

# NGO-Action: Urban Activism in Brazilian Film and Society

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**Abstract** In recent years there has been a boom of films about social exclusion and violence in Rio de Janeiro, a city that is a postcard of the socio-political contradictions plaguing Brazil. With this a new cadre of characters has emerged: the urban social activists associated with non-governmental organizations, or NGOs (or “ONGs” in Portuguese) who serve as a narrative link between viewers and the drug traffickers, prison inmates, street children, police, and residents of favelas portrayed in these films. This article focuses on the presence of these urban social activists and the organizations they represent to explore linkages between filmmaking, community activism, entertainment, and solidarity in three films set in Rio: *Tropa de Elite* (Padilha, 2007), *Falcão: Meninos do Tráfico* (MV Bill and Athayde, 2006), and *Favela Rising* (Zimbalist and Mochary, 2005). Laying out scholarly formulations for evaluating films about poverty in Brazil side by side with arguments about humanitarian activism not only draws attention to the dangers of superficiality in action and art for reinforcing oppression but also underscores the benefits of deep and persevering solidarity for working against it-in social activism, filmmaking, and other artistic and scholarly investigation.

**Key words** Brazilian film, urban activism, social exclusion, favela, relational philosophy

Everything seems tailor made to go wrong. But there is utopia. Persistent oddballs believe in transformation.

—Grupo Cultural Afro-Reggae (“Manifesto”)<sup>1)</sup>

It is not enough simply to confront external violence. We must also dig out the roots of violence in our own hearts in our personal agendas, and in our life projects.

—Leonardo Boff <sup>2)</sup>

## I. Introduction

The last fifteen years or so has witnessed a boom of films about social exclusion and violence in Brazil in the context of the country’s urban *favelas*, or squatter towns. While such films have been a staple throughout the history of Brazilian cinema, particularly in the Cinema Novo movement of the 60s, amidst the somewhat depoliticized context of social action in recent times many of the new films feature a new cadre of characters in the struggle for social justice in the country: urban social activists. Films featuring urban social activists include commercial productions like *Tropa de Elite* and *Tropa de Elite 2: O Inimigo Agora é Outro* (José Padilha 2007; 2010), *Última Parada 174* (Bruno Barreto 2008), and *Quanto Vale ou é Por Quilo* (Sérgio Bianchi 2005), domestic documentaries like *Ônibus 174* (José Padilha 2002) and *Falcão: Meninos do Tráfico* (MV Bill and Celso Athayde 2006), and international documentaries like the German documentary *Warrior of Light* (Monika Treut 2001), the American film *Favela Rising* (Jeff Zimbalist and Matt Mochary 2005), and the Oscar-nominated *Waste Land* (Lucy Walker 2010), a British-

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1) “Tudo parece, sob medida, para dar errado. Mas há utopia. Loucos insistentes acreditam na transformação.” All translations are my own.

2) Boff, “Active Nonviolence and the Moral Power of the Poor,” p. ix.

Brazilian production.

This crop of new films has accompanied a larger shift in social activism in Brazil itself. Whereas in prior decades much humanitarian activism in Brazil was often undertaken in the spirit of Marxism and Liberation Theology, activism since the 90s has turned from more explicitly ideological stances to embrace a more general commitment to the reduction of social exclusion and violence by promoting human rights, education, health, and *cidadania*, or “citizenship”, especially among disenfranchised groups such as residents of favelas, prison inmates, and street children. Never before has Brazilian society invested so heavily in social programs (to varying degrees of success and/or failure), many which depend upon partnerships between state entities, private enterprise, and not for profit non-governmental organizations in favelas.<sup>3</sup>

As Brazil’s remarkable, albeit unsteady, economic growth and increasing weight in regional and international politics has brought the country to a previously unheard of level of international prominence—bolstered by its hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio—such non-profits have played an expanding role as intermediaries between government and civil society (McCann, 149-163). Many of the country’s

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- 3) On a nationwide level, the Programa de Aceleramento de Crescimento 1 and 2 (PAC 1 and 2) have funded massive renovations in infrastructure throughout the country, including many of Rio’s favelas (Daflon). The Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora, or UPPs as they are called (Units of Pacifying Police) in Rio have begun bringing community policing initiatives and social services to several of Rio’s favelas (Misse). In the current climate of governmental scandals, socio-political unrest, and economic crisis in Brazil, however, wide-reaching cuts in spending are projected that are likely to greatly reduce the scope of such programs.
  - 4) Several of these NGOs were founded in direct response to the climate of out-of-control violence in the ‘80s and ‘90s, either in connection with the extremely high murder rates in the city more generally or specific episodes of shocking police violence, like the massacre of eight street children at Candelária Church and the slaughter of 21 innocent residents the following month in Vigário Geral, one of more than 1200 *favelas*, or squatter

best-known non-governmental organizations, or NGOs (called “ONGs” in Portuguese) are in Rio.<sup>4</sup> Such organizations have grown so common, in fact, that in Brazil today the term ONG (pronounced in English roughly as “ong-ee”) is now common vocabulary throughout the society. Even the term *ongueiro* has gained currency as a moniker for a person working with an ONG.

The treatment of violence and social exclusion in recent Brazilian films has sparked wide disagreement about the relationship between entertainment and commercial exploitation, on the one hand, and political consciousness, solidarity, and social action on the other. This has left filmmakers to answer allegations of sometimes seeking box office success and popularity through their movies at the expense of the poor by, intentionally or not, reinforcing the glaringly unequal social relations in Brazil instead of interrogating them. Such has been the case whether or not they have made explicit claims to social consciousness raising or not, due to the tendency of contemporary scholarship to scrutinize artistic expressions for their ideological dimensions in reinforcing or challenging the inequitable status quo.

In a similar manner, scholars studying the attitudes and actions of humanitarian workers and ONGs often criticize them too, claiming that many times their efforts actually serve more to exacerbate injustices than to correct them. In light of such charges, activists and organizations frequently come under fire for advocating concepts deemed to be unidirectional, paternalistic, or even “neo-liberal”, such as “development”, “empowerment”, and “personal responsibility”. Conversely, these critics

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towns, in the greater Rio area. Journalist Zuenir Ventura’s classic 1994 bestseller *Cidade Partida* included details on the rise of NGOs as the result of these incidents, such as Viva Rio, today one of the largest non-profits in Rio. Some of Rio’s largest NGOs are secular in nature, while others have a religious affiliation. Other well-known NGOs in Rio include Viva Comunidade, the Associação São Vicente de Paulo, Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Casa Espírita Tesloo, and the Santa Casa da Misericórdia do Rio de Janeiro.

argue, NGOs ought to be employing operational strategies aimed at whole-scale societal transformation from the bottom up and from the inside out.

As a means for exploring linkages between filmmaking, entertainment, and solidarity underlying portrayals of urban social activists in films about social exclusion and violence in Rio in this essay, I evoke the philosophy of dialogue of Martin Buber—or his relational philosophy, as it is sometimes called. An Austrian-Jewish philosopher, theologian, educator, and activist, Buber is best-known for the now classic *I and Thou*, first published in German, in 1923, then in English, in 1937. Buber’s point of departure was the assertion that as human beings we address existence through two attitudes: the “I and It”, through which we regard others and the world around us empirically as “objects”—or at best individuals—and the “I and Thou”, through which we turn towards others relationally as “persons”. Although he considered the “I and It” attitude indispensable for human existence, true life for Buber only came about as we employed the relational “I and Thou” attitude, as he asserted in his famous statement that, “All real living is meeting” (11). His dialogical view stressed community, reciprocity, mutuality, and cooperation as necessary ingredients for what Buber considered authentic encounters, or what he termed “*Begegnung*”, and as the basic components of social justice and more peaceful coexistence, more generally (3-11).<sup>5)</sup>

Drawing upon such a dialogical stance to illustrate these connections, I will examine scenes from three important films featuring activists in Rio’s NGOs, each chosen as what I regard as representative of a different arrangement of relationships between people across the social spectrum

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5) By social and global justice I am extrapolating on Buber’s ideas on dialogue to refer in a generalized sense to the eradication of historical inequalities based on gender, sexual orientation, race, caste, age, religion, ability, or nationality and to a peaceful coexistence of people with each other and with the world around us.

who come together in the struggle for social and global justice. Just as the NGOs depicted in the films can be classified according as “outside in”, “inside out”, or “two-way”, so too can the films themselves. *Tropa de Elite* represents an “outside in” NGO run by privileged white and middle-class university students. Not only do they come from outside of the favela in a geographical sense, they interact in a unidirectional fashion in a sort of monologue directed at local favela residents, who in this sense are dealt with by them more as recipients of aid than as partners.

*Falcão: Meninos do Tráfico* depicts an “inside out” organization run by poor, Black activists from favelas. These activists are similarly distanced from their interlocutors in other social classes geographically-interlocutors they also approach through a largely unidirectional posture that positions the outsider as a recipient of their knowledge and experience rather than as a true partner. Despite its limitations as an “outside in” film, the documentary *Favela Rising* presents an NGO that synthesizes these “outside in” and “inside out” views into a “two-way” vision of solidarity built upon cooperative partnerships between people not only coming from disparate geographical communities but also who are more fully engaged in genuine dialogue with others across the social and political strata.

## II. *Tropa de Elite*: An “Outside In” NGO and an “Outside In” Film

-*Background.* Known as *Elite Squad* in English, this commercial film by José Padilha was the highest grossing domestic film in Brazil in 2007 and was widely viewed outside of Brazil, often billed as the other side of the coin to the gangsters’ story told in *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*, 2002). Its focus is the “elite squad” of its title, the BOPE (Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais), the tactical unit of Rio’s Military Police similar to the SWAT in

the United States, and its war on the factions of drug traffickers controlling hundreds of favelas throughout the city. The real life BOPE is highly controversial for its military-style operations, frequently involving large-scale gun battles against the notoriously well-armed traffickers, and its use of machines of war like armored helicopters and ground assault vehicles in low-income communities. The film's portrayal of officers of the BOPE shooting first and asking questions later as they invade favela communities, torturing potential informants as they go, is just as controversial.

Padilha's idea for *Tropa de Elite*, his first feature length film, came about as the result of his friendship with Rodrigo Pimentel, a former BOPE officer featured in Padilha's *Ônibus 174*. Padilha first came to know Pimentel through João Moreira Salles and Kátia Lund's 1999 documentary, *Notícias de Uma Guerra Particular*, in which Pimentel appears as a representative of the police. For *Tropa de Elite*, Padilha wrote the film with Pimentel and Bráulio Mantovani, of *Cidade de Deus* fame. Upon release of the film, many Brazilians embraced Capitão Roberto Nascimento (Wagner Moura), the film's narrator and main character, as an anti-crime hero (see Faria). Some critics accused Padilha of straying away from the social protest of his documentary *Ônibus 174* in favor of commercial interests and a somewhat fascist take on crime and police (see Caldas).<sup>6</sup> Others, like Padilha himself, consider the film to be a blatant condemnation of police brutality and impunity.<sup>7</sup>

-*Story*. Set in 1998 during a mission of the BOPE to pacify key favelas in advance of a visit by Pope John Paul II to Rio, the film is narrated by Captain Nascimento, an officer of the BOPE. Nascimento is in the midst of a

6) An example of the more favorable reception of Padilha's *Ônibus 174* by film scholars is Lorraine Leu's exploration of the film as a healing gesture for victims of violence by serving to offer "multiple acts of witnessing" (181).

7) Padilha makes this clear in an in-depth interview by talk show host Jó Soares on the TV show, *Programa do Jó* (aired October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007).

personal crisis as a man living at once in a state of war in the BOPE's almost daily invasion of favelas and in civil society at the same time. Expecting a baby with his wife, Rosane (Maria Ribeiro), he seeks a replacement and brings two younger officers into the BOPE, lifelong friends André (André Ramiro) and Netinho (Caio Junqueira). André, an Afro-Brazilian officer of the Military Police (PM) of working class origins, studies Law at night at Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), an elite university located in Rio's luxurious Gávea neighborhood. After developing a romantic interest in Maria (Fernanda Machado), he begins to associate with her and her group of friends, fellow white middle and upper class Law students.

The group volunteers at a fictitious NGO called the Núcleo de Democratização da Cultura, located in a real-life favela called Morro dos Prazeres in Rio's Santa Teresa neighborhood. André is afraid to tell Maria and his other classmates he is a police officer or that his goal is to join the BOPE. When local drug traffickers see his face in the paper in a story about a police invasion of another favela, they become furious at the young students for bringing him into the favela. Baiano (Fábio Lago), the drug lord of the Prazeres, orders his men to take the director of the NGO, Rodrigues (André Felipe), and his girlfriend, Roberta (Fernanda de Freitas), to the top of the hill for execution. Rodrigues' "friendship" with the crime boss, with whom he snorts cocaine in an earlier scene, does not save him or Roberta. In one of the most horrific scenes of the movie, the gangsters burn the couple to death in a pile of tires, in what is known in Rio gang culture as the *micro-ondas*, or "microwave".

André's first visit to the NGO, located towards the entrance of the favela, is perhaps the most compact expression of the components of the role of urban social activists in the film. Upon his arrival, Maria introduces him to Rodrigues, the white, middle-class director of the NGO. Later that night as



they exit the NGO, Maria offers to take André further up the hill and into the favela to the house of a young boy who is her student at the NGO. Before they get very far, she stops and chats with an armed soldier of the drug gang, addressing him by name, Tinho (Patrick Santos), and asking him if he got a good grade on a test he had taken. Rodrigues perceives André's reluctance to enter the favela further. He puts his arm around him and says, "Don't worry about going up. The guys here are socially conscious. You can relax".<sup>8</sup> Rodrigues kisses Maria twice on the cheeks, saying goodbye, and heads off with volunteers Edu (Paulo Vilela) and Roberta. André goes a bit further with Maria, but when he sees more armed drug traffickers, he stops and tells her he needs to get his friend's car back to him, that he will not be able to go to the boy's house. He offers to take her student, who suffers from poor vision, for an eye exam and to buy some glasses, saying that someone did a similar act of kindness for him when he was young.

As André kisses Maria goodbye and shakes the hand of the boy, the narrator, Captain Nascimento, says in a voiceover, "No one starts an NGO in a favela without the drug lord's permission. That 'socially conscious' talk is just hypocrisy. For me, a dealer is a dealer".<sup>9</sup> The scene cuts to a group of armed gangsters smoking a joint in a back alley somewhere up the hill as Rodrigues, Edu, and Roberta approach. They all shake hands, kiss and hug one another affectionately. Rodrigues says, "Looks like it snowed here in the favela!"<sup>10</sup> Baiano offers him a mirror with several thick lines of cocaine, which Rodrigues then begins to snort. Baiano is wearing a red t-shirt with Ché Guevara's iconic image on it. Edu hands Baiano a plastic baggy fill with

8) "Pode subir tranquilo, sacou? A galera aqui no morro tem consciência social. Tá em casa. Fica tranquilo".

9) "Ninguém faz ONG em favela sem autorização do dono do morro. E esse papo de 'consciência social' é uma puta de uma hipocrisia. Para mim, traficante é traficante".

10) "Pelo que tô vendo nevou aqui na montanha, né?"

money he has earned selling pot at the university and is given two packs of merchandise in tightly wrapped, packed squares. All the while, narrator Nascimento makes a speech about how the true root of the drug wars in Rio are the middle-class users and dealers who have no excuse for their behavior.

-“*Outside In*” NGOs: Nascimento’s regrets regarding the NGO parallel some of the real life criticisms of non-profits from theorists of social action in their interrogation of concepts like development, philanthropy, and charity, which allegedly obfuscate economic and political differences between people who are “helping” and people who are being “helped” and ultimately serve to reinforce racial and class-based inequalities. Unlike Nascimento’s right wing point of view, however, much of the scholarly questioning of these practices has its roots in Marxist concepts like false-consciousness, via Paulo Freire’s concern with what he terms the “false generosity” typical of charity of the oppressor, as opposed to authentic love and the revolutionary consciousness love entails (39-40).

In her study of the roles of non-professional activists in transnational partnerships in humanitarian work, Tara Hefferan points out that despite the liberating rhetoric of social action carried out under the banner of “development”, in practice the development model often reinforces “Western values of science, rationalism, ‘progress’ and social engineering”, as well as the neo-liberalism at the heart of the status quo society (70). Hefferan is quite scathing in her remarks. Referring to efforts of individual non-professionals who embody such visions in their own charity work, she puts quotes around the word “help” to point out that in her estimation such actions actually work against the equality, mutual trust, and cooperation necessary for solidarity and real social progress, irrespective of the intentions of the activist.

In terms reminiscent of Buber’s twofold thinking, Timothy G. Fogarty

offers an eloquent and convenient means for framing such differences in terms of “altruism” versus “solidarity” in his work on the relationships between local Nicaraguans working in NGOs and short-term, international volunteers, or “voluntourists”. According to Fogarty, “Altruism is fundamentally a unidirectional impetus of the human spirit to reach out and help other human beings by supplying all or part of their necessities out of one’s surplus. The interior disposition of altruistic giving is often one of gratitude to some higher power for their own prosperity and sympathy for their fellow human being’s plight” (91). In contrast, solidarity is driven by a more radical, dialogical impetus to enter into relationships with others for mutual benefits resulting in, “a sharing of material and spiritual resources” (92).

Fogarty’s emphasis on the economic and political dimensions of social injustice leads him to firmly advocate for the solidarity model over altruism. Even so, he does not completely condemn altruism but offers a nuanced view that recognizes something of a continuum between the two poles in the attitudes and behaviors of individual activists and in the institutional cultures of most of the NGOs he studied and the volunteers working with them. In a similar discussion, Liberation Theologian Leonardo Boff (quoted at the top of this essay) echoes the two-way nature of relations of true solidarity, writing: “If they come to help, it won’t work. Better that they stay where they are. If they are coming to interact, and to help everyone learn mutually, then welcome!” (“Reflections” 18).

-*Tropa’s* NGO. The NGO portrayed in *Tropa de Elite* seems to corroborate such concerns. For openers, there is no evidence of anyone from the favela of Prazeres helping run it. Since Rodrigues is never said to be from a favela or shown with anyone besides middle-class volunteers and gangsters, the impression given by the film is that he too is an outsider. He is a bit older than the other *ongueiros* and does not appear with them in their classes at

PUC or in their study group at the NGO, in which they pass around a marijuana joint. Because his short scenes are the only glimpse the spectator has of Rodrigues, it's difficult to even rate him in terms of Fogarty's spectrum between altruism and solidarity. He is portrayed as being more interested in adventure and entertainment than profound personal and societal transformation. The facile academic platitudes of the students around him only solidify his misreading of things, as does his friend Edu's involvement in selling pot for Baiano at PUC.

While Maria may be somewhat naïve in the total sense of safety she conveys, she doesn't do drugs with the gang or sell drugs for them and in fact seems to enjoy a genuine connection with people in the community. But her interaction does seem to be something of the unidirectional sort pointed to by Fogarty as altruistic. The film never shows her as a learner who listens to the everyday people around her as equals. She is never seen seeking out individuals in the favela with life wisdom beyond her own. As a result, viewers are left with a question as to the depth of her relationships with members of the favela community around her.

*Tropa's* depiction of this NGO is a parable of the potential pitfalls and challenges facing NGOs in Rio's favelas today, in particular those run and operated by middle and upper class urban social activists (whether or not they are Brazilians). It serves as a warning about the blurry edges between entertainment and social action for outsiders coming in and out of the territories of oppression on similar terms, like favela tourists, short-term vacation volunteers, journalists, researchers, and filmmakers like Padilha himself, who is of middle-class background. Interaction between these people and local favela residents offers opportunities as never before for the creation of greater solidarity and social justice. But just as easily the entertainment value of social activism can make it a commodity and a source of conflict and exploitation that separates people more than it brings them

together. The “outside in” approach of social activism carries with it the risk of reducing would be solidarity to the level of commercial transactions, setting up a relationship between the activist as buyer and the community agent as vendor.

- “*Outside In*” *Films*. Such concerns about the interaction between media portrayals of violence and poverty and the realities of social exclusion are at the heart of today’s burgeoning literature on contemporary Brazilian film. Indeed, they have led many scholars to contrast the engaged stance of the explicitly political films of the Cinema Novo and the entertainment-driven films of the *Retomada*, a term used for the revival in Brazilian cinema since the early 90s, typically characterized by a more personalized, intimate gaze.

In her work on cinematic depictions of Brazil’s semiarid *sertão* backlands and the favelas in the cities, Ivana Bentes laments the loss of revolutionary consciousness of newer films and their complicity with the mainstream, status quo order. Her point of departure is the “aesthetics of hunger” (or “*estética da fome*”), articulated by Cinema Novo director Glauber Rocha in 1965 in his manifesto of the same title. Bentes argues that despite their trappings as social protest, in the rebirth of Brazilian cinema since the mid-90s films replaced Rocha’s Marxist-inspired vision with an exploitive, commercially driven, and voyeuristic “cosmetics of hunger” (or “*cosmética da fome*”). This new aesthetic romanticizes poverty, she argues, making it seem inevitable, and lulls audiences into a stupor of conformity, leaving them to relate to misery and violence “[...] through pride, fascination and horror [...]” (Bentes “*Favelas e Sertões*”, 249).<sup>11</sup> New films have either deserted the low-budget, handheld style of filming of Cinema Novo, she argues, like the

11) Bentes’ full quote, in Portuguese reads, “É nesse contexto, de uma cultura capaz de se relacionar com a miséria e violência com orgulho, fascínio e terror, que podemos analisar os filmes brasileiros contemporâneos que se voltam para esses temas”.

picturesque and panoramic extreme wide shots of the Northeastern backlands in Walter Salles's Oscar nominated *Central do Brasil* (1999), or used it in the service of entertainment, as in Fernando Meirelles' classic about drug traffickers *Cidade de Deus*.<sup>12</sup>

Marta Peixoto is similarly concerned about the potentially harmful impact of the portrayals of social exclusion and violence of recent Brazilian films. For her, many of these films represent poor people in terms of dehumanizing stereotypes that work against increased awareness and threaten to worsen social divisions and violence instead of lessening them (170-78). Ester Hamburger makes a related point in her article "Violência e Pobreza no Cinema Brasileira Recente: Reflexões Sobre o Espetáculo", in which she suggests that while true to the gravity of the situation, the somewhat one-dimensional realism of many contemporary films contributes to perpetuating unproductive caricatures (124). Although less harsh in his criticism, Ismael Xavier makes a similar point in arguing that the treatment of social and political questions in these films is often reduced to a primarily ethical and psychological treatment (61-62).

In light of such criticisms, while Padilha's film denounces this attitude in the culture of Rio's NGOs, his approach in making the film, at least in regards to poverty, it can be said to embody an "outside in" orientation in a similar way. One result is that residents of favelas are presented in stereotypical ways that can reinforce the use of extreme violence against those communities and the acceptance of such violence by mainstream society. As a filmmaker/ activist himself, Padilha has done some important work on poverty, not just *Ônibus 174* but also through his work directing other films like *Garapa*, from 2009, and *O Segredo da Tribo*, from 2010. But

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12) She makes a similar argument in an English language chapter appearing in Lúcia Nagib's *The New Brazilian Cinema* (Bentes "The Sertão and the Favela", 121-138).

making movies about social exclusion and violence does not mean a person has experience about those subjects, any more than it does for a film critic to watch such movies. In the end, by presenting a cadre of such stereotypically idealistic and ethically ambivalent characters, the one-time socially engaged documentary filmmaker Padilha runs the risk that the film's audiences will miss a unique opportunity to reflect at a deeper level on their own attitudes and unwitting complicity with Brazil's social ills.

### III. Falcão: Meninos do Tráfico

-*Background.* This documentary follows the lives of 17 *falcões*, or “falcons”, a slang name given to the youths of Rio's favela drug gangs who keep lookout for police and rival gangs. Popular rapper turned activist MV Bill (Alex Pereira Barbosa), of the Cidade de Deus neighborhood, made the film with his business partner and fellow activist Celso Athayde. During filming, which took place from 1998-2006, 16 of the youths were killed and one was arrested. The film was aired on Brazil's premiere television network, Globo, on one of its highest rated shows, a Sunday evening feature news program called *Fantástico*. The representation of the NGO in *Falcão* is more complex than in *Tropa*, since it barely mentions the organization directly or explains its connection to the film, which CUFA (Central única das Favelas) produced in the spirit of promoting human rights. Instead, this background is left to shine through in indirect ways and is explained in the various extraneous materials such as the extras included with the DVD version or the many news stories about the film in television and print sources and on the Internet.

MV Bill and Celso Athayde founded CUFA in 1999 in the Cidade de Deus neighborhood. According to its website, the organization works with local youths with digital media, hip hop music, and street basketball, among other

activities in education, sports, culture, and citizenship, all “with a local labor force”, or “com mão de obra própria” (“A CUFA”). Today, CUFA has offshoot centers in all 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District.

In addition to being about the 17 falcões, the story of the film is inseparable from that of its directors and their NGO. In part, this is because of the fame of MV Bill as a Brazilian rapper and his claim to legitimacy as a native of the Cidade de Deus. It was made as part of a larger project MV Bill and Celso Athayde carried out through CUFA called Projeto Falcão. In addition to releasing the DVD in 2006, they also put out a book of the same name telling of the story of the making of the film, featuring greater detail and more information about the gang youths featured, and a hip hop album titled *Falcão: O Bagulho É Doido*.<sup>13)</sup>

-*Story*. The film delivers on its promise of a raw, intimate portrait of the lives of the lookouts. *Falcão: Meninos do Tráfico*, like the book that documents it, is a gut-wrenching and compelling portrayal of Rio’s gang members. Both present one heartbreaking scene after another, like the scenes of Thiago’s mother as she goes through a drawer of his clothes that she hasn’t opened since he was shot to death in front of their house months earlier. She proudly shows a picture of the graduation ceremony of his fourth grade class, taken the last time he ever went to school. In another stirring moment of the film, Bill asks one of the youths what he would do if he were not in the gang and the boy answers that he would like to be a circus clown. Sadly, this boy is the only one of the 17 falcões still alive at the end of filming, in part because he is incarcerated. The film has several provocative and sobering moments that bring home the sense of powerlessness that pervades the boys’ lives. Some

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13) Their earlier book, *Cabeça de Porco*, co-written by sociologist and former Secretary of Security for the State of Rio de Janeiro Luiz Eduardo Soares, was also about the lives of youths involved in crime.



lines from the film express such a feeling very succinctly: “I’m with the drug traffickers for my mom. My mom has done everything for me, now I have to do something for her”; “I never met my dad, I don’t know if he’s alive or dead. I’m 17 and until today I’ve never had a birthday party. Nobody ever did a birthday party for me”; and “If I die, another will be born in my place just like me, not any better or worse. If I die, I’ll be at rest”.<sup>14)</sup>

The film itself subtly ties together this backdrop of grass-roots community activism and the story of the youths in crime four times, once in the beginning and three times at the end. The opening sequence begins immediately after the title screen, with no credits in between. MV Bill speaks to the camera from inside a moving car in a sort of prologue to the film that sets it up in terms of the significance of the problem and the project. This is an interesting mixture of a natural sound approach that only uses dialogue and sounds captured in locus of the participants of the production and the ambience surrounding them. By omitting any sort of introduction of MV Bill as the director, he is made out to be a participant, instead of a filmmaker studying or portraying someone else. It’s a subtle but engaging technique to draw viewers in, leaving them to wonder just who MV Bill is in relation to the film, why he’s in a car, where he’s going and what he’s doing. It also gives him a way to legitimate the authenticity of the film by appealing to his reputation, since many people in Brazil already knew him at the time, or had at least seen or heard of him. His stature as an Afro-Brazilian hip hop musician from the Cidade de Deus also provides him with a high degree of credibility.

The first item listed in the closing credits is the production, attributed to

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14) “Eu trafico pela minha mãe. Minha mãe fez tudo por mim, agora tenho que fazer alguma coisa por ela”; “Não conheci meu pai, não sei se tá vivo ou se tá morto. Tenho 17 anos e, até hoje, nunca tive um aniversário. Ninguém fez um aniversário pra mim”; and “Se morrer, nasce outro que nem eu, pior ou melhor. Se morrer, vou descansar”.

the “Central única das Favelas”, using the full name of the NGO with no web address or explanation. As the credits role on half of the screen, the other half displays scenes of the lives of the young gang members featured in the documentary. MV Bill’s song “O Bagulho é Doido” plays in the background. The song is a sort of sonic montage of phrases of the type said by the young lookouts of crime shown in the film. In the final frame the words Central única das Favelas appear, along with its initials CUFA, and web address ([www.cufa.org](http://www.cufa.org)), with no explanation.

- *“Inside Out” NGOs and Films.* The sincere, longstanding commitment to this project and to the social inclusion of poor people in Brazil more generally have given MV Bill and Celso Athayde a unique opportunity to create an intimate portrait of their subject matter. It is an excellent example of the potential power of the “inside out” approach, on both the NGO and film fronts.<sup>15</sup> The film reflects a prolonged interaction between its creators and the boys featured that is characterized by dialogue and mutual exchange. The profound solidarity they developed through the years of filming and their other social activism through CUFA is indicative of a process and evolution that have taken them far beyond the level of understanding they started with about the lives of the boys or the greater social causes of the plight of gang youths in Brazil. Their experience has also forced them to learn about themselves from the boys they’ve studied, not just to be grateful for their relatively privileged lives by comparison but for the things they share, such as love for those around them and a desire for a better world.

In the extras appearing on the DVD, MV Bill explains the philosophy of

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15) Hamburger considers the film a rare “inside out” response to Fernando Meirelles hugely commercially successful Fernando Meirelles’ *Cidade de Deus* of 2002 (Hamburger, 113-128).

this approach as what he calls the “técnica da humildade”, or “technique of humility”. For MV Bill, the application of this technique involves finding people in their lives—alongside those people themselves and things they know—and listening to them instead of talking at them. It is a posture of learning more than teaching, one that permits the learner to have rare vistas of solidarity that can be communicated to others afterwards. In carrying out the project, MV Bill and Celso Athayde exemplify their own perspective, which Bill makes clear in the extras, that poor, socially excluded people like the young, mostly Black residents of Rio’s favelas must be the protagonists of their own stories. They cannot wait in the wings while people from other classes do social activism. This point is echoed in the description of CUFA on the organization’s website, which states that the NGO was created “through the unity of young people in various favela of Rio de Janeiro—principally Black [...]” (“A CUFA”). Such deep commitment and personally transforming solidarity stand in sharp contrast to the superficial, more altruistic model of the activists from the NGO in *Tropa de Elite*.

Perhaps as the result of the effectiveness of this technique, the first few times I watched *Falcão*, it seemed hard to imagine how it could be improved as a film or how CUFA could enhance its vision of solidarity. In terms of concerns that new films are replacing the “aesthetics of hunger” with a “cosmetics of hunger”, we may consider *Falcão* to be an exception; it does not candy coat. When compared to the somewhat frivolous activists portrayed in *Tropa de Elite*, Bill and Athayde, as representatives of CUFA, clearly have much more solidarity. And in comparison to the American directors of *Favela Rising* (to be discussed below), who have only the most superficial knowledge of Brazil and its problems of social exclusion and violence, MV Bill and Celso Athayde are infinitely more experienced and personally knowledgeable. Moreover, in terms of genre, *Tropa* is an action movie created with a clear intention to entertain, whereas *Falcão* is a didactic

documentary creating as a part of a humanitarian and educational mission, which presumably would make *Falcão* more effective in motivating people to social action.

But often the distance between entertainment and social justice is not as far as one might initially suppose, especially since our creations, like our actions, reveal inconsistencies and multiple levels of motivations of which we may not be fully aware. For instance, *Falcão* is in fact entertaining despite MV Bill's assertion in the opening sequence that the film does not glamorize crime and poverty. If it weren't, it would never have been aired on *Fantástico*. Indeed, its gritty realism may make *Falcão* even more entertaining for some—and the fact that it is an actual documentary, as opposed to a neo-realist commercial work like *Tropa*. It's hard to imagine, for instance, that the tourists involved in the growing favela tourism industry in Rio and Fogarty's voluntourists would not like *Falcão*. The same could be said of viewers less concerned with social justice who are likely to be drawn to such a bleak representations of the horrible lives of other people, in the way of rubbernecker motorists passing the scene of an accident. The advantage of this is that the entertainment value of *Falcão* can draw audiences in and educate them. But it also threatens to turn the film into a horror movie that can work to dehumanize the gang youths in the eyes of public, augmenting the sense of distance between mainstream audiences and poor people. This can leave the mainstream audience with the feeling that the lives of the youths portrayed are unrelated to their own, that they are somehow less than human, or that social exclusion and violence are inevitable.

So, despite its innumerable merits as an exploration of linkages between social exclusion and crime, solidarity in *Falcão* receives an odd treatment. On the one hand, the film gives evidence of a rich and transformational dialogue between people who are poor. But when it comes to relationships between people of more affluent social classes, the tone becomes much more

unidirectional and almost condescending. Outsiders are portrayed not as partners but as subjects to be educated. In practice, clearly MV Bill and Celso Athayde are clearly interested in collaborative work, since Luiz Eduardo Soares—a white, middle-class intellectual—is one of the main authors of their first book.

The trouble is that by not being more specific and welcoming of such trans-societal solidarity, the NGO runs the risk of serving to reverse social relations instead of transforming them. By eschewing dialogue, this approach reduces the chances that potential middle and upper class activists will get involved in social action. Or if they do, they may be more likely to engage in social action that is unidirectional, like the philanthropic, charitable work of the student volunteers in *Tropa de Elite*. By the same token, there is a risk that spectators of the film will not connect with poor youths like those portrayed as people but instead as hopelessly distant “others”.

Similar questions can be raised as to how the spirit of solidarity animating CUFA and the activism of Bill and Athayde could be even more effective than they are. No doubt, they are doing a world of good for a great many people. But in emphasizing an exclusivist “inside-out” style of social action, in which oppressed people are the only legitimate protagonists, they risk going to the opposite extreme of the overly facile view of the college student activists of *Tropa*. The idea that human beings can only enter into true fellowship—characterized by friendship, trust, equality and a common purpose—with people from the same ethnic group or social class seriously weakens the possibilities of greater universal solidarity.

While the work MV Bill and Celso Athayde have done with CUFA and their various other projects has been invaluable in the struggle for human rights in Brazil, such is not always the case of NGOs with similar “inside out” orientations and warnings are worth considering. Indeed, criticism of NGOs is not limited to the middle and upper class activists involved with

them. Other observers point out that the existence of many NGOs in extralegal territories like favelas makes them highly susceptible to cooptation and manipulation by self-serving local activists as sources of personal income, power, and prestige. The lack of true solidarity on the part of outsider partners from middle and upper classes can serve to exacerbate such misappropriation since their distance, lack of understanding, and romanticism regarding favelas and the moral superiority of the poor make them easy targets for sleight of hand. This dilemma is made worse by the high number of short-term foreign volunteers and partner NGOs from outside Brazil possessing an even less nuanced knowledge of the local socio-political context. The scandals and infighting that often result from this sort of manipulation have proven disastrous to more than a few NGOs in Rio, involving local favela residents, outside benefactors, or both. Some organizations have been able to survive fraud and intrigue, even for years at a time. But it's hard to imagine they are not at least weakened by them in their missions to serve their communities.

In 2003, Júlio Ludemir published a penetrating and thoroughly researched exposé/novel, *Sorria, Você Está na Rocinha*, which recounts this story and other incidents of questionable relationships between the Neighbors Associations, police, and NGOs in the favela of Rocinha—one of Rio's largest and best-known. The main thrust of his argument is that many urban social activists from the Rocinha NGO scene have formed a new power elite in that favela that is just as corrupt and politically astute as elites in other sectors of Brazilian society.<sup>16</sup> In the first third of an interview with *Época*,

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16) A film that raised a similar concern about the complicity of social activists and NGOs in the creation of an industry of misery in Rio is Sérgio Binchi's *Quanto Vale ou é por Quão* (2005). The film, for which this is the central theme, goes as far as drawing a parallel between the hypocritical culture of philanthropy, governmental corruption, and corporate scams in Brazil with the mistreatment of Afro-Brazilians during slavery.

one of Brazil's most widely circulating weekly magazines, Ludemir affirms, "Local NGOs want a monopoly on Rocinha, which is a brand of worldwide appeal. It's the industry of misery" (Pereira). In the last third of the same interview, he astutely observes that, "People say there's no theft in favelas, but that's exactly what these organizations do the most. They steal from those who support them financially misappropriating the money destined for residents of the favelas. They grab it and pocket it. If these people snatch the money for projects meant to rescue kids from a life of crime, it's not happening. There have never been so many projects in Rocinha and yet drug trafficking there is stronger than ever".<sup>17)</sup>

At its heart, such malfeasance is the other side of Fogarty's "altruism". Just as would be benefactors may be motivated by seeking a warm, fuzzy sense of wellbeing for helping people in need, the NGO may present the needs of their constituents in terms of attractively facile, exaggerated caricatures. By the same token, even as the social activist as "voluntourist" may seek exotically authentic and even dangerous experiences, the NGO may market itself as uniquely legitimate in its humility and sincerity or as a true, bottom-up expression of the culture of the people. In their marketing strategies, NGOs may represent themselves with the same conservative stereotypes about poverty they profess to seek to overturn. Furthermore, by playing up the equivocation between the NGO and the community, the NGO can emotionally blackmail critics who withhold funds and services or criticize and scrutinize them. Any questioning of the local NGO in this

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17) Quote one reads, "As ONGs querem o monopólio da Rocinha, que é uma marca de apelo mundial." Quote two reads, "As pessoas dizem que não se rouba dentro da favela, mas é exatamente isso que essas entidades mais fazem por lá. Roubam do contribuinte e desviam o dinheiro que chegaria ao favelado. Pegam a verba e enfiam no bolso. Se esse pessoal pega dinheiro para projetos que deveriam afastar os jovens da criminalidade, isso não está acontecendo. Nunca teve tanto projeto social na Rocinha e nunca o tráfico esteve tão forte".

context can become framed as a neo-colonial or racist attack.

#### IV. Favela Rising

-*Background.* A film that portrays an NGO that synthesizes the “outside in” vision of solidarity of the NGO from in *Tropa de Elite* and the “inside out” vision of the one in *Falcão: Meninos do Tráfico* is *Favela Rising*, a documentary by American co-directors and co-producers Jeff Zimbalist and Matt Mochary, released in 2006. It was made in partnership with Brazilian activists from the Grupo Cultural AfroReggae (GCAR), an NGO focusing on alternative education aimed for at-risk youth in activities like dance, percussion, recycling, circus performance, the Afro-Brazilian dance and fighting style capoeira, and theater. The film recounts the story of the rise of GCAR from the ashes of the police massacre in the favela of Vigário Geral in 1993 that took the lives of 21 random victims, young and old.

-*Story.* The story focuses on the personal trajectory of Anderson Sá, a survivor of the attack and former petty drug trafficker who is one of GCAR’s founding members. Anderson is also the lead vocalist of Banda AfroReggae, which has played innumerable concerts around Rio and Brazil and even internationally. With lyrics of social protest and affirmations Afro-Brazilian culture and favela pride, the eclectic style that mixes rap, hardcore, reggae, samba, and Brazilian funk, somewhat in the vein of American rock band Rage Against the Machine and nationally known bands like Planet Hemp, O Rappa, and the iconic MangueBeat band Chico Science e Nação Zumbi. Today GCAR has centers in five low-income communities throughout Rio: Vigário Geral, Parada de Lucas, Cantagalo, Caju, Lapa, and São Paulo.

-*“Two-Way” NGOs.* Despite the numerous shortcomings of the film, GCAR itself embodies a “two-way” vision of solidarity built around



partnerships, dialogue and the multidirectional flow of exchanges between people of disparate classes and social groups, even though the point of intersection is the promotion of Afro-Brazilian culture and the experiences of people in Rio's favelas. This is evident both in theory, in the mission statement of the NGO, and in practice in real life partnerships with outsiders like Zimbalist and Mochary. This philosophy was succinctly stated on the 2011 version of the website, on the "Our Story" tab:

For 17 years, AfroReggae has used artistic activities like percussion, circus, graffiti, theater, and dance to try to reduce the gaps that separate Blacks and whites, rich and poor, the favela and the formal city to create bridges of unity between different segments of society. ("Nossa História")<sup>18)</sup>

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At its core, the mission of GCAR reflects the primary characteristics of fellowship: a shared sense of friendship, trust, equality, and a common purpose or goal, namely that of social justice in Rio's favelas specifically and in other contexts of oppression around the world more generally.

*-Favela Rising: Limitations.* The documentary was co-directed and co-produced by the team of Jeff Zimbalist, a highly acclaimed new filmmaker who was only in his mid-twenties at the time, and entrepreneur/philanthropist Matt Mochary. Both are well-educated (Zimbalist graduated from Brown and Mochary from Yale) and had extensive experience with volunteer organizations before getting involved with the film project. Mochary came across members of GCAR at an international conference. Although neither he nor Zimbalist had prior experience in Brazil, they were

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18) "[...] Ao longo de seus 17 anos (que serão completados no dia 21 de janeiro de 2010), o AfroReggae vem utilizando atividades artísticas, como percussão, circo, grafite, teatro e dança para tentar diminuir os abismos que separam negros e brancos, ricos e pobres, a favela e o asfalto, a fim de criar pontes de união entre os diferentes segmentos da sociedade".

drawn to the subject and the compelling people and history of the NGO (“Director’s Statement”).

Such good will notwithstanding—and despite the merits of the GCAR non-governmental organization—the film itself is not very dialogical but is rather an extreme example of the “outside in” perspective. One of its most salient weak points is its overly Manichean treatment of social ills in Brazil that flattens the field of struggle into a heartless and neglectful society, on the one side, and a poor but brave band of cultural resistance fighters, on the other—an effect reinforced by the persistent presence of melodramatic music throughout the film. One cannot help but suspect that these shortcomings are in large measure due to the lack of personal experience and first-hand knowledge of Brazil and the favelas of Rio on the part of its directors.

This disjuncture is evident in the highly stylized MTV editing enhancing its entertainment value, and in particular the emphasis the film places on rock music—which appealed to primarily middle-class Brazilians, as opposed to funk carioca or other more musical styles more common in Rio’s favelas. So, too, does the somewhat out-of-place emphasis on the personal story of Anderson Sá’s surprising recovery from a grave surfing accident, which somewhat edges out the collective story of the resilience of the community of Vigário Geral through GCAR. Directed at an international audience, the film is much less accountable for a fair representation of the various actors involved; the Brazilian state and mainstream society come off as completely disinterested in the situation of poor people in the country.

In these ways, *Favela Rising* lapses into the dialogical limitations of both *Tropa* and *Falcão*, in that it promotes an overly simplified view of social action and unity, embracing stereotypes along the way instead of challenging them. It is at once an action movie like *Tropa* and a horror movie like *Falcão*, making it something of a recruitment poster for “dark tourism”.<sup>19</sup> The danger in

this is that the touristic relationship sets up expectations about the roles of insiders and outsiders that can severely hamper the formation of deeper solidarity. Even though the overly simplified presentation of social exclusion and violence in Rio makes the film a bit hard to watch, it has received considerable praise in scholarly quarters as a rare humanizing bright spot in representations of violence and favelas (Moehn, Ribeiro, Sheriff). From this point of view, one hopes Favela *Rising's* potential for increasing viewers' awareness of injustices and the everyday tactics of ordinary people for overcoming them may outweigh its tendency to reinforce stereotypes.

## V. Conclusion

At the heart of scholarly criticism in both filmmaking and social action is a profound preoccupation with the roles of art and action in promoting the consciousness-raising and solidarity necessary in people from all social classes to make global justice possible. In laying out scholarly formulations for evaluating films about poverty in Brazil side by side with arguments about humanitarian activism—and in matching them up with relevant examples in the three films discussed below, representing the “outside in”, “inside out”, and “two-way” approach in both spheres—my hope has been to draw attention to the dangers of superficiality in action and art for reinforcing social exclusion and violence. Conversely, have attempted to underscore the benefits of deep and persevering solidarity for working against them—in social activism, filmmaking, and other artistic and scholarly investigation—and, indeed, in daily life.

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19) In her study on favela tourism and NGO “voluntourism” in the favela of Rocinha, Erika Robb points out the potential dangers of dark tourism for promoting consciousness-raising towards a more genuine social justice.

From a literary point of view, the presence of humanitarian activists in such works serves both an internal and an external function. Internally, as part of the action of the plot and the interaction between characters, humanitarian activists serve as a mobile contact zone between the others characters, as messengers and cultural mediators linking police and state authorities, religious institutions, and the middle class with gangsters, street children, and inmates, as well as people connected to popular culture, like priestesses of *candomblé* (an Afro-Brazilian animist religion with origins in West Africa) capoeira martial arts masters, or hip hop and funk singers. Externally, these characters connect readers from middle and upper class backgrounds to stories of life in the favelas. Whether humanitarian activists are portrayed sympathetically or not, it is relatively easy for mainstream audiences to understand the motives of such characters and their reactions to the violence and poverty they encounter. These characters also provide opportunities to interrogate the connections of the middle and upper classes with the causes of poverty and violence through their complicity with oppression, either self-consciously or unwittingly, in their paternalism and fetishes.

Just as the urban social activists of literature and film serve as go-betweens among the casts of police, criminals, and other residents of favelas and serve to connect audiences with the stories of such people, so too do their real life counterparts. As did the Neighbors Associations in the 70s and 80s, today activists working in NGOs regularly help bring other outsiders, foreign and Brazilian alike, into favelas. These include a great many journalists, academic researchers, students on service-learning programs, a growing number of tourists and, yes, filmmakers. Just as many poor people today are aware of their cultural and symbolic capital and concerned about its uses by outsiders, so, too, are many of these visitors. The function of activists as social intermediaries, as channels for the flow of information in and out of

favelas, is one of the most important means through which NGOs can serve to reduce social exclusion, as political scientist Enrique Desmond Arias has pointed out (Arias 58-59).

The presence of NGOs in socially excluded communities provides a great many opportunities for people of all social groups and classes to form bonds of solidarity with one another, as do films about the urban social activists working through them. Such contact can also reinforce unjust social hierarchies, conversely-intentionally or not-especially if it is carried out in an uncritical and superficial fashion. In this light of such tensions, MV Bill's "technique of humility" offers a valuable tool. But it's not enough to listen only to gang youths in favelas and to avoid imposing top-down views on them, as is apparent in comparing these film representations. Only to the extent that a film or an NGO is dialogical in nature—in ways comparable to Buber's understanding of the mutuality and reciprocity of relationships—can it serve to promote greater social and global justice. To that end, the "technique of humility" must be applied to people from throughout the social strata.

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# ONG-Ação: Ação Social Urbana no Cinema e na Sociedade Brasileira

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Sneed, Paul Michael (2015), *ONG-Ação: Ação Social Urbana no Cinema e na Sociedade Brasileira*.

**Resumo** No cinema contemporâneo, tem-se visto uma proliferação de filmes sobre a exclusão social e violência no Rio, cidade cartão postal das contradições sócio-políticas do Brasil. Tem surgido uma nova camada de personagens cinematográficos, os “ongueiros” de organizações não-governamentais, como elo entre os traficantes, presidiários, meninos de rua, policiais e favelados comuns retratados nesses filmes—e como ligação narrativa dos filmes com o público maior. Como a própria produção de filmes de índole social, a função desses ativistas sociais e das ONGs em que trabalham tem provocado grandes debates sobre sua interação com cultura popular, entretenimento e até turismo e sua eficácia em promover a justiça social. Neste ensaio, comparo representações de ONGs cariocas em três filmes — *Tropa de Elite*, *Falcão: Meninos do Tráfico* e *Favela Rising* — para considerar os desafios da ação social hoje em dia e oferecer um modelo de solidariedade que abrange atores de todas as classes sociais.

**Palavras chave** Cinema brasileira, ação social urbana, exclusão social, favela, filosofia relacional