

# City of God

(2002, Fernando Meirelles/Katie Lund, Brazil)

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives

## Themes

Brazil Conflict Corruption  
Crime Drugs Favelas Poverty  
Power Violence

### The Contexts of the Film

**Social:** Brazil is the largest country in both South America and Latin America it has a population of over 208 million people. The number of people living in poverty is almost 55 million this is equivalent to 26.5% of Brazil's total population. The top 10% of the population receive 50.6% of the countries GDP, whereas those below the poverty line share only 2%.

**Institutional:** City of God is based on a book by Paulo Lins who grew up in the City of God. The film is described as being made by Brazilians for a Brazilian audience and deals with a Brazilian reality.

City of God was funded by *TV Globo* which is Brazil's largest TV channel and *O2 Filmes* Brazil's biggest commercials company.

The film was directed by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund. Fernando was in charge of images, Kátia helped in the character development.

Miramax distributed the film internationally. Miramax was founded by Bob and Harvey Weinstein in 1979. They were involved with some of the most interesting and challenging films of the 1980s and early 1990s.

**Technological:** The editing is responsible for the development and interpretations of the characters. Often the spectator is granted different information through repeating the same scene from another perspective.

### Specialist Study Area

#### Aesthetics:

Meirelles and Lund created the organisation 'Nós do cinema' 'We of the Cinema'. This is a workshop project for boys from the favelas. They auditioned 2000 from this workshop and chose 200 who they trained to be actors in the film. This was necessary as Meirelles has no experience of the favelas, therefore he needed someone who could negotiate with the people who lived there.

In the late 1950s, early 1960s *Cinema Novo* emerged in Brazil. This was heavily influenced by Italian Neo Realism; the idea was to reflect the truth at the time about the country's underdevelopment. Glauber Rocha, a key figure in the movement described "Cinema Novo is ... an evolving complex of films that will ultimately make the public aware of its own misery."

#### Representations

The film follows a complex three-story structure. It involves 13 major characters whose actions motivate the story. There are at least 17 secondary characters who act as foils to the action.

Characters are two-dimensional. We know nothing about their background.

The film represents masculinity as dominant and aggressive. The women in the film are either passive victims or simply narrative functions. Angelica's only purpose is as a love interest of Rocket, Thiago and finally Bené who disappears one Bené dies. Marina's role is to take Rocket's virginity and to set up a life for him outside the favelas. Each woman is only there to drive forward the male narrative.

### Characters and Motivation

**Rocket:** The connotation of the name Rocket is as a fiery and explosive character; Rocket is in fact extremely passive and is an observer to action. He functions as a first-person narrator. He is a principle character, however, for much of the film outside the action as an observer, a reporter. He reconstructs the events we see in a series of flashbacks. He is remembering things that have taken place; many of the events are not things he has seen. Rocket is one of the few characters ever seen outside the City of God. Outside the limitations of the slums Rocket can function as a man and a human being. He loses his virginity outside the slums and also gets his first job. The irony being that in order for him to be a successful photographer he has to go into the favelas to take the pictures, showing he is never truly free. Rocket is based upon the photographer Wilson Rodrigues.

**Li'l Dice/Li'l Zé:** Little Zé is a mysterious character, we know nothing of his background, he appears to be evil for the sake of being evil. In the Brothel he doesn't kill the people for money, he kills them for the sake of killing. He represents the hopelessness to Rocket's hope. He has to succeed in the favela, the only place he can. Little Zé is driven by jealousy and he ends up punishing those who appear to have more than him or have things he can't have. He humiliates Knockout Ned because he is handsome, he frames the Tender Trio because they do not let him join in the robbery and he ends up getting his best friend killed as he is fighting him over his friendship with Rocket.

**Bené:** Bené represents the 'good' gangster, although he witnesses murder and is central to a violent gang, he is redeemed through his capability to love. Bené wants to escape the ghetto, he does this through Thiago, he copies his hair, trainers and fashion in an attempt to look like white and middle class. Bené's vision of escaping echoes his brother Shaggy's, they both want to live in the country with their girlfriends 'grow pot and get high'. Like his brother he cannot escape, both men's attempt ends up in a violent death because of Li'l Zé.

**Knockout Ned:** He is the opposite to Li'l Zé, he is handsome, kind and popular with women. He does not enjoy violence and is only drawn into it out of revenge. He is the tragic hero who has a military background and is only drawn into the gangster lifestyle after the rape of his girlfriend and murder of brother and father.

### Opening Scene

**Cinematography:** The film opens with close ups of a knife being sharpened. A series of close ups of favela life is used to establish the scene. There are people playing instruments, dancing and street food being prepared. The extreme close ups of the chicken being plucked, sliced and boiled doesn't allow the spectator to look away, making these normal activities look brutal and aggressive. A mid shot is used to show the chicken tethered to the table before it makes its bid for freedom. As the chicken escapes Little Zé is shown laughing and shouting in a close up, his face filling the screen shows his dominance and how frightening he can be. As the chase commences through the favelas high angle shots are used to emphasise the cramped conditions. The chicken is tracked and remains in full view of the shot, the pursuers are never fully shown, this allows the spectator to align with the plight of the chicken. Hand held cameras create authenticity and enable to spectator to be part of the action. As Rocket is introduced into the scene he is framed in a Mid shot, the camera appears steady compared to the chase scene, this could represent his passive role as the narrator amongst the chaos. As Rocket gets stuck in the middle of Little Zé's gang and the police the camera arcs in a circular pan, around him. This then turns into a whip pan as Rocket and the spectator are transported back to his childhood.

**Editing:** The close up of the knife is cut against black to exaggerate it flashing up on the screen. Fast cuts are used to show the favelas and back to the knife, linking City of God with violence. Slow motion effect is used when Rocket first sees Little Zé, this shows his realisation at the danger he faces. As the police arrive the scene is sped up to create the feeling of anxiety.

**Sound:** The first diegetic sound we hear is the slashing of a knife being sharpened. This sets the tone of violence throughout the whole film. The market place sounds include the Brazilian music of drums and people dancing, this creates an energetic and vibrant feel which is deceiving for the events that are about to unfold. As the chicken escaped there are sounds of the gang chasing and shouting. Little Zé's violent nature and need for control is established as he shouts, "Get that chicken" and "Get out of my way Motherf\*\*\*\*\*". Gun shots combined with laughter connote that violence is a game and also emphasises their youth. Rocket's voiceover tells us "A picture could change my life but if you run away they get you, if you stay they get you too" this embodies the film's message of 'You are damned if you do and damned if you don't'.

### The Brothel

The filter used for the Tender Trio creates a golden and warm tone. This creates a nostalgic feel to their story. The image created of them is a poetic idea of them as outlaws and bandits, they are robbing from the rich to give to the poor. This is backed up when Shaggy says “We go, in grab the money and get out. No killing, got that?”

**Cinematography:** The group are framed in a wide shot, as they enter the brothel the camera pans back to Li'l Dice, he is holding the gun ready to shoot. This foreshadows the type of man he is going to become, eager for violence. As the Trio enter deep focus shots are used to frame a hostage in close up with the gang in the background, this aligns us with the victim. As they rob the brothel shallow focus shots are used to focus on the Trip rather than the people engaging in sexual activities. Obscure camera angles and mirrors are used, this creates a disorientating effect and highlights the depravity of the people using the brothel rather than the Tender Trio; who are the ones committing the crime. As the Trio leave the camera pans through the brothel, using a wipe transition the spectator tours through each of the rooms and witnesses the murder of the people in the brothel. This gets us questioning how noble the Tender Trio really were, as we presume they are responsible for the carnage.

**Sound:** As the Trio enter there is just the diegetic sound of shouting. One of the women tells them “You should be studying or working, you don't even look like hoodlums.” This confirms for us that the Tender Trio aren't the typical criminals. As the robbing rampage starts non diegetic happy traditional music accompanies them as they rob, this is contrapuntal sound as is punctuated by the screams and shouts of the victims. Clipper asks one of the men “Are you from the church Brother?” and then gives him back the cross he was about to steal, this foreshadows Clipper's future of finding religion. The diegetic sound of gunfire and glass smashing puts an end to the robbery. As the camera pans through the brothel at the end there is no sound, this is to emphasise the murders that have taken place, creating confusion and shock for the spectator.

### The Story of the Apartment

**Cinematography:** A static camera is used throughout this scene and the apartment is framed in a wide shot. It is almost presented to the spectator as a theatrical piece, it is far removed from the style of shooting that the rest of the film has. The scene is shot in deep focus making the characters in the foreground appear larger, as the characters in the foreground are often the owners of the apartment it presents them as having the most control, until the next person takes it from them. Rule of thirds is used effectively in this scene, with most of the action taking place in the right-hand side of the screen; this is where the current owner of the apartment is positioned. The camera finally moves to stand alongside Blacky and Rocket when Li's Dice enters, aligning us with our narrator. The camera freezes on a close-up of Li'l Dice's face when he announces that he is now Li'l Zé; highlighting the significance of his transition.

**Editing:** Cross fades are used to show the passing of time for each person's story. This creates a haunting effect as the memories of each character fades into each other.

**Mise en Scene:** Lighting and filters are used to show the passing of time in the apartment. Donna Zélla's story is highlighted with a golden tone signifying it is probably around the time period of the Tender Trio. When she owns the apartment, although it is still run down, it has a feminine touch with a curtain and table cloth decorating it, as she is pushed out by Big Boy she literally drags the table cloth with her showing how she is completely being removed. Big Boy's apartment has stark lighting and all of the feminine touches have been removed. In Carrot's story the lighting becomes low key and by the time Blacky takes over the apartment it is shrouded in shadows. The increasing darkness connotes the levels of corruption, crime and deception that has happened inside the apartment and how most of the residents have taken ownership through force.

### Bené's farewell

**Mise en Scene:** Bené's personality is reflected in his costume choice. He is wearing a brightly coloured Hawaiian shirt connoting his positive outlook on life. In contrast Li'l Zé is wearing dark colours which creates the binary opposite to Bené. He is the antagonist in the scene, and this is clearly displayed by his outfit, his necklace is prominent reminding us of his transition. Li'l Zé is materialistic, he wants the best things and gets jealous of what others have. By stripping Knockout Ned of his clothes Li'l Zé is asserting his power taking away his material items as to Li'l Zé this is the ultimate revenge. The camera that Bené gives Rocket is also the catalyst that sparks Li'l Zé's jealousy. As Bené dies the crowd moves away and the lighting darkens, the party is over.

**Cinematography:** A low angle shot is used to show Rocket in his DJ booth; he is our omniscient narrator throughout the film therefore his position overlooking the action is fitting. Bené is pictured in wide shots surrounded by people, this reinforces his popularity and likability. Li'l Zé is in contrast to this, we view him mainly in close ups which captures his aggression and anger, firstly at knockout Ned and then at Bené and Rocket. As Li'l Zé pushes Rocket to the floor he is pictured in the iconic low angle shot that he was framed in as he rose to power. A strobe lighting effect is used as Li'l Zé and Bené fight over the camera, this disorients the spectator. The camera cuts to a close up of Blacky and then a wide shot of Bené and Li'l Zé, this heightens the spectator's anxiety as they realise something bad is going to happen. A high wide shot is used as Li'l Zé kneels over his dying friend connoting his isolation as he loses his only real ally.

**Sound:** The soundtrack for the scene is diegetic disco music. The music has Western influence which reflects the person that Bené is trying to become, he is desperately trying to rid himself of his favela hoodlum roots. Bené tells Li'l Zé “I love you man, but I have had enough”. As Bené and Li'l Zé face off against each other this moment is paralleled with the song Kung Fu Fighting. As the gun shot sounds the music fades away and the true devastation of what has happened becomes apparent. The sound of crying and Li'l Zé, shouting takes over the scene.

#### Assessment Question:

How is editing used to develop the spectator's understanding of character and narrative?

#### Assessment Question:

How effective is mise en scene at developing a sense of time and place?