



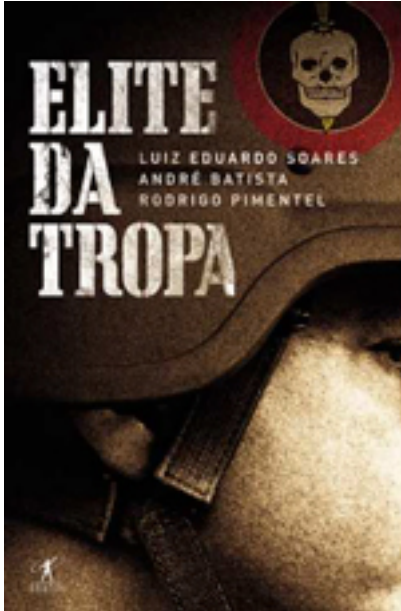
Still from *Elite Squad 2* courtesy of Variance Films

## **Contaminating Crime and Immunizing Police Gangs: The Reemergence of Sovereign State Violence in *Elite Squad***

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The semi-fictional police novels *Elite da Tropa* (2006) and *Elite da Tropa 2* (2010), which feature the division of the Rio de Janeiro Military Police squad BOPE (*Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais*), created an unprecedented stir in Brazilian cultural, mediatic and political arenas and changed the course of Brazilian police literature. Co-written by the policemen André Batista, Rodrigo Pimentel, and Claudio Ferraz (who joined for the sequel) together with the university professor and former National Secretary of Defense, Luiz Eduardo Soares, *Elite da Tropa* was rendered more widely accessible through its film versions, directed by José Padilha: *Tropa de Elite* (2007) and *Tropa de Elite 2* (2010). *Tropa de Elite* won the Golden Bear at the 2008 Berlin film festival; both the books and the film have been translated into English as *Elite Squad*. The extraordinary success of the first film partially eclipsed the more complex novel and unleashed a contagion-effect not unlike that prompted by Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which, Avital Ronell notes, "set off a form of hysterical mimicry as soon as it appeared."

(...) It was a text that programmed suicides” (2010, 19-20).



*Elite da Tropa* announces its agenda as the presentation of the police as a more sympathetic entity, and an attempt to convey the “truth” through fiction, if necessary. Comprising of various episodes of violence in Rio de Janeiro and BOPE’s actions to combat the drug trade, as well as its resistance to police corruption, the book is divided into two distinct parts. The first is narrated by a Captain of the BOPE squad, (whose voice accompanies the film, *Tropa de Elite*’s action in voiceover), and the second—presented as if it were a screenplay, with the dates and locations as headers of each scene—consists of further episodes of violence and corruption that occur two years after the episodes narrated in the first part.<sup>1</sup> *Elite da Tropa 2* is similarly fragmented into various parts, and introduces a further genre layer by introducing Twitter streams that are interspersed in the narrative. Both the original and the sequel, underscore the extent to which the drug trade and its drug lords are engaged in a relationship of mirroring and mimicry with the police and the State representatives who are supposedly at war with them.

The film adaptations of both books, which greatly simplify the narratives, fail to convey the different narrative voices and layering of genres. *Tropa de Elite 1* focuses on the character of Captain Nascimento, rendering his familial conflict—and the fact that he is about to become a father—a central aspect of the film narrative, which adds to his conflicted relationship to the BOPE squad. Moreover, the film adds a plot that is absent from the book: it makes the action revolve around the visit of the pope to Rio. BOPE’s main task becomes the security of the pope, who insists on sleeping in one of the Rio’s *favelas* during his stay. *Tropa de Elite 2* similarly leaves out various plot twists and narratives of the book version, and focuses on BOPE and on the figure of a mediator, who is called upon to quell

a prison uprising, where the confrontation between the prisoners, BOPE, and the mediator is complicated by a personal twist: the mediator has married Captain Nascimento's now ex-wife.

*Tropa de Elite 1* leaked online before it was released in movie theaters and spread the fame of the BOPE squad with the speed of contagious diseases—a contagion which, not coincidentally, is the way power—especially militia power—is said to take effect in *Elite da Tropa 2*. The sequel devotes a chapter to “the contagious effect of the film” (2010, 276), and to “the spectators’ excitement [that] contaminated the journalists, who started to review the film before its opening. The pirating was news, and the popular interest, even more so (...) BOPE[']s fame as the best urban combat squad in the world was being diffused with the speed of pirating” (2010, 277).<sup>2</sup>

That people dressed up as BOPE police officers during carnival in a country with a tradition of criticizing and fearing the police demonstrated the extent to which the work affectively engaged its viewers. On the other hand, such acts of mimicry should also alert us to a trend of support of police violence and abuse of human rights, which, if so easily triggered, may be indicative of more deeply ingrained anti-democratic sentiments that manifest themselves as support of police torture and violence. As Teresa Caldeira notes, Brazil is known for its high level of tolerance for police abuse. The United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment is “not only disregarded” in Brazil, Caldeira claims, but is, “largely opposed by the population and by right-wing politicians,” who argue that it “hinder[s] police work and ultimately serve[s] only to protect bandits” (157). This is precisely the sentiment transmitted by the *Elite* texts when they defend the action of BOPE, which is pumped up and portrayed with heroic colors as the protagonist in the combat against mounting crime associated with the drug trade. In fact, as I argue in this article, both the *Elite* novels and films construct the drug trade as “an enemy” responsible for the mounting urban violence precisely in order to justify the excessive use of State force, which, in the *Elite* texts take the form of BOPE incursions against the drug trade (as well as its assault against anyone who gets in its way).

The police actions depicted in *Elite* attest to an “autoimmune” crisis within the State, which is conveniently camouflaged by the act of shifting the spotlight onto the drug trade, ushered in as an enemy to the State. As Jacques Derrida argues in *Rogues* (2005), autoimmunity is inherent to sovereignty, which, in its continuous attempt to immunize itself, unleashes the autoimmune mechanism; this mechanism doesn't announce a break in the immunizing paradigm, but, rather, marks its very culmination. Now democracy, writes Derrida, “welcomes autoimmunity, in its acceptance of criticism and its hospitality to its enemies—that is, in its acceptance of those who don't necessarily agree with a democratic regime” (41). Indeed, in its embrace of autoimmunity, democracy offers hospitality to its enemies, “grant[s] freedom of expression and the right to vote to antidemocrats, something in

conformity with a certain hyperbolic essence, an essence more autoimmune than ever of *democracy itself*, if ‘itself’ there ever is” (41). I suggest that such an autoimmune crisis has its roots in an unprocessed historical legacy of the Brazilian military dictatorship to which these texts cryptically allude.

## The State’s Immunodeficiency Syndrome



STILL FROM *ELITE SQUAD 2* COURTESY OF VARIANCE FILMS

At a first glance, the disease that threatens the State is equated with the drug trade and its mounting activities in Rio de Janeiro, where the novels and films take place. However, a closer look at the texts indicates that the insistence on a menacing force that is external to the State and to its security apparatus is unsustainable. In fact, the idealization of the BOPE squadron of the Rio de Janeiro Military Police alerts us to a defense mechanism that invites further investigation. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, who understands idealization as a defense mechanism, would warn us that the defense provided by idealization is not so much against an external threat as against something internal. If the drug trade is identified as the threat to be targeted and eliminated, it soon becomes clear by *Elite 2*, whose film version is revealingly subtitled “The Enemy Now is Another One” (“*O Inimigo Agora é Outro*”), that the contamination at play in these novels and their film versions is another: continual references to the disease that corrodes the State’s security apparatus signal an autoimmune crisis within the State itself.

*Elite da Tropa 1* opens with a preface that claims that the police is necessary for democracy rather than its enemy, and that announces the book’s mission to valorize police work:

This book was written with the purpose of enriching the reflection of policemen and of public opinion. Its objective isn’t to depreciate security professionals, but to valorize them; it’s not to reach/affect [*atingir*] the institutions, but to promote their perfection. There is no democracy without the police. If we want to build a just and democratic society we can’t leave the policemen on the margins. (2006, 10-11)

Yet immediately following these remarks, the first episode in *Elite da Tropa* ushers us into a Military hospital, where a BOPE policemen lies dying. Having escaped drug trade bandits in a slum, Amâncio, who was not in uniform, was shot by a fellow police officer. “It was friendly fire, my brother, friendly fire,” he murmurs (2006, 19). After risking his life in the *favela*, Amâncio’s death is revealed to be the result of the excessive brutality of a police force that shoots before identifying its target. In other words, the threat originates from within, in autoimmune fashion.

If *Elite* seeks to persuade its reader to support police violence and abuse in the name of an “immunization” that will combat the disease that threatens the State, it is an “immunization” which occurs at the expense of human rights. In fact, it is BOPE’s disrespect of human rights that supposedly immunizes it from becoming contaminated by the corruption that corrodes other police departments, as well as the State, thereby enabling it to do its job well. As the narrator explains: “They received the same salary as their colleagues from the conventional police forces, but they were incorruptible. They were accused of excessive violence, but their honesty has been widely recognized” (2006, 7).<sup>3</sup>

However, despite the erection of BOPE as an uncontaminated and incorruptible protective shield, the fear that plagues the State persists precisely because the threat cannot be externally located, but is lodged within the very State and its security apparatus. At Amâncio’s funeral, we hear the internal monologue of a fellow BOPE officer, who reflects on his decision to cover up the shot from a friendly rifle as a question of honor:

At the funeral, during the gun salute, I felt like telling everyone to stop with the farce, with this buffoonery. But my thoughts turned to the widow, to the son, I reflected a bit and I realized that it was better to put a lid on the case. Better to have a hero for a father, killed by enemies, than the victim of a misunderstanding. I say misunderstanding to maintain a certain level of sobriety, in honor of the memory of a dear friend, a man of great worth. What I really wanted to do was to cry and throw up the truths about all this shit. (2006, 20)<sup>4</sup>

The preference for erecting a father figure who is a hero even if it entails an empty heroism, alerts us to the fact that *Elite* is effectively a narrative about paternity. These are texts that bear witness to military fathers who stand in, metonymically, for the patriarchal and military sovereign State left behind (albeit not entirely), and which still haunts the disjunctive Brazilian democracy—a question that deserves more consideration than I can offer in this present article. What I’d like to underscore here, however, is the way in which the above passage, which concludes the first chapter of the book, reveals the mechanisms of idealization at play in the text: if, as Melanie Klein notes, “Excessive idealization denotes that persecution is the main driving force” (192–193), the heroization of the BOPE squad, erected on a pedestal as a monument of denial, is a defense mechanism which acts as a lid—or a tombstone—to cover up the threat that originates from within the State itself.

## A Crisis in Reading: Scrambling the Immunity Codes

By shifting its focus from the drug trade to the militias formed by policemen, *Elite 2* seems to present a more sober perspective, pointing more explicitly toward the autoimmune mechanism inherent to the State itself. “The drug trade is over,” it announces: “[i]t’s in a direct decline.” The militias, which are our mafias, don’t stop growing. They’re a success. The tendency is either for the mafias to substitute the drug trade or to join them” (2010, 103).<sup>5</sup> These militias introduce us to a situation where it is no longer possible to know who is a trustworthy police officer and who isn’t, so that the autoimmune crisis is presented as a crisis in interpretation: it is no longer possible to decipher who is safe and who is a threat the same way that, when faced with an autoimmune disease, the body’s immune system can no longer read what is familiar and what it needs to guard itself against.

It is thus perhaps not surprising that the narrator of *Elite 2* introduces himself as an ex-literature student, hence a reader. (Although being a failed academic alerts us to the fact that his reading skills might not be that trustworthy.) Having given up his academic career to join the special police squad DRACO, he offers his solution to the crisis in State security when he signs his Twitter postings by adding a suffix to his police squad name: DRACOnian—a signature that functions as an explicit call for a return to an inflexible and forceful sovereignty.

I traverse the nights on Twitter and I take note of my memories in an archive titled “DRACOnian adventures in the fight against the mafia,” or ADCOM, for the intimate. I liked the title because it made me realize that the horrible word DRACO works best if not read as initials, but rather as the abbreviation of an adjective that perfectly characterizes the spirit of our work, or perhaps even of our time. (2010, 169)

Writing Twitter postings that are interspersed within the novel, and lamenting that they are followed by few readers, DRACOnian reveals the implicit desire of *Elite*, which is not only to convince its readers and viewers that we should let the BOPE policemen off the hook for their unconstitutional behavior, but that we should moreover identify with BOPE and *enjoy* the display of sovereign police violence unleashed by a war machine whose members declare, unabashedly, that they are, “horny to invade the *favelas*” (2006, 21).<sup>6</sup> Such an agenda makes it difficult to take José Padilha, or other intellectuals who support the *Elite* texts, at their word when they claim that *Elite* doesn’t promote police violence.<sup>7</sup>



STILL FROM *ELITE SQUAD 2* COURTESY OF VARIANCE FILMS

What should further put us on guard against the inflation of BOPE and its investment with a conservative, if not exterminatory, mission is the fact that its repression of criminality in the slums openly borrows from Nazi models and rhetoric. As the text reveals, BOPE trainees are formed and evaluated in “Concentration Camps” (nicknamed CC), and, when their operations in the *favelas* are too severe, they are reprimanded for too obviously recalling Nazi operations. Thus, after a particularly violent excursion that targeted slum dwellers, Santiago, one of the BOPE members transmits a warning to the Squadron captain: “The chief asked me to tell you that you made a mistake. You exaggerated. This operation looks too much like those Nazi operations against the Jews. The shit is going to hit the fan, captain” (2006, 127).<sup>8</sup>

However, having identified the projection mechanism at the basis of BOPE’s mode of operation, we can now also more easily identify the strategy behind BOPE’s training in “Concentration Camps”—as well as their rites of passage, which include torture—as nothing less than a procedure to enable projection. According to Freud, one of the modalities and purposes of projection is as an ego defense mechanism whereby repressed and displaced aggression is directed outwards. Melanie Klein differentiates between projection and projective identification, and psychoanalysts, as D. Feigenbaum, and thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno have recognized the role played by projection in political aggression, such as in anti-Semitism, which, I argue, isn’t very different from the aggression met out by BOPE.<sup>9</sup> In other words, BOPE members are treated as less than human to allow them to project inhumanity onto the slum dwellers and more easily eliminate them during their nocturnal operations, while refusing any sort of accountability. Projecting the identity of State enemies onto the drug trade, the writers of *Elite* can therefore exclaim in the preface, in an exculpatory manner:

BOPE wasn’t prepared to face the challenges of public security. It was conceived and trained to be a war machine. It wasn’t trained to deal with citizens and to control infractors, but to invade enemy territory. [...] Should we make those who were trained to kill accountable for the

insanity of war? (2006, 8)<sup>10</sup>

*Elite* thus seems to merely reinforce, or to render explicit, a national tendency of placing police brutality above human rights, and of doing so by appealing to a necessary immunization of the State from the threats of the contaminating criminality posed by the drug trade. Yet, the *Elite* texts also signal to the particular historical moment in which they are produced and situated, allowing us to read their emergence as symptomatically poised at the wake of a certain unsuccessful Brazilian democracy. As aforementioned, the drug trade comes in precisely to supplement a need for an “enemy” so as to allow the State to justify the need to boost its immunizing security apparatus. Moreover, *Elite* provides indications of an “unworked-through” relation to the history of the country’s failed dictatorships, and its disastrous relationship with sovereignty in a way that allows us to read these texts as symptoms that point to the very disjunction in Brazilian democracy announced by Teresa Caldeira.

## Military Fathers and Dictatorship Crypts



STILL FROM *ELITE SQUAD 2* COURTESY OF VARIANCE FILMS

BOPE is itself a child of the military dictatorship, which lasted from 1964 to 1985. The fact that it was conceived as a repressive supplement to the Military Police Force in 1978—at a time when, under president Ernesto Geisel, the dictatorship was ostensibly taking its first steps toward a transitional democratic government—suggests resistance to the democratic transition. BOPE’s history underscores a historical haunting and a mourning disorder that fuels the BOPE killing machine, so that it isn’t surprising that *Elite* begins with an appeal to mourn: “Psychoanalysis also demonstrates that mourning [*o luto*] is a necessary stage in the overcoming of suffering” (2006, 11).<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that in Portuguese, “*luto*” is both the term for mourning and the first person singular of the verb “to fight.” The text, which calls for an unspecified mourning seems to send out confused signals, or to scramble the codes, for what is unleashed in the pages that follow is a manic outburst of fighting.<sup>12</sup> The film version



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develops the question of un-mourning even further, with a scene of initiation that consists of forbidding the “enemy” to mourn: the BOPE officer must shoot the drug dealer in the face, as the bandit cries: “please not in the face, so as not to spoil the funeral.” Becoming a BOPE member is synonymous here with depriving the enemy of the possibility of mourning.

*Elite* further insists on the creation of a “rogue state,”—a state whose “illegitimacy,” as Derrida notes, supposedly legitimizes the act of waging war against it—so that BOPE can have a “legitimate enemy” upon which to expend its military energy. During an interaction between the captain of BOPE and his father, it becomes increasingly evident that the BOPE captain is on a mission to create an enemy ferocious enough to please his military father, who acts as superego (in other words, as the internalized law):

In the first months of my participation in BOPE, I’d come home proud, expecting the redemptive blessing, which never arrived. I’d relate to my father the threats we’d faced, the confrontations, the risks and the acts of bravery of the troop. Nothing impressed him. Perhaps, I thought, because it wasn’t enough. What if I tired harder, risked myself with more audacity, if I pushed the limits more and went further, *what if the enemies became fiercer*, what if the effects multiplied themselves, and the conquests were expanded, who knows?

I increased, week upon week, the violence of the incursions. (...) I ordered (...) more force, more force. I commanded the troop to tear in deeper and further into *the enemy’s territory*. More heads, we needed to take more heads home. I exhibited *the trophies of war*, recounting the evolution of our great march against the drug trade in Rio de Janeiro chapter by chapter. Even then it was pointless. Dom Oscar disdained ironically: ‘The police is no army.’ ‘What’s the point in killing penniless and shirtless slum dwellers? (2010, 241-42, emphasis mine)

For the military father, police work isn’t as respectable as military warfare, and poor criminals who live in the *favelas*—including the drug trade gangsters and their enclaves—aren’t legitimate enemies. The above passage indicates the way in which a “legitimate enemy” might be created through the rhetorical imposition of the category of “rogue” or “outlaw” state, which would justify the police’s actions as war, as well as its use of excessive force, while simultaneously pleasing the military father. Once again, we see the way the “enemy” is created through projection mechanisms that propel the Elite squads. This scene also suggests that the military father stands in for the undead military past, which remains installed in crypt-like form within the disjunctive and dysfunctional democratic regime and its institutions, to which *Elite* bears witness.<sup>13</sup>

We should recognize *Elite*’s popularity as a symptom of the issues it stages, which include the desire to legitimize State sovereignty and force through a focus on the drug trade, figured as a menace to the State’s immunity and authority. As such, *Elite* deserves critical scholarly attention, for it bears witness to significant

projection apparatuses at work, and allows us to trace the specter of military power still lingering within (and haunting) the disjunctive Brazilian democracy. Furthermore, *Elite* itself functions as an agent of contamination, disseminating the fear which allows for the projection of an enemy, or a “rogue state” that can be targeted in order to enable the activation of State immunizations. At a time when contamination seems to be the cause for panic and commotion—and films named *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011) hit the screen—it is important to understand its causes and compelling force, rather than to get swept into the frenzy of trying to identify a culprit in an endless series of immunizations, which merely feed the projection. Such projection mechanisms foreclose the gesture of hospitality towards an autoimmunity that is an essential component of democracy, to paraphrase Derrida, a democracy that invitingly opens its doors to what threatens it in a gesture of welcoming that stops the projective machine in its tracks.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the preface, the writers claim that the book is divided into two parts: a first in which BOPE is the = protagonist, and a second in which BOPE is relegated to a supporting role: “O BOPE é a principal referência deste livro—diretamente, na primeira parte, e indiretamente, na segunda” (10).

<sup>2</sup> Translation mine, as are all subsequent translations from the texts, which I will heretofore refer to as *Elite*. “A excitação do público contagiou os jornalistas, que passaram a pautar o filme antes da estréia. A pirataria era notícia, e o interesse popular, mais ainda. (...) [o] BOPE, cuja fama de melhor tropa de combate urbano do mundo se difundia com a velocidade da pirataria” (277).

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<sup>3</sup> “Eles recebiam o mesmo salário de seus colegas da policia convencional, mas eram incorruptíveis. Foram acusados de brutalidade desmedida, mas sua honestidade foi amplamente reconhecida” (7).

<sup>4</sup> “No enterro, na salva de tiros, tive vontade de mandar pararem aquela farsa, aquela palhaçada. Mas pensei na viúva, no filho, ponderei um pouco e achei que melhor mesmo seria colocar uma pedra no caso. Melhor ter um pai herói, morto pelos inimigos, do que vítima de um mal-entendido. Digo mal-entendido para manter um certo nível de sobriedade, em homenagem à memória de um amigo querido, um homem de valor. O que senti mesmo foi vontade de chorar e de vomitar as verdades sobre essa merda toda” (20).

<sup>5</sup> “O tráfico já era. Está em franco declínio. As milícias, as nossas máfias, não param de crescer. São um sucesso. A tendência é que as máfias substituam o tráfico ou se unam a ele” (103).

<sup>6</sup> The entire passage is as follows: “We’re horny to invade the *favelas*. I’m sorry for speaking this way, but I’m supposed to tell the truth, aren’t I?” (21). “Estamos com gana de invadir favela, um puta tesão. Desculpe falar assim, mas é para contar a verdade ou não é?” (21).

<sup>7</sup> These include the sociologist Michel Misse—director of the Center of Studies on Citizenship, Conflict and Urban Violence (*Núcleo de Estudos da Cidadania, Conflito e Violência Urbana*--NECVU) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

<sup>8</sup> “O comandante me mandou lhe dizer que o senhor errou a mão. O senhor exagerou. Essa operação ta parecida demais com aquelas ações nazistas contra os Judeus. Pode dar a maior merda, major” (127).

<sup>9</sup> See Horkheimer and Adorno’s “Elements of Anti-Semitism,” in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. See also: D. Feigenbaum’s article: “On Projection” (1936), where he writes: “Prejudices, too—antisemitism, for example—may be essentially a projection of repressed (displaced) aggressivity” (311).

<sup>10</sup> “O BOPE não foi preparado para enfrentar os desafios da segurança pública. Foi concebido e adestrado para ser máquina de guerra. Não foi treinado para lidar com cidadãos e controla infratores, mas para invadir territórios inimigos. (...) Vamos cobrar a loucura da guerra a quem foi treinado para matar?” (8).

<sup>11</sup> “A psicanálise também demonstra que o luto é uma etapa necessária à superação do sofrimento” (2006, 11).

<sup>12</sup> See Melanie Klein on mania as a mourning disorder in “Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States” (1940) in *The Writings of Melanie Klein; Vol. 1: Love, Guilt and Reparation*, London: Hogarth, 1975, pp.262-89. See also Laurence A. Rickels’ *Aberrations of Mourning; Writing on German Crypts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Here we might think of Abraham and Torok's account of crypt formations in *Le verbier de l'homme aux loups*, and the maintenance of a secret and a certain monument within the self and the psyche.

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