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No Carnival Here:
Oppressed Youth and Class Relations in City of God

Introduction

Fascism should more appropriately be called Corporatism because it is a merger of State and corporate power. —*Benito Mussolini*

To oppose the policies of a government does not mean you are against the country or the people that the government supposedly represents. Such opposition should be called what it really is: democracy, or democratic dissent, or having a critical perspective about what your leaders are doing. Either we have the right to democratic dissent and criticism of these policies or we all lie down and let the leader, the Fuhrer, do what is best, while we follow uncritically, and obey whatever he commands. That's just what the Germans did with Hitler, and look where it got them.¹ —*Michael Parenti*

We have entered into a new era of corporate-led globalized capitalism characterized not only by international flows of capital and technology but by an unrestrained military-industrial-media complex that serves to propagate and enforce the views, values, and ideologies necessary to sustain it. While the transnational ruling elite retreat into their gated communities, protected from the very people whose exploited labor-power has supplied them with their super profits, we are continuously reminded—most recently by the thousands of protestors who took to the streets of Cancun, Mexico during failed World Trade Organization negotiations—that class struggles are still active across the globe. Clearly, certain nation-states—most notably the United States—have not, as some critics predicted, yielded their sovereignty to transnational firms and international structures such as the WTO, World Bank, and IMF. The military-industrial complex—object of derision par excellence among the global left and some of its more thoughtful conservatives—is more dangerous today than ever before, not the least because it has become the sword arm, via the permanent war on terror, of its administration's geopolitical strategy to colonize the remaining untapped markets of the world.

1.2 Framed by its cardinal imperative of full spectrum dominance, the new militarism is witnessing far-reaching changes in the U.S. armed forces and their role in world affairs. As Carl Boggs (2003) has made chillingly clear, the military component of U.S. hegemony (a hegemony which encompasses economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural agencies of power) has become predominate. No rival centers of power

or countervailing military forces exist—or will likely exist in the foreseeable future—that can contain this behemoth which strides so arrogantly across the world's stage, threatening sovereign states and waging war against human freedom. Within the historical convergence of the end of the Cold War, the rise of the U.S. as the single superpower, high-tech warfare, the expanding Pentagon system, corporate driven globalization, the growth of domestic corporate power, the decline of the public sphere, and terrorist attacks of September 11, the U.S. continues to organize and manage crimes against peace, which are among the most egregious of the twentieth century. It is in this framework that class struggle today can be rendered more intelligible and our efforts to participate in it more potent.

1.3 Class, defined as a "social category that can explain inequalities of power and wealth in the 'free world'" (San Juan, Jr., 2003: 1), has become increasingly relevant for interpreting the modern portrait of capitalism. As a conceptual category, which designates a relationship of exploitation, it is "indissociable from class conflict, from the specific historical struggle of social groups divided by unequal property relations" (San Juan, Jr., 2003: 5). Further, youth as a social category typified by age are also implicated in class struggles through their constant subjugation to the imagery and needs of capital flows. This is made clear by the United Nation's declaration that "more than one billion young people in the developing world are now living in conditions of severe deprivation" (Frith, 2003: 12) as a result of globalized trade and a decrease in 'aid' packages. While countries willingly surrender themselves (or are militarily subjected to) the free market, the milk of capital nourishes only a minority of the world's population—those who are not dependent upon selling their labor-power to survive.

1.4 In the current context of global corporate domination, neoconservative policy is rapidly being replaced by Hummer pedagogy of the power elite. Hummer pedagogy refers to the progressive militarization of U.S. society, to its infusion throughout the realms of education, politics, science, technology, the media, and popular culture. Hummer pedagogy is a major state apparatus in legitimizing and naturalizing the use of military force to resolve domestic and international disputes; hummer pedagogy plays a distinctive role in the U.S. military's current exercises of pre-emptive and endless war against terrorism and the working classes throughout the world. Hummer pedagogy is implicated in twisting and compressing complex political, social and cultural realities into oracular generalities: capitalists are good, socialists are evil. Hummer pedagogy creates a 'habitus' that is most congenial to the ascendant bourgeoisie whose robust faith in the market is superseded only by their faith in the power of the cruise missile.

1.5 One flagship program for Hummer pedagogy is the State Department's International Military Education and Training Program. It is a program that arms and trains U.S. satellites and dependencies, preparing foreign soldiers to do the bidding of the United States without risking direct U.S. casualties. According to Chalmers Johnson (2003), in utilizing such a strategy, "[r]esponsibility is displaced and consequences diffused. This dislocation has roots in a much older phenomenon, in which empires sought to 'outsource' the enforcement of their political will" (54). Johnson (2003) describes the development of this program over recent years:

In 1990 it was offering military instruction to the armies of 96 countries; by 2002 that already impressive number had risen to 133 countries. There are 189 countries in the United Nations, which means that this single program "instructs" militaries in 70 percent of the world's nations. We train approximately 100,000 foreign soldiers each year—most of them officers who then can pass on American methods to their troops. In 2001 the U.S. military taught 15,030 officers and soldiers in Latin America alone. The Pentagon does this either by bringing them to one of the approximately 150 military educational institutions in the United States or by sending military instructors, almost always Army Special Forces, to the countries themselves. The "war on terror" has only accelerated these programs, in many cases replacing the "war on drugs" as a justification, with no discernible difference in pedagogy. The United States claims that such training promotes American values. (55)

Hummer pedagogy also refers to the Schwarzeneggerization of American internal and foreign policies. As California transforms itself into a Terminator state, the 'preventative' wars in Afghanistan and Iraq serve as litmus tests for the establishment of a new world order predicated on the use of preemptive military force.

1.6 Manifestations of a predatory Hummer pedagogy permeate the culture and can be discerned in various levels of discourse—from declarations in the National Security Strategy of the United States to the streets of Beverly Hills. Indeed, as *LA Weekly* journalist Nikki Finke (2003) reports from the Hollywood front:

The signs of war are everywhere. Standard-issue Hummers, especially the new H2 model in Sunset Orange Metallic, hurtle down Wilshire. Valentino-designed army fatigues, including khaki and camouflage tracksuits with elastic cuffs, are all the rage on Rodeo. Communications are erratic: That Motorola T722i cell phone in the Oscar goodie basket may have been free, but it's impossible to mobilize the troops when the damn thing only picks up static on Pico. (17)

In the era of an expanding and accelerating military-industrial-media complex, the biggest multinational corporations are expanding their monopolies in the sphere of economic enterprise. New information and simulation technologies have become part of military education and human-machine experimentation like never before. Hollywood and the television industry both provide patriotic spectacles and pay uncritical homage to the military in various films (Giroux, 2003: 17). Sports broadcasts of football and baseball games recite the patriotic mantra through symbolic gestures including majestic bald eagles soaring in air. Of course there is nothing particularly new in such formulas; only the global scope of the logic of domination is unprecedented. As critical theorist Herbert Schiller (1989) has asserted, today's big business military-industrial complex, with the generous support of the entertainment and culture industries, is the locus of systematic power:

It is the site of the concentrated accumulation of the productive equipment, the technological expertise, the marketing apparatus, the financial resources, and the managerial know-how. It is a tangible reality, not a metaphor. Moreover, the interests of big business are most powerful in the formulation of national and international policy. (19)

Now, more than ever, a large portion of the "huge message and image flow that circulates is originated in this complex in one way or another" (Schiller, 1989: 20).

1.7 The woeful neglect that social science research has given to the role of the military-industrial complex in the larger totality of capitalist society is equaled only by the academy's shameful role in discrediting Marxist analyses of social class. Today in the social sciences as well as in public and popular discourse, we are confronted by an iron wall whose purpose is to further ghettoize Marxist conceptions of class from less combative Weberian and neo-Weberian conceptualizations. As well, we are surrounded by a motivated amnesia with respect to the efficacy and strategic potential of Marxist analyses of class. Not only have Marxist theories of class been disowned historically (no doubt for fear that it might become common currency for millions of disenfranchised peoples the world over), they have more recently been relegated to the dustbin of history given the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries. While Marxism has been accused of class reductionism or equated with productivism or determinism, a careful study of Karl Marx's own work unequivocally refutes such accusations. In the social sciences today, the facile notion that dynamics of social class can be adequately captured by its common equation with lifestyle, voting preference, income, status, or some nominal aspect of personal identity—or that it is over determined by racial identity—continues to hold sway. Or concerted efforts are made—often as a result of a lack of understanding of Marxist theory rather than a lack of scruples—to reduce class to one social characteristic that "intersects" with others, such as race and gender, and which cannot be fully understood without reference to them. One central mischaracterization of class is that the class system is predicated on

"unequal exchange" of material resources, or that it is located in the sphere of market-exchange, or that it is linked to stratified systems of resource distribution. E. San Juan, Jr. (2003) has recently and compellingly articulated why we need to reject a market-relations approach to class analysis that locates discrimination by race in biased monopolistic practices, and why it is ill-advised to conceive of racial inequality in the sphere of unequal exchange. We reject both the notion that ideology and politics determine the labor market and that racial dynamics (as ideological formations and practices) determine class relationships.

1.8 Our understanding of class is centered on the primordial condition of alienation of the process of production under capitalism. As San Juan, Jr. (2003) notes, as a relation of class antagonisms, class constitutes the salient or fundamental relation for explaining the social totality. Exploitation is part of the total political economy in specific historical periods or conjunctures. Social class is connected fundamentally to the development of the productive forces and designates a relation of exploitation; consequently it cannot be considered apart from class conflict. Social class is not a discreetly bounded expression of agency outside of the production process and the social division of labor; rather, it is a relational process and must be seen in conjunction with the means of production and located in the central antagonism between capital and labor. In other words, social class is historically determinate, arising from the complex dynamics of historical development, and over determined by modes of production linked to the contextual specificity of historical moments and stages of the formation of the modes of production within the social totality intimately bound up with the historical specificity of social groups who are divided by unequal property relations. One's location within the ensemble of social practices certainly affects issues of race. While racism assigns imaginary generalized values to real people, the process of assigning these values rests upon the brute reality of class-divided societies and nation-states with unequal allocations of power and resources (San Juan, Jr., 2003). We situate racial differences within the process of class conflict operating within a complex and evolving class system. Race comes into play here in terms of the alienation of human labor, which mediates and adjusts racial dynamics to the level and stage of class antagonism specific to the social formation (San Juan, Jr., 2003).

1.9 San Juan, Jr. (2003) argues that racism arose with the creation and expansion of the capitalist world economy and that race relations and race conflict are necessarily structured by the larger totality of the political economy of a given society, as well as by modifications in the structure of the world economy. He further notes that the capitalist mode of production has articulated "race" with class in a peculiar way. He is worth quoting at length on this issue.

While the stagnation of rural life imposed a racial or caste-like rigidity to the peasantry, the rapid accumulation of wealth through the ever more intensifying exploitation of labor by capital could not so easily "racialize" the wage-workers of a particular nation, given the alienability of labor-power—unless certain physical or cultural characteristics can be utilized to divide the workers or render one group an outcast or pariah removed from the domain of "free labor." In the capitalist development of U.S. society, African, Mexican, and Asian bodies—more precisely, their labor power and its reproductive efficacy—were colonized and racialized; hence the idea of "internal colonialism" retains explanatory validity. "Race" is thus constructed out of raw materials furnished by class relations, the history of class conflicts, and the vicissitudes of colonial/capitalist expansion and the building of imperial hegemony. It is dialectically accented and operationalized not just to differentiate the price of wage labor within and outside the territory of the metropolitan power, but also to reproduce relations of domination-subordination invested with an aura of naturality and fatality. The refunctioning of physical or cultural traits as ideological and political signifiers of class identity reifies social relations. Such "racial" markers enter the field of the alienated labor process, concealing the artificial nature of meanings and norms, and essentializing or naturalizing historical traditions and values which are contingent on mutable circumstances. (8)

According to San Juan, Jr.:

Class exploitation cannot replace or stand for racism because it is the condition of possibility for it. It is what enables the racializing of selected markers, whether physiological or cultural, to maintain, deepen and reinforce alienation, mystifying reality by modes of commodification, fetishism, and reification characterizing the routine of quotidian life. Race and class are dialectically conjoined in the reproduction of capitalist relations of exploitation and domination. (9)

For San Juan, Jr. (2003), racism and nationalism are modalities in which class struggles articulate themselves at strategic points in history. He maintains, rightly in our view, that racial or ethnic group solidarity is given "meaning and value in terms of their place within the social organization of production and reproduction of the ideological-political order; ideologies of racism as collective social evaluation of solidarities arise to reinforce structural constraints which preserve the exploited and oppressed position of these 'racial' solidarities" (9-10). Much like San Juan, Jr., we are committed to the subversive core of Marx's writings and for diffusing it among a broader constituency of social critics.

1.10 In this article, we seek to articulate a position which links critical cultural studies to a Marxist humanist tradition of revolutionary critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2000; McLaren and Jaramillo, 2002). Such a theoretical stance suggests that critical, dialectical analyses of films such as *City of God* can undress the deeper political, social, and economic relations and consequences impacting youth, which may not be obvious at the surface level of cultural products. Here we are reminded of Walter Benjamin's (1968) metaphorical comparison of the magician and the surgeon: whereas the magician acts upon the surface of reality, the surgeon cuts into it. The relative value or adequacy of the solutions advanced by Marxist humanism to the problems under its purview is not our concern here. It is rather the need to advance a dialectical analysis of youth culture rooted in historical materialism. Unlike the overly textual (and often one-dimensional) foci of "ludic" cultural studies which are generally unable to cut deep into the flesh of the social, unable to discern what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1991) refer to as the "depth dimension" (274), dialectical analyses enable us to name and map the general organization of social relations and to make connections between the different domains of social reality. Furthermore, such analyses enable the possibility of cultivating conscious resistance to the oppressive structural and social conditions that give rise to and shape the logic of the military-industrial-media complex under the dictatorship of the rich. We agree with Kellner (1995) about the necessity of promoting "readings" that can advance new solidarities, new forms of struggle and revolutionary transformations. In what follows, we first provide an overview of the film *City of God*, situate it within a local-global nexus in order to contextualize its dramatic narrative, locate the lives of the *favela* dwellers in the dialectical contradiction between capital and labor, and then broaden our analysis in order to explore the landscapes of youth popular culture.

City of God (Cidade de Deus)

2.1 Rio de Janeiro conjures up images of elaborately festooned and lively carnival-goers, sun-drenched beaches, and a mélange of diverse cultures in most travel brochures. The promise of fun and sun entices would-be travelers to a city that some have dubbed the friendliest in the world. This portrait, however, stands in vivid contrast to the images provided in *City of God (Cidade de Deus)*, a Fernando Meirelles-directed Brazilian film largely adopted from former *favelado* Paulo Lins' 700 page autobiographical novel of life in Rio de Janeiro's most populated *favela* (so-called slum). This cinematic creation renders into view life where poverty governs and where youth live out their existence constrained by the conditions of a highly policed shantytown residence.

2.2 The film begins with the lurid scene of a chicken that barely escapes its slaughter whizzing through the dust-ridden corridors of City of God. A group of young gun-waving and gun-firing boys and men chase the animal until it stops at the feet of the movie's central protagonist, Rocket (Alexandre Rodrigues), who then finds himself standing not only with a freedom starved feathered chicken escaping from the *favelados*, but also in between a collage of stark-eyed youth and saber-rattling police preparing to engage in an internecine killing match. The ensuing battle—that does not rear its demise until the end of the movie—has its origins and is endemic to how life in the *favelas* is documented across three generations – corruption, drug-trafficking, justice, injustice, and most vividly, death. This is the life trajectory that the movie portrays. The young kill as a sign of maturation; the young are killed as a sign of law and order. Children between the ages of 6 and 12 who engage in cold-blooded and callous murderous assaults stalk the human imagination. Given the dire, dystopian images portrayed in the film, one may be inclined to dismiss them as unrealistic and perhaps even excessive—as devices used by the filmmaker merely for dramatic effect. That would be a mistake since *Cidade de Deus* is a story of youth experiences in the *favelas*—indeed, many of the key actors are youths who currently reside in the shantytowns and they themselves wrote the script which paradoxically offers a glimpse into the *inhumane possibilities* of lives lived on the edge. While scenes of unflinching acts of murder evoke poignant pains in the pit of audiences' stomachs, there is an attempt to leave them with a glimmer of hope: that while these youth are inexorably born into the grim *favelas*, they might, ultimately, find a way out.

2.3 Meirelles' storyline dates back to the 1970's when a bellicose trio of male youth vies for their means of survival through petty theft and midnight raids on local establishments. But of central focus is the development of Li'l Dice (Douglas Silva) who later becomes Li'l-Ze (Leandro Firmino De Hora Phellipe), the key antagonist and future drug czar of the city, and Rocket, an innocent youngster captivated by the power of images who aspires to become a "distinguished" photographer.

2.4 Li'l-Ze, who some may characterize as a boy "ambitious and hardened by the harshness of his life and the harshness of his DNA" (Hunter, 2003), initiated his bloody fate at the bequest of a handgun at the tender age of 7 or 8. On an evening where he was to innocuously stand guard while the 'older boys' robbed a local brothel, Li'l-Ze trailed in afterwards and chillingly assassinated all patrons. Although Li'l-Ze was never publicly charged (or associated) with the murders, that event unleashed the ruthless growth of a ringleader. Li'l-Ze quickly ascended the social hierarchy and secured his position as owner of the *favela's* growing drug trafficking schemes building up to the 1990's. The character captures this phenomenon best when he states, "Listen man, I smoke, I snort...I've been begging on the street since I was just a baby. I've cleaned windshields at stop lights. I've polished shoes, I've robbed, I've killed...I ain't no kid, no way. I'm a real man" (*City of God*, 2003). This is a story of a child's development, one who has stripped himself from the thwarted nostalgia and neutrality of childhood and transformed into a hardened and seemingly undefeatable "man." It is a process that does not take place in isolation of Li'l-Ze's surroundings, but is informed by the conditions that encapsulate his movement in the *favelas* across three generations. From the late 1960's through the early 1980's we witness how poor youth initially earn their wages through petty theft and intimidation. Petty theft ripens into an elaborate drug trafficking cabal where youth in the *favela*, led by Li'l-Ze, split into opposing factions—merciless drug fiefdoms—fighting over a tight drug market. It is gang warfare in a city where the law was created unto itself. The fruits of their labor are made acutely clear. Draped in gold-linked chains and toting AK-47s instead of tote bags, the youth demand respect from their patrons and intimidate anyone that breaks their code of ethics. Service boys line up for a share of the notoriety and in one of the most deranged spectacles Meirelles pieced together, we witness how one young boy is hazed into Li'l-Ze's fiefdom. Taken by the hand onto a street corner where three boys huddled together, Li'l-Ze ushers his new recruit to "pick one and shoot." The tear-jerked boy trembles while he makes his selection but he completes the initiation process by firing a shot into a small life-breathing figure that could be no older than six.

2.5 Contrast Li'l-Ze to Rocket—a wide-eyed comical virgin portrayed from an early age as the moral figure, the entity embodying hope and aspirations to participate in the world of "opportunity" outside

the *favelas*. He is characterized as "too weak and smart to be a gangster (his brother's trade), yet too imaginative to be a fishmonger (his father's trade)" (Hunter, 2003: 6). The hope we witness in Rocket has no material basis aside from the one-time scene of a father who urges Rocket to be "something" (something in relation to his "gangster" brother). Aside from attempted armed robbery and the occasional overindulgence of reefer while sitting on the white-sanded beaches of Ipanema, Rocket is portrayed as an innocent bystander to the mishaps of poor *favelados*. Through the fish-eye lens of an inherited camera, Rocket crosses over into the middle-class world of Rio by riveting the ordinary with explosive and acutely clear images of life in the *favela* to a local newspaper. The main subject is of course, Li'l- Ze. His photographs of *favelados*—of western-style gunmen wielding their Saturday-night specials and Cold War armaments—draw Rocket deeper into a ring of tumultuous relationships, but they also fill him with the aspiration of succeeding the life expectancy of his photographed subjects. This is undeniably one of the most fictional accounts of Meirelles' film. Whereas Rocket initially hid his camera lens, Li'l-Ze eventually embraced the photos as reigning family portraits. The subjects posed willingly and unabashedly created images that spoke to their level of perceived independence and their resistance to the likes of poverty. But in reality, Meirelles himself could not film inside of a *favela* due to the threat of the imperious. Camera men/women that attempt to photograph *favelados* are far from welcomed. But Rocket is truly an aberration in all respects. In the final scene, Rocket seeks refuge while the corrupt police and armed gang led by Li'l-Ze fire at one another with brute force. With camera in hand he captures the bloody death of his co-patriots, of Li'l-Ze fleeing unharmed until a pogrom of child-aged provocateurs slay him. As the boys walk away from their victorious assault, one can only imagine that the cycle will begin all over again. Rocket, on the other hand, walks away from the precincts of his poverty-stricken existence.

The Necessary Lens of Historical Materialism

3.1 *City of God* shocked audiences nationwide. As part of a series of Brazilian films where the common plot centered on children's chronic degradation in poverty, it generated fervor across the globe. In the U.S. context it was deemed as appalling, full of sensationalism, and compared to the cinematographic likes of *The Matrix* and *Good Fellas* (Howe, 2003). In the Brazilian context, it delivered a powerful and dismal glimpse into the lived experience of the poor that the urban middle class prefers to ignore (Rohter, 2003). But ultimately, *City of God*, about a real-life *favela* that houses millions of poor as swiftly as a coastal breeze along the blue chipped tide of Rio's tantalizing bare beaches, is *more than* a story of good versus evil, of hope versus despair, of cinematography versus politics. Yet we would contend that in the absence of a historical materialist analysis, representations of violence in *City of God* can easily be subsumed into a fictional lifeworld secured far away from the day-to-day grind of human consciousness. Taken, however, as a depiction of how the underclass is lived through youth at a particular historical juncture where globalized capital and the social relations of production confer an abstract calculus of the human condition, it becomes a more powerful heuristic for understanding how hundreds of millions of youth across the globe make sense of and participate in society.

3.2 While historical materialism has generally fallen out of favor among those who have succumbed to the numbing logic of TINA ("there is no alternative"), we stubbornly believe that the insights of those working within the broad parameters of this tradition still have something to say despite postmodern proclamations to the contrary. Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of an historical materialist approach is the attention it accords to *class* relations and capitalist social organization and the trenchant challenge it poses to neoliberal orthodoxy. It is important to note that at a global level, the imposition of neoliberal orthodoxy was, in no small part, linked to the conscious strategy "pursued by successful American administrations in order to maintain U.S. hegemony in the post-Cold War era" (Callinicos, 2003: 3). As Callinicos (2003) further notes, the "very name attached to those policies—the Washington Consensus—is symptomatic of the role played in their implementation by the institutional complex binding together the U.S. Treasury, the IMF, and the World Bank" (3).² Moreover, James Petras (2003) suggests that part of the current empire-building apparatus of the United States will necessarily involve the "re-colonization of Latin America" (23-24). Hence, it is imperative to understand the conditions

foregrounded in the film within the broader context of globalized capital and *historical* American influence in the region that has played a part in accelerating the gulf between the rich and poor. As Petras (2002) aptly notes, "The U.S. military-political offensive is manifest in multiple contexts in Latin America" and has been for quite some time (15). In Brazil, the United States government has worked intensely to counter the resistance to the FTAA and other economic policies promoted by the United States (and Europe) via the IMF, the World Bank and other like-minded "international" institutions. Ellen Meiksins Wood (2003) contends that U.S.-led global capital cannot allow for the growing disaffection generated "by neoliberal globalization all over the world" (155), including the less-than-revolutionary recent electoral change initiated by the election of Lula da Silva.

3.3 Brazil has been referred to as the "country of the future" for at least 50 years and yet it is stuck in an economically moribund present as it faces the inexorable advancement of neoliberal capitalist relations. At this current historical juncture, Brazil is facing "a critical situation in its history" (Boron, 2003: 1). The hopes of the people, buoyed by the election of a party from the "left" in the form of Lula da Silva are quickly being dashed as Brazil experiences increasing impoverishment in the face of contemporary political vicissitudes. Dismal old policies sanctioned by the IMF and implemented by the previous (U.S.-backed) government of President Cardoso remain largely intact.³ On the other hand, new policies like "zero hunger" previously championed by Lula have yet to be established (Boron, 2003). Brazil is the ninth largest economy in the world. Geographically it is almost as large as the United States and boasts a population of nearly 200 million—75 percent of whom live in its largest cities. The country has the reprehensible distinction of having the worst income and land inequalities in the world. Despite the fact that Brazil has, by and large, dutifully followed the neoliberal script prescribed by the IMF, miserable destitution characterizes large pockets of Brazil and indeed Rio de Janeiro.

3.4 Nearly one-fifth of Rio de Janeiro's 7 million residents live in the baked clay shantytowns with zinc-foiled roofs and dirt wrought corridors. Hundreds of thousands live in *favelas* in surrounding metropolises. There is no plumbing and there are no public phones. Tetanus and the spread of other deadly diseases often affect thousands of children living side-by-side like cigarette packed residents. Single women typically run households and children are often pushed onto the streets due to overcrowding or the need to contribute to the household's income. Boys (most often) spend a portion of their day on the streets working to supplement their family's income. An ethnographic study of *favela* children in Brazil by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Daniel Hoffman (1994) found that when asked why poor children often beg or steal, the children (mostly boys) often replied that they were doing it to help their mother. For *favela* girls, the plight of domestic servitude for ironclad bourgeoisie maidens as a form of wage labor is considered more a case of slavery than liberation (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman, 1994). Liberation for the girls interviewed is the ability to control and own their existence through the use of their sexualized bodies. Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman (1994) document:

While most of those who actually live in the street are boys, young girls may also enter the anonymous space of the street, often escaping exploitative work as junior domestic servants or abusive homes. The vehicle of their "escape" is generally prostitution. Domestic work in the context of semi-feudal flight to the "streets" and even to "prostitution" can be seen as acts of self-liberation. "The first time I sold my body was the first time I felt that it belonged to me," said one young "runaway" from the rural Northeast who chose "the streets" of Sao Paulo and prostitution over domestic servitude in Pernambuco. (3)

3.5 This is a form of class consciousness that a film like *City of God* neglects to fully capture. For millions of *favelado*youth, otherwise referred to as *moleques* (ragamuffins) and *menino de rua* (street kids), the economic, personal, and social plight of fulfilling the ranks of domestic wage labor is a straight-jacket confined existence. In response, narco-trafficking, theft, begging, and prostitution become the linchpins of their economic survival. The ethnographic work of these youth points towards an astute understanding of their likely function as an underclass in relation to the bourgeoisie. It is an alienated relation that is further

exacerbated through the violent and vile reprisals that youth face when they walk on the streets outside of their shantytown compounds. In Sao Paulo the elite avoid the poor through aerial traveling. With over 240 helipads in the city, "Skyscrapers tops are aerial parking. Executives buy into helicopter collectives, hop between buildings and retreat at night to homes in walled mini cities" (Lester, 2003).

3.6 Further, there is the case of the Candelaria Massacre of 1993. While a group of homeless boys slept on the steps of the Candelaria church, a fleeting death squad showered the youngsters during the morning rise with rounds of bullets, leaving 7 dead, 2 wounded and several survivors. One survivor in particular, Sergio, age 14 at the time, hijacked a local bus 8 years later. Prior to losing his life and that of a female passenger, he yelled out the window: "I was at Candelaria. I know what it means to die. This is no action movie. I will begin killing at 6 p.m." It took yet another film, *Bus 174*, to document Sergio's journey and to provide the public with an explanation—no less gruesome—of the conditions that led Sergio and an innocent passenger to their graves. Through *Bus 174*, audiences came to realize that the men that cruised in a taxi that early morning were police officers hired by the business elite as a move to eliminate city squatters that presumably deter proverbial investors from fully enjoying the Brazilian thrust. Louis Proyect (2003) suggests:

Since homeless children are linked with petty crime, begging and other "anti-social" acts, powerful businessmen often hire hit squads to clean them out of neighborhoods like Candelaria. The social dimensions of this ongoing conflict amount to a one-sided civil war. Considering that about half of Brazil's 60 million children survive on less than \$1 a day and three-quarters do not finish primary school, it is not surprising that the country is swamped by feral youth. (4)

City of God captured a violent and repugnant view of youth living in the *favelas*. And while violence through homicide, theft, rape, and narco-trafficking does occur on a wide scale (nearly 10,000 youth were incarcerated in Brazil in 2002 for such offenses), youth were isolated in the film and it offered no indictment of the broader societal context. Although the film tackled some issues with a critical eye, to some extent, it was ultimately infected by the new manners of Hollywood's pedagogical machine and bolstered by postmodernized screen writing motifs—namely that of hyper-real violence. Hyper-real violence is, at least in part, an end in itself since it "exploits the seamy side of controversial issues" while it concomitantly "appeals to primal emotions" and "captures the actual violence" (Giroux, 1996: 64) that people encounter in the streets of Cidade de Deus. As Henry Giroux (1996) further notes, films in the hyper-violent genre are "filled with an endless stream of characters who thrive in a moral limbo and define themselves by embracing senseless acts of violence as a defining principle of life legitimated by a hard dose of cruelty" (64). If anything, *City of God* might have employed documentary violence—which has a long cinematic tradition—which "does not become an end in itself" (Giroux, 1996: 62). Rather, it serves to "reference a broader logic and set of insights" and "probes the complex contradictions that shape human agency, the limits of rationality, and the existential issues that tie us to other human beings and a broader social world." It attempts to provide contextual understandings that invite "critical and meaningful commentary" (Giroux, 1996: 62-63). Such a cinematic approach to the stories of life in the *favelas* could have facilitated a more complex and historical understanding of the material conditions which shaped the emergence of, and continue to impact, the experiences of the *favelados*.

Borne out of the 1940's when agricultural laborers in the masses flocked to industrial precincts in search of work, the *favelas* overtook the presence of slums and nowadays play a functional role in economic society. As Julio Cesar Pino (2003) documents:

The favelas, or shantytowns offer proximity to the workplace, saving the laborer costly transportation fare and hours of travel. There is a political advantage to favela residency as

well; so long as they stay within city limits, squatters can claim the right to public services like education and health care. (6)

Over the years the *favelas* have sprouted in close proximity to middle- and higher-class zones where Whites have bought homes or set up their factories (Pino, 2003). Blacks and people of mixed race origin occupy a greater proportion of *favelados*. They primarily work in either domestic service (women) or construction (men), which leads Pino (2003) to surmise, "favela residents are likely to see themselves as a community of the downtrodden, not a racial enclave," and favela politics are dominated mainly by concerns of "social class" as opposed to those of "race" (6). This perception, we would argue, is quite telling for it undermines the general claims of various postmodernists, poststructuralists, and post-Marxists who have, over the years, suggested that "class" analysis and "class" understandings are best subsumed under the category of "difference"—be it racial or ethnic. As some of us have argued elsewhere (cf. Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren, 2003[a]), and as alluded to in our introduction, it is imperative to understand the construction of difference in terms of analyses of class formation and capitalist social relations rather than severing "difference" or "race" from the totalizing power of capital. From Pino's (2003) observations, it is clear that the oppressed populations occupying the *favelas* understand that class is not merely another form of "difference" as some post-Marxists have implied. Rather, class denotes "exploitative relations between people mediated by their relations to the means of production" (Gimenez, 2001: 24). Nevertheless, it remains important not to overlook the reality of racism in Brazil since such a focus could have helped to identify the specific ways in which capitalist social relations in Brazil provide the conditions of possibility for celebrating miscegenation and the "mixed-race" status of Brazil's population while at the same time privileging lighter-skinned Brazilians in every realm of Brazilian life. Very little attempt was made in *City of God* to draw attention to the racism that pervades Brazilian society or to address the structural racism that perpetuates Third World underdevelopment. Here, the work of Paulo Freire could be utilized to unpack the race/class dynamic as it is dialectically mediated in the day-to-day existence of the *favelados*. It is important to note that Freire's work is now celebrated by *favelados* throughout Brazil, as illustrated by the samba school, Leandro de Itaquera in Sao Paulo, that composed a song in praise of Freire for the 1999 Carnival.⁴

3.8 In a growing world where the distinction between the haves and have-nots continues to become virulently clear we must consider the current status of youth in relation to their material conditions: half of the world's one billion poor are youth; 11 million children under the age of five die each year due to malnutrition and the spread of disease; 110 million school-aged youth are not in school; 250 million youth work—half of which have never seen the inside of a classroom (The International Conference against War and in Defense of Public Education, 2003); millions of others are subject to the free trade of child pornography, vital organs, and sex; and others are inculcated in armed conflicts around the world (UNICEF, 2000). Further, of the 6.3 billion people that currently live on the planet, almost half of them are under the age of 25 and over 1 billion are between the ages of 15-24. The burgeoning population of youth will impact the development of society. As reported by Joaquin Oramas (2003):

Throughout the world, millions of girls and boys are being deprived of education, resulting in serious consequences for their individual prospects and those of society as a whole. The vast number of young people without access to these services heralds devastating consequences. (3)

Everyday life for a growing majority of youth is defined by class warfare. Theirs is a lived experience that is both bought and sold. When we are confronted with blood-soaked images on film, it should not cause us to cringe; rather it should propel us to consider the diffuse social paradigm informing relations of youth both between and within class fractions. To understand how class is lived is to understand the primordial relations that undergird society and reproduce its conditions of possibility. While the U.S. tries to hold the neoliberal economic model as the model for all countries to embrace, it fails to disclose its own dirty secrets regarding the status of youth. Youth living in poverty in the U.S. amount to twelve million, the

overwhelming majority (80 percent) of whom live in working households (Children's Defense Fund, 2003). Overall, youth have higher poverty rates than adults and the elderly (U.S. Census, 2003) and are vulnerable to increased policing in neighborhoods that are plainly segregated by race and class. With 5 percent of the world's population, the U.S. boasts the greatest number of persons in prison (over 2 million)—25 percent of the world's prison population (Street, 2003). The prison population reflects an alarming trend for poor youth of color in the nation. Blacks in particular and a growing number of Latino/as are incarcerated. On any given day, 30 percent of African-American males ages 20 to 29 are under correctional supervision—either in jail or prison or on probation or parole (Street, 2003). The incarcerated most frequently come from poor communities, lack high school degrees, and when released return to a low-skilled job market where they are likely to receive wages 10-20 percent lower than their non-incarcerated counterparts (Street, 2003). Poor youth in the U.S. are told that if they follow the neoliberal economic principles of "individualism" and "effort" then they will succeed. The ideology that informs the myth of the "American dream" (a myth which has been globally exported) is belied, however, by harsh material realities both in the United States and abroad.⁵

Global Media Culture: Selling the "Myth" of Prosperity

4.1 Today's youth are living extremely unequal lives in terms of food, health, education, employment, and social security. And yet they are, in principle, equally hit by the global media culture with its popular images of youthful exuberance, success, and prosperity. The notion expressed by Paul Willis (2000) seems to ring true in this respect: "The modern communicative imperative is not to do you good, to educate you, to inform you, to develop you, but to sell your buying power and buying capacity on the largest possible scale" (49). In contrast to the wide variety of living environments, there exists the ideological power of global media culture to bring unity and forge consensus with respect to the imperatives of capital. It is hardly necessary to dwell on the fact that the majority of the content of current media culture is of Western origin and is produced mainly in the United States by the all-powerful and pervasive Hollywood entertainment industry. Its contents are blind to the cultural, economic, and educational background and status of the young consumer. It is crucial, however, to recall the fact that the majority of young people in the world do not live according to the Western conceptions of "youth" and presentations of self. As Cara Heaven and Matthew Tubridy (2003) note:

The market place of dominant youth culture produces experiences which are enabled by the disproportionate levels of surplus capital being supplied to the West by the economically and politically marginalized countries of the developing South. The youth of these latter countries are, for the most part, excluded from the youth experience that their economies make possible in the developing world. (151)

According to UN documents, the majority of the world's youth live in developing countries and estimates suggest that by 2025, the number of young people living in the global South will increase to 89.5 percent (UNESCO, 2002). Yet, the very category of "youth" as it is commonly understood in the West is largely inappropriate when invoked in such contexts. Johanna Wyn and Rob White (1997) contend that if "youth" is understood as "constituting the period between the end of childhood, on the one hand, and entry into the world of work on the other, then it is manifest that youth does not exist" (10) in the aforementioned contexts of the global South.

4.2 For young people living in those locales, youth in its Western sense exists only indirectly through the presentations of media culture. Thus across the globe they are dreaming about the glamorous life of a pop star or a top athlete and wishing for the life of a stereotypical Western youth preoccupied by whether to drink Pepsi or Coke and other life-shattering decisions. While global media culture is not homogenous and is read differently by individuals in different cultural, geopolitical, and historical contexts, it does have a "free market" saturation effect. Its dominant message to young people, among other things, teaches that individual effort is preferable to interaction, collective action, and sharing; free trade capitalism is the

best economic system in the history of the world; private monetary gain and profit making are central objectives of life; the problems of society are caused by individual malefactors and not by anything in the economic system; U.S. military force is directed only towards good purposes and laudable goals; and that U.S. military might has been, and continues to be, a civilizing force for the benefit of poor people throughout the developing world (Parenti, 1992). In this regard, the global media are truly the "new missionaries of corporate capitalism" (Herman and McChesney, 1997: 23) for they peddle the ideologies conducive to global corporate rule and new forms of imperialism. As Petras (2003) has pointed out: "The state, the mass media and the corporate world encourage mindless, passive engagement in mass spectator entertainment...and reinforce the empire world view of 'good' and 'evil', where the 'good guys' defeat the 'evil doers' through violence and destruction" (19).

4.3 Moreover, the attitudes pushed forward by global media culture have functioned to mould young people into compliant future consumers. Naomi Klein (2000) has observed that brand-name corporations which have targeted their offers and goods to young people are abandoning youth "at the very moment as youth culture is being sought out for more aggressive branding than ever before" (275). Equipped with skills and attitudes necessary for survival in media culture, young people have become the targets of gross exploitation unparalleled in the past: "Youth style and attitude are among the most effective wealth generators in our entertainment economy, but real live youth are being used around the world to pioneer a new kind of disposable workforce" (Klein, 2000: 275). The ideology of flexibility promoted by the market has placed young people in a difficult position. By attaching their identities to popular cultural messages, they have adopted some of the ideals and ways of thinking promoted by media culture. Yet they are currently finding themselves in a situation where it is impossible to feel secure enough to make any long-term plans, let alone model their lives and futures according to the ideals adopted from the media: "A hit soap opera is generally the only place in the world where Cinderella marries the prince, evil is punished and good rewarded, the blind recover their sight, and the poorest of the poor receive an inheritance that turns them into the richest of the rich" (Galeano, 2001: 301).

4.4 In stark contrast to the glossy images perpetuated by the dream factories of global media culture, we are witnessing the rebirth of sweatshops where children labor for a pittance, an ever-increasing disparity between the rich and the poor, and a global climate dominated by the military might of the United States. As Nancy Snow (2002) has argued, the United States is now "the Schwarzenegger of international politics: showing off muscles, obtrusive, intimidating" (47). Much like the boorish, predatory behavior of the groping new governor of California, the United States is seeking to establish *Pax Americana* (i.e., America's vision of a "peaceful" world). The drive towards "American empire" may not constitute a classic imperial mission for control of another territory; it may not be about establishing a set of colonies around the globe. But it does reflect the use of political and military power on behalf of an ideology—a radical pro-corporate, anti-government, free market fundamentalism—that mainly benefits the global economic activities of the capitalist elite (cf. Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren, 2003[b]). It is a vision of a world where democracy is reduced to the freedom to consume commodities and media spectacles. It is a world where alternative visions are demonized and denigrated and where TINA reigns supreme. Those seeking to establish global American hegemony would have us believe that the only "choice" available to us is between their version of empire and the "axis of evil"—or to paraphrase the leader of the world's only superpower—"you are either with us or you are against us." According to Bush, the United States has been called upon to defend the "hopes of all mankind." This perversion of "humanism" must be challenged at this critical juncture in history and critical pedagogues must work towards revealing the specious nature of the aforementioned "choice." The march towards endless war must be exposed for what it is—a cover for corporate interests that are fundamentally at odds with the interests of working people the world over. We must be relentless in revealing that the real source of terror today is the "market" itself as Eduardo Galeano (2003) has aptly noted. The conditions of possibility for using terror as a smokescreen for imperialism by means of 'preventative' and permanent war is rooted in capitalism and any alternative must necessarily be a socialist one. While the challenge ahead is multifold and multiform, part of a progressive strategy must necessarily entail a radical interrogation of global

media apparatuses and the cultivation of radical media literacy. However, the confounding complexity of capitalist social relations cannot be erased by the mere realization of its existence. Nevertheless it needs to be branded with the designation it has deservedly earned: exploitation and alienation.

Conclusion

5.1 Films such as *City of God* reflect not just anxiety surrounding our own lives, and the lives of people close to us, but also concern for the state of the world under the jackboot of the current U.S. economic military apparatus. In the discourses and practices of critical pedagogy we should not forget the ugly political picture behind the cruel circumstances of the street described in *City of God*. The discussion on youth and representations of youth at the altar of global media culture should be broadened to cover the general political conditions and structures of life in a world ruled by global (media) corporations, and military juntas (including the U.S.). This would, in our view, be best served by utilizing a Marxist analysis of class. Today, in Brazilian society, there is a growing consciousness of racism, and it is important that an understanding of race is not relegated to nominal factors of identity politics, but linked to the social division of labor within Brazilian capitalist society, a condition so brutally displayed in *City of God*.⁶

5.2 It is sometimes claimed that people, especially young people, are natural born media critics and media savvy by nature. Following this line of reasoning, it is also believed that media awareness is the end result of the pure fact that we are living in the midst of media culture and subjected to an unprecedented flow of commercialized images and ideological sounds which penetrate our consciousness as well as our public and private places. It is true, as Kellner (1995) has put it, that "new virtual worlds of entertainment, information, sex, and politics are reordering perceptions of space and time, erasing distinctions between reality and media image, while producing new modes of experience and subjectivity" (17). But it does not follow that we can transform our consciousness and experiences in isolation from these new symbolic and material qualities of our environment. It should be self-evident that commercial image bombing neither informs nor educates people. Corporate media culture does not foster critical awareness or carry with it forms of radical media literacy—it carries only reified ideological messages. Thus we must remind people of the fact that radical media literacy does not come easy in these times of economic horror.

5.3 This is the reason why, as critical educators, we need to emphasize again and again the importance of historical materialist analyses that can expose the deeper political, social, and economic consequences and relations which do not flow about the surface of cultural representations. In the words of Kellner (1995), this sort of analysis

reads films politically in order to analyze the opposing political struggles and positions and their relative strengths and weaknesses. It attempts to discern how media culture mobilizes desire, sentiment, affect, belief, and vision into various subject positions, and how these support one political position or another. (121)

Thus current pedagogical practices must move in the direction of developing forms of radical media-economic literacy which not only invite students to read and interpret multi-layered representations of the cultural industry, but also encourage them to explore the capitalist economic relations that characterize the systematic operations of a military-industrial complex. A radical media literacy must, then, move beyond the mere surface level of representation—it must cut into the flesh of the social, reveal fundamental contradictions, and ultimately provide the groundwork for articulating a vision of what a social universe outside of capital might look like. We know that this is a difficult route to go, but we also believe that it is one of the ways to turn the tide—to move toward transforming dystopian popular images into utopian ones which enable us to see eruptions of hope and struggle even in mass cultural texts like *City of God*.

Echoing the words of Marx (and Zygmunt Bauman, 2002), to change the way media works calls for nothing less than changing the world. And changing the world for us means understanding the dynamics of class struggle in order to bring forth such a world.

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Notes

¹ Quotes cited from <<http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Fascism/Fascism.html>> 10 October 2003.

² We would add that the drive for U.S. corporate controlled global hegemony has only been exacerbated by the far right, free market rhetoric of the current Bush administration. Indeed, should anyone doubt the imperial ambitions of Bush and his minions, one need only peruse the unsettling canon of *PNAC (Project for the New American Century)* —<www.newamericancentury.org> 10 September 2003). There, in plain sight, one will find Bush's blueprint for the establishment of *Pax Americana* penned in September 2000 by a cabal of far right intellectuals and think tank mandarins. For more on this see Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and Peter McLaren (2003) "Operation Human Freedom."

³ During Cardoso's eight-year reign, Brazil's public debt soared from 29 percent to more than 65 percent of gross domestic product.

⁴ (Translated from Portuguese.) Wake up Brasil. Arise to happiness. I want love. I want love (refrain). In freedom. And today? Today beautiful Leandro asks permission. To play its part and show. The naked, raw conditions. On the blackboard, our struggle continues. My school takes a leap into the future. And comes to the war with pen in hand. The red and white asks for education. Without prejudice and discrimination. Inspired by divine light. We sing with one voice. Paulo Freire is here by our choice. Young man. I do not let go of my rights. I also have faith in my insights. In the created universe. Minds are imbued with virtue and power. Just open the doors you'll see them flower. The world, where magic shapes ideals. And knowledge, is not divided by social class. Let reflection play its part. And make conscious every heart. Relight the flame of change. All hail the youth the child. Let faith illuminate the creation. A happy future for our Brazilian nation (McLaren, 2000: 205-206).

⁵ Even the "middle" class in the United States is growing somewhat skeptical of the myth of the American dream as unemployment ratchets upwards, as manufacturing jobs are increasingly outsourced to Latin American and China, as social services shrink to near invisibility, and as medical insurance costs rise out of reach.

⁶ Furthermore, as Brazilian universities begin to enact policies that will ensure the admission of more Black Brazilians, the question of race and racism needs to be grounded not in simplistic concepts of race relations linked to identity politics, but in an understanding of the complex dialectic of race and class related to the larger social totality of neoliberal capitalist globalization.

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