

## URBAN EXPANSION AND THE “OTHER” CITY IN CINEMA. THE URGENT NEED FOR A SUSTAINABLE CITY.

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### **Abstract**

*Since 2008, the global urban population has exceeded the rural population for the first time in human history. Urban sprawl and the population movements it entails, are gradually eliminating any meaning of dipoles such as city-countryside or center-periphery, which were developed in an effort to understand space. Urbanized space extends to infinity and disappears on the horizon, while slums have become a reality that is fully integrated into ever-expanding megacities.*

*The reality of the “other” city as a social symptom, as well as, an urban experience, was captured on film. The choice was primarily spatial, as a shot of the slums can raise our awareness much more than any political declaration. Starting from the neorealism of harsh everyday life, it focuses on recording poverty, on protest, and social analysis, combining fiction with documentation and social recording in aesthetic terms. Ultimately, connecting emotion with reflection, energy with consciousness. After all, cinema does not have the right to ignore life; it must see, hear, and question...*

*Camera records, in a process of re-sensitization, the relationship between residents and the urban environment of the slum. The urban image interacts with the city passerby, developing a dialectical relationship between image and movement, where each sequence of images becomes an object of reflection. This is a reflective cinema, marking the transition from the aesthetic of poverty to the aesthetic of dream, the only right that cannot be denied. Nowadays, migration, economic and humanitarian crises, as well as the recent pandemic, constitute the social dynamic of the city, which determines cinematic writing. Cinema, as an art in motion, captures urban life in its dynamic unfolding, highlighting the social phenomena that constitute this dynamic for a sustainable city.*

**Keywords:** urban expansion, “other” city, sustainable, cinema, reflection

### **1. THE “OTHER” CITY**

Today, urban expansion and the population movements it entails constitute the expression of a new era for humanity. This process progressively abolishes any meaning in dipoles such as city–countryside or center–periphery, which were developed in an attempt to understand space.

Indeed, the deprived populations of this world are now accumulating in slums, barrios, favelas, and bidonvilles of megacities, which are undergoing an uncontrolled demographic explosion. As early as 2008, and for the first time in the history of humankind, the global urban population surpassed the rural population, as more than half of the planet's 6.7 billion inhabitants lived in cities. Many of these new city dwellers are poor, while the place where they seek residence or are born is the slum.

The global urban population is expected to have doubled by 2030, when 5 billion people will live in urban centers - a population that is constantly growing and expected to increase dramatically. Specifically, since 2017, 55% of the world's population resides in urban centers, while by 2050, it is expected that 65% (approximately 6.5 billion people) will live in cities. In other words, the increase in city residents will be the trend with the greatest impact on development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this world, most of the urban poor will be youth under the age of 25. Almost all of humanity will choose to live in an entirely artificial environment, where behind the storefronts of shopping centers and skyscrapers, vast slums will extend. These “other” cities, growing rapidly by one million people per week, are “suffocating” the large urban centers of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Today, one in three city residents’ lives in a slum. It is characteristic that in the Dharavi slum, in the center of Mumbai, one million people live literally on top of each other, as the ratio of population to area corresponds to 4.5 people per square meter.

The UN, in its reports, defines slums as poor areas with makeshift dwellings that lack access to potable water or other basic infrastructure. It uses the term "slum household" to describe a group of people living under the same roof in an urban area who lack one or more of the following:

- Permanent residence
- Adequate space
- Access to clean water and sanitation facilities

In Latin America, and specifically in Brazil, at least 1/3 of the country's urban population resides in informal settlements, self-managed communities, and favelas that signal the transition from “housing” to “shelter”. These are clusters of low-income housing, makeshiftly constructed from improvised materials, where low-income individuals reside. It is simultaneously considered a dangerous place and a situation regarded as unpleasant and disorganized.



Image 1: Morumbí favela, one of the largest slums in São Paulo.

Specifically in Rio, their population exceeds one million, accounting for nearly 20% of the city's population.

A large part of the responsibility for the existence of favelas is attributed to state power, given that effective housing solutions for the urban working classes never existed. This lack

of policy produced fewer homes for the poor in urban centers, limiting opportunities to improve their lives and resulting in the direct expansion of slums.

The favelas, as phenomena of self-housing, took place on occupied lands of reduced value, highlighting the state's lack of care for the poor. However, they also revealed the power of the need for survival of a population that literally had nowhere else to stay. Resourceful adaptation, as a privilege of the weak, created the social culture of the favela, with self-managed communities in informal settlements that implemented alternative housing practices.

In these poor neighborhoods, levels of solidarity exist that are unknown to the wealthy suburbs. They constitute spaces where different cultures mix, often functioning as communities of creation that feed new movements in the arts. Indicatively, the favelas in Rio always produce forms of cultural expression that define the identity of the city. In the past, they gave birth to samba, and many of its important singers still live there, as the samba schools are headquartered there. More recently, "funk carioca" emerged primarily in the favelas before eventually being assimilated by other social classes through the media.

Whatever is produced there eventually becomes integrated into the rest of the city and gives its residents a unified identity. As a kind of response to the intolerance of the state and the city towards the favelas, the residents create what is later launched as the "face of Rio". In any case, popular culture is not what is called "folklore" in technical terms, but what is called, in the language of the people, permanent historical change.

## **2. THE CINEMA OF THE "OTHER" CITY**

The "other" city as a social symptom, but also as an urban experience, has been uniquely captured in cinema, as the only right that cannot be denied is the dream. The path for the cinema of the "other" city was opened in the 1940s by Italian Neorealism, which echoed an aesthetic of the poor, utilizing amateur actors, documentary techniques, and lightweight equipment to create a cinema that was lean in technical means but rich in imagination.

Later, the ethics of Italian Neorealism were grafted with the aggressive aesthetic of the French Nouvelle Vague, for a cinema "*based on the means at our disposal, with low cost and in a short time... a political cinema that aims to inform not through logic, but through poetry,*" according to the pioneering Brazilian creator G. Rocha. This is a cinema that neither distorts nor embellishes the particularly unequal political, social, and cultural conditions in the slums of the "Third World". Specifically, G. Rocha pointed out that "*an economically underdeveloped country does not mean it must also be artistically underdeveloped*"; all that was needed was "a camera in hand and an idea in the head".

This movement is Cinema Novo, which initially developed in Brazil - with most of its films shot in Bahia - defining the cinematic landscape of Latin America by extending its aesthetic to the social life of the slum. It is a cinema of immediate recording of an ominous social reality, which imposed itself through the truth of its images and sounds; for if a place looks its true face in the eye, there is a chance to escape underdevelopment. This independent cinema of the "other" city, often self-funded by its creators, used the aesthetic of poverty to reveal something that many people had every reason to ignore, even though it existed right next to them.

In the cinema of the "other" city, social deadlocks dominate, highlighting a city unable to integrate its "heroes," who live trapped under conditions they did not cause themselves. This cinema records the relationship between residents and the urban environment. Urban expansion and continuous construction are depicted in cinematic images that map spaces and record their social coordinates. Those forced into marginalization live on the fringes of the city. As P. Sorlin (2004) characteristically describes, they "belong between capitalism and the proletariat, between exploitation and petty theft - that is, they live in the Third World". The

periphery becomes a gathering place for the poor; the rupture with the city is a fact - it is no longer made to their measure, it is no longer theirs.



Image 2: *The roof*, V. De Sica, 1956

In 1956, V. De Sica dared to show the suburbs of Rome with dwellings built from bricks and corrugated iron in the film *The Roof (Il Tetto)*, and to name the streets of the shantytown of his young protagonists in the film *Miracle in Milan* (1951) as Joy Street, Hope Street, Solidarity Street, and even  $2 \times 3 = 6$  Street for the young leads to learn mathematics.



Image 3: *Miracle in Milan*, V. de Sica, 1951

Within this neorealist climate, the surrealist L. Buñuel - paradoxical as it may sound - directed *The Forgotten* (*Los Olvidados*) in 1950 while exiled in Mexico. Set against the backdrop of slums on the outskirts of Mexico City, it remains one of the first and most significant films to capture the reality of the shantytown.



Image 4: *The forgotten*, L. Buñuel, 1950

Cinematic slums have an autonomous existence and recognizable characteristics. They are primarily intermediate spaces, anarchically “structured” areas with poorly built huts. These cinematic shacks are far from the center and lack the vital road that would offer a window to the outside world. People are constantly moving via motorcycles, tricycles, or on foot. The route to the center has been replaced by local dealings. Movements and chance encounters give way to an intense communal and yet harsh life, determined by the degree of tolerance and coexistence. Unemployment or temporary labor is a given, resulting in abundant free time for wandering. This continuous mobility, combined with communal life, forms significant social networks.

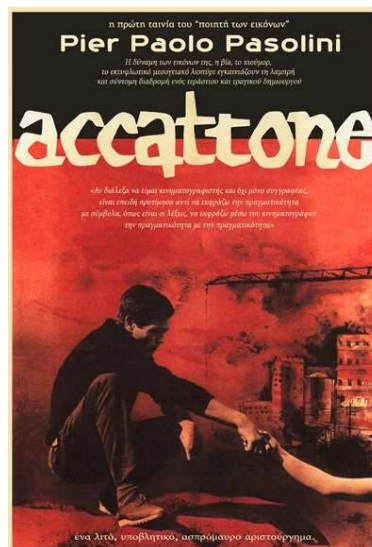


Image 5: *Accattone*, P.P. Pasolini 1961

P. Pasolini, with his films *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962), focuses on the forms, faces, and needs of the socially vulnerable residents of the slum.



Images 6 & 7: *The Constant Gardener*, F. Meirelles, 2005

In the films *The Constant Gardener* and *Tsotsi*, both released in 2005, the camera reveals the misery and degradation in the slums of the African continent. In G. Hood's *Tsotsi*, racial discrimination in the Soweto slum of Johannesburg has been replaced by equally intense social divisions and spatial schisms.



Image 8: *Bus 174*, J. Padilha, 2002

Slums are now an urban experience and a social symptom, fully integrated into the ever-expanding megacities. This fact is highlighted in the introductory aerial shots of the urban fabric of Rio in the documentary film *Bus 174* (2002) by J. Padilha.



Image 9: *City of God*, F. Meirelles, 2002

In *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*, 2002), based on the novel by Paulo Lins and real events, F. Meirelles denounces with a raw, deeply realistic gaze the deterministic vicious cycle of poverty and crime that plagues Brazil even today, making violence almost the sole option for survival. The peculiar structure of the film is akin to the relatively new hybrid genre of docu-fiction. Contributing factors include amateur actors, the narration, nervous editing, and a penetrating internal rhythm. Documentary elements are inventively incorporated into fiction, and this chosen heterogeneity gives the narrative a kind of agency

expressed in degrees of freedom. *City of God* is not the story of a person, but of a place, which started in the 60s as a housing project for the poor and ended up in the 80s as one of Rio's most dangerous favelas. Filmed frantically and breathlessly, *City of God* will chase you if you run to escape; if you stay, it will devour you.

J. Padilha follows a similar style in his Berlin Festival award-winning film *Elite Squad* (*Tropa de Elite*, 2007). With a handheld camera, he wanders through Rio's poor neighborhoods and records violence and death, as the mechanisms of suppression know no limits in corruption and authoritarianism in their attempt to "clean up" the city of "scum".



Image 10: *Elite Squad*, J. Padilha, 2007

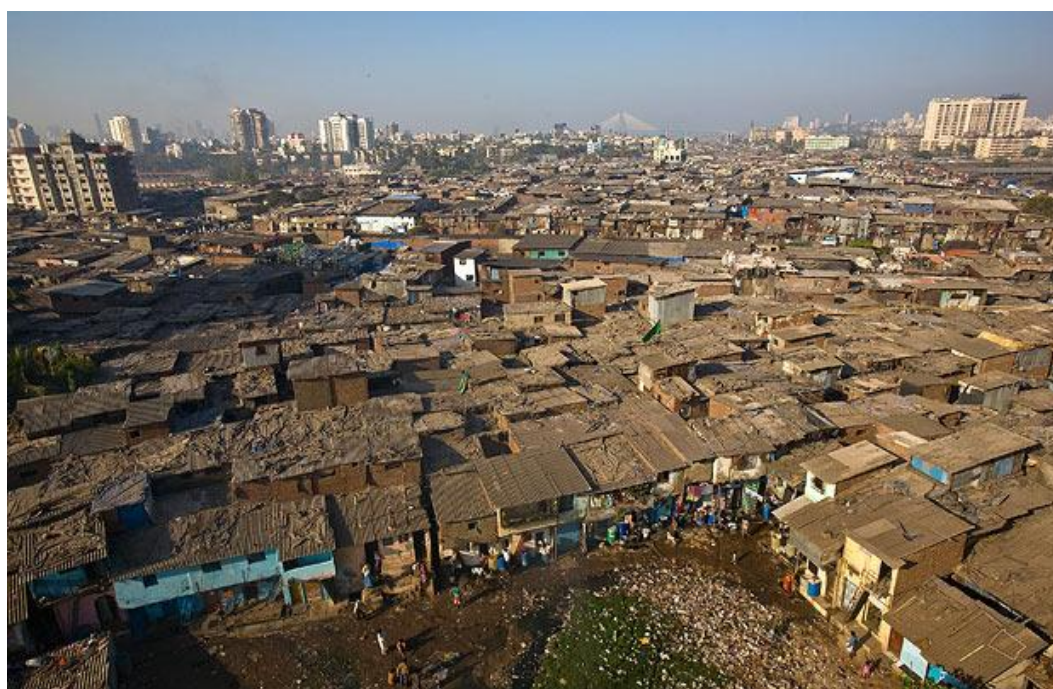
Finally, the Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* by D. Boyle (2009) records life in the Dharavi slum in the center of Mumbai, India - one of the largest slums in South Asia - with fast shooting and nervous editing.



Image 11: The Dharavi slum in Mumbai, where N. Boyle's film "*Slumdog Millionaire*" was shot in 2009.

The division between the center and the periphery no longer exists, and the cinematic camera depicts an urbanized space that extends to infinity and is lost on the horizon. The sole dissonance: the slum.





Images 12 & 13: The Dharavi slum in Mumbai, where N. Boyle's film "*Slumdog Millionaire*" was shot in 2009.

## 2.1 Towards a reflexive cinema on the path to a sustainable city

The cinema of Third World countries is no longer the poor relative of Hollywood. Instead, it produces the majority of fiction films worldwide, as it includes large film industries from countries such as India (Bollywood), Nigeria (Nollywood), Iran, Brazil, Mexico, and others. Through these films, the slum is elevated from a signified of the urban lifestyle to a signifier.

This is a cinema that, through a reflexive process, marks the transition from the aesthetic of poverty to the magical realism of the aesthetic of the dream. Creators begin from

the neorealism of harsh everyday life and, with the immediacy of their art, communicate their new vision. Moving from the recording of destitution to protest and, finally, to social analysis, they establish a reflexive cinema. They exploit the possibilities of technology, filming even with mobile phones and drones. The existence of creative communities in self-management, distribution, and screening also contributes to this.

In this cinema, issues of production methods, politics, and aesthetics are intertwined. With a spirit of collaboration between crews and creators, the authenticity of the unique culture of the shantytown is highlighted. It is another way of life, with different values and different valuations of material possessions, nature, and human relationships. A transition between the real and the imaginary, the conscious and the unconscious. A peculiar mix of realism and symbolism. A third space for negotiation on “third world” terms.

Using the aesthetics of poverty to document underdevelopment and utilize small, flexible crews, with limited time and a low budget, a cinema of high aesthetic quality and imagination was produced. Elevating cinematic art into an integral part of a culture subject to interactive relationships with socio-historical data, as it sufficed to express its own aesthetic with a spirit of reflection, the aesthetic of the dream.

The themes of shantytown cinema revolve around the daily problems of the human condition, depicting a social dynamic that tends to transcend the stereotypes it is forced into. Today, migration, the economic-humanitarian crisis, and the recent pandemic all constitute this social dynamic of the shantytown, which dictates cinematic writing. Cinema as an art in motion captures urban life in its dynamic unfolding, highlighting the social phenomena that drive this dynamic.

Today, most cities are characterized by significant inequalities, both economic and social, as well as living conditions. Informal settlements, such as shantytowns, which are the most intense manifestation of inequality, continue to emerge as a characteristic of the urban landscape and to expand. Especially in our era, where various types of crises (humanitarian, economic, social, pandemic, etc.) plague urban society, the need to protect its viability by strengthening its urban resilience is more evident than ever. That is, the capacity of residents, communities, institutions, businesses, and urban structures to survive, adapt, and evolve regardless of the chronic pressures and emergencies they may face (Urban Resilience Framework, Arup/ Rockefeller Foundation 2014) on the path to a sustainable city.



Image 14: Poster for a theatrical performance inspired by V. De Sica's film *Miracle in Milan*

Now, the great stake of the city of the homeless and immigrants is jeopardized in the areas of disruption, in the interstitial spaces, in the urban voids, in the degraded zones, in the suspended spaces of otherness in the center and on the periphery of the city. Cinema fulfills humanity's profound need to see and hear without intermediaries, as it presents these places as they are and us in relation to them. Places that the eye has learned to avoid. Cinema cannot but represent what is at stake in these areas. Developing a dialectical relationship between image and movement, where each sequence of images becomes an object of reflection. These are now urban images with identity, interacting with the city's passersby.

For the art of cinema is not concerned with the studio city, a sterile, flawless image of the city, which goes hand in hand with technological progress and sympathizes with the planning of distance, in contrast to any idea of immediacy. Cinema has no right to sideline life; it must see, hear, and doubt...

As an example, director W. Wenders advocates for a city that is not just sustainable, but livable: "Create authentic places for the children of tomorrow... Do not just build buildings but create open spaces that preserve the void/ emptiness, allowing unimpeded vision and rest." This calls for a new design on the scale of the city, one that can embody resistance to superficial change, acceptance of the documentation of the city's cultural memory, enhancement of the value of public space, and a dialogical relationship with the environment that brings about essential changes in the relationship between public and private space. In this context, today more than ever, the "game" of the city is played out in urban regeneration projects. These are essentially actions of urban renewal, which will be characterized by:

- Integrated regenerations: Extensive interventions in entire areas with respect for the natural environment and the goal of economic and social revitalization.
- Cultural sensitivity: Considering the history, cultural heritage of a place, as well as its social composition and identity.
- Targeted interventions: Small-scale actions focusing on specific buildings or blocks.
- Temporary uses as a regeneration tool: Utilizing vacant spaces for cultural or social activities.
- Participatory processes: Involvement of residents and stakeholders for sustainable and accepted solutions.
- International best practices: Examples from European cities where regenerations have strengthened urban resilience on the path to a sustainable city.

Local interventions for the transformation of the urban landscape, combined with the formation of a collective interest, a cultural consensus among the factors contributing to their implementation, constitute the important first steps. Cinema can initiate this collective interest by focusing on the relationship between itself and the city as a living social reality.

In such a context, cinema embodies the concept of the boundary, on the threshold between acceptance and resistance, in its representation of the underdevelopment of impoverished settlements and shantytowns. The choice is primarily spatial, as a shot of a shantytown can sensitize us infinitely more than any political declaration. This is cinematography that can combine social documentation with aesthetic terms, while the boundaries of representation are determined by the relationships between the real-imaginary and fiction-documentary.

Analytically, considering the language of cinema as an editing of two different, seemingly opposite, but essentially complementary shots, spoken and written words, then the former is a natural, open, and direct shot of a documentary film, and the latter is the disciplined and constructed one of fiction. Today, interest is now focused on the dialectical relationship that develops between a specific way of speaking and a specific type of writing throughout time. A feedback loop, as the movement of the handheld camera disrupts the

disciplined movement of the modern Steadicam, incorporating into technically perfect writing the orality that was initially proposed.



Image 15: *Central Station*, W. Salles, 1998

In films like the anthropocentric fiction “Central Station” (Central do Brasil, 1998) by W. Salles, the writing is not merely a direct transcription of spoken language, but primarily a complementary, overlapping form, another way of expression, nurtured by speech and in turn feeding it back. In the film, a retired teacher earns her living by writing letters for the illiterate. She is led to the arid hinterland, moving against the tide of internal migration. The camera records in a process of re-sensitization, just as it vociferously demanded in the past. As Brazilian film critic J. Avellar (2006) states, “Today we write because we spoke yesterday. We speak a common language of our own.” A language defined reflectively, as it combines writing with speech, fiction with documentary, and connects emotion with reflection, action with consciousness, resistance with social analysis.

After all, as Ch. Vakalopoulos pointed out, “the best films are those that succumb to the miracle of existence, those that defend less themselves, their city, and more the human being.” It is cinema “...for a world where good morning will truly mean good morning!”, as stated at the end of Vittorio De Sica's film “Miracle in Milan” (1951).

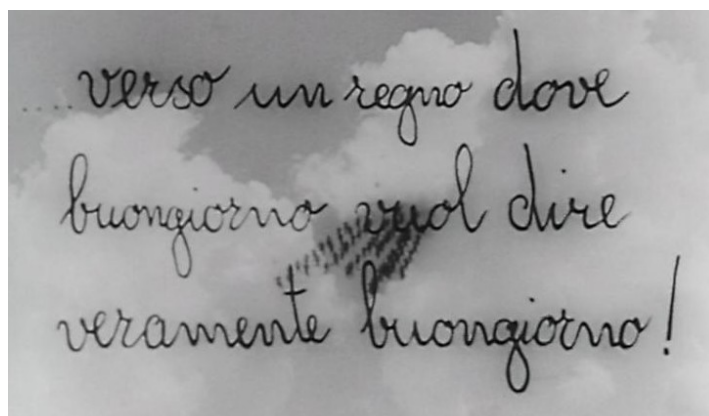


Image 16: *Miracle in Milan*, V. De Sica, 1951

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