

Social Violence for Global Consumption: The Cultural Politics of Favela Rising

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RESUMEN

En este artículo, el autor analiza el documental *Favela Rising*, de los directores Matt Mochary y Jeff Zimbalist. La problemática forma como la película presenta al Grupo Cultural AfroReggae –diseñada como una estrategia para transmitir a una audiencia global la cruda realidad de la favela Vigário Geral– da paso a una reflexión acerca de la forma como la agencia cultural y los agentes culturales son evaluados e interpretados.

Palabras clave: *Favela Rising*, agencia cultural, violencia urban

ABSTRACT

In this article, the author analyzes the documentary film *Favela Rising*, by directors Matt Mochary and Jeff Zimbalist. The film's problematic depiction of Rio de Janeiro's Grupo Cultural AfroReggae –designed as a strategy to transmit to a global audience the gruesome reality of the Vigário Geral favela– elicits a reflection about the way cultural agency and cultural agents are assessed and interpreted.

Keywords: *Favela Rising*, cultural agency, urban violence

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In the past decade or so, cultural critics of all sorts have advanced different concepts to address the widespread emergence of initiatives that—through art and creativity—have approached society’s most pressing issues, from urban violence to massive human rights abuses, from globalization to social injustice¹. And in the wake of the so-called Third Wave of democratization, Latin American cities as diverse as Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Lima, Mexico City, and Rio de Janeiro have become the privileged loci of cultivation for this kind of initiatives. This is the case of *Grupo Cultural AfroReggae*, which was born out of the desire to counteract the violent drug industry and police oppression in Vigário Geral, one of Rio de Janeiro’s many *favelas*, which came to be known as the Brazilian Bosnia.

Created in 1993, *AfroReggae* was conceived as a communal effort to lay the foundations for social advancement through artistic and cultural education for the infant and teenage dwellers of the favela. Thus, different workshops began taking place, in capoeira, dance, hip-hop, music, and theater. The idea was to afford the youth a set of cultural tools that, in the end, would allow them to redress the way they exercised their—obviously limited—citizenship, amidst what has been characterized as a disjunctive democracy.

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* I received useful comments on earlier drafts of this paper from my colleague at Princeton University, Matthew Tremé. Professor Diana Taylor, from New York University, was more than generous in her reactions to the text. My gratitude goes to both of them. Needless to say, remaining infelicities, grammatical and substantive, are mine alone.

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¹ See, for example, Álvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar; Sommer; and Yúdice.

² Regarding the concept of disjunctive democracy, Teresa P.R. Caldeira and James Holston state: “The widespread concurrence of democratic politics and systematic violence

Of all the activities offered, music became the major drive for teenagers to get involved in *AfroReggae's* different initiatives. The great success of *Banda AfroReggae*—both in artistic terms and as a social project—has been followed by the creation of other teenage bands, which are currently also making public presentations. In Vigário Geral, as well as in other *favelas*, music emerged as an effective aspiration for youths, in direct competition with the gruesome alternative of becoming involved in drug trafficking¹. Today, fifteen years later, *AfroReggae's* initiatives have become a veritable reference point for the city's cultural and social practices, taking art and education to places enmeshed in violence and drug trafficking.

In 2005, film directors Matt Mochary and Jeff Zimbalist released a documentary about this experience. What started out as a general investigation of the *AfroReggae* movement and of the troublesome reality of Vigário Geral, inadvertently became a documentary film about Anderson Sá—*AfroReggae's* founder and leader—when he became paralyzed from a surfing accident. Having lived in the community and worked in tandem with the movement—through film workshops to encourage self-representation among the *favela's* youths—, Mochary and Zimbalist had at their disposal a wide array of images both of everyday violence and of *AfroReggae's* performances. It was just a matter of putting the pieces together. Focusing on Sá, a former drug trafficker turned social activist, *Favela Rising* documents the history the *AfroReggae* movement and Vigário Geral's struggle and triumph over political disenfranchisement and social decomposition. A note of caution: these brief remarks should not be read, as I intend to show, without a hint of irony and skepticism; more as a promotional hook meant to be second-guessed and undermined.

In his director's statement on the film's Web page (www.favelarising.com), Zimbalist points out the influence of the media on the way people construct their own bleak images of global decay. Thus, he states:

against citizens in emerging democracies [...] means that many such new democracies experience a similar and defining disjunction: although their political institutions democratize with considerable success, and although they promulgate constitutions and legal codes based on the rule of law and democratic values, the civil component of citizenship remains seriously impaired as citizens suffer systematic violations of their rights. In such uncivil political democracies, violence, injustice, and impunity are often the norms. As a result, uncivil democracies undergo the delegitimation of many institutions of law and justice, an escalation of both violent crime and police abuse, the criminalization of the poor, a significant increase in support of illegal measures of control, the pervasive obstruction of the principle of legality and an unequal and uneven distribution of citizen rights" (692).

¹ In this sense, Arjun Appaduray argues for the need to regard aspirations as a cultural capacity that, as such, can be reactivated amongst impoverished communities through cultural practices. Through this lens, culture—understood both as practice and meaning—can become an effective way to combat poverty.

When I find myself surrounded by stories of the world falling apart, naturally I imagine the world as a place falling apart. The more access I have to stories of communities that work, the more I imagine a world in which people are also realizing change and breaking the odds stacked against them. I am attracted to these vital and inspiring stories because it is in them that I find myself the most activated and alive.

The documentary is thus incorporated into *AfroReggae*'s discourse and ideology, and becomes one of the movement's many means to attain its own purposes. But circulating in different circuits and playing to a different audience, how does Mochary and Zimbalist's film fit into the broader cultural politics of the *AfroReggae* movement?

The purpose of the present paper is, precisely, to offer an answer to this question. It is my contention that, in the age of global communication networks, *Favela Rising* acts as a structure of transmission of Vigário Geral's communal experience of violence to a broader international audience who does not necessarily have an experiential or emotional connection with it. To do this, I will claim, the documentary resorts to two basic strategies. It first employs the familiar trope of melodrama, basically understood as the Manichean portrayal of a much more complex reality; and second, a somehow unfamiliar mixture of both *archive* and *repertoire* imagery, which definitely inscribes the film within the performatic logic of the *AfroReggae* movement¹. Thus, as a means to address and —most importantly transmit— the gruesome experience of *favela* dwellers, where the film might fail as a documentary, it succeeds as melodrama and performance.

In this sense, this essay will attempt to untangle the melodramatic structure of the film's portrayal of *favela* violence, and the way in which images from the archive and the repertoire are intertwined to ultimately render a celebratory and triumphalistic representation of what the directors themselves have deemed a "community that works". It is worth noting, however, that I do not attempt here an interpretation or critique of the *AfroReggae* movement in itself —that is, the subject matter of *Favela Rising*—², but of the way in which the documentary depicts this subject matter. It is important that these two levels of analysis are differentiated

¹ According to Diana Taylor, the archive and the repertoire constitute fundamentally different sources of information. The first is regarded as a set of enduring materials that are used to sustain power, and that undergo a process whereby they are selected, classified, and presented for analysis as unchangeable, incorruptible, and impermeable to political manipulation. On the other hand, the second consists of those instances of knowledge and memory that pass through the body —as in dance and performance, for example—, and that allow for an alternative perspective on historical processes that the archive supposedly documents (*The Archive and the Repertoire* 19-20).

² See, for example, Yúdice.

from the outset, and remain so throughout the present article.

So, *here's the spoiler*. As stated above, the documentary tells the story of Anderson Sá, but in doing so it also tells the history of *AfroReggae's* rise and triumph over adversity—again, read with a hint of irony—and of Vigário Geral's struggle with drug trafficking and the violence that typically comes with the trade. But just when things appear to be getting better thanks to the communal reactivation yielded by the *AfroReggae* initiative, its creator and leader is rendered quadriplegic in a bizarre surfing accident. And along with him, the movement and the *favela* also seem to be irreparably crippled. The doctors give their prognosis. Sá severed his spine at the fourth cervical vertebra, a very severe injury that is rarely reversed. The doctors, acknowledging Sá's role in the community, perform a surgery free of charge. Four days later, Sá rises from his wheelchair and leaves the hospital, as music soars in the background. And thus, the film comes to its felicitous end.

Referring to this latter part of the film, Zimbalist recounts the moment when he and Mochary got to the hospital, only to find Sá in full body traction and unable to move: "In a faint whisper, Anderson told us to film him. He told us this was the truth, this was part of his story". And as such, it was also part of the history of *AfroReggae* and Vigário Geral. For in fact, and this is a point the film is constantly trying to reinforce, these are not three parallel stories, which eventually cross each other's paths; they are intertwined from the outset, as a cogent semantic structure in which meaning is constantly transferred from one axis to the other two.

The documentary opens with a close-up of Sá. In a barely lit frame, his face—with his glasses and beard—triggers the memory of another black activist: the globally renowned and historically ratified Malcom X. Sá evokes a scene from his childhood, his first direct experience with violence. When he was ten years old, sitting with his mother at a local bar, some drug dealers beat up and murdered a man across the street, probably a hotspot for cocaine dealing. Thus, the film reframes Sá's personal history within the broader context of black activism in the Americas, while at the same time introducing a storyline that is widely common in impoverished and depressed communities throughout the region.

As dwellers walked by as if nothing had happened, Sá's mother covered his eyes with her own hands. But through the gap between her fingers, he calmly watched the scene, not crying but thinking: "*Eu não tenho medo de morrer* [I am not afraid to die]". Thus, Sá is dragged into the logic of one of the most common byproducts of widespread violence: *percepticide*¹. While trying to defy it —by effectively looking—, he is nevertheless overpowered by the gruesome social dynamics of his own reality. He continues his testimony, recounting how as a kid, instead of falling asleep to motherly lullabies, he would do so to the sound of gunshots and people screaming: "*Os sons da violência* [The sounds of violence]". He grew up dreaming of becoming a revolutionary drug lord.

But just as Sá is constituted as a presence amidst this generalized violence, he is unable to bear true witness of these events. For not only the logic of percepticide, but also that of violence in itself, prevents him from doing so. I would argue that violence is a phenomenon that in every instance of its actualization *speaks for itself*; it is a language in itself, it carries a message. The murder of a man at the hands of drug lords, at a public venue, is intended to send a message to the community: "*Don't mess with us*". Commonly, eyes are poked out and tongues are cut off precisely to eliminate the possibility of an individual *or* communal account of the violence. By speaking for itself, violence becomes the subject of enunciation; and its victims, mere objects who are symbolically inscribed, and whose speech and utterance are muted. This is, precisely, what makes violence an event without a witness. Thus, a tension is produced between the documentary's *mise en scène* of Sá's testimony and the traumatic undertones of his experience².

In this sense, Caruth states: "Trauma opens up and challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, *of impossibility*. How does one listen to what is impossible?" (10). *Favela Rising* elicits a somehow reversed formulation of this question. How does one speak of what is impossible, rendering it transmissible? To this purpose, and to somehow mark the birth of the *AfroReggae* movement, the documentary goes back

¹ Referring to Argentina's Dirty War, Taylor posits the concept of percepticide to embody the particular economy of looks and looking that is produced amidst generalized violence. Thus, she states: "The triumph of atrocity was that it forced people to look away—a gesture that undid their sense of personal and communal cohesion even as it seemed to bracket them from their volatile surroundings. Spectacles of violence rendered the population silent, deaf, and blind" (*Disappearing Acts* 122-123).

² Dori Laub asserts that the truthfulness —one might rather say, the historicity— of an event hinges on the possibility of it having a witness, while —on the other hand— its traumatic nature would depend on the opposite. Thus, the historicity of trauma —as stated by Cathy Caruth— seems to originate in the ahistoricity of the event, in the impossibility of witnessing it and bearing witness to it.

to August 29, 1993, when a police death squad avenged the killings of four officers by drug traffickers at the *favela*. The attack resulted in the death of 21 innocent people, amongst them, Sá's brother.

The film locates the massacre as a sort of *ground zero* for the *AfroReggae* movement. It resorts to a wide array of archive images—including the official ID photos of the murdered policemen—and to the authorized voice of journalist Zuenir Ventura, to present the series of episodes that led to the killings. Regarding one of these archival images—a well-known photograph—, Ventura states that it became Rio de Janeiro's *anti-postcard*, substituting the images of the Corcovado and the beaches of Ipanema and Copacabana.

With a black frame around it and in sepia colors, this photograph is held still for a few seconds, yielding to Sa's own recollection of the massacre. With this cinematic move, the documentary literally gives the massacre a frame, a beginning and an end. It is deprived of its incommensurability and is located within a given context; where explicatory accounts are possible and causality can be established. Violence is not inevitable. The cycle can be broken. And as images of dead corpses supersede each other, Sá poses the fundamental question: "*Como combater essa violência?* [How can one fight this violence?]"

This framing reveals the political stakes that hang in the balance in the documentary's depiction of the massacre. For by attributing it a concrete causality, the film avoids the deadlock of condemning *AfroReggae* to failure right from the start. Inscribed in the broader political project of the movement, the documentary renders explicable—and hence, transmissible—an event that, in principle, would be very hard to explain. And while I support any intervention that can bring communities together in the face of extreme circumstances, what troubles me is the way *Favela Rising*, in order to make them apt for global consumption, oversimplifies the phenomena to which it is referring.

Discussing Vigário Geral and taking this same massacre as a point of departure for his analysis, Enrique Desmond Arias argues that the high levels of criminality and violence in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* do not primarily stem from an institutional failure, but rather from networks that bring criminals together with civic leaders, politicians, and the police. Through an elaborate scheme of clientelism, these networks enable drug lords to appropriate state power and social capital, allowing them to carry on their criminal activity *with* the political support of the *favela* dwellers. As Arias would have it, the rise of drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro coincided with the end of military rule and a democratization process that broke formal ties between the urban poor and the state. This gave the drug lords enough wiggle room to develop clientelistic relations with local politicians, and in-

directly with the *favela* dwellers themselves. Thus, local politicians agreed to provide the necessary resources for *favela* residents, in return for political support guaranteed by the criminal gangs. Accordingly, drug lords come out as a new kind of state actor that has been able to appropriate state power.

Nevertheless, *Favela Rising* does not seem to acknowledge the complexity of the reality to which it is referring. And committing some sort of percepticide, instead of talking about social and political networks enmeshed in an intricate scheme of violent transactions, it adopts the language of melodrama to render transmissible Sá's personal history, and by extension Vigário Geral's collective experience of violence; a history and an experience profoundly characterized by an institutional void that has prevented *favela* dwellers from actually rising. At the beginning of the film, Sá clearly makes this point, recalling how the government has ignored the *favelas* for decades, leaving them forever paralyzed, as if their spinal cord had been severed.

In order to do this, the documentary opts for a thoroughly organized and compartmentalized narrative, brought forth not only through a strict chronological rendering of the *favela*'s history, but also through a pronounced moral and ideological Manichaeism. In the world presented by the film, there is no space of ambiguities. The good guys are the good guys, and the bad guys are the bad guys. The documentary is built upon a melodramatic structure characterized by bipolar contrast and clash, in which the drug lords, the government, and the police forces—who constantly abuse and brutalize *favela* dwellers—embody some sort of absolute evil. In Vigário Geral, the conflict between good and evil is irreducible; they are uncompromising opposites¹. In a kind of collapsing of the children's game of cops and robbers—a game to which Sá explicitly alludes—, *Favela Rising* equates these two terms, and envisions the hapless dwellers as powerful forces of good.

The statistics presented throughout the film—in 1993, there were 150 drug soldiers in Vigário Geral; in 2004, eleven years after the birth of *Afro-Reggae*, only 25—unquestionably reiterate this heroic portrayal of Sá and the other members of the movement. This portrayal is ultimately reinforced when, just four days after spinal surgery, Sá rises from his wheelchair and walks right out of the hospital; a former drug trafficker turned social activist turned Superman.

¹ Regarding melodrama, literary critic Peter Brooks has stated: "What we most retain from any consideration of melodramatic structures is the sense of fundamental bipolar contrast and clash. The World according to melodrama is built on an irreducible manichaeism (sic), the conflict of good and evil as opposites not subject to compromise. Melodramatic dilemmas and choices are constructed on the either/or in its extreme form as the all-or-nothing" (36).

Furthermore, this moral and ideological Manichaeism is visually displayed in a constant interaction of images from both the archive and the repertoire; the former, linked to drug-related and state violence, the latter, to communal empowerment and healing. After the massacre, the birth of *AfroReggae* is presented as the answer to Sá's question on how to put an end to violence. With a corrupt police force and an inefficient government, people were forced to take matters into their own hands.

What was missing when the children, now drug soldiers, were growing up? It is here where Sá's introductory remarks gain a peculiar relevance. For the answer to this question is encrypted in his childhood memories of falling asleep to the sounds of violence. And thus, *AfroReggae* filled the void left by the absence of motherly lullabies. The images of widespread societal violence recede to give way to song, dance, and performance. In this mixture and counterpoint of images, music—or better the *non-music* of unsung lullabies—is resignified as a tool for social change; and violence—the surrogate for these unsung lullabies—is recast, despite all, as a creative force.

In the end, melodrama yields a message of hope. As percepticide and other related phenomena show, state terror and widespread violence corrodes communal bonds, and ultimately entail the destruction of collective life itself.¹ Far beyond the individual and familial trauma that are obviously left in place in their wake, they alter the institutions of justice and the process of collective decision-making; and decimate the intangible fibers that bring communities and institutions together, such as trust, traditions, and collective memory. And one of the main victims of this process is language itself. Dialogue and the shared understanding of the meaning and purpose of communal life are deeply corroded, and the only thing left is the vocabulary of violence. In the case of Latin America, this is one of the fundamental tautologies that somehow explain the reality of the region. And what *Favela Rising's* cultural politics ultimately champions is the possibility of breaking up this cycle, of putting the tautology to rest. Thus, as part of a broader social movement, the documentary advocates for an alternative notion of politics by appealing to familiar structures of meaning production, such as iconic figures, postcards, melodramatic Manichaeism, and the trope of individual redemption.

To be sure, I am not against communal or policy initiatives to recompose a decaying social body, amidst rampant violence and corruption. In its foregrounding of creativity as a tool to achieve social cohesion and political inclusion, I find the *AfroReggae* project to be both inspiring and exportable. However, what I disprove is the acritical inclusion of this type of initiatives in the global market of cultural expedients to tackle the many

¹ See, for example, Snodgrass Godoy.

problems of underdevelopment. As stated above, Latin American cities have become, in the past two decades, privileged *loci* of cultivation for this sort of cultural initiatives; privileged in the large number of initiatives that emerge from an even larger number of social, economic and political shortcomings, but also privileged in the relative success these initiatives have experienced. Nevertheless, this does not authorize an acritical evaluation of them, either as artistic enterprises or as social projects.

And this is precisely what *Favela Rising* does. A complex and protracted situation of economic and social exclusion, as well as political disenfranchisement, is reduced to a single emblematic event—the Vigário Geral massacre—which is meticulously framed and portrayed as Rio de Janeiro’s anti-postcard. And while one image can certainly speak a thousand words, the Manichaeian causality attributed to this event—and, hence, to the entire Vigário Geral’s *problematique*—calls for questioning. What could be called the *melodramatic scenario* constructed by the documentary is, in the end, nothing but a way to put into circulation—through the globalized media—a much more complex reality that is thus commodified to accommodate *AfroReggae*’s own agenda¹. The problem is that the commodification of social, economic, and political problems entails a different logic by which their value is determined. The exogenous factors of this economy of cultural expedients tend to nullify the inherent complexity of these problems, yielding unproblematized solutions and acritical exports.

Nevertheless, the recognition of this scenario allows for a debunking of the assumptions upon which it is built. Identifying the melodramatic mechanisms that underpin the depiction of Vigário Geral’s troublesome reality is the first step to acknowledge that this is not a simple battle between good and evil, but an entangled networks social and political actors trafficking in violence. Recognizing the moral ambivalence of these actors would yield a more critical and productive evaluation of *AfroReggae*’s performance—both as artistic endeavor, and as a social project meant to produce certain results.

¹ Here, I use the word scenario to convey the artificiality with which the documentary presents the protracted and widespread social violence in Vigário Geral. Thus, the so-called melodramatic scenario is a world in which complex social and political issues are reduced to a conflict between good and evil, and in which simplified solutions and triumphalistic narratives are possible. For a definition of the concept of scenario, see Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* 28-29.

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