


## The actor's ontological and collective body in Seven years in May

### O corpo ontológico e coletivo do ator em Sete anos em Maio

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article investigates screen performance in Brazilian cinema of the 2010s, analyzing the relationship between the actor and the character, fiction, and fabulation. During this period, there was an increase in the use of non-professional actors who represent specific social issues of race, class, and gender. The screen performance here is based on hyper-realistic, performative, and epic principles. The hyper-realistic and performative principles are crucial in forming a “total amalgam” between actor and character, while the epic quality and allegory help to collectivize this experience for a social group, offering a critical gesture on the film’s narrative.*

**Keywords:** *screen performance; acting studies; Brazilian cinema; actor; performativity.*

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**RESUMO:** *Este artigo investiga o jogo atoral no cinema brasileiro dos anos 2010, analisando a relação do ator com a personagem, a ficção e a fabulação. Nesse período, observa-se um aumento no uso de atores não profissionais, que representam questões sociais específicas de raça, classe e gênero. Nesses casos, o jogo atoral baseia-se em princípios hiper-realistas, performativos e épicos. Os princípios hiper-realistas e performativos são cruciais para a formação de um “amalgama total” entre ator e personagem, enquanto a qualidade épica e a alegoria ajudam a coletivizar essa experiência para um grupo social, operando um gesto crítico sobre a narrativa do filme.*

**Palavras-chave:** *jogo atoral; estudos atoriais, cinema brasileiro; ator; performatividade.*

## Introduction

This article aims to investigate the screen performance present in Brazilian cinema of the 21st century, focusing on the relationship between the actor and the character, fiction, and fabulation. We observe, particularly in the 2010s, an investment in the collectivization of social issues through the employment of non-professional actors representing a specific race, class, or gender. The analysis seeks to explore this new aesthetic and ethical relationship with non-professional actors, elevating what is often considered an absence of a crafted performance (BARON; CARNICKE, 2008) to a performative quality that defines the actor's performance, which will also become a hallmark of the cinematography of several contemporary directors.

Our hypothesis is that, since the 2010s, a significant portion of films has invested in creating a "total amalgam" between actor and character, according to the definition by Guimarães and Oliveira (2019), constructing the narrative based on the idea of an ontological body but extending beyond it through a poetic organization that favors critical-social reflection over the "psychological consistency" of a "character-person" (LEAL, 2019, p. 66) within the fictional narrative, particularly within the drama genre.

According to the idea of "ontological body," the actor and the character share some physical or mental aspect in common, which often becomes the very reason for a transparent fictional construction. In the objects analyzed here, it is less about employing procedures of bodily or psychological construction of a fictional character and more about working with the fabulation and performativity of the actor, highlighting the elements that connect them to the character in a lasting manner and with causes prior to the film. This fabulation, beyond telling the story of an individual from a plausible psychological perspective or within a classic dramatic narrative of overcoming, aims to collectivize the experience, bringing in elements from the epic critical-analytical register of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, the concept of *performativity* evokes the political and aesthetic notion defended by Baumgärtel (2018), in the field of arts, of a “body [that] does not signify another fictional body,” but that “brings contextual forces (social and historical) to itself, exposing its marks within itself” (BAUMGÄRTEL, 2018, p. 134). This is a strategy similar to that identified by Heath (1981) in the typology of Soviet cinema of the 1920s, where the individuals appearing in films are “functioning much more in terms of idea than of character, social exposition rather than psychological revelation” (HEATH, 1981, p. 183). In the case analyzed here, it involves staging situations experienced by the actor-character based on moments of violence committed by the State, through police torture, which are then collectivized for a social group: young Black and poor people from Brazilian peripheries.

In their analysis, Guimarães and Oliveira (2019, p. 5) characterize the “total amalgam” as:

a model of acting and gestural communication, an analogical representation, according to Barthes (1964, p. 40), which consolidates the idea of the total physical amalgam because the human element [...] becomes inseparable from the character by possessing a certain physical or mental condition — a condition that, in almost all cases, becomes the factor that drives the plot through overcoming and acceptance. The character and the actor afflicted by the same deficiency where one’s condition becomes a *sine qua non* for the other.

Our goal is to expand the concept of “total amalgam” beyond physical or mental disability, taking the ontological body as any common aspect between actor and character that is, in itself, the foundation of the film and, most importantly, the foundation of the acting process. The result is the production of a fiction or fabulation that, although anchored in dramatic reenactment, will refer to the collective through the use of epic and performative principles. Thus, we seek to understand the ostensive use of non-professional actors in Brazilian cinematography between 2000 and 2020, particularly in the 2010s, and how this type of approach elaborates on social themes from the perspective of collectivity.

## Two moments of the use of non-professional actors in contemporary brazilian cinema

Regarding the use of non-professional actors in Brazilian cinema, the separation of the 2000s and 2010s is important because there is a relevant distinction between these two periods. In the early 2000s, Brazilian cinematography was predominantly composed of directors already established in cinema, television, and advertising. Many of them produced works that addressed social issues in the country, such as *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, 2002), *City of Men* (Paulo Morelli, 2007), and *Elite Squad* (José Padilha, 2007). These films often employed non-professional actors from the communities being portrayed, but they underwent intense preparation to achieve a degree of verisimilar control within the realist/naturalist aesthetic (XAVIER, 2005). With this, the aim was to achieve a “*non-professional effect*,” the impression that the actor is not acting (GAGGIOTTI, 2023, p. 144), which would enhance the sense of reality in those works. It was an aesthetic produced by filmmakers from wealthier classes, seeking to align the characters with the dominant class's perspective on the poorer population (CÉSAR, 2006).

These films, generally with high investment in production and promotion, rely on a rehearsal period for the cast to learn how to act according to the specifics of contemporary realist and naturalist methods; that is, broadly speaking, through character characterization, gestural verisimilitude, and scene blocking based on pre-established shot breakdowns. Thus, many of the non-professional actors in *City of God*, although they originated from favelas similar to the one depicted in the film, saw their personal histories serving more as an asset for publicity (GLEGHORN, 2017) than as an element that modifies the quality of the acting performance.

Indeed, the non-professional actors in *City of God* underwent two months of rehearsals, six days a week (CARDOSO, 2014, p. 152). The work was primarily led by Fátima Toledo, known for her acting method that uses the actors' personal aspects to build the characters and

the scenes (CARDOSO, 2014). The final effect in the film is a naturalistic performance, characterized by “its expressive force and significant effectiveness” (DAMOUR, 2014, p. 187), a performance in which the central elements are constructing and presenting, in a claimed manner, the psychology and physiology of the characters (DAMOUR, 2016), which would give the acting expression a certain organicity in its result.

In the 2010s, we see the arrival of a new generation of filmmakers, many of them from lower-income backgrounds, who made their productions viable through the democratization of access to public funding for filmmaker training and audiovisual production. Among these developments, the following stand out: first, the expansion of access to higher education in the country, developed during the administrations of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), which included measures such as the construction and decentralization of new universities in Brazil and student financing programs; second, the reduction in equipment costs with the consolidation of digital capture and exhibition formats; and third, the emergence of local funding programs, which enabled the production and circulation of works outside the major audiovisual production centers (OLIVEIRA, 2016; RAMOS; SCHVARZMAN, 2018; EDUARDO; HALLAK; HALLAK, 2022). These events allowed new filmmakers to emerge in territories where production was previously seasonal or nonexistent. Part of this new generation produced and still produces films in and about their own territories, often featuring the people who live in these spaces — frequently their friends or family members — moving away from an industrial production model (OLIVEIRA, 2016).

In this context, casting is done within the filmmakers’ personal circles. Some actors appear in only one film or have small roles in several; others become professionals due to their consistency in this cinematography. Actors like Marquim do Tropa, featured in Adirley Queirós’ films, and Aristides de Sousa and Wederson Neginho, frequent in Affonso Uchôa’s films, even in technical roles, exemplify this trend. An exemplary case is that of Maria José Novais Oliveira, a homemaker and mother of André Novais

Oliveira, who, until her passing, systematically acted in her son's films and, posthumously, was portrayed in the documentary *Our Mother Was an Actress* (André Novais Oliveira and Renato Novaes, 2023) (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – A troupe composed of friends: the repetition of Aristides de Sousa and Wederson Neguinho in Affonso Uchôa's work



Source: Screenshots from *The Hidden Tiger* (left.) and *Araby* (right).

Thus, in significant parts of these films, acting performances created from non-professional actors and their apparent limitations gain strength. We emphasize the apparent aspect because the acting performance here is generally constructed to produce a performative action, an action that reveals the film's political discourse through the poetic organization of the actor's history and through their body, rather than to represent characters or emotions. What unfolds, in general, is a restrained performance, sparse in expressions and gestures, almost static; the lines are monotonous, and the scenes are filled with contemplative moments in long takes. A "hyper-realist" performance (MARGULIES, 1996) that can be mistaken for the absence of composition or the actor's agency in constructing the scene. This is because the work of composition in the style of realist or naturalist dramatic performance, which has been conditioned as synonymous with acting or good acting, becomes very limited in these films. In these cases, the narrative arc often lacks dramatic peaks, a moment when, in general, elements of a more ostentatious performance are employed — bodily excesses of any kind, underscoring the performance with musical effects etc.

Hyper-realism is understood here, as developed by Margulies (1996, p. 46), as being hyper-realistic the cinematic image that always shifts

representation from its figurative property to its literal property and vice-versa. The stillness of the bodies, often accompanied by the stillness of the frame, prevents the production of a suspension of disbelief pact, as occurs in naturalistic performance, but instead brings some degree of awareness of the reality of the filming to the surface.

One begins to look at the actor who, in the image, does not produce a character; they simply “are there” (GUIMARÃES; TINEN, 2020, p. 61) at the expense of the balanced and verisimilar gestural and vocal composition that creates the character. However, this is an apparent absence of an acting poetics, as we will see later in the analysis of *Seven Years in May* (AFFONSO UCHÔA, 2019), since “being there” constitutes a poetics of performativity. In this poetics, it is not just about narrating or representing an external or textual event, but about poetically elaborating a real situation, a problem to which one is subjected, and, through one’s history and body, seeking a scenic response. These bodily marks would thus be revealed by the filmic device.

The opposition between naturalism and hyper-realism becomes evident when analyzing two representations of childhood in the peripheries: the character Zé Pequeno (Douglas Silva) in *City of God*, and the actor-character Neguin (Wederson Neguinho) in *The Hidden Tiger* (AFFONSO UCHÔA, 2014). The representation in *City of God* seeks to emphasize the composition of the character, with attention to the detailing of costumes and props: the gun used in the scene appears real, Douglas Silva’s body displays a shiny skin that simulates sweat or oiliness, and his face expresses the violence of the character Zé Pequeno. The naturalistic acting performance, by evoking physiological and psychological aspects in the construction of the characters, in both methodology and result, directs their condition toward a determinism of nature (LEITES, 2020). Add to this the correlation of the work with historical episodes in Rio de Janeiro that reinforce the depicted universe as “real,” although tensions of reality seek to be concealed by the film’s fictional proposal.

The issue is that this supposed portrait of reality not only subjects the characters to determinism but also the entire class depicted in the film,



producing stigmatizations (CÉSAR, 2010). It is against this stigmatization that the acting performance of the 2010s discussed here will turn. It does not present a naturalistic intensity, an evocation of a psychosocial extreme — a favela with an intrinsic social evil or disease — but, on the contrary, it is filled with moments of contemplation.

In *The Hidden Tiger*, we see Neguin in his daily life, playing with a toy gun with the same enthusiasm with which, earlier, he had painted his face with white paint. The film shows his discussion with a friend about the fact that the toy gun attracts the attention of the neighborhood people. His face is not highlighted; it is turned toward the depth of field, and his expressions do not matter. What matters is the situation they are in, the simulation of the gun, the game, the play. The real is evoked not by its naturalistic excess but by its banalized everydayness: the children play, without much emotion, with guns. This hyper-realistic and performative perspective is predominant for the construction of characters in Affonso Uchôa's filmography (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Two framings and two performances depicting childhood in the Brazilian peripheries.



Source: Screenshots from *City of God* (left) and *The Hidden Tiger* (right).

### **Fabulation as the collectivization of experience: seven years in may**

In the case of *Seven Years in May*, the ontological relationship is established from the beginning: the film is the fabulation, the poetic ordering of an episode from the life of Rafael dos Santos Rocha, who, after being mistaken for a drug dealer, was kidnapped and tortured by the police attempting to extort him.

To delve into the performative acting performance that Rafael presents on screen, based on his ontological relationship with the character and the fabulation, it is important to understand the characteristics of the actors in Affonso Uchôa's films. The director's works employ two types of actors: a minority of professionals from the theater, generally in secondary roles; and a majority of protagonists who are men and young people from Contagem (MG), many of them friends of the filmmaker, who is also from there. These non-professional actors enter the films chosen for a reenactment of their lives: in films closer to the documentary — *The Hidden Tiger* — or in works with a more evident fictional thrust — *Araby* (AFFONSO UCHÔA AND JOÃO DUMANS, 2017). The latter takes essential aspects of the life of the non-professional actor, Aristides de Sousa, to construct a fiction that distances itself from his biography to speak of a collective, of young people from the poor classes in the peripheries of Brazil's interior and the working class of the 2010s.

Like Uchôa, a certain contemporary production — much of it from Minas Gerais — reinforces the idea of a paradigm shift starting in the 2010s. These are works often classified as documentaries, but where fabulation introduces a fictional thrust into the film and, importantly for this article, produces a distinctive acting performance. “The editing in *Seven Years in May* reflects the film's process, whose main objective was to give Fael a voice” (UCHÔA apud CHIARETTI; ARAÚJO, 2020, p. 208). It is a *mise-en-scène* in which the acting performance is in dialogue with the camera, being produced for it and with it. Let us now analyze how the acting performance unfolds in *Seven Years in May* and how, through three narrative operations, the actors' bodies in this film constitute an ontological body

## Reenact

*Seven Years in May* can be divided into three main sections and is structured around the representation/account/allegory of the torture suffered

by a young man at the hands of the police. Each section is preceded by a prologue, a sequence in which the actor arrives at the space where the action will take place. The first part, the *reenactment* of the torture, is preceded by the image of Rafael's silhouette, walking along the highway toward the camera in near-complete darkness.

After this prologue, the film moves to a field where a group of friends begins the reenactment. They are gathered around a trunk, from which they take clothes and objects that make up the standard uniform of a police officer; however, it is not a complete uniform, and they share the parts. The game proposed by the *mise-en-scène* also provokes them to use their imagination to complete the performance (Figure 3). The pieces of the uniform they start wearing, which they put on with evident admiration, are enough to make them feel authorized to torture. They find themselves handsome in these clothes, striking poses for an imaginary camera while the transparency of the device is maintained, as the camera is never referenced. The reenactment here is a transparent game of "make-believe," in which this group of vigilantes will go out at night in search of criminals (Figure 4).

Figure 3 – The switch from flip-flops to boots: the indicative elements of the police in the composition of the characters



Source: Screenshot from *Seven Years in May*.

Figure 4 – Empowerment through the police uniform design.



Source: Screenshots from *Seven Years in May*.

The group then approaches Rafael. His first gesture is one of surrender: hands behind his head and legs apart, a posture he maintains even when he is knocked down. The “social gesture” (BRECHT, 1978, p. 155) of Rafael is more than a simple gesture of a character or a subject. It aims to show the synthesis of the relationship between the peripheral man and the police forces that approached him. Rafael knows his role, whether in a fictional approach, as we see here, or in a real one. His physical appearance is not very different from that of the men who subdue him, and even the use of uniforms by the latter does not guarantee a fundamental difference between them. The acting quality here is not one of seeking gestural verisimilitude to highlight characteristics of the character that are not necessarily inherent to the actor; but an acting that feeds on the human singularity of the performer, tied to his physical appearance and, concomitantly, to his social position.

Regarding Rafael’s social gesture, it functions as a metonymy of the performance in re-enactment. “In this sense, performance is the gesture in the process of being staged, but within this ‘in the process of,’ it reinvents the scene without ultimately reducing itself to it.” (BRASIL, 2011, p. 7). Rafael’s gesture tensions the imagined and the lived, the acting and the real torture that is revisited, “the performance exposes the continuity between one domain and another” (BRASIL, 2011, p. 7). It functions as a commentary on the body conditioned by constant police approaches and as a critique of this approach; a gesture that creates the scene and evokes beyond it (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – Rafael's social gesture



Source: Screenshots from *Seven Years in May*.

The performativity of these subjects also appears in the playful enactment they create to re-enact, in a clumsy way, this common episode in their lives: the police approach. Here, it is the artificial manner in which they portray themselves as police officers that functions as an element of distancing from the action, revealing the device, and serving as a bridge to the real world. “The trinity of actor’s-body / character / actor-interpreting-the-character becomes, in these appearances, a single meaningful entity; one necessarily reminding us of the Other” (GUIMARÃES; OLIVEIRA, 2019, p. 18). Because they are not fully developed characters and their characterization references both suburban youth (the flip-flops) and the police institution (the boot), the establishment of one of the instances — either the actor or the character — never fully completes. This oscillation leads to questioning whether we might be witnessing an episode from Rafael’s past.

## Narrating

The answer to the above question comes in the second segment. Following Rafael’s arrival at an energy substation of the Minas Gerais Energy Company (CEMIG), the second part shows him in front of a campfire with the station in the background. He then begins to narrate the episode in which, years earlier, he was taken by police officers and tortured right there (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – The narratio



Source: Screenshot from *Seven Years in May*.

The long take of the narration lasts 17 minutes. The camera remains fixed, and Rafael stays turned at a three-quarter angle throughout. He narrates the police torture, his subsequent escape to the metropolitan region of São Paulo, and how he became addicted to crack there, eventually returning after years to Belo Horizonte. Although lengthy and detailed, respecting the timing of the action, the narration is concise and delivered without hesitation. The bus passing in the background during the scene, which disrupts the clarity of his words, indicates the absence of someone to correct, cut, or instruct him to repeat or redo. Rafael is alone with the audience, or perhaps with himself, and the control of the scene's rhythm is in his narration.

This narration is what seals the amalgamation between the fiction presented in the previous reenactment and the real events that happened to Rafael. If earlier there were elements of the ontological body that could be gleaned from the image, now Rafael's testimony makes it clear that the body he represents and narrates is the same one that lived and relived, in the earlier part of the film, the experience (MESQUITA, 2019; COSTA JÚNIOR, 2022).

Beyond the act of enunciation in narration, it is through the body that the amalgamation is fulfilled. The impactful experience lived by Rafael makes it so that only his body on film can be capable of re-experiencing what happened. If another actor were to portray him in a naturalistic manner, the horror experienced by Rafael would always be alongside the quality of the character's portrayal. We would be in a different domain of acting where drama and emotional identification would carry more weight. In Rafael's case, the performance is in his rhetorical work, in the narrative construction — an effort of the epic actor-narrator, who “performs a difficult balancing act between metamorphosis and distancing” (ROSENFELD, 1985, p. 161). Rafael revisits his torture and analyzes what he experienced, as he does with his social context. At the same time, a fading of other elements of the *mise-en-scène*, such as editing, directs attention to his body, intensifying its ontological connection with the narrated event.

*Seven Years in May* does not make the total amalgamation an object of the viewer's pity. The next movement is to expand the ontological dimension of Rafael's body to encompass a series of people — something already hinted at in the reenactment through the choice of a group of equals to serve as his tormentors. This collectivization, unlike naturalist determinism, offers a critical perspective on the relationship between the characters. For this reason, Rafael's acting across the three segments operates within the realm of synthesis, not detail. It aims to convey a reflection on the involved social agents (and with some of them), taking a side in the narrative.

After Rafael's lengthy speech, a counter-shot reveals that his interlocutor was neither the outside director nor the off-screen viewer, but rather another man, also Black, who, after a long silence, says: “Your story is sad, like that of everyone I meet.” Then, when Rafael asks him, this interlocutor responds that his own story is also similar to the one being narrated (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – The interlocutor in the narration as an agent of the collectivization of experience



Source: Screenshot from *Seven Years in May*.

The arrival of this man, Wederson Neguinho, shifts the epic tone of the narration to a dramatic dialogue. However, the commitment to drama ends there. The sparing use of gestures and facial expressions, along with a voice with little variation in volume or tone, draws attention to what is being said and the reflection shared by the two, but does not invite emotional identification. What matters here is less the ability of these two men to convey their emotions or depict a character, and more the formal elaboration of their experiences (COSTA JÚNIOR, 2023). It is no longer about acting the dramatic arc of the classical hero, from perdition to redemption, but about performing the emotional-descriptive punctuality of a social individual who is also shaped by the environment they are part of and who is aware of how that environment influences them. Two Black Brazilian men, sharing a series of common experiences and stories of violence.

In this sense, the difference between dramatic, epic, and performative acting is clear. The first aims to represent something. The focus is on the production of a subject — the Character — in search of a verisimilar outcome according to the historical moment in which the representation



takes place. The epic precept, the central line of this segment, requires the actor to engage more with their functional role within the film's narration, that is, in what Leal (2019, p. 43), based on his reading of Greimas, referred to as an actant. The actor aims to present something, and the focus is on the object — the narrative content. However, it is worth noting that in *Seven Years in May*, even the representation and presentation are permeated by a performative aspect that is grounded in the ontological body of its actors.

The performative acting is one in which the actor seeks to live something and, through formal elaboration, convey that lived experience (TAYLOR, 2003). The focus is on creating an experience within the actor's body, where imagination and experience intertwine, but in which the presence of the fictional character is minimal or nonexistent.

From this perspective, we can turn to Richard Schechner's (1988) performance theory, revisited by Leda Maria Martins (2011), as well as James Naremore's (1988) reference to the concept of "frame" proposed by Erving Goffman (1974). Both concepts aim to understand the staged or (re)created aspects of everyday actions. Martins (2011, p. 102) describes performance as "a network of interrelations, exchanges, movements, and motivated and recovered actions". She links performance to an everyday (re)elaborated action, which in the film can be observed in the three ways of recalling and conveying Rafael's experience. This recovery is framed not only by the *mise-en-scène* but also by the acting, the gesture, and the actions.

An example of this recovery is evident in the police approach, when Rafael states his full name: "Rafael dos Santos Rocha." This evocation of the full name, the name listed on his ID document — as well as in the film's credits — embodies the real Rafael, the citizen violently approached by a state institution. The mention of his full name also serves as a form of survival: Rafael is not just a first name, but a full identity of a person and a citizen.

The performative acting also employs an "arrangement" (GOFFMAN, 1974 apud NAREMORE, 1988, p. 22) that "divides people into

two fundamental groups, designating some as performers and others as watcher. Its [the arrangement] propose is to establish an unusually high degree of ostentation, a [...] ‘visibility’” (NAREMORE, 1988, p. 22), which is shared by both groups in the same space and time.

It is worth noting, however, that this shared reality is minimally connected to the spatial relationship present in a performance in the performing arts, since the filming moment is not the same as the exhibition. In the case analyzed here, the shared reality is more about a connection that is *temporally* rooted in the real. It is not a sharing of space, but rather a “temporal landscape [that] also extends to before and after the event, including all those who are part of it” (MARTINS, 2011, p. 105). Rafael’s narration connects him and his interlocutors — both within and outside the diegetic frame — to the dimension of the torture he experienced and that of others who went through the same ordeal. He states: “Coming back here for me is like going back in time, as if that day never stopped existing.” Complementing this reflection, Neguinho’s mention of the pile of bodies that has been growing since before the two were born, covering the sky and still increasing, highlights this shared history that exists beyond the film.

Therefore, *Seven Years in May* is not merely a representation or a narrative. It is a crafting that creates the fictional Rafael based on the story of the real Rafael; however, the first can never be complete, as it constantly needs and evokes the other. “Neither purely fact nor purely act, the body is constituted, created, and invented — effectively — while it performs, while it is exposed, and in this exposure, it establishes a constitutive relationship” (BRASIL, 2011, p. 7, p. 10). In this regard, Rafael’s repeated story (also common among many Brazilian Black youth) becomes one of the elements of the performative dimension of the acting. It is the recovery and ritualization of the experienced torture; it represents the fissure between the real and the imagined by the actors.

Given this, the performative dimension of acting observed in this Brazilian cinema piece draws from these aspects and seeks, as pointed out by Baumgärtel (2018), to address the social and collective dimension.

It is a game that always points to the collective and to a shared reality, an “alienation” (BRASIL, 2011, p. 7, p. 10) in becoming another, or, as Neguinho says, “You can still see the blood stains on the asphalt, and it is not just yours [...]. We have to move on for us and for them too”.

In summary, we can conclude that acting with a dramatic focus is engaged in the representation of a “character-person”; whereas the epic focus produces an acting whose core is the transmission of a narrative. Finally, the performative acting emphasizes the poetic arrangement of elements experienced by the actor, which are revived and collectivized within the film. What these three elements have in common is the actor as a creator in the formal arrangement of the film and as a constitutive part of the *mise-en-scène*, rather than as an accessory to it. Rafael engages in an exercise of language — demonstrating how cinematic language can reconfigure lived experience — rather than producing a character to serve a narrative.

## Allegorizing

After establishing that Rafael's experience is also collective, the final segment presents this multitude in image: it is no longer a solitary man arriving at a square at night, but a collective. Filmed from the waist down, we can only confirm that they are all Black and pardo (mixed-race) and that they are wearing flip-flops. Later, we will see their faces and discover that this chorus is made up of young men and women, among whom is Rafael (Figure 8).

Figure 8 – Playing as an allegory of Rafael's experience



Source: Screenshot from *Seven Years in May*.

The first segment reenacted the torture suffered by Rafael, the second narrated it, sealing the process of complete amalgamation between the character and the actor, and ending with the collectivization of the experience. A similar movement of collectivization can be observed in the choice of the location where the actions take place. The first occurs in a dark, abandoned vacant lot — a place traditionally associated with criminals and police carrying out illicit acts. In the second segment, the CEMIG station takes on a metaphorical character. As a state building, it becomes the place where police feel secure to commit acts of torture and extortion. During Rafael's narration, the station in the background functions as a representation of an negligent State that permits corrupt officials to carry out crimes within its institutions. The final segment unfolds in a public square, and the low lighting of the previous scenes — the first illuminated by lanterns and the second by a bonfire — is replaced by the yellowish glow of urban lighting. Everyone is visible there — victims and oppressors (LEANDRO; ARAÚJO, 2020).

The third segment allegorizes and summarizes Rafael's story, finalizing the amalgamation between the actor's body and that of the character while simultaneously collectivizing it. The "allegorical intention" (XAVIER, 2015, p. 9) initially appears as:

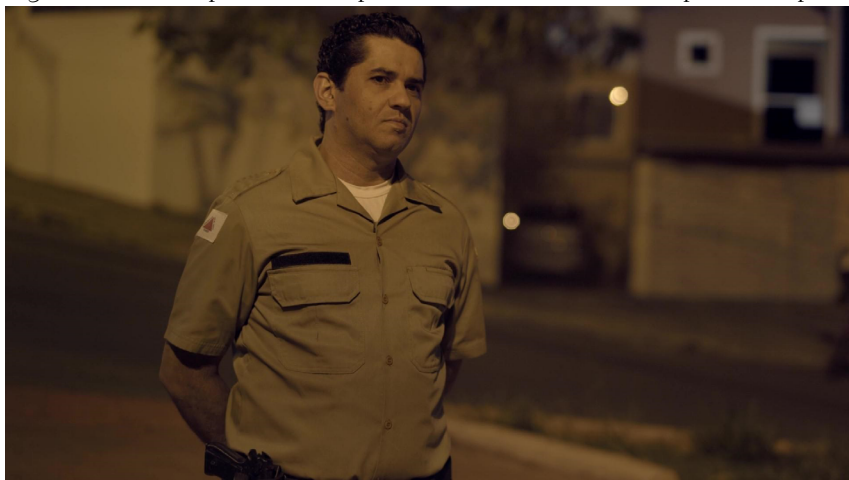
To speak one thing while intending to mean another, [...] to manifest something while aiming to make another thing present [...] [a quality that remains] very generic [...] [but] with a recognized mediation intervening between speech and experience, [...] [in which] the thickness of language itself is emphasized and its problematic relationship with experience (XAVIER, 2015, p. 9).

In other words, through a childlike game unfolding in the square, the film addresses police violence in the outskirts. In a similar movement, to speak of Rafael is to speak of a social group — poor and Black youth — a collective action that collectivizes the ontological body of the protagonist<sup>1</sup>.

1 Xavier (2015, p. 9) points out that the etymology of "allegory" contains the word "agoraeuen," which means "to speak in public, in the plaza." In the case of *Seven Years in May*, this connection is fitting. It is in the public square that the film concludes its process of collectivizing its thematic and aesthetic questions.

The crowd that arrives in the scene in front of a police officer, a figure that stands out from all who appeared so far for being the most constructed and recognizable as a social agent: they are fully dressed in uniform and behave like police. The main aspect here is the characterization of the figure that will represent the police force in a process of metonymy. Its military, vertical, and rigid body contrasts with the background, positioned diagonally: the figure of law seems out of place within that world (Figure 9).

Figure 9 – The composition of the police officer and his relationship with the space.



Source: Screenshot from *Seven Years in May*.

During the sequence, the police officer becomes a *voice-over* that directs a Dead/Alive game: anyone hesitating or moving incorrectly after a directive is out, just as one can be killed for not following the police officer's command during a confrontation. The relationship here is clear: the police are in the periphery to kill indiscriminately. However, at the end of the game, Rafael, alongside his real story, refuses to crouch and continues to face off-field, despite the police officer's persistent orders for him to be dead. Rafael's body—fundamental to the construction of this film and the foundation of its performativity — survives and remains alive (Figure 10).

Figure 10 – Rafael’s body as a metonymy for the body of the young Black person from the periphery.



Source: Screenshot from *Seven Years in May* taken by the authors.

This acting choice is a different aesthetic and political stance compared to naturalist acting. The allegory in *Seven Years in May* is connected to what Xavier (2015, p. 14) describes as the “crisis of the transparency of myth [in Ancient Greece],” with allegory functioning as an “imaginative device that, in a displaced manner, exposes concepts” (XAVIER, 2015, p. 13) that are otherwise hidden in a naturalist-oriented acting. In the film analyzed here, the breaking of this transparency is achieved through epic and performative elements, as well as through the symbolic play created in the final segment:

Autopoiesis, when self-referential, can only become politically meaningful when it mediates the boundary between social experience and artistic experience — that is, when the performativity of the scene opens itself to its dimension of being necessarily also language and discourse within a social context (BAUMGÄRTEL, 2018, p. 147).

Allegory as an encoded message evokes a dual spectator stance. First, deciphering its code — which, although simple (death/live game = police violence) — moves the sequence away from a purely emotional reading. It appeals to the intellect, as the scene structures itself as:

a montage-collage of elements assembled through an operation whose principle lies outside them, elements that form a set whose order is that of a mechanism — the pieces are radically external to each other — and not that of a living organism with its particular solidarity. On the other hand, in its incompleteness and juxtaposition, the allegory does not bring the well-formed organic shape as a transfiguration of a meaningful world (XAVIER, 2015, p. 25).

Thus, Rafael's acting operates in a mechanical manner where the actions of "reenacting," "narrating," and "playing" (the Dead/Alive game) are linked to the content — young people from the outskirts subjected to police violence — through a bias that lacks the organicity of violence often seen in Brazilian naturalist productions. Recalling the naturalistic acting in *City of God*, which served as a cornerstone of the portrayal of the Brazilian periphery in the 2000s, the characters' actions, the violence they are subjected to and commit, are organic. The *mise-en-scène* functions as a lens on a given world that is supposedly independent of an authorial vision.

In *Seven Years in May*, the focus is on the discourse and on how the pile of dead people mentioned by Wederson Neguinho increases each day in Brazilian peripheries. This discourse does not aim to present the viewer with a given reality, a form of denunciation, but to recover reality and bring it back to life on film by making "the world of images cross through the world of life: it begins earlier, is transfigured by the film, and continues, transformed, beyond it" (BRASIL, 2011, p. 7, p. 1). For this purpose, starting from an ontological body, the film employs performative acting, whose execution — like the performance art itself — "is, by excellence, relational, interactive, and inconclusive," whether viewed as practice or as episteme (MARTINS, 2011, p. 108). Just like the allegory in the final segment, Rafael's acting aims to create spaces within the film for a conscious and active intervention regarding the presented situation. He is there, together with his collective, engaged in a game — a principle also ontological of the actor's work: to put oneself into play and into a situation with body and imagination, to generate poetry from oneself.

## Conclusion

Contrasting with the deterministic naturalism often found in works depicting Brazilian peripheries, films like *Seven Years in May* employ non-professional actors to create stories about their lives or fictions that resemble their experiences. However, this approach does not aim for dramatization focused on the character's arc but instead seeks to establish a performative acting choice that is critical of the social structure producing the precarious life conditions depicted. To achieve this, the film relies on an ontological relationship between the non-professional actor and the character, which is collectivized through a hyper-realistic acting rooted in epic and performative principles.

By highlighting the process of repeating his story, making Rafael clearly an agent of this process, the film reveals his acting choices. Rafael is an agent in the poetic organization of events; he is actively involved in the scene and is not merely a subject depicted in his everyday nature. It is a crafted performance, as much as the work of professional actors on stage (BARON; CARNICKE, 2008, pp. 31-32) and in naturalist films, just as the choices of *mise-en-scène* present in the film are also constructed. The acting system in *Seven Years in May* approaches “a performative theater that showcases in its scene the very process of transformation; a semiotic instability whose constellation allows the viewer to perceive the work of time as a passing present, more than a full presence of the *hic nunc et sans kind*” (BAUMGÄRTEL, 2018, p. 128). The fictional character is never fully complete; it always references the actor's body and history, exposing the time of Rafael's narration — hence the importance of the long take in the narration of the second segment. In this case, we are dealing with a performance of content organization and filmic discourse, a form that we will observe in other Brazilian films, such as those of Adirley Queirós and Eliane Caffé.

Thus, *Seven Years in May* exemplifies a model of an aesthetic and ethical cinematic gesture where direction engages with collective issues by employing non-professional actors as active and decisive agents in the *mise-en-scène*. It does so through the use of an acting that does not aim to mask the actor under a fictional character but instead creates a performance



that critically reveals their story. This approach signifies a new perspective on representing socially marginalized populations, considering them as determinants in the final cinematic form.

**Conflict of interest:** nothing to declare.

**Funding:** Process n. 2020/11902-9, São Paulo Research Foundation.

**Authors' contribution:** Bordinhon, E.: concept, data curatorship, formal analysis, funding, investigation, methodology, writing – first draft, writing – review and editing. Guimarães, P.: concept, formal analysis, funding, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, writing – review and editing.

**Research data availability:** All the data supporting the results of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Received on: 06/20/2024

Accepted on: 12/17/2024