

FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Alive & Kicking: Soccer Grannies of South Africa. **Lara-Ann de Wet.** 19 min, 2015.

This documentary narrates the inspirational story of Rebecca Ntsanwisi, affectionately known as “Mama Beka”, who, in the midst of her personal battle with cancer, discovered football not only as a means to improve her physical health but also as a space for motivating other women of her age group to join her in forming a football team, the Vakhegula Vakhegula F.C. In the Tsonga language, *Vakhegula* means “grandmother”.

Set against the backdrop of Nkowa Nkowa, a municipality in South Africa's Limpopo province, Ntsanwisi initially embraced walking as a form of exercise to enhance her physical condition. During one of these walks, she encountered other elderly women and invited them to join her. In a serendipitous moment, they came across a group of boys playing football in the street, and by chance, the ball rolled towards them. As they kicked the ball back, they realised that not only did it help strengthen their knees, but it also brought them joy. Over time, these encounters evolved into regular football sessions, where the women not only engaged in physical activity but also found a space for enjoyment, socialisation, and mutual support, ultimately feeling more energised and empowered in their daily lives.

The anthropologist José Magnani, when reflecting on urban anthropology's role in cultural studies, references Roberto DaMatta's dichotomy of *the street versus the home*. According to DaMatta, the home represents the domain of kinship, while the street symbolises a space of encounter with

strangers and acquaintances, a field of interaction where people meet, create new bonds, and negotiate differences, feeding networks of sociability in a landscape often viewed solely through the lens of poverty or exclusion. Cities are often hostile environments for the movement of people, particularly for the elderly. Mama Beka recognised that many older women in her community felt isolated, with few opportunities for socialisation and physical activity, as they tended to stay at home, occupied with domestic chores. Football emerged as a powerful tool for bringing these women together, offering them a space not only for sport but also for social interaction and boosting their self-esteem.

In addition to the themes of mobility and sociability, it is important to highlight that these are elderly women playing football. Football fields have long been considered male-dominated spaces, and the recognition of women's football in South Africa, as well as globally, has taken years to achieve. During apartheid, women, particularly black women, faced various forms of exclusion and segregation, not only socially and politically but also in sports. Women's participation in sports was limited, and football, in particular, was viewed as a male activity. Even after the end of apartheid, women's football took considerable time to gain visibility, facing cultural barriers and a lack of institutional support. Even today, in some regions, prejudice against women who play football persists, restricting their participation in sporting events and limiting access to sponsorships. In this context, the “soccer grannies” become powerful symbols, not only for challenging these gender and age

norms but also for demonstrating the positive impact that sport can have on women and the communities around them.

By playing football, the grandmothers not only challenge traditional gender and age-related norms but also highlight the transformative potential of sport as a tool for empowerment and community building, especially in contexts where social exclusion and limited opportunities persist.

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Waiting for the Carnival, **Marcelo Gomes**.
86 min, 2019.

The history of exploitation in textile production in the rural villages of the Northeast is centuries old. In the early 20th century, the state of Pernambuco became a key site for large factories, second only to São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Despite facing long periods of drought, hunger, and shifts in labour throughout the century, the Pernambuco Fashion Hub, also known as the Pernambuco Agreste Clothing Hub, emerged. This hub formed a circuit of large street markets held on alternating days in the cities of Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, Caruaru, and Toritama.

In this documentary, director Marcelo Gomes takes the audience on a journey to a city where, on the one hand, he searches for the rural landscape he had known as a child, 40 years prior. On the other hand, his exploration is shaped by the cyclical movement of jeans production, as the garments are transported through the streets and alleys, passing by people, homes (garages, porches, and living rooms), and sewing machines. Disturbed by the

monotonous movements and relentless noise of the labour, Gomes engages in interviews with young workers, mothers, and elderly individuals who have long devoted themselves to the production of jeans, as well as with small-scale entrepreneurs, proud of their craftsmanship and creativity.

Among the many characters, three from the rural area of Toritama stand out. Léo, a jack-of-all-trades, works in various roles, from jeans manufacturing to construction and agriculture. Then, there is Seu João, who can predict when it will rain and tends to his herd of goats. Lastly, Dona Adalgisa, a farmer whose chicken farm was replaced by sewing machines. These are the only characters explicitly named by the narrator, interviewer, and director, Marcelo Gomes.

Throughout the film, the names of the interviewees are notably absent — even in subtitles — underscoring the lack of recognition and condemnation of the region's historical textile production conditions. Additionally, several images highlight the historical invisibility of female labour in domestic settings, as seen in the film's portrayal of the behind-the-scenes struggles of Toritama's textile workers, who are responsible for twenty percent of the country's jeans production.

The integration of fabric scraps from factories in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe and Caruaru into domestic production, to create “Sulanca” (low-quality clothing) and the “blue gold” from Toritama, was the solution the people of the Northeast found to survive the long periods of drought. In recent decades, this production has become the economic backbone of these towns, now

considered “company towns,” reducing the interest in migrating to cities like São Paulo, which offer better infrastructure and working conditions, as noted by two interviewees in the film.

However, the self-exploitation experienced by textile workers in the jeans and “sulanca” industries is perceived as something positive. This not only reinforces the image of female workers in the Northeast as symbols of strength and resilience — survivors of droughts who journeyed across the country in search of better living conditions — but can also be viewed as part of a family’s economic strategy to buy a house or other assets, as ethnographic studies on the subject suggest. At the same time, for some workers, it represents a form of subversion, where — deeply embedded in the textile industry’s profit-driven, exploitative, and neoliberal system — they sell everything just to celebrate Carnival.

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City of God. **Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund**. 130 min, 2002.

The film *City of God* presents the stories of characters living in the favela of Cidade de Deus, located in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro. Narrated by the character Buscapé, the film chronicles the emergence and evolution of drug trafficking in the area from its early days. Released in 2002, *City of God* marked a major milestone in Brazilian cinema, with subtitles in numerous languages, paving the way for other films

about urban violence, such as *Falcão - Meninos do Tráfico* and *Tropa de Elite*.

The film’s success was so profound that it continues to inspire subsequent adaptations, including the 2024 HBO Max series *City of God: The Fight Doesn’t Stop*. However, just over a decade after the film’s release, a documentary entitled *City of God -10 Years Later* was produced, interviewing the actors who brought the original characters to life. Through their words, gestures, and silences, the documentary reveals that these individuals were learning much more than just how to portray physical violence on screen.

Despite its compelling narrative and high production value, the entirety of *City of God* is steeped in various forms of violence — from the actions of the “Trio Ternura” to the children of Caixa Baixa. This raises the question: how much violence can be embedded in a single film? How much of it is concealed or left unnoticed? The film’s international acclaim was built on the performances of black, marginalised youths from Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, many of whom had no prior professional experience or acting careers. Yet behind the scenes, there were questionable negotiations, with producers failing to provide either professional development or emotional support after the filming, release, and global screenings. On screen, however, the slang and dialogue of the film seeped into the vernacular of Rio’s teenagers, particularly with Zé Pequeno’s iconic line “my name is Zé Pequeno”, and Bené, the so-called “good bandit”, whose character inspired the *Baile do Bené* parties.

While the film constructs a binary narrative of good versus evil — juxtaposing

crime and honest labour — it also contrasts Christian religiosity with African-derived spiritual traditions, which are subtly criticised. In one night scene, the Afro-Brazilian entity Exu Sete Caldeiras baptises and guides Zé Pequeno, positioning him as the “evil bandit”. In contrast, we are presented with a Weberian depiction of redemption associated with Christianity. In a scene where Alicate escapes the police, a drop of sweat on his face transforms into a fish, symbolising divine power in Christian scripture. After this transformative moment, Alicate walks unnoticed by the police, abandoning crime in favour of honest work.

What we witness is a film largely produced by white filmmakers, portraying a social reality that does not align with their lived experiences — be they religious or socio-economic. This is the transmission of the white gaze. Once again, prejudice and the marginalisation of black people are reinforced. The association of Exu with crime reflects narratives rooted in colonialism.

City of God transcends fiction. It embodies the anthropological theory of cinema, which views films as modern myths that gain new meanings with each viewing, shaping and reflecting the realities of specific social groups. As a myth retold through different mediums — be it in sequels, books, or news stories — it continues to produce and reproduce societal narratives. On the one hand, we see the enduring impact of the film’s mythos in the slang and the *Baile do Bené* parties, which preserve elements of funk music and celebrate black culture in Rio. On the other hand, religious intolerance, which escaped critique in the film, persists and manifests

itself continuously in the urban landscape of Brazil.

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The Football Aficionado. **Sharmin Mojtahedzadeh** and **Paliz Khoshdel**. 69 minutes, 2022.

“I am a tired warrior, after a disparate battle”, Zahra Khoshnawaz said as her final line in the film “The Football Aficionado” (2022). Directed and written by Sharmin Mojtahedzadeh and Paliz Khoshdel, the film explores how football serves as a platform for activism, particularly concerning women’s rights and the equitable access to sporting events for both men and women.

Central to the narrative is Zahra Khoshnawaz, an activist and leader of the Iranian movement advocating for women’s access to football stadiums. Throughout the film, she provides the audience with an intimate glimpse into her courageous struggle. Khoshnawaz employs a dual strategy to navigate the restrictive environment surrounding women’s access to football matches. Her initial and most successful approach involves disguising herself as a man, utilizing full-body coverings and fake moustaches and beards. This strategy often garnered her significant support from male spectators during matches. Conversely, her second tactic entailed positioning herself at the stadium gates, where she confronted security personnel and demanded entry for herself and other women. This latter approach proved less effective, while the former

ignited a substantial activist movement, inspiring numerous women to emulate Khoshnawaz's example. However, this activism came at a personal cost, resulting in her imprisonment for two months.

Despite the growing participation of women in the movement, they continued to confront the challenges posed by Iranian Islamic law, which persisted in prohibiting female attendance at football stadiums. In response to this ongoing injustice, FIFA intervened, threatening to exclude Iran from its list of host nations for international football matches. This action prompted a notable shift, as Iranian men began to refuse entry into stadiums if women were barred from attending alongside them. The aforementioned elements render this film a remarkable and essential viewing experience. It offers a compelling perspective on gender equality, illustrating how men can play a pivotal role in empowering women and advocating for their rights. Despite addressing the challenges posed by Western media propaganda, the filmmakers effectively portray a nuanced reality of Iran and its global standing.

While many traditional filmmakers may perpetuate the narrative that “the West serves as a flawless model of morality and equality for all”, Mojtahedzadeh and Khoshdel present a unique and refreshing lens — both literally and metaphorically — through which to examine a country like Iran, characterised by its distinct history, culture, and ongoing struggles that are not to be compared to those of other nations.

This film serves as an invaluable resource for both academic and practical courses focused on gender issues, human

rights in post-conflict contexts, and urban studies. It encourages audiences, both academic and non-academic, to adopt a broader perspective. The film exemplifies the complexities of the “grey” zone, compelling viewers to move beyond extreme dichotomies and to engage with the human aspects of the narrative. The audience is left with a profound sense of empathy for Zahra and the other women who bravely challenge both the law and the status quo, while simultaneously understanding the exhaustion she experiences by the film's conclusion.

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