Transnational Reception of *City of God* and *Elite Squad*

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Abstract

Brazilian cinema has historically had a pivotal role in raising social issues. Recently, it has been the recipient of considerable attention worldwide, and a catalyst for the debate of urban problems such as social inequality, drug trafficking, and violence in the favelas (slums). Although the favela is not a new topos in Brazilian cinema, *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*, 2002) and *Elite Squad* (*Tropa de Elite*, 2007) have been particularly successful in reviving its representation while problematising it in the public forum. Such vivid debate seems to reflect, and only be enabled by, spectators' deep engagement with national film. Notwithstanding, despite the popularity of Brazilian cinema among the public, critics, and the media, the relationship between cinema and audience and its ability to reflect, as well as affect, social issues seem not to have been explored, there being a scarcity of research on film reception, particularly empirical, in Brazil. It is thus the aim of this study to investigate theories of reception and spectatorship through the analysis of audience reaction to *City of God* and *Elite Squad*. Due to current interest in transnational studies and the relevance of analysis involving empirical data, the two films are investigated through the examination of 238 responses collected from three groups: non-Brazilian, Brazilian middle class, and Brazilian favela inhabitants. The films have been examined through the weaving of empirical data and theories pertaining cinematic spectatorship and gender. While analysis of the data has yielded thought-provoking insights, the study advocates for further research in the field of cinematic spectatorship in Brazil.

Keywords: audience research; Brazilian cinema; favela; gender.

Introduction

Although the favela (slum) is not a new topos in Brazilian cinema, *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*, 2002) and *Elite Squad* (*Tropa de Elite*, 2007) have been particularly successful in

reviving its representation and problematising it in the public forum. *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*), directed by Fernando Meirelles, was released in Brazil on 30 September 2002. The film tells the story of Rocket, a boy who aspires to be a photographer while living in Cidade de Deus, one of Rio de Janeiro's largest favelas. At the same time, it also narrates the story of the City of God, including a war between gangs and the development of the slum itself. *Elite Squad* (*Tropa de Elite*), directed by José Padilha, was released in Brazil on 5 October 2007. The crude portrayal of Rio de Janeiro's police force's controversial practices with focus on an individual police officer going through a personal crisis happened to be extremely appealing to Brazilian audiences in general. The film was a box office success despite an estimated eleven million people having seen illegal copies of the film prior to its release.[1] Both *City of God* and *Elite Squad* held first position as most watched national films in Brazil in their year of release with 3,307,746 and 2,471,193 spectators in cinema, respectively.[2]

Notwithstanding the films' public and critical impact, there seems to be a conspicuous lack of study, particularly empirical, investigating the relationship between cinema and its audience. Fernando Mascarello argues that this is generally true in Brazil, where "[t]he debate on this subject is found worryingly underdeveloped[…] when compared with cinema studies in the international arena, and spectatorship studies of Brazilian television and media."[3]

This study investigates the two films as national cultural manifestations, thus encapsulating issues related to class, race, gender and cultural identity through the analysis of 238 responses collected from three groups: Brazilian middle class, Brazilian favela inhabitants and foreigners. Data collection was performed through the use of a questionnaire (made available in English and Portuguese) particularly formulated for this study. The approach to the responses was predominantly qualitative, and although the data was at times quantified for analytical purposes, this quantification involved the analysis of individual responses and their clustering into categories that seemed suitable for the discussions in question. After contextualising this study's audience, the general reaction to the two films as well as the reaction to characters and narrators are analysed in sections 1 and 2 in order to investigate the extent to which respondents' backgrounds interfere in their interpretation of the movies. By the same token, the third section addresses perceptions on gender, in particular the portrayal of masculinity in *City of God,* and the similarities and differences in its reception by the different sample groups.

1. This study's audience
For this study's data collection, six screenings were organised in Brazil: four for middle-class volunteers and two for *favela* inhabitants. The bulk of the middle-class data was collected from screenings that occurred during the months of August and September 2008 in the city of Campinas, São Paulo state. The screenings were advertised (via

posters, e-mails and personal visits to classes) and took place in a private language school. Students' e-mail addresses were collected and electronic links to the online questionnaires were sent by email in order to gather a greater number of responses. In Brazil, private language schools are reasonably high-priced, which would ensure the volunteers' status as middle class. The criterion to qualify middle-class participants could be considered vague, were it not for Brazil's great inequality, which results in considerably segregated social segments.

Data collection took place in a school in a low-income area of the city of Campos dos Goytacazes, Rio de Janeiro state, in September 2008. According to *Observatório Socioeconômico da Região do Norte Fluminense* (North Fluminense Regional Socio-economic Centre), Campos dos Goytacazes has the same favela-inhabitant ratio as Rio de Janeiro city,[4] which is one of the most violent cities in Brazil. The school E. E. Joaquim Atayde is situated just outside the neighborhood of Tapera (where Favela da Margem da Linha, or simply Favela da Linha, is located). Studying in Joaquim Atayde was the criterion utilised to determine that the participants were favela inhabitants, given that the Brazilian public educational system assigns students to schools according to their place of residence.

Data of the year 2000 shows that there was an average of 3.66 persons per household.[5] Educators of Joaquim Atayde were of the opinion that Favela da Linha, despite the occurrence of drug dealing activity, was not particularly violent in that regard. It was an underprivileged community and it was only in August 2006 that the city's administration provided the area with basic sanitation.[6] Gender and gender violence were issues raised by Laura Maria Ramos Reis, social worker for Campos dos Goytacazes Prefecture and pedagogical coordinator at Joaquim Atayde. Reis stated that Joaquim Atayde's students' families mainly comprise women (70%) and most of these students lived with their mothers, grandmothers and/or older sisters. She suggested that the absence of males in the households might be due to prevalence of sexual abuse from males within the family.[7]

The films were shown on two consecutive days, one per day, for the same class of seventh-grade students. In the Brazilian educational system, a seventh-grade class corresponds to thirteen-year-old students. However, because of a series of factors, including their socio-economic situation, their average age was 14 years (with students of up to seventeen years of age in class). The screenings involved a single class of students (however students from another class joined for the second screening due to their teacher's absence). For the *City of God* screening, thirty-six volunteers completed the questionnaire while the *Elite Squad* screening resulted in fifty-two questionnaires.

The data collection for the foreigners group took place in Sheffield, United Kingdom, in the months of November and December 2008. Seven screenings were organised, three of *City of God* and four of *Elite Squad*. All screenings were advertised and took place in the University of Sheffield, thus the high incidence of students in both groups of participants. Due to the university's multi-cultural environment, volunteers were of various nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, totaling an average of 15 nationalities per film. The charts below show the nationalities of individuals who participated in each screening.

Respondents' nationalities (as self-identified) - City of God
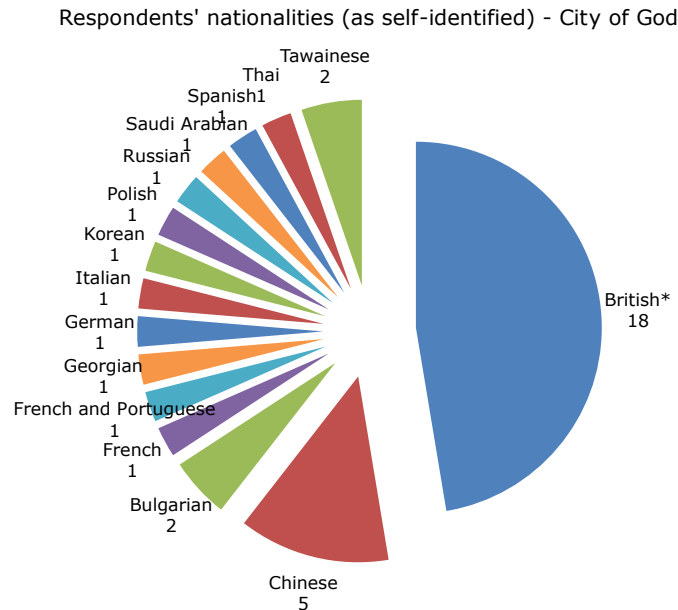
* sixteen self-identified as 'British', one as 'English', and one as 'Scottish'
Chart 1a Respondents' nationalities (*City of God*)

Respondents' nationalities (as self-identified) - Elite Squad
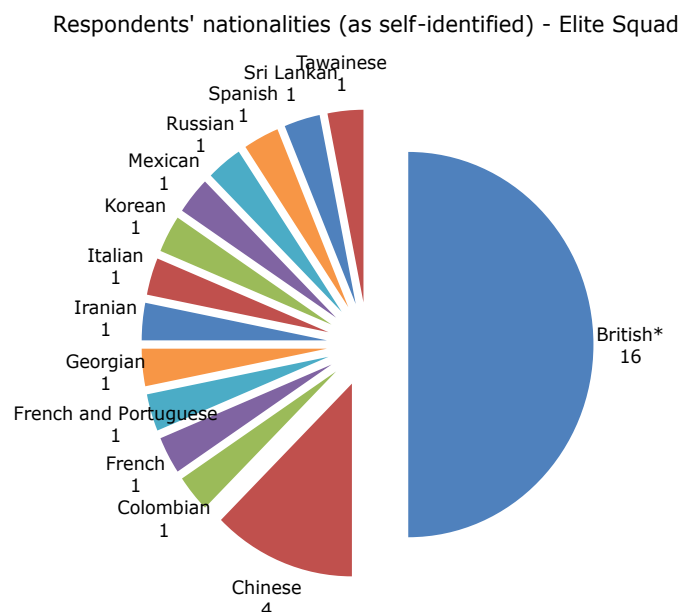
* thirteen self-identified as "British", two as "English", and one as "White British"
Chart 1b Respondents' nationalities (*Elite Squad*)

The six groups were considered as six independent groups, although the bulk of each group's participants answered both questionnaires.

	City of God Number of respondents	*Elite Squad* Number of respondents	TOTAL
Favela	36	52	88
Middle Class	35	46	81
Foreigners	38	31	69
TOTAL	109	129	238

Table 1 Number of respondents per questionnaire, per group

The average age is 14, 28 and 24 for the favela, middle class and foreigners groups, respectively. Perhaps the most noticeable variance across the groups is in terms of age and education. More than 94% of the Brazilian middle class and foreigners groups hold an undergraduate degree or were currently undertaking one (and more than 30% had pursed further higher education) while the favela group consists solely of primary school students. Whether it is true that the lower level of education of favela respondents influenced the sophistication of their responses, it has also provided fresh and insightful contributions to the study.

2. General Reaction

Reaction to characters is not seen in terms of 'identification,' which Martin Barker argues is a problematic term, most often relying on ideas of loss of consciousness, spectator vulnerability and consequent engulfment in the fictional world portrayed on screen. Rather, "[m]oments of absorption are simultaneously moments of reflection, and also moments of preparation, recollection-in-advance, account-building, and role-management."[8] The term 'reaction' is thus used to refer to the variety of responses collected, as it underscores the active nature of spectators' role in the meaning-making process. Focus is given to the divergences in the perception of films and characters due to the three groups' contrasting worlds of experience and predicaments, thus generating not a preferred meaning or one single 'message,' but plural interpretations.

Considering *City of God* and *Elite Squad*'s role as catalysts for debate, particularly in Brazil, it appears that the films have assumed the form of a "'cultural forum,' showing the 'range of response, the directly contradictory readings of the medium, that cue us to its multiple meanings.'"[9] Indeed, the study of actual instances of reception reveals the great variety of meanings raised by individuals while concurrently disclosing trends that are

exclusive, or more preeminent, to certain groups.

In order to investigate spectators' general reaction, the two films are addressed separately through analysis of response to the following questions:

> 'Can you briefly summarise the film's plot?' (hereinafter Q1)
> 'What was the impression the film left on you? Please justify' (hereinafter Q2)

The influence of their reality in their interpretation of the films can be observed in the guise of various (distinct) issues raised within viewers' responses to *City of God*. The relationship between respondents' daily reality and the movie was evident in their responses when, in the case of the favela group, they named local favelas for comparison.

> [The film shows] Reality nowadays in Rio de Janeiro in the favelas in Rio de Janeiro Tira-gosto, Boliera, rolinha, a lot of shootings (CG10F) [10]

The 'invention' of facts or events that are not effectively in the films also underlines viewers' active involvement in meaning making, thus resulting in the multiple meanings, as espoused by Sonia Livingstone. Some respondents' statements seem to clarify the extent to which their existential universe impregnates their reading of the film. The issue of prostitution in a nearby area, for example, was raised in informal interviews with the favela's school's staff, and indeed, the fact that there is no prostitution portrayed in *City of God* did not prevent it from appearing in the favela group's responses:

> That we cannot kill, steal and use drugs because in this world there is a lot of violence, prostitution (CG14F)

> a lot of death and shootings a lot of prostitution a lot of cowardice (CG22F)

> a lot of deaths, a lot of violence, a lot of people involved with drugs, prostitution but I thought it was cool (CG15F)

As Livingstone argues, this shall not be regarded "as 'communication failures,' for 'as long as the meanings read into the content are defined as real, they are for this group real in their consequences. They become part of the culturally enshrined symbolic environment."[11] It appears that it is precisely the actual cultural and symbolical environment of respondents that offers the framework within which their interpretation of the film is constructed.

Livingstone's observations regarding television appear applicable here when arguing that "viewers interpret the same news magazine program differently but in ways that are internally coherent and consistent with their various social identities."[12] Notwithstanding the fact that the films are one and the same for all respondents (and most often in spite of it), readings derived from it may not only vary greatly, but also be symmetrically opposed. The sympathetic impressions of *Elite Squad*, particularly stated in response to Q2, suggest that Brazilian middle class respondents tended to see the film as a favourable indication that, despite endemic police corruption, there do exist sectors of law enforcement that are committed to the eradication of corruption:

> That there are authorities that exercise their functions with true justice (ES45M)

> That Brazil is capable of training and maintaining specialised groups in special operations and that such groups can effectively work without being corrupted by Brazil's socioeconomic conditions (ES34M)

> That there is still a part of police which is not corrupt (ES27M)

A small number of favela inhabitants also argued in favour of the squad's integrity, but unlike the middle class, most tended to emphasise police corruption rather than BOPE's[13] alleged incorruptibility. The reason for a negative reaction to the police from favela inhabitants could be due to possible encounters (anecdotal or personal) of favela respondents with indiscriminate police violence:

> That there are corrupted policemen and that BOPE goes up the hill [i.e. favela] to kill (ES1F)

> a lot of suspense because life in the hill is difficult who enters the life of crime in the hill dies (ES7F)

> that policemen only think about killing and they don't give a second chance for those who cross their way (ES14F)

> I am afraid that it happens in my city what happened in the film (ES9F)

> An impression of fear (ES11F)

> The impression that it will happen with us (ES12F)

These statements seem not only to inscribe police violence as an actual threat for these respondents, but also suggest that the reality portrayed in the film is, for them, authentic and relevant. This is further observed in many favela respondents' interpretation of the film as a moral tale, due either to previously received cautionary advice, or perhaps, observation of their present reality:

> Not to do wrong things in this world; leave alone those who want to do it and don't pay attention to these potheads (ES10F)

> Not to mix with drug dealers (ES24F)

> It tells us not to enter the life of crime (ES48F)

> The impression the film left is that I will never enter the life of crime because I don't need it to live, but those who enter a life of crime will only end up dead (ES34F)

Further emphasising the presence of distinct motivation for each groups' reading of the film, the fact that certain descriptors are exclusive to certain groups is further symptomatic. For example, while the middle class made mention of "impotence" in regard to the film as a whole, "cowardice" (referring to the police) appeared exclusively within the favela group, suggesting this group's perception of the police as a potential source of violence.

2.1 Reaction to Characters

Viewers' reaction to the two films' narrators and various characters were analysed through the responses to the following questions:
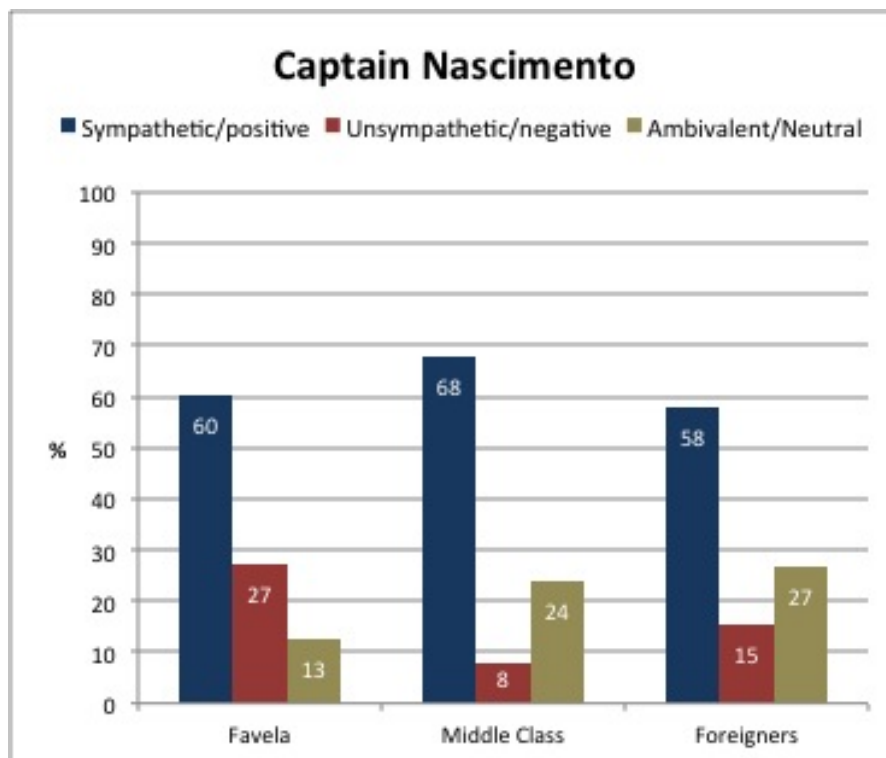
> 'What did you think about the characters? Was there one (or more) who you reacted to strongly? Why?' (hereinafter Q3)

> 'What was your overall impression of the narrator?' (hereinafter Q4)

Livingstone argues that "a viewer's response to just one major character can significantly affect his or her interpretation of the narrative as a whole."[14] Q4 focuses specifically on the figure of the narrator given that, if a major character can alter the interpretation of the film as a whole, this should be most evident when the character in question is the film's narrator (who is most likely to engender sympathy). It should be noted that both films' narrators somewhat resist sympathy due to the complexity of their characters, at times bending accepted moral standards with their controversial behaviour. *Elite Squad*'s narrator, Captain Nascimento, is an over-worked BOPE officer struggling to find a worthy

successor in order to resign and be more present for his family. The case of Captain Nascimento is a patent example of a complex narrator due to his contentious actions, namely the use of torture, violence and power abuse. The chart demonstrates noteworthy sympathy toward the character in all three groups.

Captain Nascimento

■ Sympathetic/positive ■ Unsympathetic/negative ■ Ambivalent/Neutral

Group	Sympathetic/positive	Unsympathetic/negative	Ambivalent/Neutral
Favela	60	27	13
Middle Class	68	8	24
Foreigners	58	15	27

Chart 2 Reaction to Captain Nascimento

Their diverging stances, however, emerge when contrasting their justifications. While in the favela and foreign groups Nascimento's familial drama is often mentioned as a main reason for sympathy, the most sympathetic story line for the middle class is the struggle against corruption and/or the quest for a worthy substitute. Within the middle class, Captain Nascimento's popularity seemed again to stem from indignation at systemic corruption:

> Captain Nascimento naturally impressed me most due to his strength, coldness but mainly because of his honesty, *so rare nowadays* (ES12M, my emphasis)

> Captain Nascimento because he shows indignation against our system and some hope of a less corrupt future for Brazil (ES4M)

Furthermore, the empathy created by the narrator constantly presenting his motivations in a subjective account of facts should not be underestimated, as the response below suggests.

My overall impression of the narrator is good, because of everything, his voice, his performance, his charisma. He helped us to get inside the film itself, to be involved in it, and to explain what [i]s not explicit about how [MP] works in brazil and all the corruption.[15] (ES22)

The negative assessments of Captain Nascimento also merit consideration. The greatest number of unsympathetic viewers were from the favela is in line with the hypothesis of police violence as a possible threat to favela inhabitants.

because he is violent (ES1F)

Yes, when they went up the hill shooting everybody hurt one of the criminals and rubbed the other's face on the blood (ES2F)

Mean, violent (ES7F)

for doing bad things with the others, torture, kill, spit on their faces etc… (ES18F)

Elite Squad's other main characters are Captain Nascimento's two potential replacements: André Matias, a black police officer and law student, and Neto, a white, idealistic police officer who is killed by drug dealers toward the film's conclusion. The charts that follow summarise responses to all characters cited in answer to Q3.[16]
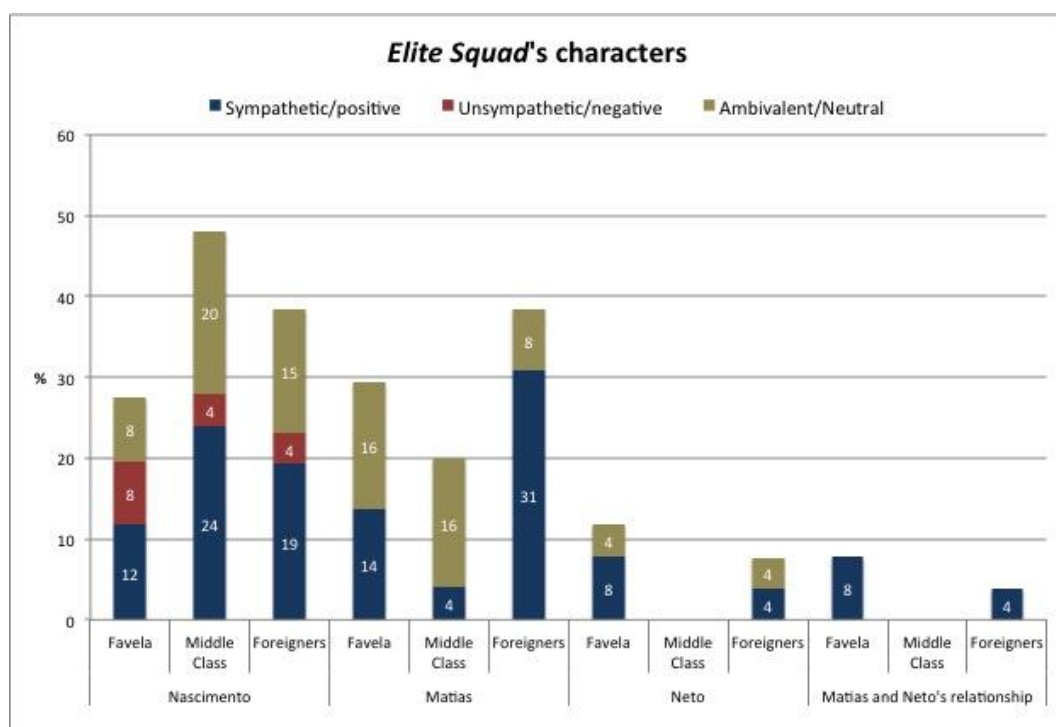
Chart 3 Reaction to *Elite Squad*'s characters

The character of André Matias elicited more reaction from foreigners and favela inhabitants (39% and 30% respectively), than the middle class (20%). While the majority of these foreigners saw the character in favourable terms, and reaction from the favela was divided equally between sympathetic and neutral, only one member of the Brazilian middle class audience took a positive view of Matias. This study was not designed to analyse response with respect to race or ethnicity, but linkage between the general disregard for Matias by the middle-class and Brazil's socio-economic and racial segregation[17] may tentatively be suggested. Indeed, racial and social discrimination is clearly presented in the film itself; in Captain Nascimento's voiceover: "in Brazil, the blacks and the poor don't have much chance in life." While no explicit mention of ethnicity was made in responses, perhaps the echo of Brazil's racial and socio-economic divide undermined sympathy for Matias's character among the middle class.

Livingstone sustains that some "readers 'filtered out' the structural role of the secondary characters and focused on the hero and heroine alone;"[18] by inverting Livingstone's statement, it could also be argued that secondary characters can be 'filtered in' and acquire a greater importance than that originally ascribed by the narrative. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that there is no coincidence across groups in the characters mentioned, as the table below demonstrates.

| Group	Character	Respondent
Favela	Fabio, i.e. corrupt policeman	ES6F, ES34F
	Baiano, i.e. drug dealer	ES32F, ES42F, ES43F
Middle Class	NGO members	ES39M
	Maria, i.e. André Matias's girlfriend	ES30M
	Lady who asked Captain Nascimento to retrieve her dead son's body	ES25M
	"Rich boy who sells drugs at university"	ES24M
Foreigners	BOPE as a whole	ES15, ES22, ES28

Table 2 *Elite Squad*'s secondary characters

If non-protagonist characters are not designed to cause spectatorial investment by the diegetic reality per se, secondary characters mentioned by respondents are likely to reveal investment originating from subjective experience. Indeed, they seem to function as vehicles for voicing issues considered relevant to the three groups, e.g. favela respondents were the only to mention the corrupt policeman Fabio and the drug dealer

Baiano. Both responses demonstrated an unsympathetic reaction to Fabio, while, quite surprisingly, one of the three responses to Baiano was positive: "Very good Baiano. Because he rules the drug den and the drug dealing" (ES42F). The fact that the middle class mentioned middle class characters is further symptomatic of the engagement originated from personal experience rather than the story portrayed in the film, as the example below clearly illustrates:

> The rich boy who sells drugs in the university because *I live in this world and I hear about people who behave like him* […] (ES24M, my emphasis)

City of God's narrator, Rocket, is a favela inhabitant with aspirations to be a photographer. When actually expressing their views on the character, the greatest index of unsympathetic responses was among the Brazilian middle class, as the chart demonstrates.
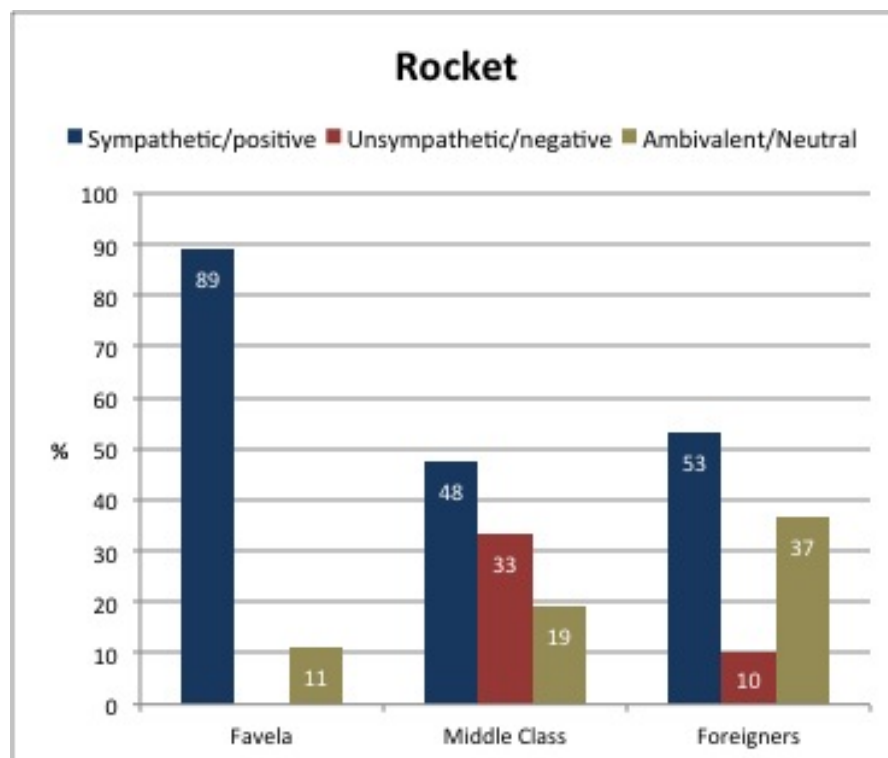
Chart 4 Reaction to Rocket

Considering that Rocket is black, similar to reaction to André Matias's character in *Elite Squad*, this might be due to the previously mentioned segregation of social and racial groups in Brazil, which could potentially undermine sympathy, also in regard to the film's narrator. The overwhelmingly positive reaction of favela respondents to Rocket is probably a result of their shared social and racial positions as well as their age; as teenagers, they are likely to align with Rocket's personal and social setting.

The differing readings of the film by the three groups are particularly apparent in relation to Rocket as they reveal "among the responses the presence of a variety of ideal expectations – that is, external measures against which the performance and qualities of a character are weighed."[19] While some favela respondents regard him as "courageous," some middle class respondents consider him "passive," or ultimately, "a coward." Some respondents also stated indifference toward the character, while others mentioned that he is distant from the story. Also as negative reaction, non-Brazilian respondents mentioned his cynicism when Benny stole his girlfriend, passiveness and the fact that he bought drugs for his girlfriend. While for the middle class and foreign groups Rocket seems to primarily serve the purpose of an infiltration point to a quasi-alien world (not necessarily involving a sympathetic or positive reaction), for the favela groups he seems to be regarded as a source of admiration, particularly due to his accomplishment as a photographer.[20]

Distortions of film events by the favela inhabitants further suggest a transfer rooted in their personal experiences, e.g. while Rocket is only shown smoking marijuana in the film, CG26F states that he is "cool, he didn't rob only snorted." Yet another inaccuracy in the viewers' readings of these events is that, although at the end of the film Rocket clearly states that he was hired as a poorly paid intern, respondents extrapolate this fact:

> [Rocket] took many important pictures and earned a lot of money with them (CG1F)

> I loved the narrator, I think he got very rich with those photos (CG2F)

> […] he got famous for the pictures taken […] (CG22F, similar responses can also be found in CG15F, CG20F and CG21F).

City of God displays a greater variety of characters than *Elite Squad*, but the most prominent ones (apart from the narrator) are Lil Dice/Lil Ze, the murderous child who grows up to be a drug dealer; his best friend, the 'good hood' Benny; and Lil Ze's rival, Knockout Ned. A notable observation, when contrasting the three groups, is the high incidence of positive or sympathetic reactions to Lil Dice/Ze within the favela group, particularly in comparison with the other groups' generally unfavourable view of the character.

Furthermore, the positive assessment of favela respondents seem to value aspects of Lil Ze's character that would not normally be deemed morally acceptable.

> Yes, Lil Ze was the most respected hood in the city of God because he was the owner of all dens (CG10F)

I liked Lil Ze most because he killed robbed (CG22F)
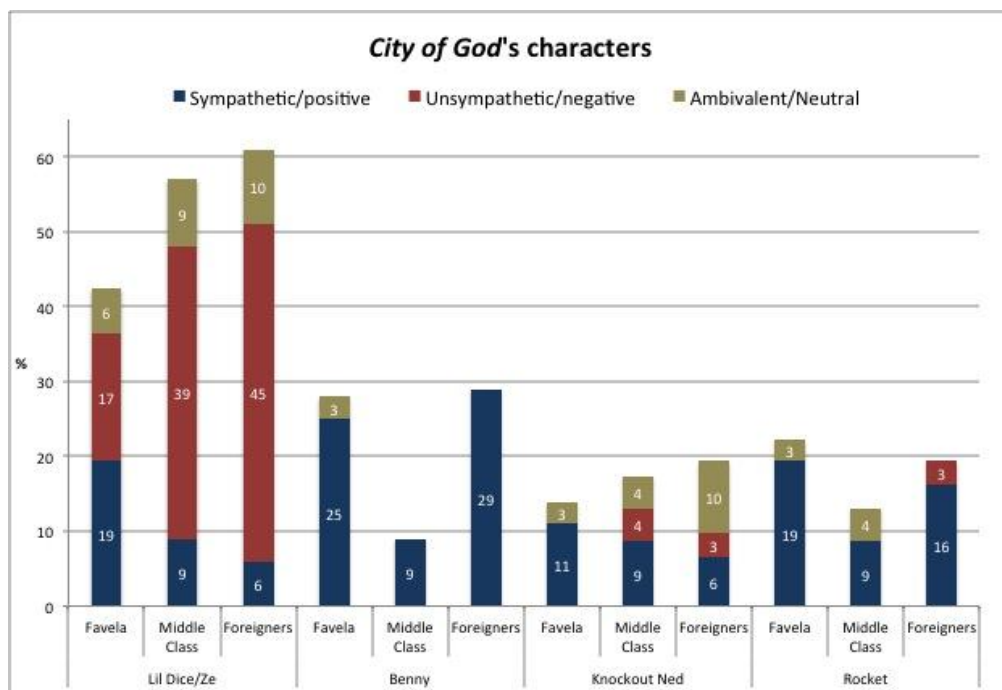
Chart 5 Reaction to *City of God*'s characters

Similar to the sympathetic reaction to Baiano, this might reflect the presence of drugs throughout their community, and a possibly deeper, more complex conception of the narcotics industry, other than simplistic or categorical rejection. The relative sympathy (or lack of rejection) of Lil Ze is quite outstanding not only because it is in contrast with the other two groups, but also due to the character's extreme violence. This contentious alignment is likely to be a consequence of the age group of the favela respondents, i.e. a reflection of teenagers expressing a certain view on law and authority.

The Brazilian middle class seems not to have identified positively with any character. Rather, identification often took the form of criticism or of 'neutral' analysis, even in relation to characters that are generally well-received by the other two groups, namely Benny and Rocket. Perhaps further underscoring the aforementioned stratification of Brazilian society, the significant lack of sympathy for Benny is particularly noteworthy, as he was cited by nearly one third of the other two groups.

In regard to secondary characters, a significant variation was also observed in the responses to *City of God*.

	Character	Respondent
Favela	"Hood who went to church"	CG11F
	Shaggy and Berenice	CG16F
	Carrot	CG20F
	Berenice	CG26F
	The Runts, i.e. children in crime	CG32F, CG35F
Middle Class	The Runts	CG7M, CG21M
	Otto, i.e. child who murders Knockout Ned	CG5M
	Boy who is shot on the foot	CG3M
	Carrot	CG19M, CG35M
Foreigners	Shorty, i.e. "the man who […] buried his wife alive"	CG19
	Steak and Fries, i.e. "[the child] who wants to integrate Lil Ze's crew and […] needs to kill one of 2 children his age"	CG6

Table 3 *City of God*'s Secondary characters

The election of secondary characters for this film also seems to relate more to viewers' personal universe than the film itself. A clear example is the fact that only the Brazilian groups made mention of Carrot, most likely because actor Matheus Nachtergaele is a Brazilian film star. Moreover, mentioning the "hood who went to church" might suggest the spectator's personal relationship with religion to the same extent that reference to Shaggy and Berenice's relationship reveals a personal point of view, as clearly stated by CG16F ("I think all films must have a bit of romance and this one had it, which was the love of Shaggy and Berenice!").

The plurality of readings of the films, narrators and characters "argue[s] strongly for the concept of the active viewer, for the heterogeneous audience, for the mediating role of interpretations (and hence of social knowledge and context) in [films'] effects on viewers' beliefs about social reality, and for the inappropriateness of talking about 'the' message or the meanings 'in' a program."[21] Furthermore, however various the divergent readings, it would be inappropriate to evoke the idea of misinterpretation as

> it seems that a number of normative alternatives may be encoded in a text, so that different viewers may select different readings and yet remain within a dominant framework. It also suggests that interpretative difference is not

simply a function of viewers' critical distance from the text, for the text is open to a number of referential readings.[22]

Even in the case of inaccuracies or errors related to events or actions portrayed in the film the concept of misinterpretation does not seem useful, for such errors seem to reveal traces of spectators' reality in detriment to the film diegesis. As seen in the reactions to the characters, narrators, or to the films as a whole, readings performed by the individuals in the various groups appear to reveal less about the film story than about viewers' realities. This seems to be the most likely explanation for the fact that the same films and the same characters generate diverging, and often contradictory, reactions. Indeed, the same film appears to generate various interpretations, according to spectators' national, social, and racial allegiances.[23] In the gap between the story portrayed on the screen and the individual instances of reception, meaning seems to be negotiated, resulting in plural, but not aleatory, socially contextualised interpretations.

3. Masculinity

Although Butler considers femininity as the signifier that is not stable in *Gender Trouble*,[24] the instability of the masculine signifier has also been educed, and "[i]t is, by now, something of a cliché within film studies to assert that masculinity is 'in crisis.'"[25] *City of God* emerges as a particularly fertile source for the investigation of masculinity representations, as "primary importance is given to the community that functions around men and their inter-connecting relationships with other men."[26] The antagonism between the distinct types of masculinity portrayed by the characters of the all-powerful gangster (Lil Ze) and the pacific narrator (Rocket) offers compelling insights into the perception of manhood in the realm of gangsterism and beyond.

Response to the following question was the main source of empirical data:

> In the universe of the film, what does it mean to 'be a man'? (hereinafter Q5)

The underlying premise for this chapter is Judith Butler's seminal conceptualisation of gender as "ritual social drama," i.e. repeatedly reenacted and reexperienced acts with a socially-established set of meanings.[27] Incidentally, it is interesting to find Butler's ideas in regard to the performative character of gender embryonic in a number of audience responses:

> To [be a man is to] do what others expect in order to conform to a stereotype (CG19M)

> To be a man is cool but very tiring (ES21F)

Indeed, both of the above examples contain the idea of performance inasmuch as they suggest the public (i.e. "what others expect") stylised (i.e. "a stereotype") character of gender in its ("very tiring") repetition. Whilst Butler offers the underlying paradigm within which the discussion is set, Susan Faludi's idea of ornamental masculinity[28] as well as David William Foster's insightful considerations regarding masculinity in contemporary Brazilian cinema are pivotal to the analysis of the specific responses collected.

Responses were categorised according to viewers' perception of what constituted masculinity within the framework of the film; anchoring masculinity to characters proved to be a useful approach to the data, considering that

> the gender features of the characters point not just to their roles as social subjects, but to the system of values and social meaning that their bodies quite literally embody: they are special cases of the social subjects that their stories, as exemplified by the bodies that they display through the visual medium of the film, encode narratives of collective history.[29]

Spectators' responses have shown that the most engaging framework on masculinity seems to have been that associated with gangsterism, as the charts below illustrate:
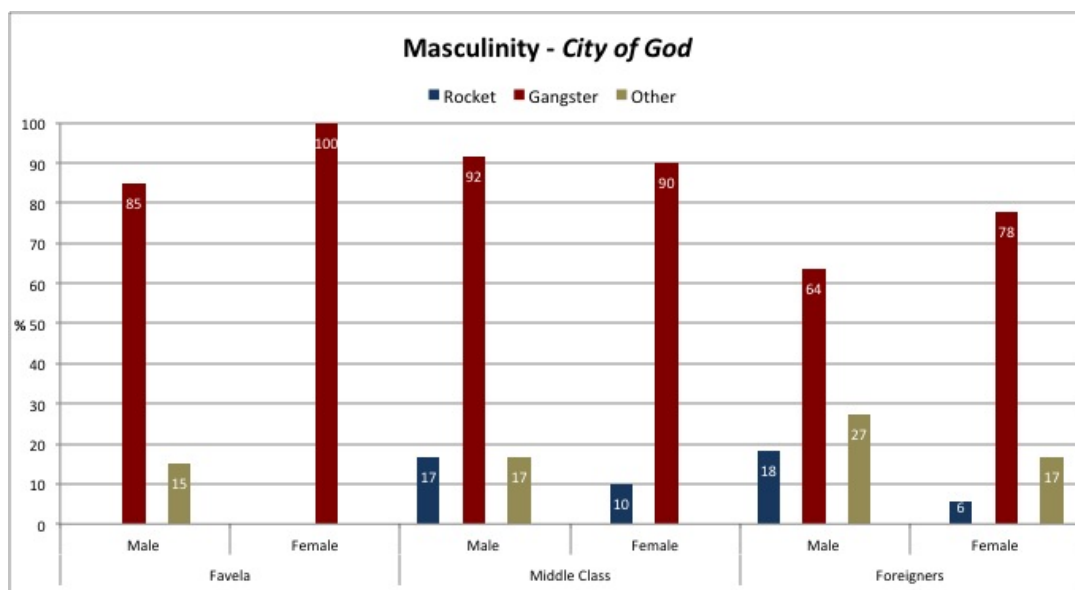
Chart 6 Masculinity in *City of God*

The qualitative analysis of the responses revealed that the most appealing definition of masculinity seems to have been that epitomised by Steak'n Fries, the character who, over the course of the film, develops from a child into a full-fledged gang member: "I've snorted, I've robbed, I've killed, I'm a man". Variations of this sentence appear in more than 40% of foreign responses and 50% of the Brazilian groups' answers. The recurrence of Steak'n Fries's definition discloses its pertinence in efficiently summarizing gender,

very much along Butler's lines, as a series of specifically meaningful emblematic acts, rather than a stable state.

Deriving from the previous section is the premise that movies encapsulate a variety of latent potential meanings that are elicited by spectators according to personal and social allegiances. The reason for this appeal is therefore of interest, given that other characters could have been invoked as the embodiment of ideal or emblematic masculinity.

There have been various critiques of the *City of God* regarding its alleged glamourisation of violence, some of which were also echoed in viewers' previous responses. Susan Faludi has addressed the association between violence and glamour through analysis of the notorious North American gangster Kody Scott. Faludi devises the concept of 'ghetto star,' according to which, in the current media age, criminality and celebrity[30] have become closely associated.[31] The concept of ornamental masculinity[32] seems to be at the core of the subject; in this framework craftsmanship, i.e. the conventional association of masculinity with utility, is substituted by showmanship.[33] Faludi argues that Scott realised his job was not so much related to manlike utility as it was to public (self-) promotion, from which she concludes,

> t]he martial rhetoric, the stockpiling of weaponry, the display of violence, all were part of a nitrous-fueled drama that had as much to do with 'winning' under the image terms of the new culture as it did with proving valor under the traditional warrior code.[34]

If on the one hand parallels can be drawn between Kody Scott and Lil Ze, the chief gangster in *City of God*, on the other, gangsterism and hip hop culture, widely popular in North America, seem not particularly appealing in the Brazilian context:

> When U.S. rap groups come here and try to be ostentatious or do the gangster thing, they get booed off the stage […]. We feel a kinship with Chuck D and Public Enemy' — known for their political commentary — 'but we don't have any respect for people like Snoop Dogg and Puff Daddy.[35]

Unlike Snoop Dogg and Puff Daddy, Lil Ze, the real-life gangster who does "command," "kill," and "win all the drug dens," seems to "have the respect" of Brazilian respondents. This might be due to the fact that Lil Ze is emblematic of a particular form of masculinity that encompasses violence, but not merely gratuitous violence. Thus, while the concept of ornamental masculinity appears to elucidate the view of certain critics that the film glamourises violence, it explains only partially the popularity of this particular view of masculinity among respondents; the manhood that seems iconic in the film is related to a number of characteristics beyond that.

The film's narrator, as suggested previously, is a powerful component in the reading of a film; hence one would expect Rocket's masculinity to be regarded as a landmark. However, references to the type of masculinity embodied by Rocket were observed in only a few of the middle class and foreign responses. Even when mentioned by the other groups, some of the reaction to Rocket was posed in an ambivalent manner, e.g.

> To be powerful, to kill, to command the drug dens, or not to do any of that, like rocket (CG29M)

CG29M's response suggests the association between masculinity and agency,[36] revealed in its negation, i.e. Rocket is identified as one who does not do. Rocket's passivity, also observed in the responses cited previously, tentatively suggests why this study's audience does not consider Rocket's masculinity iconic of the film as a whole. Conversely, the popularity of Steak'n Fries's statement might be explained by the fact that it implies activeness and agency. Steak'n Fries summarises this in his enumeration of a series of actions, symptomatic of a type of masculinity related to a "workmanlike 'usefulness'" which the gang environment seems to enable.[37] In Scott's words: "[y]ou put in work and you feel needed in a gang. People would call on me because they needed me. You feel useful, and you're useful in your capacity as a *man*."[38]

Having tentatively suggested why the form of masculinity portrayed in the film is more complex than the appeal of ornamental masculinity alone, it is of interest to analyse other traits associated with masculinity in answer to Q5, as they further disclose the framework in which the film's masculinity seems to have been defined. The following charts display the most recurrent traits associated with manhood revealed by close analysis of the data.
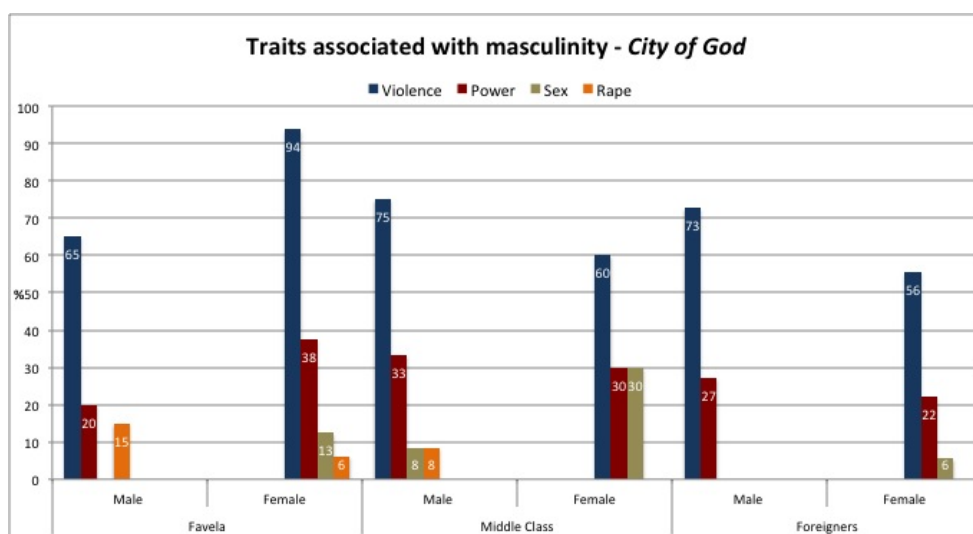
Chart 7 Identified traits of masculinity – *City of God*

The appointment of sexual activity as a feature of masculinity among the Brazilian groups is telling. An insight into this particular reaction of spectators is given by Foster's interpretation of the film *Jorge, um brasileiro* (Paulo Thiago, 1989):

> Th[e] attachment [of agency to hypermasculinity] implies that other forms of masculinity and nonmasculinity cannot have access to such agency. It […] goes on to place the feminine at the unquestioning disposition of the masculine, whereby the exploitation of the woman is never questioned.[39]

The Brazilian groups' response illustrates how the exploitation of women seems to be part of a masculinity that is not only active, but sexually active. While references to sex appear in one response among the foreigners' group (CG19), it is significantly recurring among female Brazilian respondents:

> To have killed, robbed, to use drugs and to have sex (CG2M)

> To be a man is to use drugs, to kill and to have sexual intercourse (CG16F)

> To have many women, guns and power (CG13M)

Particularly in the two latter responses (one from the favela and one from the middle class), females seem to regard women as a supplement to, as well as an important index of, masculinity.

Power seems to be yet another strong component of masculinity, as devised by the three groups. More than half of the respondents of each group make reference to power, albeit shades of the term differ across groups. These differences might point to social and cultural allegiances, e.g. power, strongly associated to respect, is presented in the Brazilian group's responses revealing a society in which "[h]omosocialism is […] the norm."[40] Exclusive to the foreign group is the specification of physical power, with its possible association with ornamental masculinity. Perhaps due to their closer contact with the universe of drug dealing, confined to the favela group is the specification that being a man equates to being a drug dealer or "the owner of the drug den."

The election of one particular type of masculinity from the multitude of meanings encapsulated by the film reveals the appeal of a manhood that is ornamental in its display of physical prowess (as suggested by the foreigners) as well as in its display of glamourised violence, as often mentioned by critics of the film. Nonetheless, there seem to be other factors in play that attract viewers past the simplistic appeal of ornamental violence and masculinity, of which agency is one that appears often overlooked. Albeit

destructive, agency in the film appears to be regarded in its relationship with power, and is therefore alluring. In the case of the Brazilian groups, violence combined with sexual activity and sexual violence also suggests that "masculinity can be understood as 'an identity practice that aims at dominance.'"[41] Thus, there appear to be complex subtleties in regard to the appeal of the masculinity portrayed in the movie past its often facile dismissal as an attraction of gratuitous violence.

Conclusion

This study was an exercise in weaving theoretical approaches of reception and cinematic spectatorship together with data analysis, with the aim of investigating issues of gender and identity in the Brazilian context. Influenced by social and national affiliations, spectators' reaction to the films and characters were analysed taking into account the group to which viewers' belonged. The inherent negotiations of meaning between the diegesis and the socially contextualised individual instances of reception were revealed in the plurality of observed interpretations. Some unexpected results emerged, most noticeably in the groups' diverging reaction to the films' narrators, suggesting distinct views on race and police violence.

Having demonstrated the multitude of meanings encapsulated in films, the analysis of respondents' view on masculinity proved to be particularly fruitful in demonstrating similarities between the groups. The appeal of a particular type of manhood, ornamental in its perceived glamour, in combination with agency, appeared to be the preferred reading of this study's audience. Indeed, the activeness of masculinity seemed to have been closely associated with power, violence and sexual activity, both from male and female respondents of all groups.

All things considered, the validity of empirical reception studies is reiterated as particularly profitable. As seen in the usage of gender and postmodern theories, a number of theoretical approaches can be applied to the empirical data, providing such theories an increased pertinence. In the light of spectatorship, gender and identity, the examination of the data has proven to offer fertile discussion, while at the same time advocating the importance of addressing these issues in Brazilian academia. As this study hopes to have proven, the empirical study of cinematic spectatorship constitutes a challenging, yet fecund and relevant corpus of study.

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Notes

[1] Cajueiro, para. 5

[2] 'Filmes nacionais com mais de um milhão de espectadores (1970/2007) por público' in *Ancine*.

[3] Mascarello, 'A *Screen-theory* e o espectador cinematográfico: um breve panorama crítico', pp. 292-299 (p. 292). My translation. The original reads "A reflexão sobre este objeto se encontra preocupantemente defasada no país, em descompasso com os estudos de cinema no cenário internacional, e com a própria reflexão em torno à espectatorialidade nos estudos de televisão e de mídia brasileiros".

[4] 'Boletim Técnico', *Observatório Socioeconômico da Região Norte Fluminense*, 5 (August 2001) <http://web0.cefetcampos.br/portal/observatorio-socioeconomico/nossas-publicacoes/Boletim05.pdf/view> [accessed 8 May 2009] (p. 7)

[5] Ibid, p. 8-9

[6] Sofia Vecce, 'Margem da Linha terá estação de tratamento de esgoto', *Campos* <http://www.campos.rj.gov.br/noticia.php?id=7823> [accessed 8 May 2009]

[7] Laura Maria Ramos Reis's written statement for the purpose of this study. For the original statement in Portuguese, refer to the Appendix.

[8] Barker, p. 357

[9] Livingstone, 'Interpreting a Television Narrative,' p. 80

[10] Respondents' identification contains the reference to the film ('ES' for *Elite Squad* or 'CG' for *City of God*) + respondent number + group (blank for foreigners, 'F' for favela and 'M' for middle class). The original 238 responses are available upon request (roberta.gregoli@queens.ox.ac.uk).

[11] Lang and Lang cited in Livingstone, 'Interpreting a Television Narrative,' p. 72

[12] Livingstone, 'Interpreting a Television Narrative,' p. 73

[13] *Batalhão de Operações Especiais*, i.e. Special Operations Squad, the elite squad of the Brazilian Military Police in Rio de Janeiro.

[14] Livingston, 'Interpreting a Television Narrative,' p. 80

[15] Other examples are ES15, ES16, ES28, ES7M, ES24M, ES45M, to name just a few.

[16] NB- Figures reflect the percentage of the audience who indicated a particular character in answer to Q3. Respondents were able to choose more than one character, in which case each instance was accounted for separately.

[17] For an introduction to the topic, see Ernesto Friedrich Amaral.

[18] Livingstone, 'Interpreting a Television Narrative,' p. 80

[19] Barker, p. 374

[20] CG9F, CG15F, CG16F, CG20F, CG21F, CG22F, CG27F, CG28F, CG34F, CG35F as examples.

[21] Livingston, 'Interpreting a Television Narrative,' p. 81

[22] Ibid, p. 83

[23] Barker (p. 359) comments extensively on the concept of allegiance as an alternative to 'identification' in the context of the work of Murray Smith.

[24] p. 4

[25] Sandell, pp. 23-34

[26] McDonald, pp. 19-32 (p. 22)

[27] Butler, p. 191

[28] pp. 451-529

[29] Foster, p. 9

[30] Scott iterates the importance of the media in a fashion that seems not dissimilar to that of Lil Ze in his eagerness to find his picture in the newspaper, i.e. "Getting media coverage is the shit! If the media knows about you, damn, that's the top. We don't recognize *ourselves* unless we're recognized on the news", p. 477

[31] Faludi, p. 478

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid, p. 463, 477
[34] Ibid.
[35] Rohter.
[36] Foster, p. 21-22
[37] Faludi, p. 477
[38] Ibid.
[39] Foster, p. 22
[40] Ibid, p. 7
[41] McDonald, p. 20