



# GHETTO CULTURE

World Cinema can seem daunting to AS Film students. Subtitles, black and white cinematography and a lack of Hollywood stars are all challenges for the uninitiated. But if you have a taste for genre movies, gangsters, guns, violence and drugs, look no further! **Pete Turner** compares the representations of ghetto culture in foreign language classics *City of God* and *La Haine*.



## Contexts

The narrative of *City of God* (2002) spans three decades from the Sixties to the late Eighties. It is the story of a **favela (slum/shanty town) and its inhabitants** through these turbulent times. Brazil has 'nearly unrivalled economic inequality' (Gilligan, 2006) and an estimated 6.5 million inhabitants live in favelas. These people live in extreme poverty and are surrounded by gang violence and the drug trade. The selling and use of cocaine increased through these decades and is depicted in the film.

*City of God* was 'financed by TV Globo, Brazil's biggest TV channel, and o2 Films, Brazil's biggest commercials company' (Muir, 2008) and directed by two white middle-class film-makers, **Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund**. It was **made on a modest budget of \$3,300,000** and **grossed over \$24 million worldwide** suggesting that this was a film that was made for, and appealed to, a mass audience, not just the people of Brazil. The funding by Brazilian corporations of more and more films (and TV shows) about the favelas (e.g. *Lower City*, *Bus 174*, *Elite Squad*, *City of Men* etc.) has raised debates about the **elite's exploitation of the poor** by pandering to middle-class desires for 'typical' representations of young black males in gangs, shooting guns and taking drugs.

On the other hand, *La Haine* (1995) is set in the 1990s and the protagonists live in '**les banlieues (housing estates) on the outskirts of Paris**'. It also deals with police brutality, racism and civil unrest. It opens with immediate context: real footage of the riots that regularly took place between youths and police between 1986 and 1996 (and were continuing during filming). **The director, Mathieu Kassovitz**, has often stated that he was inspired to write the film when he heard the story of:

a young Zairian, Makome M'Bowole [who] was shot in 1993. He was killed at point blank range while in police custody and handcuffed to a radiator.

Elstob, 1997

Made for approximately **\$3 million** by first-time film-maker Kassovitz, *La Haine* won many awards (including Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival); so devastating was its reception that:

**the Prime Minister, Alain Juppe, responded by commissioning a special screening of the film for the cabinet, which ministers were required to attend**

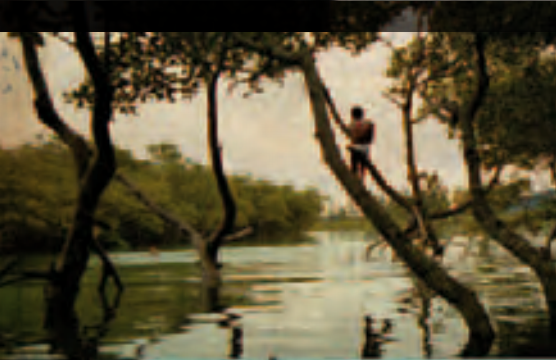
Johnston, 1995

The narrative, cinematography and use of music are all clearly influenced by American independent films such as *Boyz N The Hood* and film-makers such as **Martin Scorsese** and **Spike Lee**.

## Representations

Young men from ethnic minorities are the main social group represented in both films. Each film has a young black male protagonist: Rocket in *City of God* and Hubert in *La Haine*. The American 'hood' film sub-genre often has a character that is trying to reject a life of crime and escape the trappings of the 'hood' in which he lives (see also *Boyz N The Hood* and *Menace II Society*). Rocket and Hubert both conform to this archetype, and reject crime as a way of life. Rocket flirts with crime but cannot go through with muggings and hold-ups due to his compassionate nature. He tries working at a supermarket but is fired for his connections to the favela. By the end of the film he has become a successful photographer because of his access to the gangs and knowledge of the favela. Similarly, Hubert rejects the rioting of the other youths on his estate. He runs a gym that he worked hard to





get a grant for, and promotes boxing as a sport for young people to get involved in. The audience first meets him in the ruined gym after the rioters have trashed and burnt it in the previous night's riots. The film ends with Hubert sucked in to potentially committing the murder of a police officer (or being murdered himself) as retaliation for the shooting of his friend. Characters who try to escape the ghetto life are often stopped from doing so by circumstances out of their control – or even by death (see also *Bullet Boy* and *Benny* in *City of God*).

These representations of young black males are life-affirming and positive. However, other characters confirm the more negative stereotypes of youths from ethnic minorities. For example, Lil Ze in *City of God* and Hubert in *La Haine* are both drug dealers. Lil Ze is a typical crime film villain; the audience watches his rise to the top, followed by his subsequent decline and death. He is violent and psychotic, with no remorse for his actions or sympathy for his victims. He is a cocaine dealer, rapist and gang leader; out of control, hungry for power and desperate to control the favela. On the other hand, Hubert's drug dealing is only glimpsed in one scene; elsewhere, we see him giving money to his mother for food, and to pay for his sister's books. He deals hash to help his family; and the film-makers do not judge him for this. The scene in which he makes a transaction is done very matter-of-factly and the audience does not even hear the conversation between Hubert and his customer because the audio highlights the conversation of Hubert's friends, who are standing in the background of the shot. Dealing is seen as just a typical fact of life rather than dangerous or immoral.

## Diversity and Identity

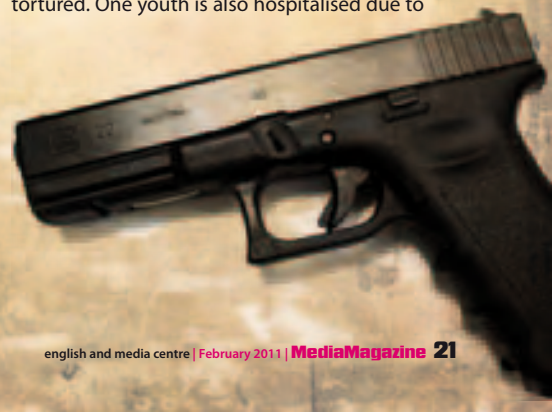
*City of God's* focus is mainly on black youths. The favelas were initially created to house freed slaves, and therefore black people are massively over-represented in this setting. On the other hand, *La Haine* emphasises **racial hybridity** with the three protagonists being of **Arab, Jewish and African descent**. The characters all refer to each other with racial banter; in *La Haine* the three friends refer to each other's ethnicities continually. It is argued that people from ethnic minorities often do this to **celebrate their difference** from the rest of society and also to give them **a sense of belonging** within their own sub-culture.

A defining characteristic of these ghetto cultures is their antagonism towards the police. The representation of the police in both films is almost entirely negative. In *City of God* the police are corrupt; they:

**stand by and watch the slaughter, only intervening to collect their pay-offs**

<http://www.totalfilm.com/reviews/cinema/city-of-god>

They sell guns to gangsters, shoot suspects on sight (including an innocent youth on his way to school), steal money and drugs from dealers and are never seen helping anyone. In *La Haine*, police brutality is witnessed when two of the protagonists are taken into police custody and tortured. One youth is also hospitalised due to





## Styles

*City of God* and *La Haine* have very different visual styles. Both use **the mise-en-scène of real locations** to add to the realism of the films. However, *La Haine* uses **black and white cinematography** to enhance this realism by linking it with the real footage from news reports shown in the opening credits. *City of God* begins with **bright colour** (to represent the Sixties and Seventies) but as the narrative progresses, the colours become duller as the concrete trappings of urban development take over. **Handheld camera** is used throughout *City of God* enhancing the documentary feel, whereas *La Haine* features more **steadicam movement** with long flowing shots following characters through their environment.

The **editing** also adds to the restlessness of the camera in *City of God*, with lots of quick cutting and speeding up of footage. *La Haine*, on the other hand, favours shots with a longer duration and the editing is less choppy than in *City of God*. This emphasises the idea that life is fast in the favelas, whereas life is boring in les banlieues. However tension is created by using a number of 'explosive' cuts at the beginning of *La Haine*. The image cuts, for example, on Vinz pretending to shoot a gun at his mirror image and hitting a boxing bag. The sound of a gunshot is used on each of these cuts.

**Music** is also incredibly important in both films; the samba beat, funk and soul in *City of God* and hip hop in *La Haine*. Both examples use music to give a strong sense of time and place, and help create a sense of identity for the characters.

The two films contain many similarities; the **iconography** of the crime film, the **mise-en-scène** of poverty, characters from ethnic minorities living in poor and dangerous conditions. They both feature antagonism towards the police, a lack of women in major

roles, drug dealing and violence. Their settings may range from Europe to South America, but the social conditions faced by young people from ethnic minorities in these ghetto cultures seem worryingly constant. Power is abused, people in poverty are angry, and conflict ensues. The films bring harsh social realities to the screen in (broadly) educational and visually exciting ways with interesting characters, thrilling narratives and differing styles all packing a punch for Film Studies students... even those who hate subtitles!

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## Bibliography

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his treatment by the police; and this propels the narrative, with one of the protagonists, Vinz, declaring that he will kill a police officer with a gun he has found if the youth in hospital dies.

**The use of guns in the films** is also interesting to compare. In *City of God*, guns are everywhere; gang members and even small children carry firearms, ranging from pistols to Kalashnikovs, bought from corrupt police. In one particularly disturbing scene, children are cornered and shot; gangs and the police face-off and have shoot-outs in the streets. On the other hand, in *La Haine* there are only four guns in the whole film. One character has found a pistol lost by a police officer in the riots, and the hesitation over using this gun leads to the devastating climax. Life is not as cheap on these European streets as it is in the Brazilian favelas.

**Women are under-represented in both these films**, and often portrayed in a negative light. They are both very masculine stories with little time for female characters. *La Haine*, for example, has been accused of:

**ignoring women and for importing the violence and nihilism of American gang movies**

Stafford, 2000

Women are **the subjects of derision** in the film; the characters tease each other using 'your mother...' and 'your sister...' jokes. In *City of God*, however, women are a **civilising influence**, with two male characters expressing a desire to settle down and quit crime when in a relationship. It is argued that the male characters in these films are often **emasculated** and that this is the reason for their behaviour and attitude to women. They lack jobs, education or any reason to feel pride, so they resort to carrying guns and insulting women to make themselves feel like men.