# Between the Image and the Story

## Representing Brazilian Favelas through Photojournalism and Film (1960s–2000s)

Maria Passanha

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Through photography and film, we are introduced to places we may never visit and lives we may never live. As Susan Sontag argues in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “To photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude.”[1]Every photograph is a choice and it’s shaped by decisions: what to show, what to crop, what light to use, and what moment to capture. Sontag pushes this idea further, by writing “Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they don’t help us much to understand. Narratives can make us understand.”[2] This idea is central to my research. Without narrative or explanation, a single photograph can grab our attention but leave us only with part of the story, not real understanding. This relationship between image and narrative becomes especially important when we consider how entire communities are portrayed in global media.

The example I'm exploring is the way Brazilian favelas have been represented in media from the 1960s to early 2000s. Favelas are complex urban communities that developed on the outsides of cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, often built because of the fast city growth and long-term inequality. Though conditions in many favelas reflect hardship, lack of public investment, and state neglect, these communities are also full of life,  known for their strong social ties, cultural richness, and resilience. However, in mainstream media, especially when viewed from outside Brazil, favelas are reduced to simplified images of poverty or violence, shown as chaotic, dangerous, or hopeless. Whether through journalism, photography or cinema, but their complexity is not explored. These representations matter because they don't just shape how people are seen, they become the only reality that audiences know. This affects how these communities are perceived and remembered.

Instead of relying only on distant representations, I had the chance to see part of this reality during a visit to a favela in Rio, earlier this year. I went to Rocinha, one of the largest favelas in South america. I was struck, not only by the visible hardship, but also by the strength of the community. I saw music, dancing, children playing, neighbours helping each other. It made me realize how much complexity gets lost when favelas are shown only through images of poverty and violence. This experience was an inspiration along with the research, reminding me of the distance between the images we often see and the lives actually being lived.

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[1] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 46.
[2] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 126.

Whether an image includes context, captions, or a larger story can completely change the meaning it carries. One of the most widely shared images from Gordon Parks' 1961 photo essay is a portrait of Flavio da Silva ( Fig. 1). Today, this image can be found just by typing "Gordon Parks" in a google search and Flavio's portrait will appear, alone with no context. In the photograph he is looking directly at the camera with a serious and tired expression. His thin body is leaning against a rough wall, one leg is bent and his feet are dusty. His shirt is loose, torn and dirty, and his shorts are worn-out. Everything about his posture, the tilt of his head, the way his hands rest on his hips, gives the feeling of exhaustion and resilience. The photograph reveals a larger story of struggle, but viewed outside of its original context, without words or explanation, it risks being misunderstood. It can seem like just another symbol of poverty, or even give the impression that Gordon Parks was simply using Flávio's hard life for his advantage. Without knowing the care, the long-term support and real connection that followed, viewers are left with only the surface, a boy frozen in suffering.

Unlike the original Life Magazine spread (Fig. 2), where images were carefully placed alongside captions and text that guided the reader through Flávio's story, the isolated photograph is shown without any background. Without written context, layout, or narrative structure, the viewer doesn't know who Flavio is, what role he plays in his family, or what illness he is struggling with. Instead of leading us through a story, the image becomes something that can move us for a moment, but never fully engage with it.

T.J. Thomson, a researcher in visual communication, journalism and media studies, argues in his book *To See and Be Seen*[3]*,* that when images are taken out of their original environments, the emotions, relationships, and identities behind them disappear. Thomson argues that News Images are shaped by many pressures, editors, and media framing what is "newsworthy". A single image of Flávio, separated from the larger context built by Life magazine, is not simply incomplete, it's already a version shaped by outside forces. Editors chose which moments to capture, what emotions to highlight, and how to frame the favela for an international audience. Even when created with empathy, these images are built within a system that decides whose pain is visible. As T. J. Thomson notes, "The environments and identities behind news images are often invisible to the audience."[4] When removing environments and identities, Flávio's portrait no longer just tells his story, it starts to speak for an entire community.

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[3] Footnote: T.J. Thomson, "To See and Be Seen: The Environments, Interactions and Identities Behind News Images," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 25, no. 4 (2020): 735–737

However, understanding  Park's relationship with Flavio, through the article with text and captions, adds layers to this image. Parks was initially assigned to photograph a series on poverty in Latin America, focusing on indigent fathers in Rio de Janeiro's favelas. During his exploration, he encountered 12 year old Flávio, a boy who had to take care of  his siblings while struggling with severe asthma. Moved by Flavio's resilience, Parks shifted the focus of his assignment to center on this boy's daily struggles and the family's living conditions. The resulting photo essay, titled "Freedom's Fearful Foe: Poverty," published in Life magazine in June 1961, received overwhelming responses from readers. Thousands of letters and donations were made, getting to nearly $30,000. This support facilitated medical treatment for Flávio in the United States and provided the da Silva family with a new home. Parks maintained contact with Flávio over the years, documenting his life in visits and publications.

The images of Flavio happen to become some of the most recognizable of Parks' career, bringing him more attention and gaining reputation internationally, while exposing Flávio's most vulnerable moments to the world. This raises uncomfortable but important questions: Was Parks using Flávio's suffering to build a powerful story, or to build his own career? Can an image be both a tool of empathy and of exposure?  What makes this case more complex is that Parks didn't walk away. He stayed in touch, helped secure treatment for Flávio, and returned to visit him years later. And yet, as Flávio himself said, he found it too painful to revisit his own story in Parks' book[5]. So, the photograph indeed helped save his life, bringing international attention and support. But it also froze him in time, as a symbol of poverty and struggle, separated from the full reality of his life. Perhaps the answer is in the relationship between intention and impact. Parks may have acted with care, but once the image was released into the world, it took on a life of its own, seen by millions, shared without context, and remembered without the relationship behind it. This reflects the larger problem of visual storytelling, even the most well intentioned image can live on in ways the photographer cannot control.

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[4] T. J. Thomson, "To See and Be Seen: The Environments, Interactions and Identities Behind News Images," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 25, no. 4 (2020): 735.

[5] "Interview with Flávio da Silva," in *Gordon Parks: The Flávio Story*, Gordon Parks Foundation, December 10–12, 2016.https://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/exhibitions/museum-exhibitions/the-flavio-story2.

When an image is removed from its original setting, what's left out often becomes more important than what's shown. Flávio's portrait risks becoming just another sad face, disconnected from the real life behind it. And when we see images like this, how do we respond? We pause for a few seconds, we feel something, sorrow, discomfort, maybe guilt, and then we move on. They may evoke emotion, but do they really stay with us? Do they change how we think or what we do? Or do they join the never ending stream of suffering we see everyday, becoming just another picture to scroll past? In a world saturated with images, we often feel something for a moment and then forget. But when narrative is present, when the image is part of a story, it can ask something more of us. It invites us to take time and part in a deeper conversation.

This is the danger of decontextualization, how a story is told can change everything. Understanding suffering requires more than a single frozen moment. It requires time, narrative, and the space to see not just what happened, but why it happened.

According to Susan Sontag, "narratives can make us understand"[6]Unlike single photographs that freeze moments in time, narratives like those created in films, offer a fuller picture. They build context, introduce relationships and show how one event leads to another. They allow us to see suffering but to understand its roots and consequences. Film, as a narrative medium, offers the time and structure needed to move from an immediate reaction to a deeper reflection.

This is what *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*)(Fig.3), directed by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund[7], attempts to do. This film tells the story of a boy called " buscape" (Rocket), growing up in a favela in Rio de Janeiro called Cidade de Deus, during a time of deep political and social tension. After Brazil's military dictatorship took power in 1964, communities like Cidade de Deus were pushed to the margins and left without support. The story is based on real events and it's adapted from the novel by Paulo Lins.

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[6] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 126.

[7] *Cidade de Deus (City of God)*, directed by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund (Brazil: O2 Filmes, 2002)

The still that I chose to analyse from the film captures a group of young boys standing together in the middle of a narrow favela street, all pointing guns directly at the camera. Their expressions are serious, almost defiant, and their thin, barefoot bodies reflect youth and hardship. Behind them, the small crowded houses and worn-out street colors give a sense of the difficult environment they live in. I chose this still because it brings together the film's main themes, how violence becomes normal, how children lose their innocence and how being abandoned by the system pushes them towards crime. The fact that the boys are facing the camera directly makes the moment even stronger, they appear to confront the viewer, forcing us to face their reality.

The favela Cidade de Deus, was built in the 1960's and by the early 1980s it became one of the most dangerous areas of Rio. To show this transformation, the film follows the lives of different characters and how their stories connect over time. All this is seen through the eyes of buscapé, the protagonist-narrator who grows up surrounded by violence but finds a way not to be pulled into crime.

The film's style is fast and intense. The directors use quick cuts, handheld cameras and bright colors to create a feeling of movement and chaos. This visual energy pulls the viewer inside the world of the favela, making the violence and tension feel immediate and real. However, beneath this aesthetic surface, there is a carefully structured story, the characters are given backgrounds, motivations and moral dilemmas. Viewers are invited not only to see violence but to understand the social conditions that make it happen. In this way, *Cidade de Deus* fulfills what Susan Sontag describes: it shocks, but it also explains.

The production process of the film itself was unique. Meirelles and his team worked with over 400 young people from the favelas in acting workshops created specifically for the project, giving the performances an authenticity rarely seen in mainstream films. Released in Brazil in August 2002, *Cidade de Deus* was a major success, drawing over three million viewers, quickly becoming one of the most internationally recognized Brazilian films. However, the film's success also raised important questions about the way violence and poverty are represented on screen. As the Brazilian film critic Ivana Bentes argues, the film risks turning violence into something aesthetic and consumable, a shift from the raw "aesthetics of hunger" described by filmmaker Glauber Rocha to what Bentes calls the "cosmetics of hunger".[8] Rocha believed that films should show poverty in a raw, uncomfortable way that would force the viewers to confront social marginalization. In contrast, *Cidade de Deus*, while telling a hard story, still uses quick editing, vibrant visuals, and energetic music that can make some scenes of suffering feel dynamic and even entertaining.

This visual style makes the film accessible to wide audiences, helping it succeed internationally, but it also risks creating distance between the viewer and reality. Sophia McClennen, who studies Latin American cinema and politics expands on this idea, she explains that by combining spectacle with suffering, films like *Cidade de Deus* risk making violence feel thrilling rather than urgent. Suffering becomes part of the entertainment, making us question whether viewers really think about the deeper problems behind the story.

At the same time, even though *Cidade de Deus* gives names to its characters and builds a strong narrative, it still leaves important parts of the favela life hidden.

Sociologist Janice Perlman, in her book *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro*, shows that the real life of the favelas is far more complex than what's usually seen in films and media. As she explains, "To outsiders, the word "favela" evokes violence, poverty, and misery. But for the residents themselves, it means community, identity, and a sense of belonging."[9] *Cidade de Deus* succeeds in giving narrative and depth, but it focuses heavily on violence and crime. It captures the consequences of inequality, but leaves aside the everyday experiences, the celebrations, the creativity, the relationships, that also define the favela life. In Perlman's research she argues that when media stories reduce a community only to its hardships, even unintentionally, they shape how audiences see and remember that community. In this way, both critiques come together, *Cidade de Deus* shows real injustice, but its fast stylized approach and its focus on violence simplifies the favela experience, again, turning deep realities into powerful but incomplete images.

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[8] Sophia A. McClennen, "From the Aesthetics of Hunger to the Cosmetics of Hunger in Brazilian Cinema: Meirelles' City of God," *symplokē* 19, no. 1–2 (2011): 95–106

[9] Janice E. Perlman, *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

But what happens when a film like *Cidade de Deus*, based on real stories, is watched by audiences far away from that reality? Can a story about life in the favelas end up feeling like just another thrilling entertainment?

Even when these tell real stories, they are still vulnerable to how international audiences choose to see them. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, explain that Western media often frames the Global south through an exotic and distant lens, turning communities into colorful spectacles for outside audiences.[10] Instead of being seen in their full complexity, these groups are depicted through fascination, difference and otherness. Shohat and Stam argue that even powerful narratives can be distorted when seen through a Eurocentric gaze, they risk turning real lives into distant stories consumed from a safe distance.

Compared to a single, decontextualized image, like Flávio's portrait, *Cidade de Deus* offers a more complete story. It gives faces, names and lives to people who are often reduced to simple ideas. It shows that violence is not just about bad choices, but about a larger system that leaves whole communities behind. Still, telling a full story is not easy. As we have seen, the way a film is made, filmed and shown to the world can change how people understand it, or how they misunderstand it.

*Cidade de Deus* brings us closer to the stories behind the images of the favela. But what happens when the community speaks for itself ? *Favela Rising*(2005)(Fig.4), takes us even deeper to the real voices and experiences of the community itself. Directed by Jeff Zimbalist and Matt Mochary, this documentary tells the true story of Anderson Sá, a former drug trafficker from the Vigário Geral Favela, who found a way to break cycles of violence through music, culture and activism. *Favela Rising* follows

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[10] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Sá's creation of the AfroReggae movement, a community project that used dance, hip hop and education to offer young people alternatives to crime.

I focused on a still from *Favela rising* that shows a young boy sitting alone in a narrow alley, playing a small string instrument. Around him, the broken walls and an abandoned chair give the sense of abandonment and poverty. However, the boy's focus is on the music. I chose this image because it captures the documentary's message, while it shows the challenges of life in the favela, it also shows how music, culture and collective action can become a form of resistance.

Unlike fictional films, *Favela Rising* uses real footage, interviews and voice over narration to build a story based directly on lived experience. We are not watching actors, we are hearing personal testimonies and seeing real consequences. Through this method, the documentary achieves a kind of immediacy and authenticity that fictionalized films, even careful ones, cannot.

The structure of the documentary is really important as it guides us through Anderson's personal transformation and the rise of AfroReggae with explanations, reflections and emotional context. This helps viewers not just see the violence, but also understand the deeper reasons behind it and the human strength to fight against it.

Matisse Gilmore, in her study of media representations of marginalized identities, emphasizes that when individuals are allowed to tell their own stories, audiences are more likely to see them as complex, multi dimensional people rather than distant stereotypes.[11] Although Gilmore focuses on American television, her idea applies more broadly to visual culture. This difference between being spoken about and speaking for oneself is key to understanding the impact of *Favela Rising*. The film does not only shift the focus from violence to resilience, it invites the audience to understand the favela through the eyes of those who live in it, adding complexity and dignity to these stories. Gilmore's analysis highlights why giving voice to marginalized communities is not simply a narrative choice, but a political and ethical act that changes how audiences perceive entire communities.

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[11] Matisse Gilmore, "Living in the Background: Analyzing the Representation of Marginalized Identities in Predominantly White TV Shows," *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 13, no. 1 (2022): 35–45

At the same time, *Favela Rising* is not free from framing and stylistic choices. It also uses music, quick editing, and positive images to keep the viewer engaged. While the documentary centers real voices and focuses on resilience rather than violence, it still builds a story meant to inspire hope and admiration. It is also important to recognize that *Favela Rising* was directed by two American filmmakers, Jeff Zimnalist and Matt Mochary. Although the documentary focuses on the voices of the community, the final story is still shaped by filmmakers. The camera, the editing, when outsiders tell a community's story, they bring their own perspectives, choosing what moments to highlight and how to frame the story for viewers far away.

This brings us back to the idea of the "other". As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explain in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, all media representations involve acts of framing, choosing, interpreting and often position marginalized people as "others" to be observed or empathize with.[12] "The Other" is not just someone different, it is someone whose story is filtered through history, distance and power. Even when communities speak for themselves, as in *Favela Rising*, the final story is still shaped by those standing behind the camera. The favela becomes a powerful symbol of resilience, but it is still framed through an outsider's lens. This doesn't take away the value of the documentary, but it reminds us that no story about "the other" is ever completely neutral or free from the way it is shown.

By looking at *Favela Rising, Cidade de Deus* and both isolated photographs and photojournalistic essays by Gordon Parks, it becomes clear that every image and story is shaped by choices. A photograph without words can move us but leave out the full picture. A film can show real problems but still turn pain into something to consume. Even when real voices are included, the way the story is filmed, edited and shared changes what we understand.

But who gets to create the image that defines others ? Who decides which voices are heard and which are left out ? Images can open windows into lives we don't know, but they can also build walls if we accept them without questioning. This research shows that while narrative adds depth, it cannot erase the power structures behind representation. Stories of suffering are not just told, they are framed, selected, and consumed. Understanding this, forces us to rethink our role as viewers. We are not passive. How we see, what we feel, and what we forget are all shaped by the choices we accept or question. In a world where images are everywhere, learning to see critically is not just a skill, it is a responsibility toward the lives behind the frame. It is in the space between the image and the story that we must look coser.

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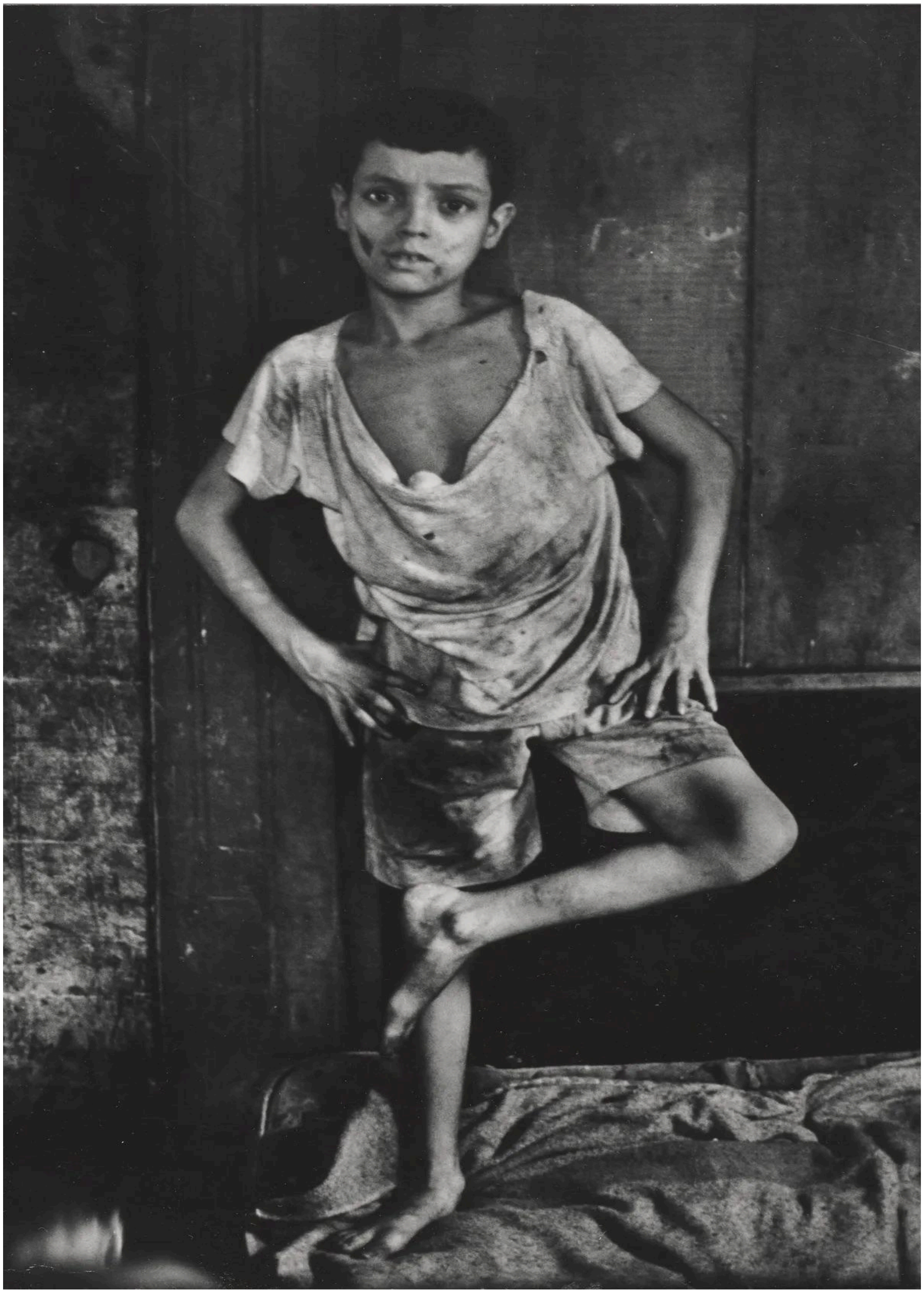
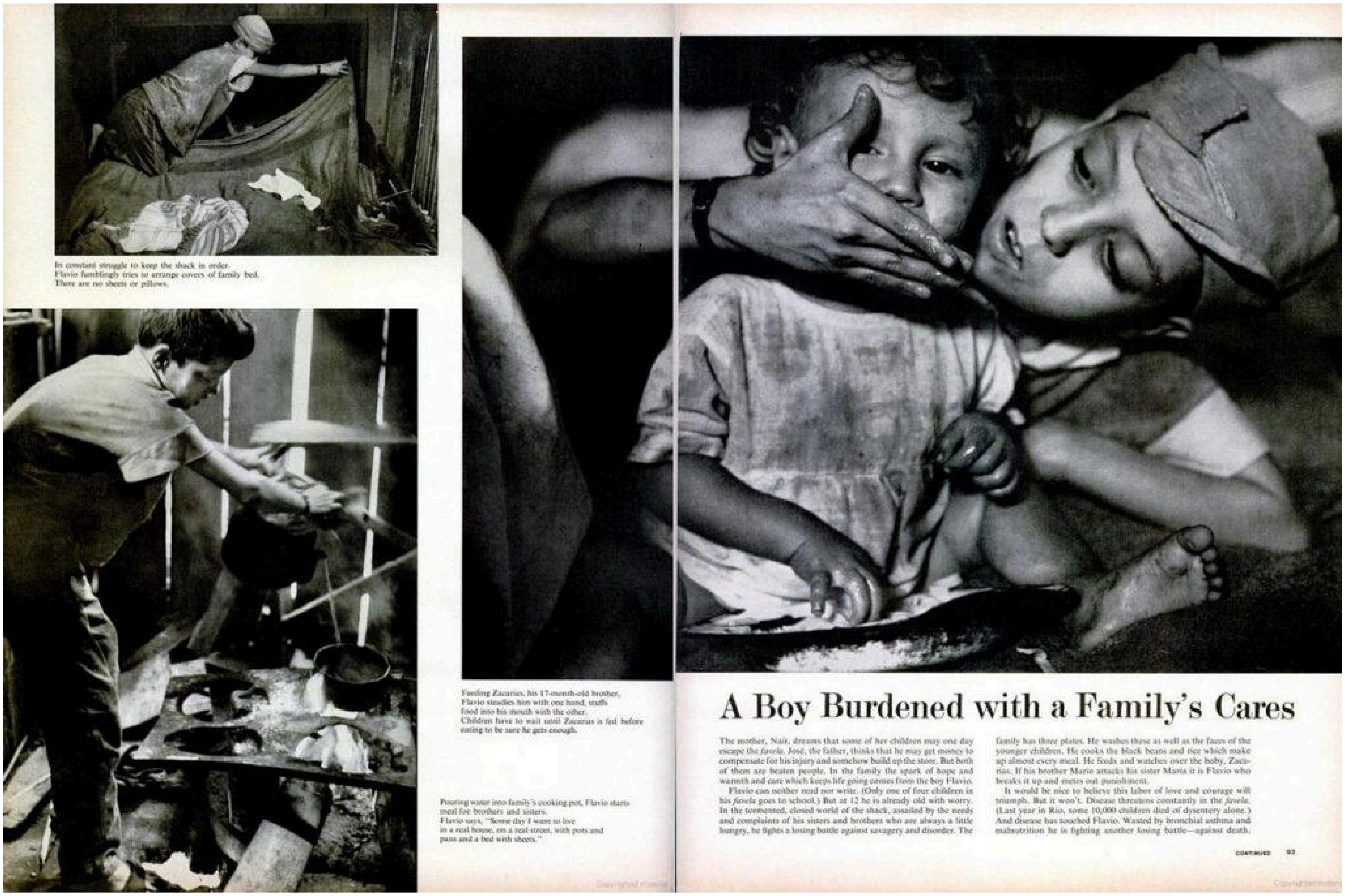
[12] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994)

Today, however, this power is slowly shifting. With the rise of social media, more people from marginalized communities are able to tell their own stories, in their own voice. Short videos, photo posts and first person narratives give people a chance to share their own view, something that used to be controlled by traditional media. While these platforms come with their own risks, they also offer a way to complicate or even challenge traditional representations. Looking at how social media changes the way stories are told and who gets to tell them could be the next step in this research.



(Fig 1) Gordon Parks, *Flávio da Silva (Portrait)*, 1961



In constant struggle to keep the shack in order.
Flavio fumblingly tries to arrange covers of family bed.
There are no sheets or pillows.

Feeding Zacarias, his 17-month-old brother,
Flavio steadies him with one hand, stuffs
food into his mouth with the other.
Children have to wait until Zacarias is fed before
eating to be sure he gets enough.

Pouring water into family's cooking pot, Flavio starts
meal for brothers and sisters.
Flavio says, "Some day I want to live
in a real house, on a real street, with pots and
pans and a bed with sheets."

# A Boy Burdened with a Family's Cares

The mother, Nair, dreams that some of her children may one day escape the *favela*. José, the father, thinks that he may get money to compensate for his injury and somehow build up the store. But both of them are beaten people. In the family the spark of hope and warmth and care which keeps life going comes from the boy Flavio.

Flavio can neither read nor write. (Only one of four children in his *favela* goes to school.) But at 12 he is already old with worry. In the tormented, closed world of the shack, assailed by the needs and complaints of his sisters and brothers who are always a little hungry, he fights a losing battle against savagery and disorder. The family has three plates. He washes these as well as the faces of the younger children. He cooks the black beans and rice which make up almost every meal. He feeds and watches over the baby, Zacarias. If his brother Mario attacks his sister Maria it is Flavio who breaks it up and metes out punishment.

It would be nice to believe this labor of love and courage will triumph. But it won't. Disease threatens constantly in the *favela*. (Last year in Rio, some 10,000 children died of dysentery alone.) And disease has touched Flavio. Wasted by bronchial asthma and malnutrition he is fighting another losing battle—against death.

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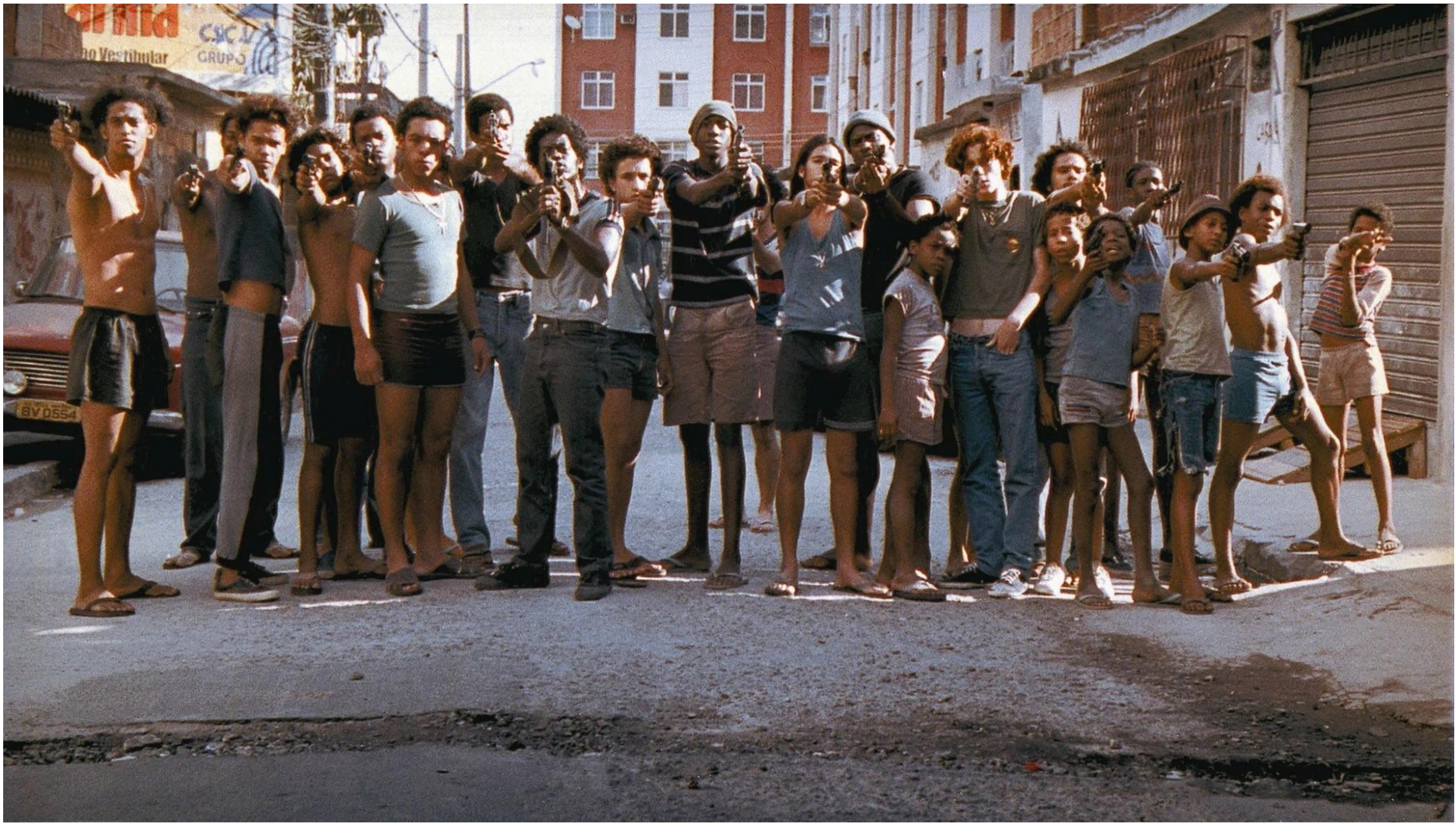
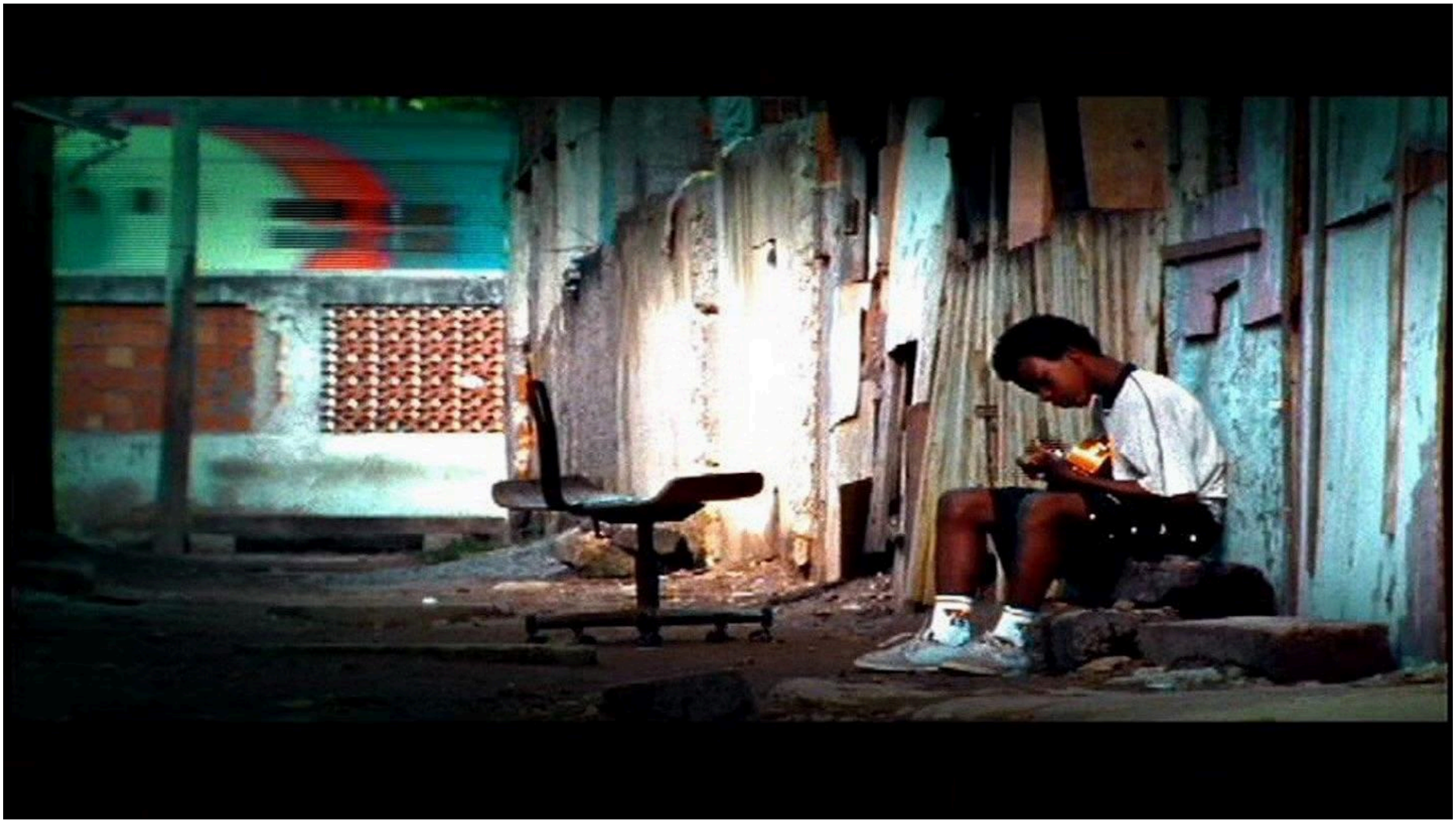
(Fig.2) "A Boy Burdened with a Family's Cares," *Life Magazine*, 1961



(Fig.3) Still from *City of God*, dir. Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, 2002



(Fig.4) Still from *Favela Rising*, dir. Jeff Zimbalist and Matt Mochary, 2005

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