

# City of God / *Cidade de Deus*

(2002, Fernando Meirelles/  
Katia Lund, Brazil)

## Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives

### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

#### Rationale for study

- *City of God* is an example of Brazilian national cinema. It is also an international film that secured worldwide distribution and critical acclaim. Its settings in a Rio de Janeiro favela are 'authentically' Brazilian and the language is Portuguese, but there are enough genre characteristics to invite comparisons with Hollywood 'hood' films. The flamboyant and stylish spectacle of violence and poverty is narrated by a man/boy/observer of the action Buscapé/Rocket the photographer.

#### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Opening sequence 'The Flying Chicken' 00:00:44 - 00:05:50
- 'The Story of the Apartment' 00:35:00 - 00:38:11

## CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

### Cinematography

- Cinematography César Charlone. The film depicts the changing nature of the slum, the *favela* itself features as a major character that grows and changes. The open environment where there are spaces to play football gives way to the closed one with the cramped and narrow streets confined by apartment blocks, tin roofed shacks, and graffiti spattered walls. The characters become more and more hemmed in by the encroachment of these walls and barriers, their dimensions emphasised by overhead shots. The characters are imprisoned, the killings are speeded up.
- Camera in a fixed position for 'The Story of the Apartment', spectator watching from a place in the stalls of a theatre, not entering the Apartment or seeing things from the characters' points of view, a marked contrast to the highly mobile style of most of the film. A wide-angle lens and deep focus give an exaggerated perspective to the room where figures appear large in the foreground, small in the background. The story is told with a series of dissolves where people appear, disappear and reappear in different parts of the room. In the Apartment

the characters watch themselves. The walls change colour, the furniture moves, and objects change. The lighting gets darker and darker. The story appears like a series of tableaux.

- The atmosphere created by lighting, cinematography and camera movement can be illustrated by looking at the disco scene where Bené is killed. Shots of the dancing crowd from the dancers' eye line contrast with high angle shots from Rocket's point of view as he puts discs on the turn table, emphasising his position as an observer and not a participant.

### Mise-en-Scène

- 'The Story of the Tender Trio' retains some of the romantic, warm imagery of the earlier poetic representations of outlaws, social bandits, echoing the *cangaceiros*, the revolutionary outsiders of earlier Brazilian films but there is often a disjunction between the image we see on screen and what we hear Rocket say. The image of Bené and Dice with their arms round each other laughing will recur later in the film as a sepia coloured insert, the recollection of a lost more innocent time.
- A montage of shots of six images that turn the boy Dice into the man Zé. His rebirth is through a candlelit voodoo christening ceremony that evokes the dead. A priest in a wheelchair gives him a magic amulet that seals his pact with death and sanctifies his violent behaviour. God has forgotten him and he can gain power through Exu the devil "the light that shines forth". The glimpse of slum dwellers wearing gold jewellery, with their cars and girls bears some relationship to the understood paraphernalia of the gangster film.
- In contrast to this Rocket is seen in an atmosphere of normality and freedom - working in the newspaper office, riding around in the newspaper delivery van with the open aspect of the mountain in the distance.

### Editing

- Daniel Rezende editor "*What we tried to do with the editing was attempt to use 'effects' whenever we thought that this could bring something extra to the sensation or emotion that we were aiming to evoke. If the situation is tense, and there's no time to think, we speed it up and make it even tenser. If the character is going to be important later, then we freeze the face to commit it to memory. If both things happen at the same time then we split the screen,*

*so as not to lose anything. In the third part of the film, we especially welcomed anything out of the ordinary for the editing style. If a 'badly made' cut could increase levels of discomfort in the viewer then we incorporated it."*

- The 'restless' style, characteristic of the film, announces itself from the start. It begins not with the customary establishing shot but with flashes that illuminate a series of close ups - knife, hand, and stone - with a cut to black between each shot. Another photographic flash illuminates Rocket with his camera. He zooms out from behind a network of bars, which collapses down into his image. This is in fact a flash forward to the scene that will replay very near the end of the film, where we will see then that the reverse shot has denied us here, with Zé bribing the police after his gun battle with Ned and subsequent arrest. He has been introduced as a key player in the drama, but still only a fragment. The montage of conflicting shots and the collision of the fast paced editing now gives way to the spectacular circling shots which will morph Rocket from a young man to a boy, and the *favela* to its former days of low rise shacks and open spaces. The meeting between two of the principle characters initiates the story; the circular shot will provide the bridge between what they were and what they will become.
- The series of tight close ups zooms in and out on further fragments of street life - faces, a guitar, a tambourine, hands with tumblers of drinks, hands scraping and chopping carrots, chicken feet and chickens being lowered into the cooking pot. The first mid shot of the film is of a live chicken on the table, tethered by its leg. A cut provides the first long establishing shot of the film. The chicken jumps down off the table making a bid for freedom. Brazilians describe a situation that appears to have taken off and be going but will soon crash to the ground as a "flying chicken". This apparent freedom is illusionary - the chicken might try to fly but it can't get very far. A close up low-level shot from the chicken's point of view shows a plate of blood on the ground, a reminder of the chicken's fate.

### Sound

- The use of the first person narrator places us in a particular position in regard to what we might describe as the narrative "truth" of the film. The use of various cinematic devices that insert us into the text and privilege our understanding - point of view, shot-reverse-

shot, eye line match – are sometimes undercut by the voice over that contradicts that position.

- Diegetic music documents the era. Bené dancing to James Brown's *Sex Machine* emphasises his new found persona. *Kung Fu Fighting*, a song about controlled power played at Bené's farewell party, is an ironic counterpoint to the real violence that erupts there.
- The music then often acts in a similar way to Rocket's commentary, as a seductive counterpoint to the violent images. In many films the music underscores the mood of the drama played out on the screen. A tense, violent or emotional moment will be signalled and echoed by the sounds we hear. The music that accompanies the end credits of *City of God* is what Brazilians call *saudade*, (happy/sad) leaving the audience with a feeling of nostalgia. This can be said to work against the carnage and deprivation we have been witnessing and neutralise the impact of the film.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

#### Representations

- The complex 3-story structure involves 13 major characters whose actions motivate the story, and 11 secondary characters who act as foils to the action. The rival gangs and the Runts contain some nameless characters. *City of God* has no or very few personal details. The only families we see are those of Rocket and Ned and both play very minor roles. Characters are in many ways incomplete and two-dimensional. We know nothing, or next to nothing about their background.
- Mané Galinha / Knockout Ned is assured and handsome. He has lived outside the *favela* as he served for the military, as well as this his job as a bus fare collector also takes him into the outside world. He has no thought of antagonising others. The rape of his girlfriend and the murder of his brother and father draw him back in. He contrasts with Zé in his appearance, a fact commented on by Rocket. Whereas Ned is tall and handsome Zé is *pequeno* (small). Unlike Zé, who is given no motivation other than inherent evil, Ned's fall into violence is motivated by the need for revenge. Ned is the tragic hero, drawn into gang warfare and forced to use his physical prowess and skills as a marksman when he embarks on his quest

for retribution. Described by Rocket as a hero who takes on the bad guy, initially welcomed as some sort of saviour or champion by the inhabitants of the City of God, he is transformed into a kind of terrible avenging angel.

- This is a film that centres on an aggressive definition of masculinity. The female characters have passive and peripheral roles. The women in the film - Shorty's wife, Dona Zelia, Blacky's unseen girlfriend and Ned's girlfriend are there to be the recipients of male violence and are attacked, murdered and raped. Berenice and Angélica may reject this violence but they are sucked into it as observers and mourners. They "disappear" from the narrative and what happens to them afterwards is of no consequence. Angélica, threatened by Zé, leaves Bené's body and is not seen again. Berenice, who was given the gun, is seen fleetingly as a gangster's moll. Marina's function is to provide the bridge to Rocket's entry into manhood and the outside world.

#### Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Fernando Meirelles was in charge of the images; Kátia Lund helped in the character development and supervised the crew. Meirelles had no experience of the *favelas* and needed someone who knew their way around the area and could negotiate with the people who lived there. Kátia Lund is the daughter of middle class American parents who now feels that she's Brazilian. They started the organisation "*Nós do cinema*" / "We of the Cinema", a workshop project for boys from the *favelas*. They chose 200 who they then trained to be actors in the film.
- From 1960 to 1964 the first phase of *Cinema Novo* "an idea in your head and a camera in your hand" established modern cinema in Brazil. It transformed its image outside the country by reason of its critical success. The Brazil that it symbolised was one of exploitation, violence and deprivation.
- Buscapé / Rocket, the documenter and voice-over in *City of God*, is based on the photographer Wilson Rodrigues. He becomes Rodrigues at the end of the film and his association with photography enhances his "neutral" view of events. The poverty and violence are seen through the viewfinder of his camera, he documents the final shoot out. He is the one who informs us what is taking place both on

a local level (the City of God itself) and at a national level (the slums of Brazil). *City of God* mixes the notion of the reporter with his objective camera that is able to reveal the truth of a sordid and violent area with the film's own highly manipulated and constructed style.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

#### Social

- Brazil is part of the “developing world” and the largest country in Latin America, covering about half the continent. It is the fifth largest country in the world in terms of both land area and its population of about 163.7 million. An estimated 20 % of the population (32 million) live in absolute poverty. The disparity between those living below the poverty line (who receive 2% of the GDP) and the top 10% (who receive 50.6%) is greater than most other countries in the world.

#### Historical

- Brazil was colonised by Portugal in the 16th century resulting in almost genocidal subjection of the indigenous people. Struggled for independence, which was then gained in the 19th century. Economy partly founded on the transport of huge numbers of slaves from the west coast of Africa, a practise abolished in the second half of the 19th century. Their multi-ethnic communities are today made of the descendants of these slaves, together with immigrants from all over the world.

#### Political

- Economically dependent and dominated by the USA in the 20th century. In 2002, the

year the film was made, ex-metalworker Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva was elected as President on his fourth attempt. Head of PT, the Worker's Party, he led the first left-wing government to be in power for more than 40 years. He promised economic prosperity fairly distributed to all Brazilians.

#### Technological

- The use of digital editing allowed Daniel Rezende to experiment and try out new ideas. He claims that many of the interpretations of the characters were created at the editing stage. Different results could be obtained with the same footage “*all the scenes evolved from the actor's improvisations, and of course each one was unique.*”

#### Institutional

- *City of God* was financed by TV Globo, Brazil's biggest TV channel, and O2 Filmes, Brazil's biggest commercials company. The international distributor was Miramax, the company founded by Bob and Harvey Weinstein in 1979. Their involvement with the film was a continuation of successes they had with international and so-called independent films. Beginning as promoters of rock and roll concerts their reputation as “art film brats” was founded on their involvement with some of the most interesting and challenging films of the 1980s and early 1990s.