

Elite Squad Movies and Sense of Agency in Brazil: How Fictional Narratives Contribute to Shaping Fans' Realities?

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the reception José Padilha's movies *Elite Squad* (2007) and *Elite Squad 2* (2010) received by critics, audiences and fans both in Brazil and worldwide. This analysis takes into account the fact that never, in Brazilian cinema history, a blockbuster movie with such a strong social and political content had been so polemic among critics and so successful among audiences, at the same time. In Brazil, during the past three years, because of *Elite Squad* phenomenon, not only scholars but also audiences and the media had been discussing the relation between cultural and artistic works and socio-political issues. First, I will present a brief literature review on cultural activism studies and how arts (in general) and movies (in particular) may inform political debates. Secondly, I will discuss how different perceptions on the movies' plot and narrative were constructed and then publicized through media channels—mostly on newspapers and magazines (printed and online versions), blogs and social networks. And finally, I will argue how these fiction features captivated Brazilians in such an emotional level, thus providing a narrative structure used to read events that happened in the real world. And I consider for the analysis the notion that, in Brazil, viewers who connect with a cultural product deeply enough to invest their time in participating on social networks' discussion forums, communities and groups are usually considered (by themselves and/or for society) fans and not only regular movie goers.

Keywords: Brazil; *Elite Squad*; José Padilha; Movie fans; Online Communities; Rio de Janeiro; Wagner Moura.

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1. Introduction

It has been a common sense for the media, the public and the critics to discuss that—from the mid 1990s on—most mainstream Brazilian movies tended to focus on drugs and violence. Academia also followed the concerns. Pereira (2009) discussed this subject analyzing the meanings of violence in relation to drug trafficking from the perspective of Brazilian cinema. In his opinion, the depart from Cinema Novo movement (1950s—1960s) and its hunger aesthetics to the drugs and violence aesthetics of Brazilian recent cinema—although still dealing with the question of subalternity—represents a much deeper concern with the spectacle and market dimensions of the seventh-art, thus producing more “Hollywood style” movies. Still, nothing prepared Brazilians for the phenomenon that was about to come. *Elite Squad* (*Tropa de Elite*, 2007) was an unprecedented case of a national cultural success that subverted the logic of film distribution and reception in Brazil. Audiences felt attached to the movie in a way that allowed practicably everyone—despite social, political or cultural background—to relate and (re) interpret it. People would love it or hate it, but everyone had a strong opinion about it.

But in order to understand the circumstances that fostered its fandom and how the fans’ narratives to discuss “real life” issues developed, we should take a look at the background contextualization that allowed *Elite Squad* to capture a massive nationwide attention. As I stated before, drug traffic, urban crime and violence were on the spotlight among filmmakers in Brazil since Fernando Meirelles’ *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*, 2002) and Hector Babenco’s *Carandiru* (2003) hit the screens. Why was so important to movie producers and directors to focus on these subjects? What is the status of these so-called socially engaged forms of arts in Brazil? Were the audiences really interested in their political agenda? And how the polemics with *Elite Squad* (2007) ultimately created the momentum for *Elite Squad 2* (*Tropa de Elite 2: O Inimigo Agora É Outro*, 2010) to become the biggest domestic box office of all times? This paper analyzes how fans related to both *Elite Squad 1 & 2* and how critics and audiences discussions about the movies have flown over the past three years into more overtly political conversations, with constructive or destructive discourses and consequences.

This paper is the result of an exploratory research with a cultural studies approach. Its goal is to open paths to understand the importance of what the entertainment industry would call “audience” (either the “specialized” or the general public)—but we could simply call “people”—to construct meanings and to create affections while relating to a movie so they can make sense of their life experiences and social realities. The paper is built upon media reception studies (Staiger, 2005) and Internet research (Markham; Baym, 2009). For the media reception studies I will present a narrative analysis of Brazilian and international online and print media publications that will appear throughout the following pages. When dealing with Brazilian versus international reception I will consider Stam’s (1997) contribution on film reception, especially the mediations and the cultural differences that usually intervene between social “reality” and its artistic representation and the “fidelity” of such representations. The focus is to analyze the discussion from different reception perspectives for both movies—from specialized media/journalists/film critics and general audience/fans. I have also been part of several online forums and communities in social network websites such as Orkut, Twitter and Facebook for the past years, following the release of both *Elite Squad 1* and *2*, during which I could observe people’s reaction to the movies and how these cultural products were capable of creating such a strong, diverse and broad fan base. Fan studies are a relatively new subject of study in Brazil, but scholarly work on this field has been growing lately worldwide due its social, economical and cultural relevance¹ and with this work I hope to contribute with further investigations.

2. A brief discussion on cultural activism in Brazil

Most of the recent discussions about cultural production and activism in Brazil are case studies of musical or artist collectives (Yúdice 2004; Mazetti 2008; Benassi 2009; Herschmann 2005). The literature produced in Portuguese on this subject focus on three main issues: (1) It is very difficult to define artistic or cultural activism, especially because there is no specific field dedicated to this analysis; (2) The relation between socio-politics and art is mediated by communication and technologies, thus the role of both the traditional and new media is fundamental; (3) There is a great polemic about the imbrications of politics and spectacles in our society.

Mazetti (2008) highlights that media tends to report creative, colorful, humorous and theatrical protests. And that does not mean the ludic aspects undermine their critical agenda. The tactics (De Certeau 2007) of the protestors aim to adjust their demands and concerns to the media logic in order to call attention to issues that might not get press coverage otherwise, or even might get a negative response from public opinion. Thus far, they are not being submissive, but rather communicative and creative. Foster (1996) ponders about the danger of being naive and to assume that every artistic narrative with political tone is criticizing the established power relations in society. Or to overestimate certain analysis that interpret all forms of art as resistant in their own terms. There is a certain voluntarism in some spheres of the artistic field that approaches politics with already consensual and trendy discourses. Benassi (2009) also points to the fact that being valued by the media, the actions of individuals and collectives risk caring only about what is fashionable and hip. This is a concern when discussing Brazilian cinema. But *Elite Squad's* case was a departure from the other drugs, cops and violence movies in recent Brazilian cinema history. In Brazil, the arts are situated somewhere between resistance and institutionalization but, yet, there is a potential for awareness inherent to their sociopolitical critique. The concern of artists to relate to the political environment as inspiration for their work seems to be a worldwide trend in the convergence culture not the result of individual initiatives.

Mazetti (2008) states that when it is not possible to foresee radical forms of transgression in which to put efforts, some activist artists settle for activities that aim subjective repositioning, quotidian micro politics. They do not intend to fully transform society, but they act in specific contexts aiming, if only, a displacement of sight. It is necessary to investigate how power is legitimated and naturalized nowadays but also to present ideas that disestablish common sense in an innovative way. The author also discuss how important it is for the democratization of Brazilian arts the new technologies of communication and information since they allow groups that usually never had access to the media to intervene along the institutionalized channels. Although he notes that, compared to other countries, artistic activism in Brazil has a more low-tech profile because technological equipments are still more expensive than in the United States or Europe (Mazetti 2007). Not all underprivileged groups have the technical means to speak for themselves when it comes to produce and distribute arts to massive audiences. This is a problem of inequality that Yúdice (2004) discuss deeply in his book when analyzing the funk movement in Rio de

Janeiro and the work of the NGO Afro Reggae. Middle and upper class individuals or their institutions construct most representations of violence and favelas (slums) in Brazil. That is the case of the movies. The costs to produce, shoot and distribute films are among the most expensive in cultural industries.

Rubim (2001) and Gomes (2004) discuss the critics to the spectacularization of political issues in Brazil while Herschmann (2005), De Assis (2006) and Ribeiro (2003) build a theoretical analysis of how Brazilian hip-hop movement, *City of God* (book and movie) and some contemporary cultural activists negotiate their political agendas with ludic tactics and media strategies. This body of works helps us to understand how civic engagement and direct forms of political activism relate to culture and arts discussions in the country through examples. Gomes (2004) says that politics are staged and there are imbrications between institutional politics and media culture in contemporaneity. And activism, which used to be against image manipulation, marketing and advertising now has changed its mentality trying to adjust to spectacle through institutional gaps playing with its own rules.

Rubim (2001) believes that there is no loss of legitimacy, or deflation of politics, when activism adapts to the logic of media. One must criticize the exaggerations, but he says the logic of speed and novelty observed in spectacular cultural productions is the result of an adaptation of media to the fast transformations of contemporary capitalism. The system will only sustain itself through constant reformulations, in an increasingly rapid pace. New information needs to be inserted to keep it functioning. The author also analyzes the views from spectacle by Debord (1967) and Schwartzberg (1977) among others in order to highlight the characteristic “fear” caused by its imbrications with politics. He demonstrates that spectacularization is a constant tool used by political sphere, because there is a need to transcend functionalist government agency only. The combination of spectacular actions—usually artificial, exacerbated and extraordinary—in the political arena is nothing new, but a necessary device used by policy agents to achieve their goals since ever.

The representations of violence are also a concern in other Latin American countries, especially for artists living in big cities. Villaveces-Izquierdo (2002) discusses the work of Colombian

sculptor Doris Salcedo who defies the tactics mass media uses to present real situations transforming violence in a mere spectacle and ignoring the depth of human tragedy. Salcedo believes the media do not sympathize with suffering, since it denies or is indifferent to the damages violence cause to the victims. But these critical remarks present a paradox one cannot escape: in order for the audiences deeply relate to certain works they need to have some knowledge about the current situation in urban societies and that knowledge is only available to certain people through media representations of violence. The violence is always present, and although she does not believe in a unified political artistic movement anywhere in the world, she thinks art is important as a way to provide new point of views that transform audiences in witnesses of violence. She says that although art itself does not tease viewers to act, it reveals something. For that reason it is also important to avoid political correctness when it comes to artistic expression. As *Elite Squad* shows, the same narrative can reveal different real situations to different audiences just by choosing not limit itself to a specific explicit politically correct undertone. Salcedo says, “There is another important aspect in this regard. It has to do with how the images touch the social context in which they circulate. [...] Once an image is produced, it begins to function in society in a negative or positive way, no matter what. The fact is that it starts to play a role. Images are not harmless. Some may have a meaning, but surely they may play another role” (2002, p. 55). As we will see later, this was certainly the case for *Elite Squad*.

3. The first *Elite Squad*: The creation of a (polemic) myth

Elite Squad was officially released in October 2007 in Brazil. But before that it had already become a cult movie—and a polemic one. The discussions about the movie among audiences and in the media focused mainly on three issues: (1) Did the movie become a hit because of the fact it leaked and was massively sold on pirate DVDs before its release or it would have been bigger if this episode had not happened? (2) Did it present a risky and new narrative style for Brazilian standards, which deliberately permitted multiple understandings, or was a reactionary and fascist propaganda of bad guys and good guys made just for profit purposes? (3) Is the main character a hero or a villain?

The movie tells the story of Capt. Roberto Nascimento (Wagner Moura) a BOPE official. BOPE is the Special Operations Battalion of the Military Police of Rio de Janeiro—the Elite Squad. The movie is set in 1997 and the main character narrates the events that unfold in retrospective using the first person—a narrative device that denotes the director has chosen to present the captain’s point of view. The movie develops two main plotlines, both of them complementary. First, Capt. Nascimento is preparing the police operation for the arrival of Pope John Paul II who will be staying close to a slum complex during his visit to Rio de Janeiro. The problem is that—like many lower class communities in Rio—drug dealers rule the neighborhood. Secondly, he is trying to find a new officer to replace him in BOPE because his wife is pregnant and he promised her he would quit the frontline when the baby arrives. He believes in the importance of his job, but realizes it is like fighting a war with all its contradictions. He is not dealing only with drug dealers but also with corrupt cops from other police corporations. The combination of both situations that develop simultaneously take a toll on him, hence he suffers from panic attacks during the movie.

Elite Squad is a fictional movie although some of the events and characters portrayed are inspired by real life ones. The adapted screenplay is based on the book “Elite da Tropa” (The Squad’s Elite) written by Rodrigo Pimentel, André Batista (both former police officers) and anthropologist Luiz Eduardo Soares. Most of the critics to the movie are due to the story director José Padilha and his co-writers Bráulio Mantovani (*City of God*) and Rodrigo Pimentel have chosen to tell. Basically there were three things that annoyed the critics: (1) The documentary style and fast pace giving the film a realism appeal, although its claim to be fictional; (2) It is an action cop thriller, which in Brazil means “Hollywood appeal”; (3) The decision the director made to portrait a story of military operations from the perspective of the police (with all its problems: abuse of power, violence, corruption, and even torture), while presenting a sensitive issue for Brazilians—the war on traffic. It may seem obvious that these decisions were made because of the material Padilha chose to work on to create his film. The book in which the movie was based was written by former BOPE officers. Of course, it would have been a total different movie if the book’s writers were former drug dealers, NGO workers or the mother of a kid who was murdered victim of the violence.

According to a 2009 report² published by ANCINE (Brazilian National Film Agency) about the movies that crossed the 1 million-audience mark from 1970 to 2009, Padilha's film occupies the 60th position with 2,417,754 viewers. In fact, most of the first 30 positions are occupied mainly by family movies and classics from the 1970s and 1980s. Just to put it into perspective other similar violence themed movies like *Carandiru* (4,693,853) and *City of God* (3,370,871) are in the 13th and 30th positions respectively. The other Brazilian Gold Bear winner from Berlin Festival—and Academy Award Nominee—*Central Station* (*Central do Brasil*, Walter Salles, 1998) occupies the 107th place with 1,593,967 viewers. Analyzing the list we can realize that, in recent years, audiences and the specialized critics were not giving attention to the same productions. This will change dramatically with *Elite Squad 2* in 2010. But the public still made *Elite Squad* the top box office movie of 2007 despite the massive pirated distribution before its release. And, according to Silveira (2009), *Elite Squad* is among the top five box office grossing between 1998 and 2007 with approximately R\$ 20,3 million (US\$ 12,2 million).

Most of the current articles about *Elite Squad* (2007) have been written under the light of the release of *Elite Squad 2* (2010). This is an expected situation. Journalists and critics are comparing both movies now, some with a new perspective. For now, I will discuss how the first movie was received and reviewed by national and international media between 2007 (domestic release) and 2008 (international release). It is important to note that academic and journalists' opinions are very different from fans' opinions on the movie. The readings of these arguments will show that institutional opinions are usually privileged over the opinions of fans (Jenkins 1992). Most of the critics were more concerned about the way the audiences would interpret the movie, than with the technical and artistic aspects of the movie itself.

In March 2008 Brazilian *Playboy Magazine* published an interview with director José Padilha³ summarizing the controversy his first fictional long feature was facing. 11,5 million people had seen the movie before it hit the big screens. An unauthorized rough-cut copy was stolen from the company that was responsible for the subtitles, pirated in DVD format, and sold nationwide. Before its release the movie was already being accused of glamorizing police torture and also of accusing recreational drug consumers as the only responsible for financing the traffic. Some critics labeled the director a far right reactionary and a fascist. A columnist from *Folha de São Paulo*⁴ (one of the biggest newspapers in Brazil) opened his review saying “You could not applaud

it, even under torture. Padilha's movie mimics North-American commercial cinema with schematic screenplay, mystifying moralism and, what is worse, banalizes torture". Another columnist, from Rio de Janeiro-based newspaper *O Globo*, asked "Is Elite Squad fascist?"⁵.

Of course the movie did not receive only negative reviews. An editor of *O Globo*⁶ said, "the criticism the film has received is part of a mistaken premise—they are confusing argument with director's intention. To believe that José Padilla supports the practices of BOPE because he made *Elite Squad* makes as much sense as accusing Francis Ford Coppola to have links with the Mafia because he directed *The Godfather*. The opinion-makers who have seen the movie are [...] confusing protagonists with heroes". A lot was published everywhere in the media about the pirated DVD⁷ and also the status of Capt. Nascimento as a "national hero" or a myth. Some critics questioned Brazilians' motivations to enjoy the movie; others accused audiences of not getting it. In most of his interviews, Padilha addressed the critics. He told *Folha de São Paulo* "if I knew the risks, I would not have made *Elite Squad*"⁸ (29 Aug. 2008). But when *Elite Squad* premiered in Brazil despite the piracy—and to everyone's surprise—it did incredible well in the box offices becoming an unconventional mass success. Quotes from the movie became popular mottos in every corner of the country; parodies spread all over the Internet and on TV shows; and the main character covered some of the most important newspapers and magazines. In a folkloric episode, the Ministry of Culture's (musician/politician Gilberto Gil) wife told the press that director José Padilha found a pirated DVD copy of the movie she had received from a friend on their apartment. As the countless parodies and "internal jokes" about the movie attested, Brazilian audiences apparently approached the movie mostly from a sarcastic perspective.

Padilha also discussed with *Playboy Magazine* the pirated DVD episode: "You get this dubious reaction in relation to piracy. [But] The dimension the movie achieved in the pirate market gave me the certainty that the public had accepted it". During the same interview he also addressed the other main criticism, about the reactionary and fascist issues: "I read in the *Washington Post* that the Brazilian population was radical far right because they had applauded the film. And then, suddenly, started this criticism that the problem is not onscreen, but in the audience. It inaugurated a new form of criticism, where the critic sits with his back to the screen and looks at the audience. I've been to several debates in colleges and asked, 'Who believes Captain Nascimento is a hero?' In these discussions I must have met some 6,000 students; only one girl raised her hand,

once. I wonder: ‘Where is this huge population that agrees with Nascimento?’ [They] created this idea, as if the entire Brazilian population was stupid and did not know the difference between fiction and reality”.

While promoting the movie, Padilha was constantly asked what were his opinions about the reviews it was receiving from international publications such as *Variety* (Berlin Film Festival Review: “The Elite Squad”—11 Feb. 2008)⁹, Reuters/Hollywood Reporter (“The Elite Squad” a violent shoot ‘em up—13 Feb. 2008)¹⁰, *The Guardian* (Elite Squad Review—08 Aug. 2008)¹¹, *The Observer* (Elite Squad Review—10 Aug. 2008)¹², *The New York Times* (A Violent Police Unit, on Film and in Rio’s Streets—14 Oct. 2007)¹³. He argued, “The movie has a tendency to generate extreme reactions. This happens because we chose to narrate the film from the standpoint of the violent police officers from BOPE. It is a bold decision and it assumes that the public will understand that obviously we are not endorsing this view. Our film is clearly against this view. Fifteen million Brazilians understood the movie like that. Brazilian intellectuals understood the film in their vast majority. The jury at the Berlin Film Festival got the movie. What more could I want? Nothing.”¹⁴ Also the leading actor Wagner Moura—whose outstanding acting performance made Capt. Nascimento an emblematic character—responded directly to some critics’ opinions on that matter¹⁵.

5. Elite Squad 2: Is the hero on right side?

An official government bulletin published on February 15, 2011 by the Brazilian National Film Agency (ANCINE)¹⁶ states that domestic cinema broke several records in 2010. The total public was 134,364,520 viewers and the total grossing R\$ 1,256,550,704.09 (around U\$ 754 million). It is the best result since 1982. Specialists believe the market grown is resulting of the increase of domestic productions that grew 57% in relation to 2009 presenting a total public of 25,227,757. The share of audience for Brazilian movies was 19%—the best result since 2003. *Elite Squad* was not only the top box office of the year—but also of all times breaking a 34 years old record (previously held by 1976 *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*). The movie registered 11,023,475 viewers. Also, four other movies crossed the 1 million-viewers mark in 2010.

The sequel is set nowadays. Now Lt. Col. Roberto Nascimento is divorced and estranged from his teenager son since his ex-wife married Diogo Fraga—a human rights advocate—who believes police force in Rio is cruel and Nascimento is a murderer. The action is triggered by an episode inspired by a real life event. During a rebellion in a maximum-security prison facility, Capt. André Matias—the rookie from the first *Elite Squad*—shoots a prisoner while he is negotiating with Fraga and without Nascimento's authorization. The media publishes the images of the shooting and human rights organizations condemn the police publicly. Government decides to punish the officers involved in the matter to calm down public opinion. Matias has to leave BOPE and Nascimento receives a prestigious desk job as the sub-secretary of intelligence of the Public Security State Department because the population believes he is a hero for keeping the streets safe from the criminals. Any similarity to the discussion that followed *Elite Squad* is not a mere coincidence. There is a scene in the movie when Nascimento says that there are people who believe he is a fascist. While working in a powerful government position he reinforces actions to get rid of drug trafficking in the slums. But when they arrest the drug lords, and put the police teams to work hard in the most problematic neighborhoods, he realizes that militias formed by corrupt cops start to rule these places. After all, corrupt cops are allies to corrupt politicians and he realizes there are more powerful enemies than he imagined in the first movie: the problem is not only the drug dealers and the consumers—there is a much larger and powerful scheme financing criminal activities in the city. And these people would do anything to keep things the way they are. When Nascimento finally realizes his will to end corruption can put innocent people, like his family, in danger he will start to see people like Fraga—now a state parliamentary—with other eyes.

Most of the critic interpreted the movie as redemption from *Padilha*. He explicitly addressed the questions he intentionally has chosen not to in the first movie and which were the main target of the critics. The audiences were invited by Nascimento voice-over narrative to understand how and why the things he did 13 years earlier were not solving the violence problems in Rio. The viewers—because of their affinity with Nascimento since the first movie—could feel like they were inside his head, seeing things through his eyes as events started to develop. Some have called it a cathartic movie. Former 2010 Election's President candidate Marina Silva declared, "Elite Squad 2 took my sleep and my peace away"¹⁷ (10 Oct. 2010). *Padilha* kept the same narra-

tive style in the second movie, but now most of the critics “got it”, and audiences went crazy. All over the Internet people would brag about seeing the movie 3 or 4 times.

But some critics still did not like the sequel and criticized the director because he “left no room for ambiguity and nuance this time around, betting only on his fan’s loyalty”¹⁸ (12 Oct. 2010). Padilha tried to explain his intentions on making the movie, once again. This time he wanted to show the audiences his views on the subject of corruption and violence. If the first *Elite Squad* showed Capt. Nascimento oblivion to deeper political issues and firmly believing that police reinforcement could end trafficking if everyone would do their jobs honestly and if people would stop using drugs—the sequel showed his discovering of more intricate issues. The director said, “I had already made two films about urban violence: the documentary *Bus 174* (2002), and *Elite Squad*. Both were my attempt to answer the same question: why in Rio we have such urban violence? Traditionally, there are two views: the left wing, according to which violence is a result of poverty. And the right wing that says that violence exists when it is not repressed. [But] the State turns misery into violence”¹⁹ (01 Oct. 2010).

Writer Mantovani said, “It seems that [*Elite Squad 2*] received more praise than the first. In the first movie, what surprised me the most was that such a large portion of the population has seen Nascimento as a hero. For me, he never was. He is an anti-hero, an interesting character. Interests me because he is so unlike me. He does not think like me, so he interests me. I was a bit startled by this, on one side. On the other hand, in the case of intellectuals, journalists and critics who called the film fascist, I was more scared because these people, theoretically, should know how to differentiate an author from a narrator. [...] Nascimento is the narrator of the film and he needs to say the things he thinks. What he says is not necessarily what the filmmakers think. Actually, we did what every artist should do: portray something without fear. If you want to tell a story from the perspective of a cop, you have to expose this point of view without limitations. That is what we did in the first movie and we were very misunderstood by people who were supposed to understand these things in the universe of fiction. With the second movie, this is not happening [the misunderstanding]” (“Captain Nascimento was never a hero”, says screenwriter²⁰—28 Oct. 2010).

The international media was also interested in covering the movie's premiere. Newsweek noted the importance of the movie encompassed with recent Brazilian cinema movement. They said, "In the fading hours of his presidency, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva penned a few last-minute directives for Brazil. Chief among them: increase protection from Hollywood for the country's rising film industry. He needn't have bothered; last year was a banner year for Brazilian cinema, with three national titles finishing in the top 10 moneymakers. *Elite Squad 2: The Enemy Within* was a runaway blockbuster. The sequel to a cops-and-criminals film by José Padilha, it has bagged 11.2 million viewers and more than \$60 million, trumping imported 3-D sensations like *Avatar*, *Shrek Forever After*, and *Alice in Wonderland* to become the year's top box-office draw. It was an impressive showing for a region long thought to be in thrall to Hollywood" (A Renegade in Rio²¹—06 Feb. 2011).

The Brazilian weekly magazine *Veja* reported that during a special press conference held for the foreign press, the international correspondents wanted to know if everything featured on the screen was actually true: questions on violence, drug trafficking and piracy were the themes they asked the most about (*Elite Squad 2* caught the attention of foreign press in Rio²²—07 Oct. 2010). *Hollywood Reporter* reviewed the Sundance Festival screening of Padilha's movie and attested that "Elite Squad 2 is one of the fest's most purely entertaining movies [...]. The most successful film in Brazilian film history, co-written by the 'City of God' writer Bráulio Mantovani [is] a fast-paced, hard-hitting Brazilian police thriller"²³ (30 Jan. 2011).

A Reuters correspondent also attended the festival and reviewed the movie: "The unabashedly entertaining *Elite Squad 2: The Enemy Within*, the most successful Brazilian movie in history, gave Sundance audiences a welcome break from the usual angst and weirdness. [...] A compelling cop thriller"²⁴ (31 Jan. 2011). BBC tried to explain why the movie was a box office hit²⁵: "The success of *Tropa de Elite 2* reflects the transformation that Brazil's film industry has undergone in recent decades, moving from a politically censored environment to hyper-realistic accounts of social and political issues. [...] Part of the film's success is the result of a commercial strategy. Before the film's launch, the production company waged a strong anti-piracy campaign to prevent illegal copies from reaching the Internet. [...] But much of the success of director José Padilha's sequel can be attributed to all the controversy and praise that his original film received.

The first *Elite Squad* is regarded as a powerful interpretation of Rio de Janeiro's complex police issues and is cited by numerous scholars and authorities whenever real life events unfold in the city, such as in last month's police operation in the Complexo do Alemão slum" (14 Dec. 2010).

This is one of the key elements that set *Elite Squad* apart from other Brazilian movies—even other movies with similar concerns with urban violence. It is a unique example of the way specialized critics, massive audiences (in general) and fans (in particular) used the characters, aesthetic elements and narratives to explain the real world and Brazil's social and political current situation and events—with all the complexity of such effort. It is impossible to account the amount of press the movie received—mostly in Brazil, but also internationally. These excerpts only illustrate the main issues most media channels addressed. It is important to note that in most popular Internet news portals—on the majority of articles or reviews quoted here—viewers would write in the comment boxes to state their very passionate opinions about what was written—either positive or negative responses to the movie itself or the reviews.

5. Fan's online communities and interchangeable narratives in Rio de Janeiro: Fiction versus real world

In 2010, when I started to write this paper, I posted on my Facebook page that I was excited to see how the reception of *Elite Squad 2* would be internationally. The curiosity behind my post was regarding the reviews and forum posts I have read on Internet Movie Database (IMDB) about the first *Elite Squad*. Brazilians had loved it but foreigners were not impressed—most of them would judge *Elite Squad* based on *City of God* (rated #18 on the IMDB Top 250 movies—the best position occupied by a Brazilian movie). Some discussions on the forum were about Brazilians complaining non-Brazilians would never understand the movie due to its regional discourse—an argument many agreed with. A friend, who had no idea why I was so curious about this, gave me a good perspective on the importance *Elite Squad* might have to Brazilian fans. He said, "I never thought a movie like *Elite Squad* would be an international success like *City of God* was. Fernando Meirelles' film almost takes on a tone of a fable. To foreigners (and perhaps to the filmmaker), the underlying social problems, and the slums portrait, only serve to mount an exotic backdrop to tell a great story of mob and violence, just like any other Hollywood movie. I

compare *City of God* to *Slumdog Millionaire*: two beautiful films with fable narratives amid a backdrop of real social problems (different stories, of course). *Elite Squad* is a political movie, it assumes a tone of a denounce movie much more interesting to us Brazilians than to other audiences. I think it is a commendable film because it touches on social wounds that are very important to us. But as a narrative, the film is not as attractive as *City of God*. Of course that, as a Brazilian, I think both films are laudable and I can clearly identify the differences between them. I just think that the failure of international audiences and critics to get *Elite Squad* abroad is understandable”.

I wanted to stress that testimonial to clarify that despite being common sense that each viewer will read and relate to a movie based on his/her own emotional, familiar, social, cultural and political background—while analyzing the first *Elite Squad* there is a very clear demarcation between domestic and international audience’s reception. Most of international audiences discourse about the movie would agree with some Brazilian’s critics that read the movie as propaganda for police violence and BOPE’s unorthodox methods. To discuss if this reasoning is due to a political correctness need to condemn Capt. Nascimento as the narrator it is not the intention of this paper. My guess, after reading many reviews and articles on the subject, is that Padilha and Mantovani are correct: Brazilian critics did mistake (either unintentionally or not) the narrator’s discourse by the author’s ideas. Then, international critics might have just gone with the flow. They probably have read the Brazilian critics to the movie and replicated it—creating a consensus that also influenced the viewers worldwide. Obviously personal tastes play a huge part on reception, but we can see three main trends regarding *Elite Squad* reception: Brazilian audiences applauded the movie; most Brazilian and non-Brazilian critics disliked it; and international audiences were not impressed.

Rotten Tomatoes reviews, for example, show an interesting perspective. The current Tomatometer for the movie is 53% positive reviews—being its average rate 5.1/10. The site features 34 critic’s reviews—18 fresh and 16 rotten. The audience rating is 88% (the average is 4.1/5 from a total of 13,179 users’ ratings). The difference is obvious when observed that among the users’ reviews there are a great number of Brazilian fans, while among the approved critic’s reviews there are only one Brazilian—Pablo Villaça (from *Cinema em Cena*). His rate of agreeing with

Tomatometer is 77%, although he was barely the only one who gave *Elite Squad* a 5/5 rate because the first quotation mark is reversed "It is infinitely more rewarding to watch a movie that stimulates discussion and self-analysis than one that, through cowardice or lack of ambition is limited to follow the mainstream of political correctness". The only non-Brazilian critic to also give it a 5/5 was Manohla Dargis (*New York Times*): "Elite Squad is a relentlessly ugly, unpleasant, often incoherent assault on the senses from Brazil". Most of the reviews—although some of them giving a positive rating—also featured some negative criticism. Scott Weinberg (*Cinematical*): "A very compelling movie that's almost ruined by a horrible narration track". David Jenkins (*Time Out*): "It is impressively made, but leaves a nasty taste in the mouth". Peter Bradshaw (*The Guardian UK*): "Here is the biggest, fattest, dampest squib of the week: perhaps the most disappointing film ever to have won the Golden Bear at the Berlin film festival". V.A. Musetto (*New York Post*): "For nearly two hours, Padilha bombards viewers with senseless, sickening violence for its own sake". Anthony Quinn (*Independent*): "Padilha gets as close to the daily violence as *City of God*, though this feels more like a documentary than an epic". Rich Cline (*Shadows on the Wall*): "The moral dilemmas are gripping, but the film takes itself far too seriously to ever connect with us". Nick Schager (*Lessons of Darkness*): "Padilha succumbs to monotonous, hollow flamboyance with his *City of God* clone". Cole Smithey (*ColeSmithey.com*): "The film's message is that all of society is corrupt, so it doesn't matter who gets killed. It's a propaganda movie that shows no empathy for its characters or for its audience". And, finally, Robert Koehler (*Christian Science Monitor*): "Given that Brazil, as a Latin American movie-making powerhouse, steadily produces vibrant, vital films of real impact and humanity, it's a crime itself that *Elite Squad* may be the only Brazilian film that American audiences see this year".

The reception of *Elite Squad 2* apparently is following a different path. Although not widely released yet in most countries, critics' reviews after 2011 Sundance Film Festival praised the sequel, just like Brazilian press did in 2010. But it is important to highlight that the movie is a massive success and record breaker mostly because of popular support in Brazil. Due to a strict piracy control previously to the release, audiences had to wait until the movie hit the theaters to check it out. Fans watched the movie repeatedly in the theaters. And the journalists, by realizing that the "flaws" of the original movie were addressed on the sequel, also agreed that this should

be the correct timing to praise it. For the fans, both films are regarded to be equally excellent. They do not see the difference in the narrative—rather they understand the movie in a way very similar to what Padilha expected: in *Elite Squad 2* they are witnessing Lt. Col. Nascimento's awakening to the depths of the problems which he believed were simpler while he was a BOPE captain 13 years ago. This feeling of being close to the leading character led fans to start using his point of views to explain real life situations. If the problems portrait in the movies are similar to the real ones—violent cops, military and political corruption, militias, human rights issues, and so on—reality could be read through fictional eyes.

What if Roberto Nascimento was real and dealt with the Rio de Janeiro's (and Brazilian) problems like he does in the movies? The fans were asking themselves this question and that was the problem for many critics. How can a politically incorrect cop that abused violence to destroy his enemies be regarded as a hero? Because the movie intentionally functions as a documentary-style fiction most of the critics were made as if the movie would be a documentary. Not only culture editors and journalist gave their opinions, but also political columnists—a really uncommon situation in Brazil. To the audiences, however, that was not a problem at all—they are just movies, although political ones. To use an analogy familiar with the US pop culture: to Brazilian audiences, Roberto Nascimento is a Jack Bauer kind of character.

The popular weekly magazine *Veja* also called the attention to the phenomenon of audiences reading political and military problems in Brazil through the movie's narrative. They featured Wagner Moura as Lt. Col. Nascimento on the cover calling him "The first Brazilian super-hero: He is incorruptible, relentless with the criminals and beats rogue politicians. What message the millions of Brazilians who have seen and applauded the film are sending?"²⁶ The authors wrote (p. 126-127): "Both *Elite Squad* present a complicated cop, miserable in his personal life, who commits unspeakable acts of violence. But despite that—and the disappointment he reaches at the end of the second film—he is a man who is proud of his uniform. This is a fundamental aspect for police self-esteem—and also for the health of democracy in Brazil: after all, a society that does not acknowledge its police force evidences a dangerous distrust in its own institutions. Among the millions of lawmen portrayed by American films and series, some, like Nascimento, have become iconic. For example, the cop who risks his life for honesty in *Serpico* (1973) or

Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* (1971) who strongly defended the rights of the victims but was very flexible with the rights of criminals. These figures came to icon status because they echo a yearning that exists in reality. And the Brazilian reality is complex. [...] Lt. Col. Nascimento, in short, is a hero of the Brazilian tragedy”.

As observed among Brazilian users on the popular social network Orkut, there are more than 1,000 communities (discussion groups) devoted to the movies. Among the largest ones: “Tropa de Elite” is dedicated to both movies and accounts 387,660 members; “Tropa de Elite II”, which is dedicated only to the sequel, has 148,012 members. But the most curious case is the community “Tropa de Elite 3” with its 66,789 members and a description that features “The battle is now live”—a clear reference to the real life events that happened at Complexo do Alemão slums in Rio de Janeiro (November 2010). In these communities users discuss everything related to the movies. There are topics debating who are the real life inspirations to fictional characters—Nascimento, Fraga, some of the criminals, the journalists, deputies, and so on; who is to blame about the crisis in Rio—the State, politicians, police, media, criminals, drug users. They argue if Nascimento is part of the solution or part of the problem and if the violence he uses is justified—is Rio in war, after all? They also have fun campaigning, for example, to build a statue of Capt. Nascimento in Rio inspired by a similar demand of *Robocop* fans to build one in Detroit²⁷. Fans questioned if the police actions in Rio during the invasion of Complexo do Alemão were triggered because of the movie—and also if the city's population applauded the troops' actions because of a positive image that was fostered after the movies. And also what recent events could be featured in a possible third sequel.

In Twitter, during the days the military invasion in Rio's slums unfolded the hash-tags #tropaelite3D or #tropa3D were used to refer to the real life operations and became trending topics. Eliane Brum analyzed the “3D Elite Squad”²⁸ phenomenon in *Época Magazine* (06 Dec. 2010). She also noted that countless reporters were mentioning the movie while explaining the events they were witnessing live. Rodrigo Pimentel, the former ex-BOPE captain who wrote the book the first movie was based on, was daily on TV news programs to discuss the operations. That situation reinforced the association between the movie and reality. BOPE troops were cheered on the streets and population called the police direct lines to provide as much infor-

mation as possible about the activities of the criminals. Brum questioned if “Capt. Nascimento has any influence on the public support to operations in Rio?”

Actor and producer Wagner Moura who has a B.A. in journalism wrote an editorial that was published in major newspapers asking the population to “Take it Easy”²⁹ (05 Dec. 2010). He said that the police interventions through the UPPs (the governmental program called Pacification Police Units) in Rio de Janeiro were only the first step: “The coverage major media outlets have given to police operations is of a dangerous triumphalism that might induce a simplistic solution. [...] The state needs to do this in full. [...] Poorer communities have to stop being treated like a police matter. They need hospitals, sanitation, employment, sport, entertainment and especially education and culture. Just as it is better not to let the guns enter the communities instead of having to shoot them back; it is best to care for the young kids from the slums to have alternatives before they become one of those 100 criminals running and hiding from the police like we saw on TV”.

I will agree with Brum on her analysis of the whole episode. She says, “Real life does not fit in black and white. Something always leaks through the gray margins. In this sense I think it is important, with all the other questions, to try to understand how *Elite Squad*—the double movie phenomenon—provided a symbolic support to the operations in Rio. Not just for what the movies said, but the way they were decoded and reworked by the population. Or, to put on another terms, it is always worth thinking about the truth of fiction and falsification of reality. It is highly significant that the creators of the most important spectacle of decade—and perhaps in the history of Brazilian cinema—are those who try to remember all the time in debates, interviews and articles that what we have seen in real life is not spectacle. But the creators do not have control over the creature. In the hands of the people, politicians and the media it becomes what one wants or needs. It is a pity that the gray areas of *Elite Squad 1* and *2*—so multiple and so rich—have been swept aside in favor of black and white, always the easiest path”.

6. Conclusion

The theoretical discussions cited throughout this paper and the media reception analysis of *Elite Squad* movies point to what we could draw from Herschmann (2005): that spectacle seems to indicate the contemporary emergence of a new political arena—the media—and the importance of the cultural sphere or the cultural factors as vectors capable of effectively mobilize social actors. The assumption that guides his argument is that spectacularization and high visibility, built in the media environment, are strategic for discourses and political actions to achieve success today. The author assumes that spectacle is a trait that characterizes contemporary society, but that it does not necessarily reflect only negative aspects to be extirpated. Spectacle must always be examined critically, but it is true that its agency can be used by different social actors and organizations being in service of social norms or for the construction of new perspectives or critical actions that put on the agenda claims of different social groups. More than performance, we deal today with spectacular situations that permeate our daily dramas in the world to the point where the social life and the self, in a sense, became a movie. There is a blur separating one side of the screen and the other—the limits between fiction and real life are not clear anymore.

This is particularly observed when we discuss the complementarities of the narratives of *Elite Squad* and during the police actions that took place in Rio de Janeiro in November 2010. Also, very important to the movie analysis is the remark that in Brazil, in recent years, there has been an official effort from the government (especially since President Lula da Silva was elected) to make the social peripheries more visible. And if, on one hand, very often the popular classes are stigmatized. On the other side, when minorities have their issues shown in the media (in both new and traditional channels), they start to recognize themselves as active agents in the process of building citizenship. Media and cultural industries often demonize or glamorize the sociopolitical excluded but, at least, certain cultural products raise awareness to the public sphere and the middle and upper classes that citizenship must be seriously discussed in the country in order to effective changes to happen.

De Assis (2006, p. 55) reminds us that “the pleasure in being a political actor with relevance to the society in which one is inserted and the pleasure of mixing pleasure itself (music and colors,

feelings and emotions, drama and spectacle) with politics is a contemporary principle still considered as "radical". The future that the media activism wants has got to be enjoyable. I agree that social stigmatization and the transformation of social issues in cultural products are polemic subjects, and not only in Brazil. But I also believe that it is positive that due to complex pictures it is possible that today we can see the residents of real-life places like Cidade de Deus or Complexo do Alemão discussing on its effects and inaccuracies, trying to define where, when and how they wish to speak of their community. The same happens to the much wider phenomenon of Elite Squad not only in Rio de Janeiro, but also all over Brazil. Among the multiple possible interpretations opened by the movies about the intersections of urban violence and political corruption the debate is important to the consolidation of a very young democracy.

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