figure. He is the one saved by God just as Rocket is saved by art. God = Art.

In Rocket's *City of God*, the only way out is through art, art in the classical sense of a transcendent inspiration that can transgress pre-established boundaries. There is, in fact, a direct relation between *City of God* and Augustin's *On the City of God* in this respect. The latter delivers the grammatics for an aesthetic mode of justification, in which the grandeur is an immediate relation to an exterior source, God's (gift of) grace, which is expressed in the inspired manifestations of the body such as sacredness, artistic sense, creativity and authenticity (Boltanski & Thévenot 1999). One invokes this "regime of inspiration" every time justification includes as an essential moment that it is valid regardless of others' opinions (Ibid. 370). Against this background, the most important metaphor of the film is perhaps the

juxtaposition of the talisman and the camera. Thanks to his photographs, Rocket is able to escape from *City of God* and gets access to women. Thanks to the magic talisman, Ze gets access to *City of God* but should abstain from women. The magic of camera is artistic creativity and inclusion in society. The magic of the talisman is the mastery of the ghetto and a Faustian exclusion. The camera brings to life (Rocket), the talisman sends to death (Ze). In short, the camera and the talisman are the positive and negatives of the same photograph.

The return of the real

 "All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability" (Sontag 1977: 15). In *City of God*, the camera functions as an inventory of death. Rocket wants to become a photographer the day he sees a camera in the crowd when Harry, member of Trio Mortes, was killed by the police. From then on the camera signifies death. He comes to own a camera, for instance, only when Bene dies (Ze gives Bene's camera to Rocket). Rocket becomes a photojournalist only when he shoots Ze being shot. The camera functions as a transitional fetish object that demands sacrifices (Harry, Bene, Ze). In a sense, therefore, Rocket is parasitic on the death of others. Indeed, in a remarkable scene, the camera coincides with the gun: just as Rocket is about to shoot a picture of Ze's gang they are shot by the other gang. In this moment, when the camera fixates/mortifies the gang, which becomes a target for the other gang's shooting, shooting pictures and shooting people completely overlap. "Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder" (Sontag 1977: 14-5).

For sublimation to be able to be effective (that is, for the elevation of an ordinary object to the status of the Thing to be able to take place), the gap between *small object a* and the *Thing* must be sustained. If the gap cannot be sustained, the socio-symbolic order disintegrates, and the other coincides with the monstrous Thing (Žižek 2000: 165). When, for example, violence stops being sublimated qua the despotic leader (Ze), it turns into the monstrous evil, the Thing itself, which is symbolized by the kids' gang and their meaningless violence. In other words, the demise of symbolic authorities (the fall of the father) and the process of de-sublimation are parallel processes (see Žižek 1999: 322-334). Thus, in its final phase, in *City of God* there is no father, only a simulacrum: a smooth space without symbolic hierarchies. Herein lies the source of naked violence: the demise of the symbolic law is "supplemented by the re-emergence of ferocious superego figures" (Žižek 1999: 368, 373). Thus we are dealing with two authority figures: authority qua the symbolic order (the Law) and authority qua transgression, qua the real (Thing). Whereas the first authority demands obedience, the latter demands the transgression of the Law and thus enjoyment. Violence in *City of God* emerges as a result of transgression. So we potentially no longer have the Thing (das Ding) as the beyond of the Law: "the ultimate horror is that of the real Thing itself which directly 'makes the law'" (Žižek 2000: 132). The Real of violence emerges at the point at which transgression (exception) becomes the rule. And at this point João Moreira Salles's parallel between Sarajevo and Rio gets its true meaning. Aleksandar Tijanić, one of the Milošević's ministers, says:

> In the time of [Milošević's] rule, Serbs abolished the time for working. No one does anything. He allowed the flourishing of the black market and smuggling. You can appear on state TV and insult Blair, Clinton, or anyone else of the 'world dignitaries'.... Furthermore, Milošević gave us the right to carry weapons. He gave us the right to solve all our problems with weapons. He gave us also the right to drive stolen cars.... Milošević changed the daily life of Serbs into one great holiday. (quoted in Žižek 2000: 133)

In another sense, too, the relationship between sublimation and seeing/being seen (e.g. through the camera) is decisive in *City of God*. The stakes of struggle regarding symbolic power are images, which "construct" social reality (Bourdieu 1990: 134). However, symbolic capital "only exists in the eyes of the others" (C. Joppke; quoted in Çaglar 1995: 311). In this context, the photographic image is a *percipi*, a being-seen-ness, and functions as positive or negative symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1994: 191). For the favela occupies a dominated position in the field of power, it is categorized (the etymological root of the word, *kategorein*, means "to accuse publicly"; Bourdieu 1990: 34). People of *City of God* hold an uncompromising deficit in symbolic power, which is accentuated by the fact that the struggle for symbolic capital goes

through distinctively local paths, within the favela. No wonder, then, we find out about *City of God* only through Rocket, the escapee.

Pauolo Lins, the writer of the novel *Cidade de Deus* (1997), was a former favela resident and a research assistant to Alba Zaluar, a leading anthropologist who specialized in favelas, violence and drug trade. This role as researcher/insider produced a powerful reality effect, which was further electrified by the film in 2002. Thus many commentators welcomed *City of God*, finding it "realistic" because it is "played by real slum kids" (Maurao 2003). After all, "a true story can be as brutal as Pulp Fiction" (Karten 2003). As Jaguaribe (2003: 1) points out in a broader context, in Brazil the 1990s have seen the "return of the real" through a series of realist representations of the favela that effectively seek to produce a "shock of the real", signaling the impossibility of representing Brazil as one nation. Or, in Baudrillard's words, "the characteristic hysteria of our times: that of the production and reproduction of the real" (Baudrillard 1994: 23).

It is naïve, however, to suggest that the film merely re-presents a profound reality. To confer upon *City of God* a realism is merely to confirm one perspective – in this case the Orientalising middle-class perspective of the successful black escapee – in the tautological conviction that an image of the favela "which is true to its representation of objectivity is really objective" (Bourdieu 1990: 77). Fictionalizing the favela necessarily pushes away, or masks, some realities (e.g. contact zones, flows, et cetera). What if, however, the representations of the favela do not only mask a reality but also an absence?

Indeed, the secret of *City of God* can only be understood when one shifts focus from the dissimulation of something (e.g. through "fictionalizing the favela") to the dissimulation of an absence. As Baudrillard has shown, there are four discourses on the relationship between image and reality: an image can reflect a reality, it can mask a reality or can disguise its absence, and, finally, itself becoming a simulacrum, an image can cease to bear any relation to a reality (Baudrillard 1994: 6). Presenting the favela as a state of nature, *City of God* projects the "problem of despotism" to this fantasy space, creating the illusion that outside the favela this problem ceases to remain a problem, that outside the favela there exists the "city".

Which is not the case, however, and one way to illustrate this is to consider the favela as a "camp". Carl Schmitt argued that it is the link between localization and order that constitutes the "nomos of the earth". Through this link, the biological (*zoē*) and the social/political (*bios*), nature and the polis, are separated, and bare life (life reduced to biological existence) is excluded from the polis. There is an ambiguity in this context: in the state of exception this link breaks down. Further, when the unlocalizable, the exception, achieves a permanent localization, the "camp" emerges. The camp is a zone of indistinction, in which law and chaos, inside and outside become indistinguishable: "To an order without localization (the state of exception, in which the law is suspended) there now corresponds a localization without order (the camp as a permanent state of exception)" (Agamben, 1998, p. 175). It is precisely this dislocating location of unlaw within the law that transforms *City of God* into a camp, creating the confusion whether it is an "independent country". However, this is not the whole story. Even though the camp originally emerged (in the Nazi period) as an exceptional space in which the life of the inmate was violently transformed into bare life, the production of *homo sacer* is today extended beyond the walls of the concentration camp. Which is not to say that all contemporary spaces can be characterized by the cruelty of the Nazi camps (although camp-like structures such as detention centers are spreading quickly). But the logic of the camp is generalized throughout the entire society (Agamben 1998: 20, 174-5). We increasingly live in a time in which populations' "ontological status as legal subjects is suspended" (Butler 2000: 81). In certain cases it is easy enough to recognize the camp (e.g. refugee camps, rape camps, detention centers, et cetera). But there exist more benevolent and thus more desirable and invisible camps (e.g. gated communities, theme parks, shopping malls, sex tourism, et cetera) that repeat the logic of the exception. At both extremes, the distinction between the biological and the political tends to disappear and it becomes increasingly difficult to refer to the polis and politics in the classical sense. In this sense, the outside of the camp reflects the inside: modern biopolitics as a whole reduces the citizen to bare life (to Foucault's "docile bodies"). It is therefore "not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West" (Agamben 1998: 181).

Against this background, it is tempting to argue that the favela exists in order to hide the fact that it is the contemporary society, all of "real" Brazil, that is the favela (compare Baudrillard

1994: 12). In a sense there is no more favela: all contemporary urban space is organized according to the logic of favela. Which perhaps explains why *City of God* "is a great movie to see, even if only to appreciate the relative surroundings we live in the western world" (Sheila 2003). Even if only to sustain the fantasy that we still live in the city. This is indeed the most important characteristic which *City of God* as a "realist" film shares with Reality-TV shows such as Big Brother. When "society" and "social facts" lose the weight once attributed to them in today's "liquid modernity", that is, when "society" no longer can repress or promise salvation for individuals, it can only be staged as a spectacle, as a simulacrum of a "society" that exists, masking the anxieties that follow the disappearance of "society" and the privatization of politics (see Bauman 2002). The outrageous popularity of the TV show "Big Brother" is illustrative because this new version of Big Brother is "the tragicomic reversal of the Benthamite-Orwellian notion of the panopticon society in which we are (potentially) 'observed all the time' (…): today, anxiety seems to arise from the prospect of *not* being exposed to the Other's gaze all the time" (Žižek 2001: 249-51). Big Brother stages the big Other (the "society" or the "city") in a world where the camp is generalized.

Thus, regarding the "return of the real", one should focus on not only how fiction is mistaken for reality (e.g. *City of God* distorts reality by "fictionalizing" it) but also on how reality itself is mistaken for fiction (e.g. the camp as "just a movie"). Which brings us to the nature of the real that "returns". "The real which returns has the status of an(other) semblance: precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience as a nightmarish apparition" (Žižek 2002: 19). In a sense *City of God* is not so much about producing an "effect of the real" through which fiction is perceived as real but about producing an "effect of irreality" through which the real itself (the camp, the favela) is perceived as a violent specter, as a fantasy space. In *City of God*, through images the favela turns into a virtual entity, into a simulacrum. The paradox is that the spectral presence of this "fantasy-favela" starts to function as the sublime irrepresentable Thing. The lesson here is:

> We should not mistake reality for fiction – we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are only able to sustain if we fictionalize it. In short, one should discern which part of reality is 'transfunctionalized' through fantasy, so that, although it is part of reality, it is perceived in a fictional mode. Much more difficult than to denounce-unmask (what appears as) reality as fiction is to recognize in 'real' reality the part of fiction. (Žižek 2002: 19)

City of God deceives, then, not by presenting what is fiction as true but by presenting what is true (the camp) as fiction. Hence the camp/favela comes to be perceived as a specter, projected into a fantasy space. Herein lies perhaps the most significant deception of *City of God*: that it is merely its own simulacra. It does not only show or mask a reality or hide an absence; it produces and reproduces a zone of indistinction in which the reality (the camp) is dissolved into a fiction (see Baudrillard 1994: 31).

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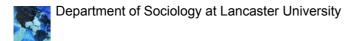
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