# Brazilian cinema and the myth of *"Rio de Janeiro: The Marvelous City"*

## Cinema brasileiro e o mito *"Rio de Janeiro: a Cidade Maravilhosa"*

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper will discuss the representation of the "myth" of *the marvelous city* attributed to the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro by looking at the contemporary Brazilian film production and its creation of new paradigms for representing and understanding Brazilian cultural identity. It will also comment on the concept of production of space through the analysis of the cinematic representation of Rio de Janeiro in the film *The Man of the Year* (*O Homem do Ano*, José Guilherme Fonseca, 2002). This film generally touches on many relevant matters related to the understanding of contemporary Brazilian urban life and cultural identity commenting on the concepts and discussion such as: the city of imagination; the city as a product of a certain cultural uneasiness in relation to current concerns about identity and its confusing relationship to time and space; the city as embodying the notion of an entire country imagery; and finally, the city combining two opposing poles: the city as a civilized and modern space and the city as a traditional and primitive space.

**Key words:** myth, urban and cultural identity, cinematic city, Rio de Janeiro.

**RESUMO**

Esse trabalho discute a representação do "mito" da *cidade maravilhosa* atribuído à cidade do Rio de Janeiro através de uma reflexão sobre a produção cinematográfica brasileira contemporânea e a criação de novos paradigmas de representação e entendimento da identidade cultural brasileira. Trata-se aqui também do conceito de produção do espaço por meio da análise da representação fílmica do Rio de Janeiro no filme *O Homem do Ano* (*The Man of the Year*, José Guilherme Fonseca, 2002). Esse filme discute de forma genérica sobre vários elementos relacionados ao entendimento da vida urbana brasileira contemporânea e sua identidade cultural comentando sobre conceitos e discussões do tipo: a cidade da imaginação; a cidade como produto de certa instabilidade em relação à problemática do conceito de identidade e sua relação confusa com/no tempo e espaço; a cidade que comporta a representação imagética de todo o país; e, finalmente, a cidade que combina dois polos opostos: a cidade como um espaço moderno e civilizado e a cidade tradicional do espaço primitivo.

**Palavras-chave:** mito, identidade cultural urbana, cidade cinemática, Rio de Janeiro.

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# Introduction

In this paper I will examine the premise that films are able to evoke the becoming of a city, revelling it to be continually in transition according to the demands of time, but at the same time unveiling it as a site of accumulated collective recollection of a "myth". The allusion is to a particular case, the *cinematic Rio de Janeiro*, and to a particular "myth" – the one that, for a long time, quotes and celebrates the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro as "*the marvelous city*". My central argument here is that one can read "the myth" as both a narrative and a material city and this concerns both the narration and the reality of the city itself.

What makes the case studied here particularly interesting, and worth noting, is that film analysis, along with the investigation of the ways in which "the myth" of *Rio de Janeiro: the marvelous city* has survived and also maintained the notion of an "ideal city" promoted by it, constitutes an outstanding practice for allowing a broader comprehension of the contemporary Brazilian cinema.

This paper is divided in four parts: the first part is a short overview on the thoughts of the cinematic engagement with "the city". In the second part, a discussion about the city of Rio de Janeiro as a zone of "myth" in terms of its conception, a shifting and dynamic image is presented. The third part is a brief presentation of the Brazilian national cinema context within which the imagery of "the myth" of Rio as "*the marvelous city*" plays a role. Then, in the last part of this paper, a discussion about the imagery of Rio de Janeiro constructed in the film *The Man of the Year* (José Guilherme Fonseca, 2002) explores the film's construction of this city and the ways in which its *cinematic city* relates to the myth of "*the marvelous city*".

# The *cinematic city*: A general context

The interest on "the city" and its cinematic form are nearly as old as the cinematic medium itself. Cinema made visible more than the city's architectures, buildings and streets; the combination of mobility, life experience and persistence of vision is as much a characteristic of filmic images as it is of the material city itself. In both cases, one can argue that "the city" is something both revealed and mediated by film.

As I have pointed out somewhere else (Costa, 2012), it seems to be quite difficult to comprehend the *cinematic* version of a city without connecting it to its physical counterpart or, as Harvey (1992, p. 589) creatively writes, with "[...] that giant screen which is the city". First, this is due because the *cinematic city*, although not a straightforward depiction of physical reality, is essentially recognised through association with "the real"; second, the *cinematic city* discourse is always built and connected, on one way or another, to the ways in which real cities are experienced and visualized.

There is a relationship between the construction of the filmic diegesis[2] (emphasising the use of framing, landscape, architecture and *misé-en-scène* and the placing of characters within particular geographical locations) and the living world of actual social relations (Crang, 1998; Lury and Massey, 1999). Film constructions help either to criticise or to reorder the "geographical imaginations" we have of the world. As Crang (1998, p. 44) points out: "[…] most people's knowledge of most places comes through media of various sorts, so that for most people the representation comes before the 'reality'". This is to say that cinema cannot be taken as simply describing cities and places because it plays a central role in shaping people's "geographical imaginations" therefore helping to "invent" these places. This is crucial to the understanding of the *cinematic city*.

Being for long a constant subject in films the city established an intrinsic and powerful relationship with cinema in such a way that one can state it is through the cinematic imagery that one makes sense of the urban world (the city) and of the representations of that world. The city imagery is the familiar image; it is the metaphor for the state of living in a modern (or postmodern) world.

To reiterate: the cinematic city has connections with reality where it finds its referential system of meanings. Through its text and language it helps to interpret reality, connecting us to it. It thus transforms, re-creates

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[2] The word *diegesis* derives from the Greek word for narrative. As Nichols (1981, p. 318) explains, "Using it allows us to designate the imaginary world of the fiction without building in a bias toward realism or even illusionism, as the word mimesis does. The concept of a diegesis emphasises the fabrication of this imaginary realm, its lack of immediate (unmediated) transparency with any external reality, and guards against the danger of short-circuit leaps between reality and realism".

and establishes the real. As Daniels and Cosgrove (1988, p. 1) state: "[...] every culture weaves its world out of image and symbol". It is then plausible to say that the *cinematic city is image and symbol* and thus also "moulds" our views of the world, in particular, of the city. The city is itself a continuum of representations; different images and layers intersect. To make sense of the city – or rather the world – it is necessary to examine its physical, sociological, political and economic elements. This examination is then transformed into text, becoming also a representation. It is then of paramount importance to look at representations of the imaginary city of literature, films, and so on, because this helps the understanding of the meaning of the real city. Daniels and Cosgrove (1988, p. 1) arrived to a similar conclusion from their thoughts on the idea of landscape: "A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings".

> *To understand a built landscape ... it is usually necessary to understand written and verbal representations of it, not as "illustrations", images standing outside it, but as constituent images of its meaning or meanings. And, of course, every study of a landscape further transforms its meaning, depositing yet another layer of cultural representation (Daniels and Cosgrove, 1988, p. 1).*

The cinematic city is a cultural representation. As a landscape is more than a material display of things, more than an "illustration" of a specific place at a specific time, the same also applies to the cinematic city. The specificity of the cinematic city is its *motion condition*. Cinema is peculiar in that the construction of its aesthetic is strongly mediated by the ideology of realism. This drives the way that cinema represents things, the city in particular. Its *motion* condition leads it to an apparent association with reality, therefore connecting it more strongly with the "real" object that it represents. It follows that, once subjected to the cinema the meaning of the cityscape will be further transformed.

Although Daniels and Cosgrove (1988) make no mention of cinema, much of their work on literary texts

and landscape art can be applied to films. Consider now the notion of landscape as both image and symbol. Consider the image acquired through the filmic representations. As the vision is socially constructed and/or culturally located the notion that any representation *per se* "mirrors" the real world has become increasingly untenable. The argument is now that there is no pre-interpreting reality to be reflected within any system of representation.

Furthermore, social, economic and political aspects of urban life are recognisable either as being connected to a specific city or to a general idea about "city life". The association between the city, the cinema and modern urban culture has being for long calling scholarly attention. One side of this connection is the belief that values within the wider culture, which are put into play within a specific cityscape context, are reflected on the screen[3].

After all, people go to the movies because they can relate to the storyline as films allow the viewers to gain insight into social and cultural beliefs. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that, because the very essence of the film representation is being an *interpretation* rather than a *record*, the *representation* of a city can say as much about the city's reality as it can influence the ways in which this reality is judged, interpreted, acted upon, used, lived through, and so forth.

I should be clear that within this framework the *cinematic* Rio de Janeiro is as much a *reflection* of the physical city itself, the one built by nature, architects, urban designers, builders, inhabitants and passers-by, as it is a *cinematic version* of a city that is also influenced and formed by imagination, subjectivities and the symbolic and mythical representations that shape it in many different ways.

The notion that the cinematic reading of a city – Rio de Janeiro for example – helps in the understanding of the city itself is not new. Additionally, the cinematic Rio de Janeiro contributes for the reality of this city acquiring new meanings, because the "city out there", constantly being transformed, turns out to be also a product conceived within and by the diversity of media representation. That is, cinematic images of the city, for instance, play a key role in the way we see, perceive, behave, and approach and interpret

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[3] The notion that films merely reflect events is challengeable, though they tend to reflect social attitudes more than they refracted a point of view. As Markert (2011, p. 316, xx) explains: "Refraction occurs when the filmmaker deliberately sets out to change people's ways of seeing the social world". So, "Films may reflect society and provide a glimpse of what people believe. [...] This aspect of reflection theory may be better described using the metaphor of refraction since the point of view that is propagated tends to refract the values and beliefs of the proselytizing individual or group. The refracted message can be taken as reality by the viewer. Refraction theory suggests that recurring exposure to a film's message may not just reinforce existing attitudes and beliefs but shape them".

the city because the "real" city is, in the end, influenced by the signifying system of meaning constructed and put into play by the medium of representation that is cinema. Film, thus, is capable of transforming, re-creating and establishing the real. As Daniels and Cosgrove (1988, p. 1) state:

> [...] every culture weaves its world out of image and symbol. It is then plausible to say that the cinematic city is image and symbol *and thus also "moulds" our views of the world, in particular, of the city. The city is itself a continuum of representations; different images and layers intersect.*

In view of the above, it is of paramount importance to look at filmic representations of Rio de Janeiro if the intention is to have both a full picture of this particular city and to achieve an understanding of a "cultural myth" that has been, for a long time, playing a great role in the context of the collective imagination of Rio de Janeiro.

Yet, it is important to explain that the intention here is not to reduce film to a direct way of mapping the real because this will deny the imaginative potential of the medium, though sometimes, ignoring the place of the real can be perverse. "The city" in cinema is made, as Brunsdon (2010, p. 94) explains,

> [...] through the editing together of different spaces which may or may not have any pro-filmic proximity, and which may or may not involve a coincidence between location and nominated setting. Just as it can be made in different ways the city in film can also be read in different ways.

So, the use of location shooting on the streets, buildings, beaches, landmarks and shantytowns (*favelas*) of Rio de Janeiro can work in different ways at the same time: "eliciting recognition of a cinematically rendered real, guaranteeing the authenticity of a story *and* disrupting the coherence of the imagined cinematic world" (Brunsdon, 2010, p. 94).

Before moving any further, it must be considered that, more often than could be desirable, the image of a particular city, the one constructed by film for example, is anchored in people's general assumptions and limited knowledge about that city; or, in the case of cities people know well, it rests on hegemonic meanings that, because they have been successfully socialized through and by a great deal of media representations, seem more legitimate than privately acquired ones (Cf. Resina, 2003).

Markert (2011) has stated that people have always lived in a visual society and that its visual aspects have become increasingly pronounced during the last hundred years, due basically to the extensive diffusion of cinema and television (and more recently, the Internet and You-Tube). As he points out:

> The problem is that the sheer pervasiveness of images prevents people from pondering what they have just seen. And precisely because they are images, people often unreflectively interpret them to be the truth. [...] The truth of images may be debatable, but since the images often do reflect part of the everyday world, they are less likely to be questioned (Market, 2011, p. xxxiv).

More specifically in the case of the cinematic narrative images, he points out:

> Fiction can be mistaken as representative of reality by the viewer. This is more likely to occur if the fictional event reflects a slice of the world with which the viewer is already familiar (Market, 2011, p. xxxv).

What really counts is the plausibility of the image rather than its specificity. And in the end, it is the image that gives conceptual content – that of "cityness" for instance – to an otherwise meaningless name. As Resina (2003, p. 18) explains, "Like a road sign, or like an icon on a tourist map, the image [functions] as a universal coding device, oblivious to the peculiarities of the actual site".

In the case of the cinematic representation of Rio de Janeiro, this paper will assert, Brazilian cinema has contributed a great deal for the creation and imagination of the myth of "*Rio de Janeiro, the marvelous city*". If it is true that we construct the world and our attitude towards it from texts that speak of who we are, or wish to be (Barnes and Duncan, 1992), the filmic text that has been perpetuated and reedited throughout the years on the idea of this myth can tell us a lot about Brazilian culture's identifications and desires.

## The shape of "the myth"

The geneses of "the myth" that render the city of Rio de Janeiro as "*the marvelous city*" can be timed and placed in the early twentieth century and in Brazil's then-capital

Rio de Janeiro as a part of a political agenda for reaffirming Francisco Pereira Passos' political power as the city's mayor and also as an answer to the desires of a new Brazilian elite who aspired for an original face and identity to the country by a modernization program of Rio de Janeiro.

Pereira Passos' plan aimed to turn Rio de Janeiro into a kind of "business card" for Brazil, that is, *the* place that would be a symbol of the whole country. The plan was basically making the most of Rio's exuberant nature – sea, mountains, forest – involving it with a pleasant and sophisticated modernization of its city life, through an improvement and a re-qualification of its urban landscape.

Rio's economic and urban development, and the political advertisement put into play which "painted" the place as "the city of opportunities", "the beautiful city", and finally "*the marvelous city*", was in fact a result of an aspiring elite who had been educated, influenced and inspired by the European standards and also by the French capital's model. Pereira Passos' intention was then to transform Rio de Janeiro into a modern metropolis; acceptable, desirable, a kind of "Paris by the sea" glamorized by its tropical and magnificent setting.

Rio de Janeiro had been for a while, in the early twentieth century, considered by the country's elite as an uncultured, decadent and colorless place. Moreover, if Europeans had been fascinated by the "exotic" aspects of Brazilian life – the natives (indians), its fauna and flora, the coffee, the beautiful stones and valuable gold, etc. – the Brazilian elite had questioned its own identity resisting the classification of *exotique* given to the country, and therefore to them by the Europeans.

The plan, thus, was to "transform" Rio's old, ugly, dirty, dangerous and chaotic streets into an "ideal city" having the French capital as the main archetype (Pesavento, 1999). As Conde (2012, p. 4) explains,

> *Brazil turned its back on the former slaveholding past to rewrite itself as a modern nation-state, a nation of order and progress, as the new flag boldly announced. […] the most important symbol of Brazil's modern identity was the city.*

Because "the mirror" from which Rio de Janeiro should be reflected has produced an image of an hygienic, beautiful and ordered city, the urban imagery and the identity of people who lived in this city, in the view of the Brazilian elite, could not be allowed to correspond to its reality. A "cleansing" operation was then put into action swiping from social life and from memory everything that could evoke "the old", "the uncivilized" and "the popular". As Pesavento (1999, p. 170) points out:

> *In the looking for a formulation of an identity for the country, the First World is the "desirable other" which is as far, as one could desire, from the national popular subject that became the "undesirable other" rejected by the national identity[4].*

Rio de Janeiro, starting in 1902, was therefore radically altered. Old colonial structures were razed and replaced with a new modern urban and architectural vision modeled on the 1850s Parisian reforms conducted by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann[5]. The Brazilian capital then turned into a changed, striped, opened city, transformed by the actions of the "producers of space" – architects and urban planners and designers. With the support by the Federal and Municipal Estates the transformation of Rio de Janeiro into *the* Brazilian prototype of modernity has come into being and with the changing of landscape, social and cultural practices changed too.

It is obvious to forecast the "myth of the *marvelous city*" associated to the city of Rio de Janeiro as one considers Paris as an emblematic allusion for the conception (and comprehension) of modernity as a whole subjective concept. The paradigmatic and metonymic traces of the representation of Paris as *the* world's modern city in the early twentieth century, takes what we could call "the mirror effect" into the Brazilian territory. Regarding the scale differences of course, in Rio's case, the result of the combination between time and space – the colonial city of before, the chaos of the interventions known as *Haussmanization* of urban space, and the "new" and "modern" city that has appeared – established the context for the imagery that gave support to the collective imagination related to the "myth" of "Rio, the *marvelous* city".

The urban reform carried out by Pereira Passos in the city, took modernity and its *marvelous* imagery and imagination to the center of a core whereby the symbolic

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[4] My translation from Pesavento (1999, p. 170).
[5] Haussmann's Renovation of Paris, or the *Haussmann Plan*, was a modernization program of Paris commissioned by Napoléon III and led by the Seine mayor, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, between 1853 and 1870 (work continued until the end of the 19th century).

predominated over the real and the representation over its referent (Pesavento, 1999). Aware that representations do not automatically mirror their referent; that they, before anything else, have to do with the imaginary capacity of "inventing the world" turning it into a convincing, desirable and plausible place, to the concrete and real transformation of Rio de Janeiro was added an idea, an "image", of the city as a "*marvelous*" place to go, to be, and to live. The expectations were that the "force" of the construction and representation of the *marvelous city* would transform Brazil into a desirable country – a kind of wonderland. Therefore, the looks and the façade of modern Rio became hyper signified and the detail soon was taken for the whole.

The specificity and the strength of the perverse conditions of the reality of capitalism in Brazil were then "camouflaged" by a context within which the representation, "the myth", assumed a preeminent place over the real. That is, the "myth" ended overcoming reality.

A tropical country, with a colonial and slavery heritage, with a huge poor and mixed population, becomes the perfect place where the representation provokes a strong effect on the real and truth; so, the "imaginary city" superposes the real one. Accordingly, as Pesavento (1999) calls attention to, if the urban reform of Rio de Janeiro, promoted by the city's mayor Francisco Pereira Passos, was made with the goal of constructing a "*Paris-sur-mer*" in its tropical version, the distance between the intention and the result does not invalidate the strength of the imaginary construction. Even if in practical terms the closeness with Paris" myth and real city reduce itself to a few isolated elements as the *boulevards* or eclectic facades or *art-nouveau* buildings of the majestic Central Avenue (*Avenida Central*), the urban life in Rio on the whole was lived within the standards of the modern *ethos*.

Being social imagination a sort of representation of the world, it does not feel wrong to say that it legitimates itself through belief and faith and not through authenticity or proof. In the case of Rio de Janeiro, the city's elements such as its architectural urban features and natural landscape as a whole have acquired a symbolic dimension. The earlier "old" and "traditional" image associated to the city is now changed by not only the concrete modifications and changes that transformed its public spaces but also and primordially by the "idea" about the place, what paved the way for the vast interplay put into practice between reality and representation giving life to "the myth".

It is central for the understanding of *cinematic Rio de Janeiro* to accept that collective imagination and imagery, and the "myth" which defines them, have assumed a more authentic and truthful nature than the actual conditions of life in the city themselves. As Pesavento (1999) reminds us, the image on the mirror is always an illusion, but the image is not necessarily always a lie. As an account, "the myth" is always a version about the real which resulted from concrete and subjective options and choices. It is often an attempt to give some "order" to the real filtered through feelings, desires, anxieties, and of course, social forces.

## The *marvelous city* and the Brazilian cinema

Since the beginning of the XX century, cinema and the film production in Brazil had become an important part of the country's public life. Along with Rio de Janeiro's urban renovation, Brazilian films started to endorse the place's visual rendering it as *the* new modern, civilized and attractive city in Brazil by ways of constructing a cinematic imagery shaped by a particular style which ended introducing a new visual practice for the new public that was just beginning to consume the new medium.

Those early cinematic images of Rio de Janeiro were residual components of a fashioned way of looking at "the city" that have dominated the imagination of Europeans and American filmmakers. That is, they were traces of a structure of visibility that was (and still is) tied to modernity.

> *Urbanization, the emergence of new masses, and technological changes altered social and spatial configurations. The cinema was not just part of these changes; its visual aesthetics also worked to trace and project another urban imaginary, one that manages to visually interpolate new citizens into its modern spaces (Conde, 2012, p. 9-10).*

Filmic pictures of the city have reached beyond the limits of the physical city allowing spectators – not just in Brazil of course but also in the world at large – to perceive, conceive of, and visualize its own place in modern life. Films were therefore linked to a profound (re)elaboration of the cultural, social, and spatial contours of the cities.

In Brazil, the city of Rio de Janeiro became *the* symbol of modernity and *the* place from where a new

cultural identity should arise if not only by means of the urban improvement that took place but also and mostly by its cinematic representation.

The advantage brought by the cinema to the visual account of Rio de Janeiro's cityscape was giving to the city an "identity" recognized widely by people all over the world and also to build a general understanding of it as *the* Brazilian version of *the* modern city *par excellence*. It can be said additionally, that "the myth" of Rio de Janeiro (that of *Rio, the Marvelous City*) became a popular topic as soon as the city lent itself to graphic visualization through film.

Nevertheless this cinematic representation of Rio de Janeiro has become standard for a long time. Since the early 1990s Brazilian films have acquired new characteristics that have placed the national film production in Brazil into a new phase within the complex social-cultural context. As Dennison and Shaw (2004, p. 227) call attention to:

> *Brazilian cinema in the 1990s, and continuing into the first few years of the twenty-first century, has been, if anything, eclectic, as filmmakers battle to place on the screen as many different representations of Brazilian national identity as they possibly can. As one of the [Brazilian filmmakers] said in interview: "Democracy has arrived on Brazilian cinema screens in the form of the depiction of the thousand and one aspects that a culture like ours should have. Films made in Brazil today reflect this multiplicity, this complexity, these thousand different tongues, these thousands different faces, which form on a map the continent we call Brazil".*

There are many Brazilian films located in Rio de Janeiro that can be placed as an example regarding the above statement. However, there is no reason or sufficient space here to talk about all of them. But, it seems necessary at least to point out that the cycle of Brazilian films produced in the early-1990s and in the early-2000 centered their attention on discussing the experience related to social, political and economic conflicts of identities so commonly associated to the urban scenario and more specifically urban life in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The films produced in the early years of the 21st century have, very often, touched on many relevant matters related to the understanding of contemporary urban life, globalization, and the "cultural uneasiness" associated to existing concerns about national and cultural identity – what probably explain why recently cinematic images

of Rio de Janeiro are representations struggling between two opposing poles: the reinforcement of the universal picture of the modern city and "the myth" icon that has shaped the city for a long time, or the denial of "the myth" by means of "coming close to reality".

Rio de Janeiro, as well known, has both a light and a dark side, and these structuring opposites became central to contemporary film representations of this city. Recent Brazilian films have multiplied perspectives and perceptions of Rio de Janeiro subjecting them to the rhythm of urban activities while vastly enlarging the field of perception for the city dweller.

Accordingly and in addition, the Rio de Janeiro shaped by contemporary films, is a civilized and modern space created by "the myth" and also a city formed by a "traditional" and "primitive" space. The dichotomy of these representations reveals itself through the opposition of worldwide known images of the places which have become the recognizable "identity" of the city: the "Sugar-Loaf Mountain" (*Pão de Açúcar*) and the Jesus Christ Statue on the top of the *Corcovado* mountain, for instance, *versus* confined spaces which are supposedly chaotic and violent, like the city's center and its shantytowns (*favelas*).

It is revealing the way these opposed places imageries are organized within the films narratives. The paradigm of representation can be regarded as very similar but at the same time the intention behind it is a very different one as it seems that the purpose is to highlight diversity, the "other side" of this inherently mythical city.

What I am suggesting is that, Rio de Janeiro is a place where the peculiar combination of nature and urbanity, civility and barbarism, immobility and stasis, common to a few other cities, is predominantly evident. Since this particular city combines the enduring emblems of its "publicity poster image" with a "not so kind" reality, its recently cinematic construction is in fact often shifting from "the myth". It is worth noting, however, that whether guided by hand-held tours driven to the city's best vantage points to enjoy sweeping panorama, entertained by lighthearted views or moved by lugubrious tones of the violent city, Rio de Janeiro's imagery in Brazilian films furnishes an emotional sense of place through real and imagined mythical cityscapes.

So, contemporary Brazilian films depict Rio de Janeiro as a "marvelous city" any longer. Currently, Rio is normally a violent place where criminality, drug dealers, pick-pocket homeless children and poverty can be found everywhere. *Cinematic* Rio is now the city without past and the impossibility of any future or fortune – as in films

such as *Turbulence* (*Estorvo*, Ruy Guerra, 2000), *Bus 174* (*Ônibus 174*, José Padilha, 2002), *Master, a Building in Copacabana* (*Edifício Master*, Eduardo Coutinho, 2002), or *The Man of the Year* (*O Homem do Ano*, José Henrique Fonseca, 2003).

Paradoxically, another distinct way in which the city of Rio de Janeiro is constructed in contemporary Brazilian films matches the filmmaker's choice for avoiding the widespread and familiar images of the cityscape. This is the case for example in *Master, a Building in Copacabana* (Eduardo Coutinho, 2002), a film that does not show even one image of Rio de Janeiro cityscape. Maybe, the "disappearance" of Rio's imagery in some contemporary Brazilian films can be partly explained as being the result of a decreased utopian vision related to present-day urban life that has come strongly into being with the so-called post-modernity, a time when "the myth" *Rio, the marvelous city,* probably became out of place.

The mode of "avoiding" the city's well-known and recognizable imagery and also continuing with the film narrative tradition of telling much about *the* city, convey the notion of the "vanishing city" discussed by Conley (2003, p. 210):

> The term "vanishing city" points to how visual representations of cities impose and simultaneously take away a sense of identity and belonging on a vast and anonymous public. […] the media gain credibility when they succeed in making their readers and viewers feel they are part of a space delineated by the name of a city. For the media, it is important to craft a public that will affiliate itself with the urban images they project. Viewers are invited to identify with these images, but, as a corollary, in a quasi-dialectical fashion, the identification is felt only with the disappearance of city views. The sense of "vanishment" entrances … whenever the observer is inclined to imagine that a given city may be an origin, a site of a particular "lifestyle", or what it may provide an illusion of rootedness.

The above statement is exactly what comes into play in the film *Master*. In this case, the picture-postcard Rio de Janeiro, with its coastline, mountains and beautiful natural scenery, is entirely absent. The city is just brought into scene via the words of the interviewers whose answers to the film director's questions are the center of the film. The "image" of the city is here transformed into an idea, a subjective concept changeable according to each of the interviewers" conception of it.

Rio de Janeiro in *Master* is turned into an "invisible city", a city built by mind, the one in which its visual form *vanishes* from the scene, but it is captured by the film spectators through imagination, in this case, conducted by the city's many subjective narratives that are shaped and come into life by the particular and sometimes confusing memories of the building's habitants (Cf. Sales, 2010).

Differently, in films like *Turbulence*, the image of the city can be seen, but it is not definitely recognized or even mentioned as a particular place (Rio de Janeiro, for instance). However, because some city motifs are familiar and related to Rio de Janeiro's imagery – tunnels, particular street-walks design, seafront avenue, beaches, shantytowns on hills, etc. – they indirectly index place recognition. This is relatively what occurs in the film *The Man of the Year.*

# *The Man of the Year* in the *marvelous* city

*The Man of the Year* (*O Homem do Ano*, José Henrique Fonseca, 2003) can be placed within the themes and contexts discussed above since its narrative relies on themes related to the patterns of construction of a *cinematic city*, the cultural identity and "the myth" of *Rio de Janeiro: the marvelous city.*

*The Man of the Year* tells a story of an "ordinary" man, Maiquel (Murilo Benício), who lives in a poor and violent neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, the so called "*Baixada Fluminense*". After getting involved in an argument with a man in a bar Maiquel shoots him dead and turns into a "hero" respected by the people who live in the region. As it comes out, the man killed by Maiquel was a "bad guy", a dreadful man strongly disliked by almost everybody. So, in getting rid of him, Maiquel becomes the person in command of a "neighborhood security company", which is really a façade for his real occupation as a hired-gun-man whose job is to "protect" the community.

So, the film's title *The Man of the Year* corresponds to the title given to Maiquel by people in the *Baixada Fluminense* community in appreciation for his "hygienic and patriotic work" – as described by the character of Dr. Carvalho (Jorge Dória).

Like in the film *Turbulence*, the post-card imagery of Rio de Janeiro – *Pão de Açúcar*, *Corcovado*, *Copacabana Beach*, etc. – is excluded in *The Man of the Year*. However, even with the absence of familiar and "beauty" city settings,

unlike *Turbulence*, *The Man of the Year* manages to specifically evoke the city of Rio de Janeiro as *the* location and the characters" place. In this case, Rio comes to the scene through the construction of the characters" way of talking (their accent), their behavior and the film's dialogue allusions to the city; contributing towards what Abbas (2003) refers to as the "cinematization of space" – that is, direct observation and lived space (the recognizable imagery of a particular place, the city of Rio) give way to the authority and primacy of the myth reaffirmed by the film.

Rio de Janeiro is, in this case, represented as a peripheral, chaotic metropolis, typical of late capitalism, providing the ideal setting for an unusual crime thriller, with its typical mixture of violence, blackmail, conspiracy, greed, murder and general pessimism. Even considering that "These contextualizing elements bring to the fore the ugly, dirty, inharmonious and awkward aspects of the city" (Nagib, 2007, p. 122)[6], it is not easy to disconnect the *marvelous city* "myth" to Rio's representation in *The Man of the Year*.

*The Man of the Year* works with common film techniques to represent the outskirts (*periferia*) of the city, avoiding establishing shots of the post-card Rio de Janeiro, and preferring to highlight the discourse of the specialization and rising of urban violence and marginalization within a specific place in the city (*Baixada Fluminense*). Even so, a realistic counterpoint on problems such as overcrowding, criminality and drug trafficking that pervade Brazilian present-day life in the slums (*favelas*) is not completely abandoned in the film.

*The Man of the Year* stylized and highly edited cinematography, with the use of narrative-style voiceover, self-conscious story-telling, and Hollywood-style "spectacularization" of gun-shooting, would seem to prevent whatever realistic intentions might have lain behind the aesthetic choice. The contrast between the film's narrative conventionality (the use of the motif of the "survivor" who tells the story in the first person) and its engagement with the violent and marginal life, creates a potential reading which finds the film as a potential critique of the representational practices which mediate the production of such urban spaces (Cf. Kantaris, 2010).

The film represents the living world, the city where everybody desires "a new and better life", "a place in the sun", a social and economic ascendance. All of which, in Maiquel's case, came with the "title" and consequently with his changed attitude towards life and coincidently with his "new looks" (he has dyed his hair into a platinum blonde color after a bet). So, Maiquel's singular appearance is placed by the narrative as a metaphor for the Brazilian "troubled" and undefined cultural identity. Maiquel's "new identity", composed by his new job, his platinum blonde looks, his daily new experiences, "friends" and family, makes him confused about his own perception of himself. That is why, when looking at his reflection in the mirror, he describes it as *"a guy who was me, but, at the same time, wasn't me"*.

Another interesting aspect concerning Maiquel's character is the way in which his continuously changing identity works for the narrative purpose as a comment on Brazil's cultural diversity. Maiquel is "shaped" as a cultural jigsaw; composed of and played with different pieces that, even though contradictory most of the time, look like as if they are in apparent harmony. Maiquel's confusing and fragmented identity is furthermore highlighted by his strong admiration for everything (or anything) that relates to the North American culture[7].

There is a strong influence of foreign words and icons in the film – the names of characters (Maiquel), pets (Bil), shops (Nato's aluminum, *Merys* Market), and other references (pizza, Big Fest Midnight, Pokemon) –, appropriately composing what Stuart Hall (2001) calls "cultural supermarket". Once recognition and identification have to do with the capitalist system of buying and selling – typical of U.S." economy and culture – the *Other*'s culture is then (re)negotiated through the representational system, allowing for the association and the incorporation of foreign elements into one's own culture.

Television is another element that expresses the "cultural mix" –predominantly composed by American aspects – into which the contemporary and "globalized" world has been transformed. Television programs and commercials appreciated and watched by Maiquel are mostly about foreign products and world (American)

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[6] Lucia Nagib is here referring to another Brazilian film of the period: *The Trespasser* (*O Invasor*, Beto Brant, 2007).

[7] I have mentioned before that Europe, particularly Paris, has provided the cultural and modern model aspired by the Brazilian elite in the search for transforming Brazil into a civilized and modern country. Nevertheless, by the mid-1900s onwards, this circumstance shifted towards the U.S. and the 'American way of life' that became the 'new' target for the Brazilian elite whose concerns had to do with the latest politics and economics of a globalized world and the position occupied by Brazil within this new context. The character of Maiquel is a reflection of this state-of-things.

news – the advert of the Japanese knife *Ginsu*, the soap opera *Samantha*, the news about the US president and the dollar exchange market. Influenced by all these television images, Maiquel names his daughter *Samantha* and his piglet pet *Bil*, both as a homage to the late-1960s American television program *Bewitched* and to the former American president Bill Clinton respectively.

Furthermore, in the opening sequence of the film, we see the symbol of McDonald's, one of the biggest icons of the North American culture, located in a periphery of the city of Rio de Janeiro, representing the multinational capital taking over the country. The big "M" within the *Baixada Fluminense* scenario helps the film to build a discourse that situates the globalization process as a generalized and spread one that crosses borders and also carries with it the super-valorization of consumption that in itself is characterized by the strong power of the media.

Hence, *The Man of the Year* composes many references to the North American culture by means of revealing the intensity of which Brazilians incorporate a diversity of elements from other culture in their everyday life. As much as social life becomes mediated by the global market of styles, places, and images, by international traveling, media images and linked global communication systems, the identities become more and more unarticulated, dissociated and misplaced from time, place, history and tradition and they seem to be "freely floating".

All the above remind us of Coelho's (1995) allusion to the "culture of entertainment". This enlightening concept brings the idea of references and quotations that once taken from books, have now been replaced by film and television adverts and programs. The audiovisual media (cinema and television) now accountable for producing cultural changes and "mixture", have become in charge for controlling and manipulating behavior, style, language, cultural practices, time and space perception.

Accordingly, Maiquel lives and behaves most of the time as a "transitory being". Every new affair or "impulse" demands a new identity that ends replacing the previous one. Every new identity taken by Maiquel can, in any convenient moment, be restored over again without any guarantee of success. This is exactly what the last sequence of the film comments on. Here, we see Maiquel, with his hair now colored in its original color (brown), driving a car off the city, running away from the police and the people from his community and hear his thoughts in *voice-over*:

*Life's so weird. If you let it, it flows all by itself, like a river. But you can harness it and make life your horse.*

*You make what you want out of life. Each of us chooses his fate, horse or river.*

Once more, Maiquel's own feelings are placed by the film narrative as a metaphor and also as an account of the contradictions of life, fate and identity and also people's powerlessness in controlling their own fate. This final scene is assertive in its meaning: though Maiquel has freed himself from the "trap" of his former life and identity leaving them behind, he is now "driving" towards a different (and certainly indefinable) identity and the unknown; he is in search for the possibility of one more singular life that for sure will come with its implicit risks and doubts.

The self-reflexivity that emerges from this last sequence can perhaps serve to alleviate, if only slightly, the film's tendency to make a fuss of a disarticulation which is all too common and dominant a sign in Brazilian contemporary cinema: the portrayal of crime and violence in the city (Rio de Janeiro) and its association with the complex system that brings together place, social, political and economic matters and the politics of representation of a highly multifaceted contemporary cultural identity.

## Closing up

The intention here has been to delineate the representation of "the myth" of *Rio de Janeiro, the Marvelous City* in contemporary Brazilian cinema, relating it to the typical Brazilian attitude since the early 1900s towards constructing the city of Rio de Janeiro's imagery as *the* symbol for a desirable and viable nation. The driving force at the heart of this approach was the "cultural identity crisis" that then and still nowadays determined a significant and consonant amount of transformation not only at the city's core but also in Brazil's cinematic output.

Even if the notion that films can be regarded as a way of changing people's opinion is a doubtful one, films can certainly be said to at least help inflame and stimulate the debate on a particular topic or public debate or even by preceding change in public attitudes. This can be accomplished by simply keeping the issue alive in the public arena. By fictionalizing a "real life" in a "real city" such as Rio de Janeiro, cinema – medium that reaches a wider audience – is capable to introduce, reinforce and transform interest on a specific topic.

Setting the scene for exploring the notion of the *cinematic city* within the context of the construction of "the myth" this paper pointed out that there is a fundamental interplay between the "city out there", its representation and its reading. Even for reality itself to acquire "life" and meaning, there is a need for the interpretation of its many representational counterparts. By the same token, the "real" physical city can only become "real" by its *representation* and *presentation* through different interpretations, and readings of its different layers of meanings. Therefore, any representation of the city of Rio de Janeiro within the context of the (contemporary) Brazilian cinema becomes also a fundamental part for the construction of the actual city itself and the lived experience of the individuals who inhabit this particular place.

In the case of *cinematic Rio de Janeiro* constructed in the films commented here, the kind of city, which predominantly comes up, is the one in which for the most part the city of Rio de Janeiro "plays itself" (or at least a version of itself). That is, the landmarks and locations of the city, depicted in any format as they may, draw on the "imagination of the place" that is in some manner expressive and significant of the actual city – itself related strongly with that of "the myth". Interestingly enough, the city not only "plays itself" but also plays a more pertinent part in the endorsement of the urban and modern myth that has been working as a symbolic structure that has bound people and place together for the sake of constructing both a national and a cultural identity.

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