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*CIDADE DE DEUS* (CITY OF GOD, 2002),  
DIRECTED BY FERNANDO MEIRELLES

*Cast*

Buscapé (Rocket), as a boy, played by Alexandre Rodrigues  
 Buscapé (Rocket), as a man, played by Luis Otávio  
 Zé Pequeno (Li'l Zé), played by Leandro Fermino da Hora  
 Dadinho (Li'l Dice), played by Douglas Silva  
 Bené (Benny), as a child, played by Michel de Souza  
 Bené (Benny), as a man, played by Phellipe Haagensen  
 Cabeleira (Shaggy), played by Jonathan Haagensen  
 Mané Galinha (Goose), played by Seu Jorge  
 Barbatinho, as a boy, played by Emerson Gomes  
 Barbatinho, as a man, played by Edson Oliveira  
 Cabecão (Knockout Ned), played by Mauricio Marques  
 Sandro Cenoura (Carrot), played by Matheus Nachtergaele  
 Tio Sam (Uncle Sam), played by Charles Parventi  
 Thiago, played by Daniel Zettel  
 Angélica, played by Alice Braga

*Crew*

Producers: Andrea Barata Ribeiro, Maurico Andrade Ramos  
 Co-producers: Hank Levine, Daniel Filho, Marc Beauchamps, Vincent Maraval  
 Executive producers: Walter Salles, Donald K. Ranvaud  
 Line producers: Bel Berlinx, Elsa Tolomelli  
 Original Music: Antonio Pinto, Ed Côrtes  
 Art Director: Tulé Peake  
 Editor: Daniel Rezende  
 Cinematographer: Cesar Charlone  
 Scriptwriter: Braulo Mantovani  
 Co-director: Katia Lund  
 Director: Fernando Meirelles

*Awards*

Winner, Gran Coral, Best Fiction Film, New Latin American Film Festival,  
 Havana, 2002

Official Selection, International Film Festival, Cannes, 2002  
 Winner, BAFTA Award, Best Editing, 2003  
 Nominee, BAFTA, 2003, Best Film not in the English Language  
 Official nominee on behalf of Brazil, Oscar, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Hollywood

### Plot

The establishing shots of the film place us within the slums of Cidade de Deus (City of God) in Rio de Janeiro. A chicken is being prepared for a street barbecue, and the other chicken escapes. The gang members go in pursuit of the chicken, until they meet Rocket; Li'l Zé (formerly Li'l Dice), the gang leader, asks him to catch the chicken. Rocket, the photographer, is then caught between the gang and the police. The camera swivels back to Rocket's childhood and tells his story, starting with his childhood in the 'favela' City of God. His older brother, Goose, and his two friends, Chipper and Shaggy, rob a truck. Li'l Dice, a young boy, tells them to rob a brothel, which they do, while Li'l Dice keeps watch. While Chipper, Goose and Shaggy simply steal, Li'l Dice (as we find out later) goes in and shoots all the customers. The police hunt them down, but Shaggy hides with Berenice, his girlfriend, and Goose starts selling fish. Goose has an affair with Shorty's wife, and, when Shorty catches them *in flagrante delicto*, he takes a nasty revenge, by burying his wife alive. **The Seventies.** Rocket falls in love with Angélica, and buys himself a camera. **The Story of the Apartment.** The Apartment is the drugs den of City of God, and passes through various hands until it is taken over by Li'l Zé. Li'l Zé attends a shamanistic ceremony in which he changes his name, decides to kill off all the competition, and then becomes the local drug baron. We find out that, as a young boy, he had killed Goose. Li'l Zé's right hand man is Benny, who becomes the cool guy. Competition grows between Li'l Zé and Carrot who controls the other half of City of God. Li'l Zé wounds one of the kids who are creating a disturbance, and kills another. **A Sucker's Life.** Rocket gets a job in a supermarket, but is thrown out. **Flirting with Crime.** Rocket and his friend try to become hoods but they find it too hard. A man kills his girlfriend, and the body is found. **Benny's Farewell.** Li'l Zé tries to get a girl at a disco, but is too ugly. He humiliates the girl's boyfriend by forcing him – at gunpoint – to strip. In the ensuing chaos, Benny is shot and killed. Li'l Zé rapes Knockout Ned's girlfriend, kills his brother and uncle, and then shoots his house to pieces. **The Story of Knockout Ned.** The slum becomes more and more violent. Rocket wants to become a photographer, and his hero is Rogerio Reis. Knockout Ned decides to link up with Carrot in order to get his revenge on Li'l Zé. Gang warfare between Li'l Zé and Carrot's gangs. Rocket takes a picture of Li'l Zé's gang, and it gets on the front page. Marina, a journalist at the paper, invites Rocket round for a meal and they have sex. Li'l Zé makes his fatal mistake by not paying up for the guns he is getting from a gunrunner, little knowing that he has double-crossed the police who are involved in racketeering. The police decide to get him. We return to the

chicken sequence. Follow through until we find Rocket between the police and Li'l Zé's gang. Carrot's gang arrives, and battle commences. The police clean up afterwards, and take off Carrot and Li'l Zé. In a secluded building, the police frisk Li'l Zé, and seize his money. Li'l Zé is subsequently shot to death by a gang of kids who want his patch. Rocket is taking pictures all the time, and exposes police corruption. Sequence of the gang of new kids on the block discussing how they will become hoods. Rocket is now a photographer, and has become Wilson Rodrigues.

### Analytical Overview

Seen by more than 2,000,000 Brazilians in the first two months after release (Xavier, p. 28). *Cidade de Deus* soon afterwards became an international box-office hit, justifying its high (by Brazilian standards) budget of \$3,500,000 (Nagib), and subsequently scooping various prizes, at Havana (Tiemey, p. 334), and BAFTA ('Awards'). The important point to remember here, though, is that the multi-million-dollar budget was based on the funding for the project (the year-long training of actors, the extended shoot) rather than, as in Hollywood, on attaching a high-impact movie-star name to the film who can launch it internationally. (Typically a substantial percentage of a \$3,000,000–5,000,000 Hollywood film will be spent on attaching an internationally-known face to a film; Simens.) *Cidade de Deus* had no professional actors in the cast (for more information see below). The film is based on the novel of the same name by Paulo Lins (*Cidade de Deus: Romance*), which came out in 1997, and which was re-issued in a reduced edition in 2002. The novel is based on a true story of the life of a number of gang members living in the City of God, a violent shanty town on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. More than a novel, Paulo Lins's work can be described as a 'testimonio', that is, a fictionalised version of a real-life story based on real-life characters: perhaps even more intriguing, as its author has confessed in an interview, *Cidade de Deus: Romance* is deeply poetic ('I thought that if I didn't put a poetic charge into the work nobody would be able to read so much horror'; Arias, p. 2). Lins's work springs from a long tradition of *favela* literature dating back to Carolina Maria de Jesus's *Quarto de despejo* (1940) (Williams). Testimonial literature of this kind typically seeks to offer a vision of the subaltern sections of society to a literate audience, and this sense of the work providing an authentic vision of life on the other side of the tracks is carried successfully over into the film. The birth of the novel and the film within the Latin American tradition of 'testimonio' is confirmed throughout by the use of the voice-over, which is used extensively in the film in order to fill in the gaps between the spectacular action shots which make up the major part of the film. The life which is portrayed within the film, as in the novel, is a dog-eat-dog existence, one in which, as Rocket says in the establishing sequence, 'Fight and you'll never survive. Run and you'll never escape.'

It is important to underline, however, that the sense of reality within the film is an effect rather than an intrinsic characteristic of the subject matter. Not for

nothing did *City of God* win a BAFTA Award for Best Editing in 2003 ('Awards'). Though the film used non-professional actors, they were trained in the art of acting over an extended period of time. The street scenes were not 'real' in the sense of being filmed 'live', but were instead vast elaborate stage sets. A small detail perhaps but, for one of night scenes, a black body was painted red, and the image of the body further touched up during post-production (Nagib). Even the use of voice-over – normally seen as part of the film director's repertoire of naturalist techniques – has a staged feel about it in the film. Meirelles had clearly decided to use the voice-over in order to avoid using up precious film time 'explaining' the life-history of the characters or the set of events leading up to the present. The use of the voice-over gives Meirelles more time to experiment with the visual image of his film. As Paul Julian Smith points out, we are 'treated to slow and fast motion, expressionist coloured filters, even *Matrix*-style circling around combatants. The sequences set in the 1970s break into split screen' (Smith, p. 39; for more on the use of split screen, which was probably inspired by Brian De Palma's works, see Lehman and Luhr, p. 55).

### *The Image of the Subaltern*

It would be difficult to think of a story which had less hallmarks of what has traditionally come to be known as the subaltern class, a violent, voiceless, illiterate group of murderers living in a shanty town near Rio de Janeiro. This illiteracy is emphasised throughout the film by the vigorous repetition of the colloquial vocative form 'rapa' (boy) rather than 'rapaz'; the oxytone suggests the abruptness of a life cut short, while the repetition of the sounds 'ra' and 'pa' simultaneously echoes the sound of machine gun fire, and resounds with the violent ethos of U.S. 'rap' music (Nagib). Indeed the music used throughout the film is a transculturated amalgam of U.S. and Brazilian music (samba, 70s disco music, and rap are all components of the final mix), stressing a dialogical continuity between local and international musical discourses (Treece). Most of the actors who appear in the film are non-professional; 'the children and teenagers were selected largely from Rio's *favelas* (some come from the theatre group Nós do morro / We from the hillside) and were trained by Fátima Toledo and Katia Lund for a year' (Xavier, p. 29). Li'l Zé epitomises the subaltern in that his conduct transgresses all norms of social propriety. What this film does address is the way in which the lives of the subaltern classes are manipulated by the mediatic, governmental, and law-enforcing powers within society. An underlying current within *Cidade de Deus* is the hypocritical ways in which the authorities react. The police, as we soon find out, are quite happy to allow the killing in the City of God to carry on as long as it does not escalate out of control, and affect their 'clients', the middle classes. It is – ironically enough – only as a result of Li'l Zé's refusal to pay for his guns that the police decide to act, because they have been providing him with the guns in the first place.

The most complex relationship between the media and a site of authority occurs when the gangs intersect with the media. Rocket first becomes aware of

the media by the number of pictures which are taken of Shaggy's body when he is shot to death by the police. He subsequently becomes the 'official' photographer of his group of friends during the seventies when they live out their teenage dreams on the beach, but this is not enough for him to get the girl he wants (Angélica). His first attempts at employment – i.e. in the supermarket, and subsequently as a trigger-shy gangster – do not come to anything, and it is only when he takes a photograph of Li'l Zé's gang that he achieves a degree of fame. His photograph is put on the front page of the newspapers and, in a cute allusion to Hollywoodesque rhetoric, he gets the girl (Marina the journalist – a white, middle-class woman who would normally be way out of his league – invites him round to dinner, and sleeps with him). The film is very clear on this point: as a result of his ability to take photographs – that is, produce images which are appetising to the middle-class press – Rocket escapes his roots in the City of God. It is a world, as he says at the beginning of the film, which, if you fight, you will never survive, and which, if you run from it, 'you'll never escape', but Rocket has, in effect, proved that you can escape, since he becomes – as the closing sequence of the film makes clear – a professional photographer: no longer Rocket, he is 'Nelson Rodrigues, fotógrafo'. As Ismail Xavier points out, Rocket 'refuses to engage in the gang wars, substituting a camera for a gun, culture for violence' (Xavier, p. 28).

### *Ironic Religious Symbolism*

There are a number of elements in the film which suggest a pattern of meaning is being built up which portrays religious symbolism ironically. The most obvious, of course, is the name, 'Cidade de Deus', an ironic inverted image of St Augustine's description of The City of God, a world in which peace, love and harmony reign. In this very earthly City of God, war, hatred and chaos are the order of the day. The shamanistic ceremony which Li'l Dice takes part in is also important in this regard. It is essentially his baptism into a new religion of hate. In an ironic reversal of the Christian ceremony of baptism, he is provided with a new name – Li'l Zé – and immediately begins his devilish work, destroying in one day all of his rivals by murdering them, and taking over the apartment which operates as a drugs den. During the ceremony in which the red lights are designed to capture the stereotypical notion of the 'fires of hell', Li'l Zé receives an amulet, which will protect him as long, the shaman tells him, that he doesn't fornicate while wearing it. It is because he eventually ignores this warning – specifically when he rapes Knockout Ned's girlfriend (we do not know if he is wearing the amulet at the time, but internal logic suggests he is) – that his days are numbered. Knockout Ned, after all, eventually takes his revenge by joining forces with Carrot. It is not by chance that the first time we see Li'l Zé's image of seeming invincibility changed – he limps off with Tule – as a result of Knockout Ned's attack on the gang. It is at this point that his power retreats from him, and the audience senses that his days are numbered. Pointing in a similar direction, it is at the point that the two gangs decide to fight to the death that they

begin to recite the Lord's Prayer. Their subsequent action is in contradiction of the prayer they have been reciting, suggesting once more that the film is building up a set of ironic resonances with the Bible.

### *The Voice-Over*

The function of the voice-over in the film is similar to that in a number of other recent Latin American films (*Y tu mamá también*), and it could almost be signalled as a characteristic of modern Latin American cinema, a feature which differentiates it from standard Hollywood film which tends to minimise the voice-over, seeing it as the director's cop-out (Simens). When over-used, of course, it can become a safety-net for the bad director, but in *Cidade de Deus* it provides an excellent means of shifting between stories. The opening sequence of the film, indeed, offers a good example of what becomes a standard technique – the flashback initiated by the voice-over, and the subtitle, indicating – in the manner of a novel – what will be coming next. *Cidade de Deus*, because it does not attempt to mask what it's doing, comes over as more authentic as a result. The voice-over also allows the film director to introduce a note of suspenseful anticipation into the narrative. One of the best examples of this occurs when Rocket and his friend consider stealing from the bus, and get a bit of friendly advice instead from Knockout Ned. As the voice-over suggests: 'Ned did not have to protect himself that day, but one day he would.' The prolepsis introduced here allows for a neat tying into the future event, which loses none of its dynamism as a result, and is eagerly anticipated by the viewer. It is, though, a technique more readily associated with the novel form rather than the film: but Meirelles is not afraid to use it, and indeed creates a filmic style which uses the language of film and that of the 'testimonio' osmotically.

### *Flashback*

The flashback is, of course, a supremely filmic technique which has little place in the novel, and Meirelles uses it successfully in this film, above all because he explores the range of temporal vision it offers to an extraordinary degree. The viewer, for example, is often unaware of at which juncture in the film a new flashback sequence will begin, and this gives an almost picaresque feel to the movie, as if we as viewers are following the story as it unravels before our eyes. The best example of this occurs in the brilliant opening sequence of the film. We see – in a sequence of abrupt close-ups cross-cut delicately between the hen being prepared for the meal and the hen who nervously surveys the events, realising what the future holds – the street barbecue being organised by Li'l Zé, and then follow the hen as it concocts its great escape along the back streets of the City of God. As Paul Julian Smith points out: 'The quick cutting of the first scene (a blade sharpened, a drum beaten, a chicken careering through the slums) announces bravura filmmaking' (Smith, p. 39). Finally landing in front of a young boy, the chicken is about to be captured, when suddenly the police arrive,

and we switch – in a brilliant revolving camera take – from the sight of the police to the sight of Li'l Zé's gang, at which point the camera swivels once more and begins to reconstruct the past from Rocket's vantage point. During the flashback sequence initiated from that juncture, we will meet the young boy – Li'l Dice – whom we saw in the opening sequence, and thereby reconstruct the past as it leads back to the point at which the film began. This angular relationship between people and events is – as the film develops – translated into a frontal relationship, and this is particularly evident in the context of the (fraught) relationship between Rocket and Li'l Zé. The other flashbacks operate in a similar way. It is as a result of Li'l Zé meeting Knockout Ned and his girlfriend by chance in a street of the City of God that their fateful meeting occurs, leading to Li'l Zé's decision to rape the girl, and to Knockout Ned's decision to fight back. After they have met, then the film begins once more its flashback sequence. *Cidade de Deus* thereby manages to balance a sense of the fortuitousness of everyday events with a sense of editorial control which is aesthetically pleasing. It is redolent in some ways of the mastery of Gabriel García Márquez in such novels as *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (Chronicle of a Death Foretold; see Hart, pp. 39–43).

One other point ought to be made about the flashbacks and this concerns the point at which they re-connect with the narrative proper which, as it were, had halted in order for the past sequence to be 'remembered' by the film's consciousness. Typically the event returns to the present of the film, and then continues its onward thrust, thereby in effect merging the two times (the past re-connects with the present, and their respective times become as one). Meirelles tweaks this technique slightly by having the viewer perceive the same event from a different camera angle. When Blackie's apartment is invaded by Li'l Zé, for example, we hear the banging coming from outside; our mindscreen therefore is internal to the apartment. After the flashback has taken place, however – as initiated by the subtitle, 'The Story of the Apartment' – and brings us back to the present, as viewers we now perceive the event from behind Li'l Zé's gang, and this continues during the following sequence, such that now we 'become' Li'l Zé as he enters the apartment. Though not doing so in the same sequence, Meirelles is overturning the 180° degree rule, whereby the viewer is not allowed to see 'behind' the camera (that is, the fourth wall of the film studio where the camera is). While Meirelles is, of course, not the first to experiment with this rule (we find an example of this trick in the opening scenes of Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver*; see Buckland, p. 39), it could be argued, nevertheless, that the Brazilian director appears to take delight in breaking the 180° rule since he often wants the viewer to 'see' behind the camera, in a way which is reminiscent of the 'revealed 360-degree space' in the work of the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu (Lehman and Luhr, p. 81).

One other element of the flashback as used by Meirelles ought to be mentioned and this is that, far from allowing for a seamless projection of events, its use often catches the viewer by surprise. Such is the case, for example, with the sequence in which Goose, Rocket's older brother, happens to stumble across Li'l

Dice. He rough-handles Li'l Dice and then walks off-screen. But a later flashback shows us what happened next – Li'l Dice shot him to death. Rather than showing us everything the flashback is revealed to be a very human registering device. As human beings we can only remember what we saw. A similar technique is used when portraying what happened at the hold-up of the brothel. We see the dead bodies after the gang has left, and our initial reaction will be to think that we missed something. Only later do we realise – in a subsequent, fuller flashback – that Li'l Dice went in afterwards and started shooting everyone. Flashbacks can be deceptive.

### Works Cited

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### GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

An excellent basic introduction to some of the seminal concepts in film studies – film aesthetics, structure, the director as auteur, the basic genres – is found in Warren Buckland, *Film Studies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998). Peter Lehman and William Luhr, *Thinking about Movies: Watching, Questioning, Enjoying* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) is a very accessible discussion of the basic concepts used to analyse film. A more theoretical discussion of the mechanics of film is provided by Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Mairie, Marc Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, translated and revised by Richard Neupert (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); has superb chapters on montage, narration, and the spectator, *inter alia*. A very helpful anthology of all the essential essays on film theory is provided by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (Oxford: OUP, 1999). Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), is not only a lucid overview of the evolution of film studies, it also introduces and analyses modern approaches to film such as 'Third Cinema' and 'Film and the Postcolonial', which are very helpful in an analysis of Latin American film. An accessible and broad-ranging glossary of film terms is provided by Susan Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996); some of the entries are like mini essays. A more technical description of the filming process is found in Daniel Arijon, *Grammar of the Film Language* (Beverly Hills, CA: Silman-James Press, 1976); excellent on shot sequence and camera angle. Lucy Fischer, 'Film Editing', in *A Companion to Film Theory*, eds Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 64–83, helpfully splits up the discussion of editing under various headings, including 'Editing and Realism', 'Editing and Authorship', *inter alia*.

John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1990) is the single most important study of Latin American cinema, and is indispensable reading. Re-issued in 2000, it has lost none of its relevance. An accurate overview which analyses the films country by country is found in Guy Hennebelle and Alfonso Gumucio-Dagrón, *Les Cinémas de l'Amérique latine* (Paris: Pierre L'Herminier, 1981); an advantage of this book is it covers the cinema of less-studied countries such as Honduras and Guatemala. Deborah Shaw, *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America: 10 Key Films* (London: Continuum, 2003) is essential reading. *South American Cinema: A Critical Filmography 1915–1994*, eds Timothy Barnard and Peter Rist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), is a wonderfully informative piece of research; has the advantage of having separate information on each film chosen. Basic background information