

IReflect – Student Journal of International Relations



www.ireflect-journal.de

Cinematic hidden peace representations as a
barrier to social development?

Reflections on the Brazilian blockbuster Elite
Squad

RENATA MALKES

IReflect – Student Journal of International Relations 2018,
Vol. 5 (1), pp 5-22

Published by



IB an der Spree

Additional information can be found at:

Website: www.ireflect-journal.de

E-Mail: board@ireflect-journal.de

Website: www.ibanderspree.de

E-Mail: vorstand@ibanderspree.de

Berlin, May 2018



Cinematic hidden peace representations as a barrier to social development?

Reflections on the Brazilian blockbuster *Elite Squad*

Renata Malkes

Abstract

This paper starts from the assumption that peace representations in cinema present international politics with a conundrum. Nobody would dispute that peace and war are inherent parts of the world. However, it is hard to think of any film that clearly depicts peace. It is never a main plot, but often forgotten or, at best, side-lined. On the other hand, war representations emerge as dominant and powerful narratives on the screen. Why cannot we see equal representations of peace in pop culture? Which impacts does the lack of peace representations have on shaping our understanding of reality? Starting from the Foucaultian idea of “truth”, an analysis of Brazilian blockbuster *Elite Squad* suggests that peace can be found in shifting analysis from high-end, state-centric actors to peripheral ones. Moreover, it demonstrates that hidden representations of peace might contribute to maintaining a certain balance of power and hinder social development.

Keywords: representation, peace, cinema, development, Brazil.

Introduction

Pop culture is a valuable asset to help us understand the world. Since the 1990's, scholars have discussed the need to investigate the power of images and representations consumed through newspapers, television, films, books, video-games, and pictures to assess how our knowledge is constructed. Mitchell (1994) defended a “pictorial turn” in International Relations (IR). Perhaps one of the most vociferous advocates for an “aesthetic turn in IR Theory” is Bleiker (2001). He observed how the international and its conflicts

are shown in media in a quite arbitrary way, leaving us with distorted perceptions and metaphors of what we take for real. Weber argued popular films should be paired with IR, because they present drama and trauma in contained spatial and temporal locations, offering “worlds that are familiar enough for us to relate to” (2001: 185). Shapiro also claimed cinema is a vehicle for animating and encouraging thinking as it “involves resistance to the dominant modes of representing the world” (2009: 5).

Although scarce, I argue that interpretations of peace are present, yet misrepresented in pop culture. This phenomenon is analysed through the Brazilian movies *Elite Squad*. Ten years after its release, the films are still vastly debated. By dragging around 22 million spectators, the franchise became the country's biggest cinematographic success of all times. The films expose a contradiction: they communicate a story of peace pursuit in Rio de Janeiro using mostly representations of raw violence. The first one was launched in 2007, winning the Golden Bear at the 2008 Berlin Film Festival. Its sequel, *Elite Squad 2: The Enemy Within*, was released in 2010.

Moreover, evaluating *Elite Squad's* scarce representations of peace is important in light of the socio-political context, in which Brazil lived in the 2000's. That was a “golden decade”, when GDP grew around 3.7 percent a year, and the government was praised worldwide for social programs that reduced poverty from 10 to 4 percent of the population, according to the World Bank (World Bank 2014). It was a moment of optimism, but in spite of that, this huge social change was neglected on the screen.¹ The film challenges the common assumption that pop culture reflects “reality”. So how does peace remain hidden in a movie that speaks of the search for peace in a moment of development? I attempt to defend the view that the definition of peace makes it a hard object to represent, going further to assess whether representations depend on epistemological observations of society's prevalent discourses in specific periods of time. This hypothesis relies on the premise that “each society has its own regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault 2002: 131). In the Brazilian case, discourse in the 21st century still appears quite attached to the country's colonial heritage, as it will be further discussed.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I will present definitions of representation and peace. Having in mind the connection between representations and world politics, according to which “the 'real' is therefore always intertextual, an image of the world among many others images that claim to adequately represent the world” (Engert & Spencer 2009: 91), I will explore the dialectical relationship between peace and conflict. Conflict is

¹ At least 36 million Brazilians left extreme poverty (people living on less than 18€ a month) – exactly the population that composes the *favelas* depicted in *Elite Squad*, according to official Brazilian government data, assessed by a United Nations report on the fight against child mortality (Governo do Brasil 2014).

visible; peace, in contrast, presents itself at the same time as universal and interpersonal, symbolic and even utopian (Richmond 2008). This difference matters. It leads to unbalanced social representations. Second, some violent film plots will be discussed, and it will be highlighted how the screenplay deliberately focuses on the police' agency in order to erase "the other" in favelas. However, one does identify representations of peace if turning to embodiment, by looking at the main character as a small, regular citizen.

Finally, this paper examines the impact of such timid representations of peace, suggesting that *Elite Squad* was more focused on the normalization of violence rather than on a critical reflection on its roots. In light of Brazil's colonial heritage, there are indications that violent narrative serves as a tool to perpetuate a certain balance of power, cultural violence and prevent social development.

The state of (peace, representation and) art

Representation is the study of meaning and how meanings are culturally produced, diffused and contested (Hall 1997). In this context, peace encompasses many meanings. It is a word that everyone can relate to, but no one seems to be capable of precisely expressing. Although there is a notable paucity of high-quality research engaged in the search for a scientific definition, this paper follows the proposition from Johan Galtung, who identified the existence of a negative peace, meaning the absence of physical violence yet the existence of social injustices, and a positive peace, "the integration of human society" (Galtung 1964: 2). The choice is deliberate: it appears the most adequate to look at Brazil.

However, even with a definition at hand, a second challenge appears. "Countries at war always say that they are fighting for peace" (Ishida 1969: 133). Individual, cultural and contextual factors influence the understandings and perceptions of peace worldwide, making this word almost an empty signifier able to justify any policy or behaviour – including war. Concepts of peace are "bound up within a temporal web of social, political and psychological issues that include sovereignty, self-determination, political and personal autonomy, the salience and sensitivity of national identity and religious affiliation, collective memory, territorial boundaries, access to resources, fair trade, social mobility, social injustice and human rights" (Hewer 2012: 12:4).

That being said, definitions of peace remain loose. To date, different disciplines have tried to investigate representations of peace in a systematic way, with inconclusive results. Social Psychology experiments have noted traces of cognitive imbalance between perceptions of peace and conflict. In general, children understand war around the age of six, associating it with weapons, military action, suffering and damage (Sarrica & Wachelke 2012). They claim that peace perceptions, on the other hand, are formed only

around pre-adolescence, and are always associated with positive, personal, abstract feelings.

On a philosophical sphere, a Derridean perspective would pose the dichotomy of peace and war as a pair of concepts that appear to be mutually exclusive, but one, in fact, cannot operate without its opposite (Zehfuss 2009). Equal representations of peace and war are clearly inexistent in pop culture. Therefore, his idea of *différance*, something distinguishable, could explain the predominant representations of conflict. The French philosopher shows us that, when something cannot be shown (peace, in this case), we have to make a detour (and appeal to conflict). He proceeds to subvert the dichotomy by claiming that “nothing...is anywhere ever simply present or absent” (Derrida 181: 26). If this logic is applied to our case study, *Elite Squad*, it could be argued that the films rely on a peace vs. violence story. This hierarchy could be subverted according to the Derridean thought though. If we look at it through a violence vs. peace perspective, there is the establishment of a new, artificial hierarchy. And we can finally argue this hierarchy relies on power, as social representations provide an underlying structure for peace and conflict because “culturally and temporarily beliefs about the appropriate development of cultural and institutional power determine social and political actions” (Hewer 2012: 12:1).

Back to IR, I claim that while conflict appears to be universally depicted by a realist approach to power, combat and deaths caused by states or social groups, peace lags behind, because realism sees peace in a narrow way, exclusively in the state-centric balance of power. Peace remains far from our idealized notions of what it could and should be “because it largely exists in the form of *Realpolitik*” (Hewer 2012: 12:17).

That is where the asymmetry lies. Peace is more imagined than actually seen, remembered and even experienced, and that is why identifying representations of peace in pop culture requires a poststructuralist approach, which is able to shift the attention from the state (or social groups) to the individual, observing more than the simple intersections between them.² Clearly put, peace could be easier perceived, if norms, institutions, culture, and the interactions between actors and structures were more deeply scrutinized. Orthodox IR has a limited engagement with peace, even though the discipline also tries to address the issue. “[...] peace is always aspired to and provides an optimum, though idealistic point of reference; it is viewed as an achievable global objective, based on universal norms” (Richmond 2008: 8).

² Other IR theories are not disregarded when generally analyzing pop culture, but my choice of poststructuralism is deliberate, as I claim it offers broader opportunities. For instance, if constructivists often study norms, institutions and culture while being interested in interactions between actors and structures, poststructuralists would focus on how these structures mean actual change.

Bleiker (2001: 512) criticizes the blind pursuit of realistic and authentic political representations, as mimetic frameworks “do not pay enough attention to the relationship between the represented and its representation” He defends an aesthetic approach instead, which presupposes there is an unexplored knowledge gap between representation and represented: we cannot ignore our relationship with facts in order to comprehend them.

Some allege the growing interest in the field has already made a significant, long-term contribution to IR by focusing on micro-politics and moving it “away from stagnant macro-political analyses focused on systemic relations between states to find new referents and highlight new dynamics of power” (Caso & Hamilton 2015: 2). Recent research suggests a need to put an end to a systemic underestimation of the power mechanisms demanded for the world to function as “examining the everyday phenomena that ‘are’ popular culture helps us to grasp the centrality of the many ‘margins, silences and bottom rungs’ of world politics” (Weldes & Rowley 2015: 25). Looking at pop culture in a constitutive capacity, and amplifying the voices of the until then “marginalized low-ends” of the political sphere might make sense – as it provides evidence on the state of norms, beliefs, ideas and values within a particular society. Therefore, it can be particularly useful because “it may reflect general cultural themes and assumptions better than the elite discourse” (Neumann & Nexon 2006: 13).

Elite Squad: hiding peace and erasing “the other”

The act of adopting certain discourses means what Foucault (1971) calls a “will to truth”.³ The reference to the French philosopher seems pertinent because of the origins of *Elite Squad*. Although officially classified as fiction, the movies were initially conceived as a documentary by director José Padilha. The screenplay was inspired by real facts from the book *Elite da Tropa* (2006) by Brazilian sociologist Luiz Eduardo Soares and two former BOPE policemen (*Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais*, Rio de Janeiro's highly militarized police squad for special operations) which has around 400 men.⁴ The book accounts the violent routine of the group, which has a skull pierced by two guns and a sword as symbol, as a killing machine. Plans changed when Padilha realized that it would be impossible to find real

³ At an inaugural lecture delivered at the Collège de France in 1970, the French philosopher explains how speech is legitimized based on the social conditions in which discourse is used (see Foucault 1971).

⁴ The military police of Rio de Janeiro does not provide exact numbers. Without revealing sources, several academic works suggest 400 troops, an account endorsed in a personal conversation with Gustavo de Almeida, former Rio's police spokesman between January 2000 and January 2015, on July 28th 2017.

“sincere policemen willing to speak in front of the cameras for fear of retaliation”.⁵

That said, it is possible to note a Foucaultian “will to truth” reflected even on the official promotional material of the film in Brazil. Original posters had under the title *Elite Squad* the subtitle “a war has many versions and this is the true one” (*uma guerra tem muitas versões e esta é a verdadeira*).⁶ The story unfolds in 1997 before the visit of the pope to Rio de Janeiro around the main character, BOPE Captain Roberto Nascimento. He drags spectators into the main plot when explaining how the police and the drug lords of Rio de Janeiro cooperate with each other, exposing the corruption of an underpaid police force who depends on collecting bribes from drug dealers – who are left free to operate – to survive.

Nascimento is not a man of thought, but a man of strategies at any cost, including torture, something implied by his frequent remarks to the troops that “a given mission is an accomplished mission” (*missão dada é missão cumprida*). For him, “the only good bandit is a dead bandit”. BOPE, whose men wear black uniforms and are equipped with heavy weaponry used in war zones, is portrayed as a special, yet small police squad where there is absolutely no tolerance for the overall corruption spread within the rest of the blue uniform police. Nascimento is the one assigned to “clean up” a dangerous favela before the pope arrives while also trying to find a successor: his wife is pregnant, and he intends to resign and dedicate time to the family.

Apart from the predominant top-end view of violent policemen divided by clean BOPE troop and a corrupt rest, the story is organized around two other epicentres. Rio’s (white) middle class represented by students who make voluntary work in *favelas* while occasionally using light drugs such as marijuana, and (mostly black) slum inhabitants – treated as a whole, without any distinction between armed criminals and civilians. By focusing the narrative exclusively on police agency, the film simply erases “the other”, or at best, blurs it, perpetuating a systemic state of social segregation driven by inequality. In order words, it perpetuates cultural violence, aspects of culture used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence, thus, a negative peace (Galtung 1990).

The narrative reinforces state-centric views, ignoring society’s peripheral actors. It represents the students’ core as a naive group of young and idealistic people disconnected from a harsh reality in their claims of drug legalization and respect for human rights, blurring their attempted social

⁵ As acknowledged by José Padilha in an interview to Brazilian newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* on December 29th 2006 while the movie was being edited (Folha de S. Paulo 2006).

⁶ Although the movie official website seems not to be online anymore, one can see the original promotional poster captured by the Internet Movies Data Bank (IMDB). Available at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0861739/> (last accessed on July 28th 2017).

agency as NGO volunteers. Moreover, the narrative recurs to a certain paternalist tone, to “traditional moralism to adopt a prohibitionist stance toward drugs, refusing to discuss their legalization or regulation and to impose a general discourse of fear which equally criminalizes drug dealers and drug users” (Bentes 2013: 113).

What is perhaps the most striking is that *favela* inhabitants as regular citizens of a democratic state were completely ignored. They have absolutely no voice. Nascimento describes his job in the slums frequently referring to war conditions. Statements like “war is war” and “nobody is innocent, bro” imply the idea that “the other” in the slum is just one single, cohesive entity, an enemy to be fought and eliminated. For Nascimento, *favelas* are composed of drug dealers or people living under a parallel rule of law dictated by drug dealers. “Who helps bandits is also a bandit”, sentenced the captain. His discourse throughout both films shows he is not interested in assessing the identity of this “other” – be it a school kid or an armed criminal.

A tentative explanation to this choice of social representation emerges with claims that Rio’s *favelas* were born by the end of 19th century out of violence, through evictions and restrictions, amidst government attempts to “civilize and Europeanize” the city, pushing the poor, black, working class to the surroundings, where they would be invisible to the white elites (Möller 2016). Put differently, the state was never really interested in assisting these slums or their populations. There are indicators this became such a normative behaviour in Brazilian pop culture that the depiction of *favelas* as places of violence and poverty overlapped the interpretation of *favelas* as the samba communities producing the joyful sounds and colours of Carnival (Jaguaribe 2007).

By the end of *Elite Squad*, it is suggested that Nascimento had finally found a successor – his colleague Matias. However, three years later, this assumption proves wrong. Among big expectations and a heated national debate on the values of a police who fights violence with even more violence, *Elite Squad 2: The Enemy Within* hit the theatres in 2010 with the same dominant representations of conflict. The general plot advanced 13 years in time, and used the same Nascimento, now a colonel and BOPE’s commander, as a narrator. Although older, with grey hair and looking tired, the truculent man resurfaced in even more cathartic scenes. Nascimento was now divorced and quite distant to his teenager son, since his ex-wife married a human rights advocate who believes the whole police force in Rio is cruel – and that Nascimento is a murderer.

In the sequel, after a bloody BOPE invasion of a prison in order to control a rebellion, Nascimento and his friend Matias are accused by human rights activists of executing the inmates. While the latter is punished by being downgraded from BOPE to the regular, corrupt military police in blue uniform, Nascimento is expelled from the corporation. However, he gains public recognition and popularity because of media coverage. The population believes he is a hero for keeping criminals behind bars, and turned into a

political asset, he ends up invited to join the government as secretary of security.

Nascimento joins “the system” and discovers he needs to fight “the system” itself. The biggest enemy, now, is the militias. They are made up of corrupt cops who turn into crime by covering up the drug sales in exchange for money in areas neglected by the state. Furthermore, the militiamen associate with criminals to improve profits by illegally supplying services as gas and cable TV in the *favelas*. In order to avoid being caught, they also make obscure agreements with politicians in office to ensure their election and re-election by brokering closed votes so that the whole favela’s voters choose the militia’s candidate. A win-win game to the ones out of the rule of law.

The narrative focus erases the “*favela-other*” again. Its inhabitants are dehumanized; represented merely as a grey mass of humans to be inducted to choose a certain candidate dictated by militias in times of election. They are denied every possible social agency.

Here, the most important observation refers to a shift in the construction of the enemy – Nascimento’s struggle turns into a complex network of corruption involving not only *favela* criminals, but also top politicians. In this context, *Elite Squad 2* seems to break a paradigm in Brazil. Instead of focusing on a spectacle of conflict where the poor kill one another, a recurrent theme on national cinema, it starts relating “violence and poverty with the elites and the culture of enterprise, banks, commerce, with the middle class” (Bentes 2013: 109).

Thus, I propose scrutinizing the main character in more detail. Surprisingly, by observing the dualism involved in Nascimento’s construction, I reject Möller’s (2016) remarks that the movies communicate only violence. He argues they depict “unbearable violence not only unbearably violently but also more violently than did earlier films” (2016: 110). He is right to note that mostly raw conflict scenes emerge clearly out of both *Elite Squads*, but what I propose is changing our analytical focus from high-end, state-centric actors to low-end, small and peripheral actors. That is exactly where slight representations of peace are hidden – and from where we should try digging them out.

Between villain and hero: Captain Nascimento

In order to understand the representation of such a violent cop, it is pertinent to bring back the human dual behaviour observed by Max Weber (1923) when he tries to make sense of the religious ideology and identifies the concepts of *Binnenmoral* (morality in the group, meaning the police force) and *Außenmoral* (morality outside the group, in the *favelas*, in front of “the other”). The theory seems to fit Nascimento perfectly. The representations of an implacably cruel man at work are intertwined with the representations of Nascimento as a loving, peaceful family man, a regular citizen of high morals

who just happens to work for the state and “do the dirty job”. Those are traces of peace. The assumption is based on several of his speeches when dealing with his own private life. Turning to a critical discourse analysis at this point proves fundamental because “language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language” (Fairclough 2003: 3).

Recognizing small traces of peace representation through critical discourse analysis, though, brings us to another crossroad that might explain the prevalence of conflict representations – the power of images. It is necessary to reflect on the intertextuality between words and visuals in order to identify the asymmetric representations of peace and conflict.

First, I propose a focus on discourse. When first introducing Nascimento in *Elite Squad*, the film presents us a black screen with only his name stamped on it. While seeing the title, spectators just hear his voice in a surprisingly sweet, calm tone. “Oh, my love, I would love to be there with you now, but I am working... Can we hear his heart? Let me try! Put it on the phone so that I can hear it! Wow! It beats hard! My love, I have to hang up as I am at work... Don't worry. I will heat it in the microwave when I arrive... Love you too”.

That was a peaceful phone conversation between Nascimento and his then pregnant wife, a regular conversation which could be held between any husband and any wife “from an office, chair or couch not only for the soft voice used, but also from the apparent calm of the site where we imagine the conversation” (Menezes 2013: 70). When images emerge, though, the spectators are surprised by the hostile environment: Nascimento was actually hidden in the dark, on top of a *favela*, positioned with snipers, waiting to open fire. Suddenly, the idea of peace is abruptly swept away from the viewers.

Now let us turn the focus to images. If the example above indicates how visuals were in charge of representing conflict, other scenes do the exact opposite, using images only to represent peace. Observing images, Menezes (2013) points out that the social roots of Captain Nascimento become clear. Despite his high patent in the police force, his home is a quite modest household. His apartment is located in a Rio suburb made of grey concrete buildings. The flat has tiny rooms, the small TV appears in front of a humble double couch, the kitchen contains basic utilities, and the furniture is the one found in very popular Brazilian shops – leading us to the portrait of a regular middle-class man who works hard for minimal living conditions of a peaceful existence.

Moreover, as every human being, the truculent Nascimento is also afraid of death – exactly as his opponents in *favelas*, but we get this information only through images. In one of his few leisure moments, when climbing an indoor facility, he gets paralyzed after a sudden tachycardia. Later on, several images during the police preparation for securing the pope's visit show a nervous, cold-sweated Nascimento – the same sensations during climbing. We are finally led to discovering that he secretly resorts to drugs to calm his

own nerves after what appears to be outbursts of a panic syndrome. It could be argued that this summarises the ultimate representation of a normal, stressed family boss who cares of the future of his family in case of his own death.

What is stronger then? Text or images? Several scientific attempts have been made in order to create a framework to investigate the power of images with few concrete conclusions. Some claim the biggest advantage of images is their authentic character, as visual has a “privileged epistemic status: it verifies and it brings the audience closer to the event” (Hansen 2011: 56). Möller borrows the term “family frames” coined by Marianne Hirsch⁷ to suggest images might be more powerful, too. They can be used to refer to images employed to build, justify and keep “often idealized national and international security policies, and rules of appropriate behavior within the realm of the international” (Möller 2008: 101).

Peace in the backstage, how come?

So, how could *Elite Squad* so successfully manage to hide peace as a general goal? An answer might arise by addressing the question of what the movie does to Brazilian audiences. In a country in which 59,080 homicides were registered in 2015 (28.9 deaths in each group of 100,000 inhabitants, see *ipea* 2017), it can be stated that millions of Brazilians live in constant fear of violence – mainly among the young, black or impoverished *favelas* populations. In 2012, for instance, more than 50 percent of homicide victims were between 15 and 29 years old, and 77 percent were black (Instituto Igarapé 2017).

It has been demonstrated that public dismay is a powerful tool for maintaining a *status quo*. Bourdieu's (1996) analysis of television reminds us that the predominance of news reporting episodes of violence is a representation that causes consensual emotions of fear, thus creating a certain social consensus without questioning what exactly the origins of this fear are. Furthermore, he noted the media needs such consensus in order to reach the biggest possible number of individuals, making visible only what is broadly understood as consensus – violence and fear of violence.

Brazil's colonial heritage shall not be forgotten either. Hardman (1998) claimed the hegemonic narratives of the country reproduce to exhaustion the idea of violent, poor people and a need of preventive violence to deter and even control them. The way Brazilians see themselves might also be useful to understand the broad acceptance of representations of violence in local pop culture. Arruda (2014) goes back in time to argue that Brazilian imaginary

⁷ She refers to the idea of family photo albums as means of constructing, justifying and maintaining often idealized family relationships and norms of appropriate behavior in the family. For more, see Hirsch (1997).

roots have been characterized by race and environment since the arrival of Portuguese colonizers in 1500, when the new land was defined as a paradise on earth, where “nature was exuberant, natives were portrayed as friendly, innocent, even childish” (Arruda 2014: 136). It can be assumed thus that the narrative implied the idea of the natives as ignorant and submissive: a human mass which could be easily controlled and manipulated.

Later on, black slaves brought from Africa joined this human mass of native Brazilians under the rules dictated by a white elite of European descent. Freyre (1933) was among the first who tried to quell centuries of growing inequality by criticizing racism. For him, the periphery social conditions in Brazil were born out of a systemic culture of privilege and the limited access to power structures, given to very few people through personal relations. That brings us to the idea of the “cordial man”, an expression coined by Brazilian sociologist Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1936) in a touchstone of Brazilian cultural thought, *Roots of Brazil*. He referred not to any gracious aspect of national psyche, but to a sense of Brazilians as people ruled by heart, and base decisions uniquely on affinities and emotions – a nation where personal relationships always prevail over abstract political, religious, or moral principles.

The cordial man has high tolerance of corruption and misconduct if those do not concern their “friends”. “The other” is irrelevant. Thus, I argue that the deep social gap between rich (predominantly white) and poor (many times black) in Brazil activates mechanisms of fear and prompts some sort of structural racism and animosity on both sides: while the rich perceive the less privileged as a source of constant threat to their security, the poor feel vulnerable, unable to access privileges, and defenceless when confronted by a state which denies them basic living conditions.

This inequality enables predominant artistic representations of state violence against the poor in Brazil, where liberal assumptions prevail, according to which the marginalized are seen as someone with the same capacities as those coming from the elites (Souza 2006). Thus, it can be suggested that while Brazilian elites and middle-classes often see themselves as part of privileged upper sects of society, poverty, on the other hand, is justifiable simply by destiny, and can, hence, be ignored. That explains why erasing millions of “others” in *favelas* is acceptable on the screen – it is an elite’s choice to deliberately ignore any social or political agency coming from there. Sontag (2003) highlighted this possibility when noting that political awareness is a precondition for the impact of images on society. In other words, if there is no awareness of the Brazilian poor, any images representing them – even if only violence and misery – become acceptable.

Moreover, it is not to be forgotten that Brazil was the last American nation to abolish slavery, on May 18th 1888, and influences of those times still constitute the country’s collective memory to these days. Class differences and the acceptance of a complex system of many privileges to few people were normalized through memory. This is relevant, because according to

Möller (2008), memory is exactly what helps us assign meaning to incoming information and construct our sense of the world. In other words, collective memory makes us somewhat hostages of images locked up in our minds.

Slavery images seem alive in Brazil. Thus, it can be stated that the abundant representations of violence in *Elite Squad* contribute to a continuous securitization process with two goals: they normalize the actions of a violent and corrupt police acting on behalf of the state, and maintain an abyss between a powerful small elite composed of the rich and white, while denying agency to a large, impoverished and black population, condemned to perpetual marginalization. It brings back the remembrance of the hierarchy established between colonizers and colonized.

The representations of peace and conflict tend to function according to stereotypes in which the poor are portrayed as sources of risk and social menace. The most visible consequences of the discourse of fear are “greater indifference toward the origins of poverty and toward structural injustice, more private security, more repression and demand for the containment of slum populations so they cannot leave their ghettos without being observed, more CCTV surveillance in defense of private property” (Bentes 2013: 104).

It can also be concluded that those violent representations are a mechanism through which the privileged classes ensure not only their control over capital and resources, but also maintain their self-confidence. “The rich and happy in every epoch, in every place, do not want to be only rich and happy. They want to know they have ‘the right’ to wealth and to happiness” (Souza 2015: 4).

Conclusion

Elite Squad's popular and vibrant soundtrack declares the BOPE special police unit “is a hard bone to chew, it catches one, catches everyone, and is also going to catch you”.⁸ That is what it does to *favela's* population in Rio de Janeiro. But the action goes beyond that. Exactly as in the song, the films catch any distracted viewer – it engulfs spectators in such a tsunami of raw violence that it sweeps away any attempt to identify representations of peace.

I claim that peace is still there. Having discussed the hardship of defining peace as a first obstacle to clearly seeing its representations, I suggested that making depictions of war appears easier. However, finding some sort of hidden peace in pop culture is always possible when diverting the focus of analysis from realist, state-centric agents to the more peripheral elements of society through a poststructuralist point of view – through Nascimento's

⁸ In the Portuguese original, it says “*Tropa de elite, osso duro de roer, pega um pega geral, e também vai pegar você*”. The lyrics and a music video clip can be found at <http://bit.ly/2wa406t> (accessed 01/08/2017).

embodiment. Furthermore, the franchise managed to misrepresent peace due to the historical political memory in Brazil, characterized by a colonial heritage, which established a deep social gap between rich and poor, black and white, elite and “the others”. Sarrica (2007) had determined that peace and conflict cannot be equally represented, and proposed, for instance, that in light of the weakness of peace representations, any peace activist should try to strengthen the connections between peace and human rights in order to bring peace representations to the surface. That might show us a way to dig peace further, and help us understand how and if (mis)representations influence us, dictate public policies, create or perpetuate norms.

Most important is to push harder for an aesthetic approach when observing world politics “to explore ever new ways of writing, seeing, hearing and sensing the political; to break free of disciplinary boundaries; to write creatively and to explore other ways of communicating” (Bleiker 2017: 262). This paper echoes his plea. As scholars interested in better understanding the world surrounding us, in clear contrast to the usual movies we watch in the cinema, there is no black screen stamped with the words “the end”.

– I reflect –

This article comes out of a term paper for the seminar “Pop Culture in World Politics, Peace and Conflict” at the Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg. Throughout the course, I was mesmerized by the fact that no matter how we look into peace in photography or movies, for instance, we can also identify conflict. Representations of peace appear idealized, blurred or left aside. Does the idea of peace exist only because there is war? Why is peace not clearly represented? What happens once we cannot see it? How does it affect power relationships, social structures and policy-making?

Being Brazilian, my homeland came to mind. If popular culture also reflects reality, cinema from the 2000's, some sort of “golden decade” in Brazil, posed an interesting contradiction. The GDP grew around 3,7% a year, and former president Lula was praised worldwide for social programs which took 36 million people out of extreme poverty (population living on less than 18€/month), according to the World Bank. However, blockbusters showed only misery and violence on the screen, despite a historical social change. I wanted to understand how development could be ignored in movies such as *City of God*, *Bus 174* and *Elite Squad*. The latter was chosen for being the country's most outstanding cinematographic success of all times. Not only: it speaks of peace pursuit while showing only conflict. How paradoxical is that?

Such a research is no easy task. I struggled with definitions of peace, and realized that a Peace and Conflict Studies perspective of “positive” and “negative” peace provide new windows of analysis, challenging an orthodox IR understanding of peace as the mere absence of war. A multidisciplinary approach to reflect on representations of peace in pop culture – or the lack thereof – is perhaps the only path towards the answers for several questions raised here.

Renata Malkes
Master Peace and Conflict Studies, 3rd semester
Otto-von-Guericke-Universität Magdeburg
Contact: renata.malkes@st.ovgu.de.

References

- Arruda, A. (2014) Social Imaginary and Social Representations of Brazil, in: *Papers on Social Representations*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp 13.1-13.22.
- Bentes, I. (2013) Global Periphery: Aesthetic and Cultural Margins in Brazilian Audiovisual Forms, in: Andermann, J. and Bravo A.F., eds., *New Argentine and Brazilian Cinema*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 103-118.
- Bleiker, R. (2001) The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory, in: *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 509-533.
- Bleiker, R. (2017) In Search of Thinking Space: Reflections on the Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory, in: *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 2017, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 258- 264.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996) *On Television*, translated by Ferguson, P.P., New York: The New Press.
- Buarque de Holanda, S. (1936) *Roots of Brazil*, English Translation (2012), Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Caso, F. & Hamilton, C. (2015) Introduction, in: Caso, F. & Hamilton, C., eds., *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies*, Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, pp. 1-10.
- Derrida, J. (1981) *Positions*, London: Athlone Press.
- Engert, S. & Spencer, A. (2009) International Relations at the Movies: Teaching and Learning about International Politics through Film, in: *Perspectives. Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 83-103.
- Fairclough, N. (2003) *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*, London: Routledge.
- Folha de S.Paulo (2006) "*Tropa de Elite*" de José Padilha explica por que política "é o que é". Online: <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/ilustrada/ult90u67237.shtml> [28/04/2018].
- Foucault, M. (1971) Orders of Discourse, in: *Social Science Information*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 7-30.
- Foucault, M. (2002), Truth and Power, in: Faubion, J.D., *Michel Foucault Essential Works: Power*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Freyre G. (1933) *The Masters and the Slaves*, English Translation (1946), New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hardman, F. F. (1998) Tróia de Taipa: Canudos e os Irracionais, in: Hardman, F.F., eds., *Morte e Progresso: Cultura Brasileira como Apagamento de Rastros*, São Paulo: Unesp, pp. 125-136.
- Hirsch, M. (1997) *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, London: Harvard University Press.
- Galtung, J. (1964) An Editorial, in: *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 1, No. 1, 1-4.
- Galtung J. (1990) Cultural Violence, in: *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 291-305.
- Governo do Brasil (2014) *Brasil retira 36 milhões da miséria extrema e bate meta da ONU para mortalidade infantil*. Online:

- <http://www.brasil.gov.br/centro-aberto-de-midia/noticias/brasil-retira-36-milhoes-da-miseria-extrema-e-bate-meta-da-onu-para-mortalidade-infantil-1> [28/04/2018].
- Hall, S. (1997) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage.
- Hansen, L. (2011) Theorizing the Image for Security Studies: Visual Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis, in: *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 51-74.
- Hewer, C.J (2012) Tracing the Social Dynamics of Peace and Conflict, in: *Papers on Social Representations*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 12.1-12.22.
- Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (ipea) (2017) *Atlas da Violência 2017 mapeia os homicídios no Brasil*. Online: http://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=30253 [28/04/2018].
- Instituto Igarapé (2017) Latinoamérica puede bajar el homicidio en un 50 por ciento en 10 años ¿Cómo hacerlo? Online: <https://igarape.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Campanha-Instinto-ES-13-06-web.pdf> [28/04/2018].
- Ishida, T. (1969) Beyond the Traditional Concepts of Peace in Different Cultures, in: *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 133-145.
- Jaguaribe, B. (2007) 5 Cities without Maps: Favelas and the Aesthetics of Realism, in: Çinar, A., & Bender, T., eds., *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 100-120.
- Menezes, P. (2013) Tropa de Elite: Perigosas Ambiguidades, in: *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, Vol. 28, No. 81, pp. 63-75.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (1994) *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Möller, F. (2008) Imaging and Remembering Peace and War, in: *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 100-106.
- Möller, F. (2016) From Aftermath to Peace: Reflections on a Photography of Peace, in: *Global Society*, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 315-335.
- Neumann, I.B. & Nexon, D.H. (2006) Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics, in: Nexon, D. H. & Neumann, I.B., eds., *Harry Potter and International Relations*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 1-23.
- Richmond, O.P. (2008) *Peace in International Relations*, New York: Routledge.
- Sarrica, M. (2007) War and Peace as Social Representations: Cues of Structural Stability, in: *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 251-272.
- Sarrica, M. & Wachelke, J. (2012) Make (?) Not War! Are the Social Representations of Peace and War Antonyms?, in: Gibson, S. & Mollan, S., eds., *Representations of Peace and Conflict*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 163-186.
- Shapiro, M. J. (2009) *Cinematic Geopolitics*, London and New York: Routledge
- Sontag, S. (2003) *Regarding the Pain of the Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Renata Malkes: Reflections on Elite Squad

- Souza, J. (2006) *A Invisibilidade da Desigualdade Brasileira*, Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG.
- Souza, J. (2015) *A Tolice da Inteligência Brasileira: Ou Como o País se Deixa Manipular pela Elite*, São Paulo: LeYa.
- Weber, M. (1923) *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen: Mohr.
- Weber, C. (2001) *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, London: Routledge.
- Weldes, J. & Rowley, C. (2015) So, How Does Popular Culture Relate to World Politics?, in: Caso, F. & Hamilton, C., eds., *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies*, Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, pp. 11-34.
- World Bank (2014) *Cómo reducir la pobreza: ¿nueva lección de Brasil para el mundo?* Online: <http://www.bancomundial.org/es/news/feature/2014/03/22/mundo-sin-pobreza-leccion-brasil-mundo-bolsa-familia> [28/04/2018].
- Zehfuss, M. (2009) Jacques Derrida, in: Edkins, J. & Vaughan-Williams, N., eds., *Critical Theorists and International Relations*, London; New York: Routledge, pp. 137-149.