Grassroots activist video documentary in Brazil and the construction of new cultural identities: the case of the Homeless Workers Movement

Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco

*Departamento de Cinema e Vídeo, Universidade Federal Fluminense,
Niterói, Brasil*

In 2005 the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto* (Homeless Workers Movement), operating in the Brazilian state of São Paulo since the 1990s, created its *Brigada de Guerrilha Cultural* (Cultural Guerrilla Brigade). The Brigade's responsibility was to produce through cultural activities such as theatre, music, poetry and film production the Movement's own political culture. The Brigade, which worked simultaneously as advertiser and agent of insurrection and militant expression, lasted until 2007. The central focus of this article is the activist documentary video that was produced within this context and its influence on identity formation. The article discusses more precisely how political video documentaries took part in a broader social and cultural project, contributing in this way to processes of transformation of community identity.

Introduction

The aim of this essay is twofold: firstly, it is to analyze how a recent experience of Brazilian activist video documentary, in the context of a broader politico-cultural project, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto* (Homeless Workers Movement),¹ was able to contribute to this social movement's processes of construction of new cultural identities. Secondly, the essay aims to identify the identity types the MTST presented to its members by means of audio-visual documentary work.²

According to Jordan and Weedon (in Alvarez, Dagnino & Escobar, 2000),

new identities are fundamental to the maintenance and continuity of organizations that propose structural changes in society. Precisely because of the complexity of the question regarding identity in the contemporary world, it is difficult to define cultural identity. According to Stuart Hall (2005), the present moment, which is full of controversy and uncertainty, is not unprecedented. The word identity and the phenomenon it aims to name have experienced similar moments of crisis in earlier periods, and, as a result, he suggests a periodization that takes these phases of turbulence as landmarks.

Hall explains that from an early-Enlightenment perspective, the concept of the human subject was that of a completely centered and unified individual, capable of the faculties of reason, conscience and action, whose center consisted of an inner core (Hall, 2005). Following this line of thought, identity would be a virtually immutable essence, and it would not make sense to talk about the formation of new identities. Later, there developed the sociological theory that the inner core of the subject was not independent and self-sufficient but formed in the midst of our relations with significant others (Hall, 2005). However, this understanding of identity, despite having the merit of recognizing its associative and unfinished nature, maintains the notion of a single identity. Finally, Hall describes the postmodern concept of subject, perceived not as endowed with a fixed, essential or permanent identity but as constituted by overlapping identities that are not harmonious but in constant transformation.³

Certainly, the latter was the idea of identity at stake when the MTST first proposed the construction of new identities through their audio-visual production in 2005. For a homeless person in Brazil a new identity may cause a rupture from an earlier state of resignation. In fact, the unwillingness to accept the precariousness of their existence has been the first necessary step taken by the homeless in Brazil towards joining a political movement and continuing in it. As I shall show below, the transformation of cultural identity is an essential dimension of the fight of the MTST.

In order to demonstrate the above proposition, the essay will discuss video productions by the *Brigada de Guerrilha Cultural* (Cultural Guerrilla Brigade), a group located within the Formation Department of the MTST and based in the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil.⁴ More specifically, the essay will discuss video documentaries made and exhibited during land occupations that took place between 2005 and 2008. This focus on a specific kind of audio-visual production is justified by the fact that the land occupation is a unique moment in which all the members of an organization of homeless people gather in one place and concentrate their strength towards one common goal.

In the essay, I analyze six video works. *Chico Mendes - a dignidade não se rende* (Chico Mendes: Dignity Doesn't Surrender), the first movie produced by the MTST, tells the story of the homonymous occupation, promoted in the city of Taboão da Serra, from 2004 to 2005. *Direitos esquecidos* (Forgotten Rights) is probably the most distributed video production by the MTST, since it was broadcast on national television; a rare event that will be later addressed in this essay. The film has two parts: 'The Slum' and 'The Occupation' (the latter presented as an alternative to the former).

Video-Informe 1 (Video-Report 1) was the first audio-visual production made in the João Cândido land occupation (which occurred in Itapecerica da Serra in 2007). It showcases the occupation's first few days, describing how the camp was organized. *Video-Informe 2* (Video-Report 2) features the March of the Five Thousand, a 2007 demonstration promoted by the MTST in an attempt to avoid the eviction of the João Cândido occupation. In the end, this occupation prompted the production of a further documentary, *Video-Informe 3* (Video-Report 3), which documents a further demonstration by the Movement, whose aim was to avoid eviction. The video documentary also depicts the closing down of the Raposo Tavares, Castelo Branco and Regis Bittencourt highways, an event that paralyzed the city of São Paulo for a few hours in 2007.

Construindo o Poder Popular (Building People's Power), the only video made during the Silvério de Jesus occupation (Embu das Artes, 2008), brings to the screen the daily realities of the fight. Although the group of people responsible for the audio-visual production within the MTST had already been gone when this film was produced, I chose to include it in the corpus to be analyzed owing to the fact that it was made exclusively by former members of the group and during a land occupation.⁵

The Homeless Workers Movement and the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade

In order to allow for a deeper understanding of the documentaries to be analyzed, I shall draw a brief chronology of the MTST and the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade, a group that is responsible for fomenting the Movement's own cultural production. Historical knowledge about the Movement is of great relevance to understand recurrent themes throughout their audio-visual

production. A more detailed knowledge of the Brigade, in turn, will help explain the politico-cultural project of the MTST, which embodies the production and screening of documentary films.

According to André (personal communication, 2008), one of the leaders of the MTST, the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade was an initiative of the members of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), who simultaneously participated in both collectives at first.⁶ The months between 1995 and 1996 were a difficult period for the MST. André estimates the crisis was caused to a great extent by exterior factors that nevertheless directly affected the Movement. On a national level, he highlights the drastic cutbacks by the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration in the agricultural (which affected land reform) and urban development portfolios.

Focusing specifically on the State of São Paulo, André (personal communication, 2008) explains that the MST gained strength in the Pontal de Paranapanema (an area of approximately 7,500 miles that includes 21 municipalities), prompting fierce reaction from rural elites, who armed themselves and organized paramilitary groups to combat landless workers. In addition, there arose what he called a media war governed by some of the most frequently watched news media in the country.

The Landless Workers Movement was, then, at a crossroads. In the face of the landowners' aggression, it had two options: proceed to armed confrontation or find political means to become stronger at a local, state and national level, especially in the urban social milieu. The MST generated several debates in which to discuss their circumstances. After assessing that it would be a mistake to arm itself, the Movement needed to find a way of building a social front that would mobilize the masses and be able to put them in the streets to defend land reform (the majority of the poor population in the cities had long lost contact with the country and had no interest of returning to it). After much discussion, it was agreed that the new movement would have as its central theme the issue of housing. Because of its wide appeal, housing could be easily related to other issues (such as lack of basic infrastructure and education).

Besides moving militants to key spots, the National March to Brasilia in 1997 had the fundamental role of creating and expanding the MTST in different parts of Brazil (although in most cases it has not lasted). André (personal communication, 2008) points out: 'It was the first time in Brazil's history that a social movement accomplished the feat of making thousands and thousands of people from various corners of the country arrive on foot and at the same time in the capital of Brazil. This event demonstrates a great

deal of potential and unity of action'. As they crossed the country, these landless workers met city dwellers, and those who approached with a willingness to help or join the fight were guided in the same direction: organize and strengthen a local homeless movement. By the end of the 1990s, one of the most expressive urban movements in Brazil had been established.

With time, the MTST became independent from the MST. Despite being partners in many ways, the separation was necessary for them to pursue the path that best suited their needs. The MTST, based in the Brazilian state of São Paulo, began its occupations in 1997. In recent years, the Movement has promoted several occupations, among which are those portrayed in the films discussed here, namely, *Chico Mendes* (Taboão da Serra, from September 2005 to June 2006), *João Cândido* (Itapecerica da Serra, 2007) and *Silvério de Jesus* (Embu das Artes, 2008).

It is noteworthy that the outline of a project that is both political and cultural is found in the MTST's very roots. The MST had always had an immense concern with culture, which must be a legacy of its initial liaison with the Basic Ecclesial Communities. For instance, the MST has an extensive repertoire of original songs (as the Catholic Church has hymns) and rituals. These songs and rituals find expression through mysticism, which 'synthesizes the tales of struggle' and through which 'values are cultivated and conveyed, the interpretation of social reality is presented, and collective identity is reinforced, fortifying the [MST's] members' convictions' (Torres, 2010, p. 6).

However, it is clear that affiliation alone does not explain the rise of a Cultural Guerrilla Brigade within the MTST; after all, this initiative was taken only by the São Paulo group. In fact, low-budget audio-visual collectives abound in the history of political documentary cinema across Latin America. Nowadays even movements that are not massive and do not belong to partisan, student or union structures often leave the audience position and move into film or video production. In present-day Brazil, most of the middle class and many non-governmental organizations acting in the poor outskirts have personal computers that can be adapted, at a relatively low cost, into editing suites. In addition to that, digital film cameras, especially handycams, can be purchased at an accessible price by these groups.

Despite having always depended on the equipment of its members and supporters, the MTST has nearly always had the technical means to create its cultural products. The same cannot be said about screenings, however. The purchase and maintenance costs of video projectors still remain high, and are present in the wish list of a very small slice of the population. However, the problem was fairly handled when the Movement acquired a video projector

which was considered, in the words of Bernardo, 'the AR-15 of the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade' (personal communication, 2007).²

It is plausible to suggest that, even in the absence of digital video technologies, the MTST would have produced and screened their own films. Yet, without digital video the swiftness typical of their audio-visual strategies would have been highly compromised. Except for one film, *Direitos esquecidos*, which was planned, executed and finalized in a few weeks, the rest of the films were made in six to ten days, and there were some whose production deadline was under 24 hours. *Vídeo-Informe 2*, filmed in the João Cândido camp, is one of them. About this film, Bernardo comments:

[Carlos, one of the Brigade's members], did a very good job with this movie, he was willing to make a movie in eight, ten, twelve hours or so. The march was Friday and on Saturday the movie was screened during the soiree. It had a huge impact. Imagine, we had just done the march and, just like that, there we were on a big screen.

(Personal communication, 2008)

In a nutshell, the history of the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade has four distinct phases. Circa 2004, Carlos joined the MTST and, despite being a philosophy graduate, he had taught Brazilian film history in a cultural center. He brought the proposal to initiate an audio-visual production within the Movement, although neither he nor the other members of the collective had experience in the area.

Although it is not possible to dissociate Carlos from this stage, he elucidates that, in spite of being the only one who started to participate in other spheres of the Movement, there were other people involved in the process (personal communication, 2008). Besides Joaquim (the first member of the MTST to be a part of the Brigade), the group consisted mainly of philosophy and film students, most of them friends or acquaintances. Yet in spite of having planted the seed of politicization and the use of audio-visual means in the heart of the Movement, the results were meager: records of a few acts, a seminar at São Paulo's Pontifícia Universidade Católica, some sessions of a frustrated film club, and two video-letters from one community to another.

Nonetheless, these initial drawbacks were overcome in the stage called Consolidation, which coincides - not by chance - with the Chico Mendes occupation, a moment when the Movement appealed to people who at first only sympathized with it but eventually became members. In this context, the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade finds the perfect scenario in which to establish itself. Firstly, this happens because the camp is the place where the full experience of the fight occurs; secondly, because 'culture, education were

spaces where those who were arriving could start to see what the Movement was like', says Bernardo (personal communication, 2008).

The enthusiasm of the land occupation, which in just a few days gathered thousands of people, had its match in the fulfillment of many cultural activities: theater performances, including some from renowned companies, two hip-hop festivals, musical bands of different styles: samba, forró and others, besides video screenings. The MTST was screening its own video production at the time: *Chico Mendes - a dignidade não se rende*, a documentary filmed in just thirty days of occupation. During the Chico Mendes occupation, the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade produced two other films, among which *Direitos esquecidos* stands out as probably the most wide-reaching of them all, given that it was broadcast on national television.

In 2005, TV host João Kleber was sued for making discriminating comments against homosexuals, women, the elderly, the handicapped, people from the Brazilian Northeast, and other minorities on his show on RedeTV! (an important Brazilian television network). The court decision was unprecedented in the history of Brazilian law, as it obliged the network to yield for a certain amount of time the same time slot to a series of programs called *Direito de Resposta* (Right of Reply), which were produced by social movements. When they became aware of this opportunity, the Movement and its Brigade decided that it would be crucial to occupy the territory of mainstream television, which was usually hostile to their cause. After meeting with other groups, the proposal to approach the housing problem in the city of São Paulo was established: militants from different homeless organizations would address the issue, while the Homeless Workers Movement would be responsible for promoting debate about the situation in the poor outskirts of the city. The importance given to this endeavor was such that, for the first and only time in the Movement's history, a member was released from all other duties in order to devote himself entirely to the making of a video.

It is fundamental to stress that not only was the Chico Mendes camp the place from which the audio-visual production of the MTST and even the Brigade were propelled, but it was also the birthplace of the soiree, something that all of my interviewees pointed out as the single most important contribution from/to the Movement. Several factors prompted this occurrence: first was the fact that soirees were booming in the outskirts of São Paulo. There was also the need to create activities to motivate weary members who, after enduring five months of occupation, were beginning to establish a sense of community. Finally, the fact that the Movement's members constantly demanded a more active participation in cultural activities also helped the

realization of the soirees.⁸

When asked about the importance of the event to the Movement, Bernardo highlights its democratizing features:

The soiree, particularly, is the form that, as a friend of ours once said, 'is the art of the poor outskirts. It's their art form'. Why? Because it's democratic, because everybody's got the opportunity to go up there and say a little something, because it creates an environment of really strong brotherhood. A guy goes up there, sings a song off-key, man [clapping]... that's it, you know? The guy went there and did it. He faced his fear of public speaking and expressed himself. N also said something interesting, he said that the soiree is a kind of rehearsal to the assembly. I mean, it's a place where people gradually lose their aversion to public speaking. In general everybody's got a little bit of stage fright. In a movement, a political organization, this is bad. It's bad because your discussions end up limited to a very small group of people.

(Personal communication, 2007)

Bernardo also emphasizes the relevance of the soiree within a situation of distress and endurance that had lasted five months:

During this time we had five, six hundred families in the camp. And we already had great difficulties for mobilization too, for anything. And the preparation meetings for the soiree start to happen on Fridays, so forty, fifty people start to gather to prepare the soiree. I mean, it becomes an organizational tool, gathering people to work as a group and create something collectively for everyone.

(Personal communication, 2007)

It is not hard to imagine how the soiree, usually the place where the Movement's documentaries were screened, magnified the impact of the images and sounds projected, which alone were already significant.

After vacating that place, without the urgency and rush characteristic of a camp, the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade - with its members now amounting to a much larger number (most of them newcomers) and with time to rethink their activities - could organize a series of meetings and debates in which audio-visual production was always part of the agenda. Thus had begun the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade's 'golden age', as described by Bernardo:

[From] December [2006] to March [2007] we continued to discuss: 'Well, how is the João Cândido [the occupation that was about to happen] video going to be like? How are we going to do it?' And then these common sense discussions deepened a little bit, the culture of the people, the kitsch culture, how we incorporate these, how we dialogue with this universe without simply reproducing it, you know, bringing as well the Movement's contribution, its politics, but above all searching a way to

communicate with the people, to touch them and make them relate with what they're watching. And also, who knows, a way to encourage them to get closer to the group, the Brigade, and to produce.

(Personal communication, 2008)

During this golden age, from June 2006 to May 2007, a new occupation took place. In March of 2007, the João Cândido occupation began and substantial audio-visual work was developed there. Bernardo describes this work:

The video screenings in the João Cândido occupation were very, very constant, even if you consider the time frame (and that it was impossible to hitch an illegal connection, so we had to make do with generators). In two months, we definitely screened a lot more than in eight months in the Chico Mendes occupation. Our work was still a crawling baby back then.

(Personal communication, 2008)

Not only screenings but also production activities were habitual. Three major documentaries were produced during this period: *Video-In forme 1*, *Video-Informe 2* and *Video-Informe 3* (also known by the names of the occupations they reported: 'João Cândido', 'March of the Five Thousand', and 'Lockup', respectively).

For a number of reasons, the end of the João Cândido occupation in May 2007 heralded the downfall of the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade. Firstly, several members were sent to other cities in order to form new groups (a project that to date has not prospered). In addition, it was quite some time before the MTST could accomplish a new occupation, one able to resist eviction orders and police repression. Also, outside the camp the Movement lost strength and members, and the Brigade felt the consequences of this. Finally, there was the internal strife common to any social movement, and the MTST could not stay immune to it. Nevertheless, two more films were produced in 2008, including *Construindo o Poder Popular* (Building People's Power), which was made by former members of the Movement who had been part of the extinct Cultural Guerrilla Brigade.

The documentary film and the construction of new identities

As explained in the introduction, the concept of identity mobilized in the MTST's audio-visual documentary production is akin to that articulated by Hall (2005), who describes the postmodern subject as not endowed with a fixed, essential or permanent identity but as constituted by overlapping identities, which rather than being harmonious are in constant transformation. In this context, Carlos notes:

Something... important is that 'it's us now!' thing.² We started to realize how films helped us create watchwords, how songs that belonged to, I don't know, a kind of cultural imaginary, an imaginary of the camp itself... It's funny because it was a Zapatista phrase, which was good in my opinion, 'cause when we read it, you know, 'it's us now!', it spread, everybody kept saying 'it's us now, it's our time now' and all that. It was indispensable, I think, managing to incorporate this street language into the political discourse of the Movement, showing that it was not only the traditional socialist discourse. Because we fought a lot for this discussion, you know, having had plenty of experience inside the MTST with political formation based on the Communist Manifesto. We get there, man, and the people couldn't understand this kind of language. So, we were concerned with working with image, metaphor and rap slang, you know?

(Personal communication, 2008)

Carlos's account is emblematic, for it addresses a case in which the documentary was at the same time essential to the dissemination of a watchword and responsible for showcasing the difficulties caused by the overlap of two different identities, namely, that of a member of a leftist homeless movement and that of a dweller of the poor outskirts of a 21st century third-world metropolis.

According to Castells (2006), identity is the process of constructing meaning based on a cultural attribute or, yet, a combination of interrelated cultural attributes, which prevail over other sources of meaning. Let us reflect upon this brief definition, since it is going to be the basis of a deeper commentary on some of the characteristics of the identity concept that will be fundamental for understanding the audio-visual project of the MTST and its potential.

First of all, we should stress that identity is a process. In other words, it is not something you are born with, neither something that remains unaltered. Bauman (2005) emphasizes the precarious and eternally inconclusive condition of identity and affirms that people in search of identity find themselves continually facing the intimidating task of reaching for the impossible. For this reason, as we shall see below, the main identities proposed by the Movement are reiterated in almost every film.

In addition to that, Castells points out that during their quest, subjects

assemble, reassemble and disassemble several distinct materials. Several other scholars also perceive this peculiarity. One of them is Nestor García Canclini (2001), who states that identity today, even in the lower classes, is plural, multi-ethnic, migratory, and made of mixed elements from numerous cultures. The soundtracks of the films analyzed here are perfect illustrations of Canclini's statement: they feature rap music, important Brazilian popular music stars (such as Caetano Veloso), samba, regional music, and songs inspired by the repertoire of Afro-Brazilian religions.

Castells also stresses the active characteristics attributed to social agents in formative cultural processes: identity always has to be invented, never discovered. And in this process of inventing, the task of the identity builder is, as Lévi-Strauss would say, that of the bricoleur, who builds all sorts of things with the material at hand (Bauman, 2005). To say this does not mean that people are always consciously molding their subjectivities to suit themselves. Morley (2005), for instance, believes that not enough attention is paid to the processes in which the forms of cultural capital available for people to remodel their identities are unevenly distributed, or to the fact that many people are still living under the constraints of identities attributed to them by others, instead of identities they choose themselves.

This is a very important aspect to be considered in the case of a homeless movement defined by the media and other sections of society as a 'bunch of layabouts, brawlers and invaders'. No project whose aim is to propel new identities can work if it does not take into consideration the ground upon which it will be built. After all, as Couche (2002) states, identity is always the encounter - or even clash between self-identity and hetero-identity, both attributed by groups that hardly possess the same amount of power to name others and themselves. It is possible, therefore, to think of identity as a demand for control over representation and a battle over narrative authorship (Herschmann & Pereira, 2003, p. 184).¹⁰

Countless are the cases of conflict in the video productions of the MTST. The following section from the video documentary *Chico Mendes - a dignidade não se rende* illustrates this point perfectly. The Secretary of Housing of Taboão da Serra answers those who had introduced themselves as leaders in the Movement, in the presence of several homeless people: 'Are you one of the coordinators? 'Cause, you know, it's the legitimacy thing, right? Having legitimacy is a big deal for a movement, right? Not having people taking advantage'. She smiles. 'So, who else is a leader? You two are too well dressed to be leaders of a homeless movement [pause]. Sorry'. The Movement leader shakes his head and says: 'That is a pitiful attitude'. The Secretary tries

to make amends: 'No, no, it's just...' An unidentified person off camera says: 'prejudiced'. The Secretary answers: 'No, it's not prejudice'. The cameraman ends the discussion saying off camera: 'Class prejudice'.

In most news media coverage, the opinion of the Secretary of Housing of Taboão da Serra would be predominant, and the homeless would hardly be given a voice. However, as this is a film by the Movement for the Movement, her speech is put in the spotlight only to be deconstructed. As producer, and therefore author of the narrative, the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade can denounce the prejudice that society holds against the homeless, thus justifying the need to construct new identities.

The fact that the documentary films analyzed here are produced by the Movement and for the Movement affects in a very specific way the identities showcased therein. The ontological question 'who are the homeless?' is answered in a rather vague manner (almost nobody says, for example, 'the homeless are...'). In fact, it is unnecessary to give people an explicit definition of who they are or, even, who the Homeless Workers Movement wished them to be.

The members of the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade knew that images and sounds would be able to suggest identities in less obvious and more appealing ways. Likewise, the new identities of the homeless conveyed by the films do not stress their precariousness. This is an obvious characteristic of the identity of the homeless, it is a well known fact and it is not what differentiates a homeless person from a member of the MTST. Accordingly, it is possible to discover in the films a combination of identities, from the most impartial and predictable ones to some that are surprising for their boldness and humaneness. In the essay's final sections, I shall discuss some of the key identities of the homeless as elaborated in the MTST's video documentaries.

The homeless are fighters

Although a sentence such as 'the homeless are fighters' is never uttered, the stories themselves reveal the fighting spirit of the group. Scenes captured on the first day of the João Cândido occupation, which are part of *Video-Informe 1*, only confirm this statement. A few of the first occupiers are seen wearing winter outfits beneath a grayish sky, warming by the bonfire - and, of course, the weather is damp. It is impressive to see in this video documentary the effort by men and women of all ages to build the shacks, a theme that is also widely explored in *Chico Mendes - a dignidade não se rende*. In addition, in

Video-Informe 2, which focused on the March of the Five Thousand, one of the members shows to the camera his foot full of blisters, and with a rap he stresses that this drawback will not keep him from achieving his goal. In the wide shots, people are seen protecting themselves from the sun under their umbrellas. And, in all films, there are countless demonstrations and roadblocks. Furthermore, the resonance of their words makes a strong contribution. Early on in the film *Chico Mendes - a dignidade não se rende*, the speaker calls out the 'fighters of the Chico Mendes occupation'. In *Construindo o Poder Popular*, a dweller in the Silvério de Jesus occupation states: 'We do demonstrations in the streets, at the doors of the City Hall, the Government Palace. If necessary, we do rallies. Our goal is to fight for our rights'.

At other times, the weapon of choice is humor, which is a resource very little explored by Latin-American political documentary films, but used by the Brigade while experimenting with drama and melodrama techniques, widely adopted by this type of production. A scene from *Construindo o Poder Popular* illustrates this option. It is daytime and a couple of clowns perform in the camp Silvério de Jesus. Clown 1: 'I came farther than you'. Clown 2: 'Oh, yeah? Have you come from Santos?' Images of several militants marching through city streets: the soundtrack is rap music. After a sudden cut, we return to the clown performance. Clown 1: 'Farther than that'. Clown 2: 'Oh, from Minas Gerais'. To the same soundtrack, now there are images of the march proceeding. After a few seconds, another sudden cut. We return to the clowns. Clown 1: 'Farther still'. Clown 2: 'From Europe!' Again, images of the march: the editing establishes a relation between the march and the funny skit performed by the artists. Sudden cut. We return to the clowns. Clown 1: 'I'm tellin' you, it's the middle of the boondocks'. The audience laughs. Clown 2: 'Why, so where did you come from?' Clown 1: 'I came all the way from Pirajuçara, man'. The audience laughs. Dozens of homeless people find themselves inside a room in a public building. One of them waves the MTST's flag. The rap follows along these images. Sudden cut. We return to the clown performance. Clown 2: 'And now Pirajuçara is far away?' Clown 1: 'It's far because you didn't come walking, huh?' The audience laughs. It is getting dark. Militants and sound truck proceed marching. Thus, the use of humor in this sequence has a twofold function: not only does it reinforce the fighting spirit attributed to the identity of the homeless, but also points toward another identity construction that is very common in the films of the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade: that the homeless are irreverent.

The homeless are irreverent

An individual deprived of a home, who has suffered and survived all the hardships homelessness entails, having managed to raise a family and purchase some belongings (in *Direitos esquecidos*, for instance, there are refrigerators in all the houses in the slum), needs to be smart, savvy, and irreverent. Although in the documentaries there are no testimonies that directly confirm this claim, the choice of language in films made by/for the Movement conveys this idea to the spectator.

Relying on parallel editing, a sequence can be seen in *Video-Informe 3*, in which policemen are depicted repressing protesters during the lockup. In the João Cândido camp, there is a screening of Charles Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921). The sequence used in the documentary is precisely the one in which the kid tries to fool the policeman. The soundtrack chosen by the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade only emphasizes the cleverness that characterizes the former against the mockery performed against the latter. Cut to the lockup. Protesters protect themselves behind the barricades. The song played in the back is 'Eu também sei atirar (I can shoot too)' by the band Comadre Florzinha. Another scene from *The Kid* is shown: the kid, who has been seated, is forced to stand up. Back to the lockup: a protester kicks back a gas bomb thrown by the policemen. Cut to the movie: same scene as before, but now the complete scene. The kid looks at his hands before standing up. After he stands up, we notice the policeman behind him. The kid enters a house and slams the door. Defeated, the policeman can only go away.

In *Chico Mendes - a dignidade não se rende* there are several situations featuring the homeless taking advantage of their position as owners of the means of production to mock policemen, landowners and, naturally, politicians. In one scene of the film the image of a politician talking on TV is matched to the voice of the narrator saying: 'These gentlemen have lots of words in their mouth but they have no ears'. Similarly in this film, after scenes depicting the Act in Defense of the Republic and Democracy, an event that featured authorities and personalities, a guest complains that only a few handpicked individuals had the opportunity to voice their opinions, but not the people. At this point, the film shows the Secretary of Housing of Taboão da Serra, who appears shrugging and tilting her head, while stating: 'that's democracy'. This piece of footage had previously appeared in the film, when her conversation with the militants was interrupted by a series of life stories and cries of 'we want land, we want land!' The repetition of a previous sequence out of context shows this public character making a comment that

probably she would never make in such circumstances - but the film does.

The homeless are instigators

In several cases, the aforementioned irreverence develops into extreme provocation and challenge in the documentaries. *Video-Informe 2* is the production in which this is more apparent. In the film's soundtrack, a leader of the Movement has the opportunity to respond loudly and clearly to a comment he has heard from a policeman:

The Military Police prevented us from reaching the Government Palace. Colonel Alaor and other police officers claimed that they were at the service of public order. But we reply: public order means housing for the people! Public order means people having a house to live in! Public order means a government concerned with social politics, concerned with the people! So, with all due respect, Colonel, we are also at the service of public order.

The last speech featured in this film is made by this leader: 'More occupations to come! Get ready! Get ready, José Serra. You'd better surrender, or else we'll push forward!' If an official leader of the MTST makes such a threat, he probably believes that the Movement has the power to fulfill it. Power is also a theme expressed by another leader:

It is essential for the Governor to remember that his political life doesn't end. Every two years, politicians need the people. They go to slums, hold our snotty-nosed children and eat food from a can. Now they want to tell us where we can and cannot go. But we'll go. Because the people united will never be defeated! The people united will never be defeated!

[The occupiers follow in unison.]

Similarly, the documentary *Video-Informe 3* uses a song to emphasize the power of the people. The documentary begins and ends with a version of 'Pedro e Teresa', by Teresa Cristina, sung by the homeless people: 'Se o povo soubesse o talento que ele tem / Não escutava desaforo de ninguém' (If the people knew how talented they are / They wouldn't take insults from anybody).

The homeless are heirs to the slaves' struggle for freedom

Tying the fighting homeless of today's Brazil to the slave rebellions of the past is a major theme of most of the Movement's films. This is most deeply explored in *Vídeo-Informe 1*, which features GOG, a famous Brazilian rapper, wearing a MTST shirt and declaiming the lyrics to the song *Fazendo Escola* (Paving the Way) by the group Face da Morte (Death Face), during a cultural activity held at the João Cândido occupation. Fie hands the microphone to an unknown person who says: 'the shack used to be the slave quarters ... now is the quilombo.'²¹ In the next sequence, we see onscreen the occupied land still empty and we hear the sound of mocking noises (as in an animated cartoon). There is an intertitle: 'The landowner / a golf course?' The noises proceed. Two other intertitles appear: 'The authorities / an airport? / a highway?' and 'Press / a slum, People / a quilombo!' In a bird's-eye shot, now we see plenty of shacks.

For the final participation of the speaker in *Chico Mendes - a dignidade não se rende*, the audio and video tracks are structured as follows. Speaker: 'We all know that every slum is a bit like the slave quarters. Every police car is a slave ship'. This is followed by a shot of the police. Then, the speaker concludes: 'Every occupation is a quilombo'. These words are heard over the image of a homeless person digging.

The homeless are united

One final feature of homeless identity, as widely seen in the MTST's video documentaries, is fellowship: that is, a willingness to build something collectively. In *Chico Mendes - a dignidade não se rende*, a leader declares: 'He who is poor, needy and a fighter is my fellow'. A dweller of the Chico Mendes camp seen in *Direitos esquecidos* asserts: 'I want a better life for me and for those courageous enough to fight by my side'. And an elder woman, who is one of the highlights of *Construindo o Poder Popular*, says: 'I'm homeless, right? So, I'm struggling. I like the Movement. It digs and cuts. And speaks, you know, shouts [she laughs]. The meetings too, all of it... the friendships we develop'. Although mutual help is very common in the Brazilian slums, people in precarious housing situations or deprived of housing generally seek individual solutions. As an alternative to this behavior, the Movement preaches about collective action, which they propose as the only way to solve the housing problems not just of one person, but of many in the same condition.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this essay, the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST) utilizes its activist video documentary production conscientiously to impel the construction of new identities, mobilizing a concept of identity that recognizes its relativity, inconclusiveness, plurality, contradictions and constructedness within usually asymmetrical power relations.

Because the video documentaries of the MTST were made by the Movement for the Movement, these new identities emphasize and reinforce characteristics that every single member should bear. Importance must not be given to material limitations but to what they manage to accomplish subjectively, such as a sense of fellowship towards the oppressed from past and present generations, and a willingness to fight and change their condition and that of their fellow members.

The homeless portrayed in the Cultural Guerrilla Brigade documentaries are not represented simply as people deprived of housing, but as people who rebel against their situation of social inequality. Therefore, homelessness, as construed by the MTST in its video documentaries, is not an identity determined by precariousness. On the contrary, it is an identity constructed within the Movement that develops processes of visibility of the homeless in the public space, while initiating people into politics.

In addition, it is through the consolidation of this new identity in all its plurality that the MTST consolidates itself. As mentioned earlier, organizations that propose to resist and struggle in order to change certain aspects of society need to pay special attention to the question of identity and, accordingly, develop a politics of identity. In order to disseminate this politics, video documentary production resulted in a strategic tool for the MTST.

However, neither a film nor group of films can be considered responsible for the fate of a social movement that fights for a broader cause. If there is a lesson to be learned from the use of video documentary by the MTST's Cultural Guerrilla Brigade, it is the importance of articulating and integrating different spheres (culture, education, and organization) in a single strategy, instead of approaching them separately or favoring one over the others. This is the only way fully to consummate the marriage between social movements and grass-roots activist cinema.

Notes

1. Hereafter referred to as MTST.
2. To locate the MTST within a broader historical context of traditions of activist cultural production in Brazil is outside the scope and possibilities of this article, whose specific objective is to analyze grass-roots video documentaries as used by the MTST in community building work between the 1990s and 2000s. For a more expansive discussion of contemporary Brazilian cultural history see Alvarez et al. (2000).
3. The dialectic character of identity can imply that identity formation may be seen as part of a mimetic process; for analyses of the function of mimesis in the process of formation of cultural identity see Taussig (1993), Gebauer and Wulf (1992). For another authoritative discussion of the process of constitution of cultural identity see Jenkins (1996).
4. Since the MTST does not work nationwide, it is possible that, despite sharing the same denomination, the group in Rio de Janeiro does not know the group in São Paulo. Because it is only the group based in São Paulo that has its own audio-visual production, every time the MTST is mentioned in this essay, it is a reference to the group based in state of São Paulo.
5. The historical data used in this essay derives from a series of interviews I conducted in 2008 with five members of the MTST, who were involved in the land occupations and documentary video productions discussed here.
6. All interviewee names were changed to protect MTST members' identities.
7. The AR-15 is a semi-automatic rifle.
8. The MTST soirees were public events in which people could express themselves artistically, for example, declaiming poems and singing. Public soirees and participatory budget meetings can be contrasted with theatre of the oppressed plays. Where the former's success was due to the shared social experience of those on the stage and those in the audience, the failure of the latter may have been an effect of the different class backgrounds of actors and audience members; on theatre of the oppressed see Boal (2005).
9. 'It's us' is the English translation of the Portuguese 'É nós'. The original phrase is very common in Brazil's poor outskirts, and it spread as a slogan of the MTST with the help of a video.
10. For a conceptualization of how thought creates identity and how in this dialectical encounter identity is formed and transformed, see Heidegger (1969).
11. A quilombo is a settlement founded by escaped slaves.

References