

## **Performance, Television and Film: *Bus 174* as a perverse case of appropriation of the means of constructing spectacular audiovisual form**

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### **Abstract**

Urban violence, poverty and race have appeared as intrinsically connected themes in the recent boom of Brazilian film. These themes gained a sort of "hiper visibility" in the media that contrasts with their relative invisibility during the 70s, 80s and early 90s. This paper deals with the film 'Bus 174'. The specific case reveals the contradictory ways in which the TV cameras end up stimulating certain behavior – not so much for what is going to be shown, but for the fact of going on air itself. Therefore, the sense of breaking with the invisibility that had characterized the character's life, with recurring victim positions, witness of bizarre tragedies, stimulates the protagonist to develop a performance for the cameras.

On July 12 year 2000, at Jardim Botânico upper middle class neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro city, Sandro do Nascimento, a young black man, was the protagonist of what would become a spectacular event of violence. Surrounded by the police, what apparently started as a "small act of robbery" inside a regular urban bus, became a threatening scenario, a dangerous "stage". Sandro hijacked bus passengers. During this event, besides the hijacker and his victims, a series of Rio de Janeiro policemen and state government officials performed to the media. For hours, from afternoon to early evening, present at the scene, television reportage transmitted the evolution of the case live to the whole country. At the end of this bad thriller two people – the 18 year old hijacker and 23 year old teacher Geísa - who was two months pregnant - died. She was shot live on national television. He – on the contrary - was killed away from public eyes, during the only moment television cameras were not there. He was suffocated inside the police car which took him from the scene of the crime.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of a wider project about the politics of representation, and different forms of "appropriation" of television and film apparatus in contemporary Brazil<sup>2</sup>, this paper – and this panel - focuses on film *Ônibus 174 (Bus number 174)* – a documentary made a couple of years afterwards, which reviews and contextualizes the brutal events of that day.

<sup>1</sup> Detailed description of Rio de Janeiro's newspapers coverage of the event in Cristina Dias da Silva, "*Quando o algoz vira vítima: um estudo de caso sobre práticas narrativas de jornais em contextos de violência*", paper apresentado à XVIII Annual Meeting of ANPOCS, Caxambu, 2004. Detailed description of televisual – as opposed to documentary film – version of the event can be found in ..... master's thesis presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Sociedade de Estudos de Cinema e Audiovisual – SOCINE, Ouro Preto, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> *Inclusion and exclusion: the politics of representation in a São Paulo favela* is funded by CNPq, the Brazilian National Research Council.

*Bus 174* places TV reportage in perspective. Through an assemblage of television footage, *expo facto* reports by privileged participants, such as hostages, the "swat" officer who was in charge of the operation, former friends and family of the protagonist, social workers who knew him, as well as drug dealers, policemen and specialists who did not have any organic connection with this specific case, the film constitutes privileged material to feed research about the relations between television and film media, public visibility, violence and performance in contemporary Brazil.

I use the term "appropriation" here to designate different ways through which subjects represented in the media as this "other" - who is associated with violence, poverty and race - control the ways their image appears on the screen. The hypothesis of the project is that different ways and degrees of "appropriation" assume specific aesthetical forms in each selected film, and express different relations filmmakers establish with their subjects. Within this broader framework, in relation to other films such as *City of God*, *The prisoner of the iron bar*, *Carandiru or Falcão*, *the kids of the dealers*, *Bus 174* presents a "perverse" form of "appropriation". During a whole afternoon and early evening, the performance of Sandro, the protagonist here, galvanized television, and the media. As he became aware of the fact that he was at the center of the scene, his performance privileged this unique chance to speak up, in detriment of his own chances to survive. In this sense, his action can be analyzed as one - perverse - form of appropriation, first of live television, later of documentary film.

I go through detailed discussion of the documentary directed by José Padilha and the ways in which it can be thought of as a perverse form of appropriation. From there I go to a brief description of the broader research project in which this discussion of *Bus 174* is situated. Unsolved questions about how to represent violence without reinforcing prejudice and discrimination conclude the paper.

*Notícias de uma guerra particular* the 1999 documentary by João Moreira Salles can be thought of as starting a whole trend of films on violence and poverty in association with the beginnings of current revival of Brazilian cinema. Only 4 years later, *Bus 174*, directed by José Padilha, comes out amidst a "boom" of documentaries and fiction films that bring to light this up to the early 90s submerged world. The interplay between all these films expresses the intense ongoing dispute over what can be thought of as the control of representation.

The four years separating the two films are the years of the so called "revival" of Brazilian film, both fiction and documentary. But they were also crucial for the passage of the invisibility in the media, characteristic of the previous decades, to a series of diversified experiences that gave visibility to the universe of the urban popular classes. Both films express representation principles adopted in this new phase of Brazilian

cinema. Violence, present in allegorical register in the films made in the 'cinema novo' era, emerges in the register of document in contemporary Brazilian film production.

*Bus 174* added one perspective to those perspectives approached in *News: the media*. By taking television archive material, as his prime material José Padilha's film brings elements that stimulate us to think about audiovisual representation, television and film. Television footage of the occasion guides the film, in its chronological reconstruction of the event. Archive material was edited in a way as to foster our understanding of the situation. The idea here is that a film, done after the fact, with the benefits of distance, in time and space, both in production and reception, can contribute to put the television event in perspective, to foster our understanding of the tragedy, to stimulate the formation of an enlightened public opinion, which should be able to escape maniquean views of the drama, specially a possible dominant interpretation that would approve the police's attitude of killing the aggressor.

Documentary film in this case should be able to contextualize the event, to give voice to participants, in ways that live coverage cannot do. The analytical general view proposed in the film can be noticed right from the beginning, with the panoramic shallow flight over the city of Rio de Janeiro, pointing out the social differences registered in the urban geography, the beach and the hills (the favelas), until its arrival at the Botanical Gardens, approaching the crime scene<sup>3</sup>. Throughout the film, sequences of television material, recorded live on the day of the hijacking, are intercalated with archive material, such as the police/criminal record of Sandro, news published in the press about his mother's death, the Candelária massacre, besides countless interviews with hostages of the bus, policemen, journalists, drug dealers, real relatives or relatives by affinity, professionals who took care of him as psychologists, social workers and a capoeira teacher.

Although not exactly in the same order, the film follows very closely the chronological script of the protagonist's life, reconstituting his trajectory, not as the cruel man or violent criminal, pictured on live television at the time, but as a victim of an unfair, violent and unequal society. The complex scenery composed of different and sometimes contradictory perspectives, ends up, as much as in "*News of a private war*", by creating a complex picture with no way out. The almost solitary burial of a boy illegally strangled inside a police car (the only moment, after hours of negotiation, when television cameras were absent) was accompanied by an also solitary lady who presented herself as the person who Sandro (already an adult) adopted as a mother, and to whom he promised to "be someone". No blood family, appealing tragic soundtrack.

Instead of the audience of millions, who in the year 2000, followed live coverage of the event, the film, in Brazil, had a modest audience of spectators. It succeeds in making the viewer – usually an upper middle

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<sup>3</sup> See Ivana Bentes, "*Do sertão à favela*" for a comparison with other films which open with similar aerial shots of Rio de Janeiro.

class Brazilian who goes to the movies – feel guilty – of omission, or for being complacent with stereotypes that associates blackness, poverty, ignorance, criminality and violence – a social context which, ultimately, would have murdered Sandro.

In contrast to what perhaps could be thought of as an overdramatic structure, which duplicates, in the other extreme, the stereotype of the *algoz*, which associates black poor male kids from Rio de Janeiro favela hills with violence, Padilha's film presents a decent and legitimate picture of an innocent poor black who at the age of five saw his mother being slaughtered, a couple of years later survived a police massacre, and who finally was killed by police abuse. Beyond the extreme polarization, the film offers excellent material to think about the relationship between citizens who belong to an almost invisible society and the mechanisms of producing representation such as photographic cameras and TVs.

"*Bus 174*" discusses a 'mediatic phenomena'. The presence of cameras transformed a robbery of small dimensions into a national event with international repercussion. And different reports on the event reveal unexpected critical perspectives, such as the one by a masked character. This drug-dealer, who protects his face for obvious reasons, does not approve Sandro's operation, from start, for organized crime condemns crime against bus passengers, simple people just like them. Furthermore, strategically, this masked person explains that the robbery was not properly planned as the place where Sandro stopped the bus did not offer conditions to escape. Even further, as the drama became the center of attention in the media, the chances of escaping diminished radically. This professional belittles Sandro as an "amateur". His opinion matches other interviewees' opinions who knew Sandro very well either as a companion, a student, an inmate, or a hostage. They all unanimously describe him as a human being different from the monster that was pictured during the event.

The assembly of the *in loco* recorded material in chronological order, mediated by contextualizing reports, allows us to reconsider the parallel development of the police and the kidnapper conduct. The film reveals that the presence of the media introduces a variable that paralyzed the police, leaving technical routine procedures to the wills of political leaders. Later on, after the arrest, it is only in the absence of cameras that the shameful act of revenge takes place.

The presence of the media also changes Sandro's performance and in this specific case the film allows us to infer a transformation. The inside of the bus becomes like a back stage - where not everything can be seen or heard – creating a true drama performance. Reports by some of the victims confirm that Sandro not only acted, he also directed their performance. Throughout the event, step by step, he gradually embodied the stereotype of the bad character, for which he had a perfect physique du role. This character gradually takes his real mask out, only to vest an invisible mask of a well known stereotype character. He started by wearing a hat, a mask, and sun glasses, and by speaking through the voice of his hostages. He ended up

by exposing his opened face through the opened window of the bus. Through this privileged post he told Brazilians, and the world, about the most dramatic episodes of his impressive biography. Things he emphasized are relevant here.

As chances of escaping become less likely, Sandro gives up hiding his face. He removes his mask, puts his face literally out of the bus window and yells. He addresses, not the hundreds of people that are watching the drama in the spot, right behind the isolation cord, but the millions of TV viewers who followed the developments of his dangerous operation live, on radio or TV.

The lines Sandro shouted are expressive. He refers to things he imagines he shares with the people he imagines as his viewers. He says that unlike fiction events in the American film he saw on TV the day before, his actions were for real. At the same time, a hostages' testimony, who escaped, tell us the story of the negotiations going on in the back stage between these antagonistic characters. Sandro told the hostages – all women, since he had released the men – at his signal, to pretend they were being hit. In other words, he directed a play. He pretended to the outside public that he would shoot, while arranging with hostages to scream as if they were actually being hit. Inside the bus, hostages at that moment were lying in the floor, so that from the outside, their voices would be heard, but their bodies would no be seen. As I suggested before, the police, on its turn, played the role of the paralyzed. The operation was marked by comings and goings. At the time there was even suspicion that the bullet that killed one of the hostages was shot not by Sandro, but by a policeman who would have killed the innocent pregnant woman instead of the hijacker. This was not true. The suspicion itself nonetheless reveals general lack of confidence in the police.

The presence of the media immobilized the police and mobilized the hijacker. At the same time, the media became, itself, a prisoner of the event. TV channels and radio stations fell compelled to broadcast the story, with the kind of frenzies that is typical of mediatic events.

Sandro in his turn was in a sense "prisoner of the lights", or, in other words, prisoner of the attention given to him by the cameras. Gradually, as I say, he switched his moves from emergency gathering of little money, to urgent performance of the role of the bad guy, everybody who knew him and was interviewed in the film – including some of the hostages – agreed he was not.

Although, according to the reports by his street companions, he hardly mentioned anything about his past or his family, when facing public visibility through television cameras, Sandro denounced his tragic early years. He seemed to be aware that that story would capture attention. He denounced that he had consistently got beaten in life. This boy as a victim had appropriated the situation aiming to revert it. And in his hours of fame, he uttered a threatening speech. Again, his "bad man's" discourse, vicious victim, according to him was inspired by American movies, contrasts with the perceptions that the hostages had of

him - with a double game told them – from the outside he pretended to shoot while inside there was a guarantee that he would not hurt anyone. The windows of the bus framed the stage.

As usual, live coverage explored the event without much contextual information. In order to go beyond this sensational approach, the film recovers the wicked-victim's trajectory. It intends to recover the identity of someone who miraculously survived several violent tragedies. It pictures someone whose life embodied the Brazilian social drama with incredibly sharp colors. The film sharply denounces a succession of extreme unjust circumstances – we see simulations of his eye witness of his mother's murder; of the horrendous, police massacre of street kids, during the night, in front of the Candelária church downtown Rio de Janeiro. We are presented with images that show humiliation and abusive treatment of kids in the correction institution where Sandro was sent, and from where, not surprisingly, he escaped.

The film takes Sandro's speech as a guide to tell his history. The characters the hijacker mentioned in his speech to the cameras are all interviewed. The hijacking event – beginning during the day and, as a bad omen, finishing in the dark – serves as a guideline to the film that cuts scenes in order to put things in context several times. With a dramatic non diegetic music in the background, the film develops towards the tragic end as if there was no other way out. Sandro's relationship with the camera – the performance of a despaired man facing the spotlights, which is quite obvious in the film – is the knot that remains to be undone.

*Bus 174* sharply denounces enduring Brazilian social inequality as the root of an incredibly tragic life. It powerfully assembled TV images in a way that allows viewers to rethink a relevant event which would otherwise be rapidly forgotten. It does, with more sensitivity and fairness, the same role as the TV coverage did – it lets the boy direct the show – despite the police, government, and the media - and against his own chances of surviving.

The atmosphere of a tragic end is enhanced by setting up a narrative in melodramatic tone. *Bus 174* does not play with goodies or badies. Sandro appears as the victim of perverse social conditions. Viewers are presented with this terrible otherness for which they should feel co-responsible at least for complacency with discrimination.

In the case of 'Bus 174', the documental material seems stronger than fiction. Sandro was five when he saw his mother being stabbed. He never knew who his father was. As a rebel, he adopted the streets. He was the witness of another cruelty, this time carried out by policemen – the Candelária massacre. As a survivor, the boy for a while, that was perhaps the healthier period of his life, could count on a capoeira teacher from PUC, Rio de Janeiro Catholic University. Addicted, he went back on the streets. In the absence of a mother, he adopted one. He promised that she would be proud of him one day. The tone of the music highlights the path as an inevitable tragedy.

*Bus 174* is powerfully disturbing. The question it raises, though, is how to disarticulate this complex conundrum that associates poverty, race, gender and violence to fear? Would it be possible to think about esthetical ways of disarticulating these common sense connections?

### **Politics of representation in contemporary Brazil: the notion of appropriation**

Urban violence, poverty and race have appeared as intrinsically connected themes in the recent boom of Brazilian film. These themes gained a sort of "hiper visibility" in the media<sup>4</sup> that contrasts with their relative invisibility during the 70s, 80s and early 90s. Film and television treatment of violence, poverty and race has provoked intense debate involving directors, musicians, critics, social movements. Questions in this debate revolve around accuracy of filmic representation, eventual excess of violence that would reinforce stereotyped images of the poor, mistaken images of violence as the only possible account of daily life in poor neighborhoods, non legitimate appropriation of local images.

The broader project in which this paper is included takes part in this debate. Dispute over the control of what is represented, how and where defines the relationship that people from different social classes and professional segments maintain with various audiovisual formats, such as TV programs (the news, reality programs, soap operas), documentaries and/or fictional films. The idea here is to relate different forms of representation to the different ways in which the people who represent and/or are represented in each specific work perform. The ways in which people perform in the process of filming – including rehearsal, rewritings of the script, sound track, mise en scène, etc... express different games of appropriation of the mechanisms of constructing representation.

Roughly, the idea is that in different ways, still under investigation, people try to appropriate the mechanisms of producing representation. And different aesthetic arrangements capture and express different forms of this appropriation. By becoming a candidate to take part in "reality shows" such as the "Big Brother", by writing a book about the poor neighborhood where one lives, (which eventually might become a movie, as was the case with *City of God* by Paulo Lins), by writing and interpreting Rap songs (which can become TV or film soundtracks), by participating in audiovisual workshops in poor neighborhoods or in prisons, or by shooting one's own documentary – as it was the case with rapper MV Bill, who had his film *Falcão* broadcast on primetime television – people aim to be included in the universe of the visible – an universe which sometimes is framed as the universe of the "spectacle".

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<sup>4</sup> Recent Brazilian film has been subject to different interpretations, some of them with emphasis on the shift of meaning in the representation of "favelas". See for example Ivana Bentes, "The sertão and the favela in contemporary Brazilian film", F. Ramos, "Humility, guilt and narcissism turned inside out in Brazil's film revival", and Ismail Xavier, "Brazilian cinema in the 1990s: the unexpected encounter and the resentful character". For the place of violence in Cinema Novo see Ismail Xavier, "Sertão mar: Glauber e a estética da fome".

In the theoretical horizon of the project figures the problematization of the notion of "spectacle" in itself. From the perspective of film and television makers, the question is how to represent violence without reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. Producing representation of poverty and violence nowadays means dealing with images that play strategic role in the interplay of social relations and representations.

If the hypothesis of different ongoing forms of appropriation of the mechanisms of producing representation is correct, the idea that contemporary social relations should be understood in terms of the "society of the spectacle" roughly understood as this almost independent universe, which would fascinate and alienate people - would be questioned by the idea that even though unequal and distorted, interaction rather than separation would mark relations between viewers and films and/or television programs. Different kinds of continuity – some more perverse than others - would mark relations between viewers, people represented and professionals who work on the building of representation. Different forms of "appropriation" of the mechanisms of producing representation" range from aesthetically oriented political actions that aim at television exposure – the 9/11 can be thought of that way, to films that construct their verossimilitude based in the body movement and oral language of endogenous cast, scripts that are based in insider reports, local sound tracks, etc.

This paper dealt specifically with the film 'Bus 174'. The specific case reveals the contradictory ways in which the TV cameras end up stimulating certain behavior – not so much for what is going to be shown, but for the fact of going on air itself. Therefore, the sense of breaking with the invisibility that had characterized the character's life, with recurring victim positions, witness of bizarre tragedies, stimulates the protagonist to develop a performance for the cameras. For this documental performance, Sandro embodies the stereotype of the bad negro and enjoys as much as he can of the capacity to scare. During his '15 minutes' or so of fame, the revolted man immobilized the police. The police and the government became hostages of what they could imagine as a negative repercussion of an aggressive act in the eyes of the public. The boy became a hostage of the character that he embodied, infuriating the police, humiliated by the inability to act when live TV is present. On the other hand, the presence of the cameras guaranteed a certain survival. It is possible to conceive that if the police car had a camera, the murder of the hijacker would not have taken place. Conversely, the same cameras that guaranteed Sandro's celebrity, led him to a performance that could not envision another way out but the tragic end that happened.

'Bus 174' allows these kind of speculations, but perhaps it could have gone a little further concerning the aesthetical disarticulation of preconceived notions that connect the violent social order and its representations. Would it be possible to deal with the case without falling in the space that flirts with the melodramatic tradition, opposing victim and criminal, in some ways justifying violent acts by the lack of

social dignity? Again, in concrete terms, the question is how to escape these traps? How to dismantle the convention that makes the media easy to manipulate, especially when representing violent acts? How to create other mechanisms, different from the attainment of violent acts, in order to set television and cinema guidelines?

From this perspective television and film versions are not as different from each other as the proposal of the film would suggest. Perhaps television and film defend opposite theses: while television reportage served to transmit the role of this stereotypical bad black young guy that Sandro incorporated in his improvised performance to the cameras, documentary film put that performance in context in order to show Sandro as the tragic victim of unjust inequality and discrimination. And the evidences are strong. In the role of hijacker shot by television cameras, he submitted innocent women to an enormous tension for hours under his command. In the role of the victim of a society that has kept black kids in poverty and invisibility Sandro's life history offers a privileged case for at the age of 5 the little boy saw his mother being stabbed to death. Years later, at the age of 11, already as a street kid he survived the police Candelaria Massacre.

In terms of the content of what is on display here, television reportage and documentary film express opposite views. Nonetheless perhaps both elude what might constitute the main question for discussion: to what extent filmic strategies fo

But both television live version, and film reflexive attempt follow Sandro's script. This case suggests that audiovisual shooting, recording, and live exhibition can be thought of as a factor of enhancing violence, and prejudice. But it also suggests that live television coverage might work as a guarantee against police violence.

This tragic end illustrates the ambiguity that surrounds the presence of cinematic and/or television cameras, as well as televised and/or cinematic diffusion of stories of violence, especially stories which involve racial and gender stereotypes, as was the case here. Live coverage of the event, in this case, as in other media events elsewhere in the world, is constitutive part of the event. We will see how the performance of Sandro, as the hijacker, changed as he realized he was on live television. We will see how he shifted his mode of address from a more circumscribed interlocution with the policeman who played the role of the negotiator, to a discourse about fear, violence, fiction, and fact directed to the whole Brazilian population, through the mediating eyes of the cameras. At the center of this media event, Sandro enacted a reversed version of Foucault's panopticum - he had the eyes of the world upon him.

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