

DEAD END

Violence in Latin American Cinema



Huelepega [Glue Sniffer] (1999) Directed by Elia Schneider

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Huelepega [Glue Sniffer] (1999)
Directed by Elia Schneider
Country: Spain / Venezuela

La Virgen de los sicarios [Our Lady of the Assassins] (2000)
Directed by Barbet Schroeder
Country: France / Spain / Colombia

Cidade de Deus [City of God] (2002)
Directed by Kátia Lund and Fernando Meirelles
Country: Brazil / France / USA

Young Dadinho (little dice) was, at 10 years of age, in his first formal job. Dadinho, at the gates of a suburban motel, was asked to shoot the motel's luminous sign at the first sight of the police. Inside the motel an armed robbery was taking place. After a few minutes of boredom, Dadinho deceptively shoots the sign, his partners quickly flee the crime scene, and the audience of *City of God* (2002) is confronted with a 10 year old kid indiscriminately killing motel workers and middle class Brazilians while having a good time. A disturbing but very real scene in what is staged as the birth of gang violence in Río de Janeiro, Brazil.

Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund succeeded in directing a film that not only engages its audience with an interesting story and its fast-paced aesthetics, but also conveys "what happens inside the slums," as Meirelles himself pointed out in an interview for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* in January 2003. In the same interview, Meirelles also confesses being influenced by Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Robert Altman. It is certainly this influence, added to Lund's experience directing some of the most influential and outspoken (Brazilian) rock and hip-hop music videos, that give *City of God* its unique visual language despite of being highly innovative, this style does not escape the hyper-real Latin American style and, on the contrary, might be even taken as an evolution of the urban-violent storytelling trend that is common among artists in the region.

The fact that urban violence is the focus of many Latin American films is no coincidence. Various cities in the area have been classified as the most dangerous in the globe, a situation that transforms its children in the easiest target of the apparatus of violence. Such is the case of Caracas, Venezuela, the capital of a privileged oil-rich nation (fifth largest exporter in the world), but one that nevertheless hasn't escaped the wave of corruption that turned the region upside down in the past four decades. The opening of Elia Schneider's *Glue Sniffer* (1999) bluntly denounces the situation in which Venezuela's 600,000 homeless children dwell, most of them living in the roughest streets of Caracas while consistently being abused by police and drug lords alike. Schneider's film, as most of this genre, flirts with fiction and documentary,

driving the audience through a nightmare in which kids have powerful guns and no love.

Love is precisely what Fernando Vallejo's characters are desperately looking for in his novel turned into the feature film *Our Lady of the Assassins* (2000). Directed by Barbet Schroeder (the only foreigner in the film crew), *Our Lady* narrates the violent love story between Fernando, a middle-aged writer who is coming back to his native Medellín after 30 years of absence, and his underage lover, who lives by the rules of the drug-controlled *Medallo* (the city's underground alias), which not surprisingly, coincides with those that govern the characters of *City of God* and *Glue Sniffer*: kids with guns killing other kids with guns and everybody else that comes across their interests.

In the opening sequence, the viewer of Schroeder's film is casually introduced to the presence of firearms, a "character" that will prevail throughout the film. Fernando, the film's protagonist, visits an old friend who owns a gay brothel, in which the writer is introduced to Alexis, a 16-year-old prostitute who is also a professional assassin. Fernando quickly asks Alexis to take his clothes off as he sits and begins to slowly undress himself. The scene cuts to a medium shot of Alexis, completely naked and covering his penis with an automatic gun. Schroeder candidly offers a key message that remains true throughout the three films analyzed in this article: for the victims of violence, the gun not only represents a tool for survival but also the assertion of their often premature masculinity. Guns are not merely phallic symbols, they are actual extensions of their penises, arms, and consciousness. These kids can only be up to what their guns are: an upgrade of their weapon means an upgrade in their social status. This fact is clearly stated in the three films as their characters are always in the hunt for a bigger and better killing machine.

When Fernando asks Alexis to write on a small napkin what he expects from life, Alexis does not hesitate to include a Mini-Uzi among his requests, which by the way, also include designer clothes; this is very similar to what *City of God's* Benny got from his middle class friend after kindly requesting a supply of decent garments. After all, a proper outfit is what represents oneself, at least according to *Glue Sniffer's* Chino, a semi-retarded adolescent who shot his first victim in the back to steal his shoes.

It shouldn't be a surprise that designer fashion and heavy weaponry appear in the same dialogue in any of these films. After all, Latin American's underprivileged kids are far from escaping the consumption race, and a brand name comes with a short term satisfaction that fills in the gap of more substantial and often unachievable life expectations.

The arms dealer just arrived in *City of God*, Dadinho is now Zé Pequeno (Li'l Ze), who controls a big chunk of the slum's drug-dealing business. Sweaty but perfectly comfortable, the salesman opens a sports bag and begins a speech in

which he introduces all guns by their name, manufacturer, country of origin, and capacity to kill as many humans as possible in the shortest time. The United States, Switzerland, and Israel come across as key manufacturers, at least of the weapons sold to Zé Pequeno which, by the way, included *Our Lady's* Alexis' preferred weapon: the Mini-Uzi.

In *City of God* as in *Our Lady* and *Glue Sniffer*, guns are often showed alone, in a close up, as if the arms dealer had left them on the table on purpose, so they could be framed by the camera, out of context, and without any physical relationship with humans, in an effort to grant them a disproportionate aesthetic energy as the natural result of any object displayed in the large screen without a human reference. They are just laying there, as big as they can get, in an effort to become as important to the viewers as they actually are to the characters of these seemingly surreal stories.

Another constant in the three films in question is the use of “real” people to perform in leading roles. *City of God* relied on non-actors for most of the key parts, according to Meirelles in his *Atlanta Journal Constitution* interview, he and his team interviewed 2,000 real life youths. Two of the 200 who ended up acting in the film are Jonathan and Phellipe Haagensen, who interpret Cabeleira (Shaggy) and Bené (Benny). In a November 2003 conversation with *interview* magazine, Phellipe shared with his public a glance of his before and after *City of God* story, a look that might help us visualize how the idiosyncrasy of the fictional characters hops between the screen and the real life:

“Before *City of God* we lived in a small house [at the top of a hillside] and we slept on the floor of the living room with our mother and, occasionally, friends. After *City of God*, we put in bedrooms for ourselves and our mother. But first I spent 1,000 reais [Brazil's unit of currency] for a motorcycle, which I destroyed after one week...”

With that short story, Haagensen confirms both his status as one of the unprivileged majority and his juvenile restlessness, which fortunately is not as sharp as that of Anderson Ballesteros, the Alexis of *Our Lady of the Assassins*, for whom director Barbet Schroeder feels somehow responsible as he explains in an interview in *Bomb Magazine*, Fall 2001:

“Anderson kept his money [that he made with the film] for a long time, he wanted to go into business. Finally he took all the money out of the bank bought himself a superbike and got in trouble with the police again... one more incident and he is in jail for a long time... It's driving me crazy, because I don't know what to do.”

Anderson, like the Haagensen brothers, was recruited from the streets of his hometown, as were many of the cast members from *Glue Sniffer*, in a pattern

that does not resemble a coincidence and that can be read as a need to show the real, to stress the issues in a direct manner. The fact that their lives are so similar to that of their characters makes these actors not only look and feel more genuine on the screen, but also allows the filmmakers to enter into a mix of fiction, reality show, and biographical documentary. The lives of these characters illustrate a truncated vision of the future that is now part of the Latin American paradigm.

The nature of these films does not allow for happy endings, much like the life of some of the actual individuals who act in the films. The stories lead their characters into a dead end, one that does not betray the spirit of denunciation and self-criticism of the artists involved in the three motion pictures. It is not a surprise that most of the characters end up dead, or at least worse than at the beginning of the film. Only *City of God's* Buscapé (Rocket) finishes the film in a better position. Most of his friends and enemies are killed along the way and the survivors are equally set for disaster. In *Our Lady*, both of Fernando's lovers die in the hands of other assassins and Fernando himself ends the film closing the dark curtains of his apartment, not only dimming the sunlight to total darkness but also signifying the end of his life. Again, we are confronted with a dead end, with a vision of a dark future, one that torments these three Latin American countries in their struggle with their issues, a struggle which seems to be lost from the very beginning.

At the end of *Glue Sniffer*, a socially decomposed character continues his miserable life only after taking justice in his own hands by killing the signifier of a rotten part of the legal system. In the same lines, after *City of God's* Zé Pequeno is killed by the police, his responsibility passes on symbolically (through his gun) and explicitly (through titles on the screen) to the youngest generation, which seems to be even more disturbed and resentful. During the last minutes of *Our Lady*, Fernando finds out that his new lover (Wilma) is the assassin of his dearest Alexis. When challenged with this question, Wilma justifies his killing with a solid argument: I killed him because he killed my brother. Fernando replies with forgiveness. Again, we are forced to confront a dead end, and the audience is left with an unpleasant aftertaste that makes all the previous violence, still not digested, justified.