

Sincere, but avoiding difficult questions

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City of God, directed by Fernando Meirelles; screenplay by Bráulio Mantovani, based on the novel by Paulo Lins.

Over 500 shantytowns or slums, known as *favelas*, exist within the confines of Rio de Janeiro, comprising more than a third of the city's population. The word *favela* specifically refers to a community whose inhabitants neither own nor have formal permission to occupy the land. Rio's *favelas* were constructed in a period of rapid industrialization to keep the poor isolated from the city's center.

City of God (*Cidade de Deus*), a film by Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles, attempts to portray the horrors of life in the *favela* known by the same name. The movie spans three decades: from the late 1960s, when the *favela* originates and its youth enter adolescence as petty thieves, to the 1970s and 1980s when the characters grow up to become first minor, then major drug lords. In a recent interview, Meirelles explained, as an update to his film, that the drug trade has been so consolidated in Rio that currently all the *favelas* have fallen under the control of three criminal factions.

The film's 1960s sequence depicts the adventures of teenage bandits known as the Tender Trio, and is narrated by Rocket, the younger brother of one of the featured hoods.

The trajectory from gas-truck hijacking to robbery and murder in a brothel ends in either death or hardened criminality. Cocaine supplants marijuana, and the weaponry becomes increasingly more lethal.

The 1970s segment focuses on the murderous activities of rival gangs who initiate a reign of terror on the neighborhood. The most notorious drug boss, Li'l Zé (known in the 1960s as Li'l Dice), murders and rapes with such abandon that peaceable residents, such as Knockout Ned, join the gunmen of Li'l Zé's arch nemesis, Carrot. *City of God* is soaked in blood as a new wave of pre-teen gangsters called the Runts begin to overrun Li'l Zé's turf.

Rocket escapes the typical fate of the *favela's* young people by landing a job as a photojournalist when his pictures of Li'l Ze's outfit and the drug wars hit the newspapers' front pages.

The movie is based on a novel by Paulo Lins, who grew up in the City of God. To his credit, filmmaker Meirelles wanted to bring attention to the nightmarish conditions in the *favela*. As he explained in an interview with *Gal.com*: "Reading *City of God* was like a revelation. A revelation of another side of my own country. I believed I knew all about social apartheid which

existed in Brazil, until I read the book. I realized that we, from the middle class, are unable to see what is going right in front of our noses. We have no idea of the abyss which separates these two countries: Brazil and brazil." This is a bit surprising, given that nearly 50 percent of Brazil's population are under the age of 25 and live below the poverty level. Meirelles's movie does express somewhat more the attitude of a mesmerized tourist than of a probing or angry investigator.

Content appears in general to be subordinated to style. Meirelles, one of Brazil's most successful director of TV commercials, "seems to be showing off the violence as if it were a product line," as one reviewer aptly put it.

This perhaps contributes to the film's tendency to treat its characters with too much detachment. The filmmaker wants to avoid the maudlin, but he goes too far. The characters are for the most part seen as though from a distance. They are largely two-dimensional, lacking psychological definition. The all-dominating violence is all too passively presented. This tends to inure the audience to the brutalities and, as a result, the film fails to generate much sympathy for its victims—not a minor weakness.

In quasi-documentary style, flashbacks are used, together with frenetically edited jump cuts. Slow-motion shots and whirling camera work, as well as rapid color transitions and jittery close-ups, give the film its intended slick look. The combination of these elements, however, works to create an inappropriate coolness that erects barriers to any serious involvement with the film's protagonists. The result is a certain glamorizing of the violence and a dehumanizing of the film's subjects.

The spectator is left with a vision of life as a *permanent* nightmare in the City of God—more akin to a mythological inferno than to its reality as the byproduct of a bankrupt and irrational social order.

Again Meirelles on his reaction to Lins's novel: "The monotonous repetition of different lives which appear and disappear before your eyes and *the acceptance of this reality by those living it, was what amazed me most about the project* [emphasis added]. A 16 year old kid knows that he is at the height of his life; he knows that if he is lucky he'll last another three or four years. He knows he's going to die early and he walks towards this death as if searching for the final fatality. The wasting of lives is the theme of the movie."

The wasting of lives is a terrible crime and deserves more of an inquiry into its causes and more of a protest against its existence than can be detected in the film. Meirelles's fatalistic and passive notions concerning the "walk towards death" of the youth of *City of God* has undermined his presentation of the problem.

Although Meirelles is shocked by his "discovery" of the *favelas*, he is adamant about not drawing political conclusions. The director declares that "[s]tate, laws, citizenship, police, education, perspective, and the future are all abstract concepts, mere smoke, when seen from the other side of this abyss." How then to explain the increasing physical and moral destruction, as the film chronicles, of those condemned to the abyss? Does this take place in a void? Who is responsible for the creation and continued existence of the abyss? How does a Li'l Zé come into being? How is a filmmaker to accurately portray a hell-hole like *City of God* without placing it in its political and historical context, without perspective, without thinking about the past or the future?

It is not accidental that the notorious *City of God* originated during the onset of a 21-year military dictatorship in Brazil. In the early 1960s, the threat of civil war loomed. A new and explosive industrial working class was arising out of a population that had doubled since the 1930s and was concentrated in the urban areas.

The *favelas* had a rural genesis as the poor from the countryside flocked to the cities to fill industry's need for cheap surplus labor, heightening the tensions in an already polarized society. By the early 1960s, the ruling elite feared "a mass uprising, supposedly instigated by international communism," as described by one historian. The disparities between rich and poor intensified, with 10 percent of the population accumulating 40 percent of the wealth. The image was "of a budding proletariat ready to join a reformist government [João Goulart, 1961-1964] against elite privilege and United States imperialism." In 1964, inflation approached 100 percent, foreign loans came to a halt and the economy neared collapse.

"[P]olitical mobilization gripped the society. Peasant land seizures and urban food riots contributed to a sense of impending chaos." In events similar to those that were to follow in Chile in 1973, a CIA-backed military coup overthrew the democratically elected, bourgeois Goulart government in March 1964. The military junta under Humberto Castello Branco that replaced the Goulart regime became one of the most bloodthirsty in history, creating Latin America's first death squads—supported and trained by the CIA. The dictatorship lasted until March 1985.

After the collapse of the junta, an amnesty was declared that protected the military and police from any prosecution for the murder and torture of thousands upon thousands of political oppositionists, journalists, militant workers, peasants and students under the dictatorship.

The traumatic history that encompasses the film's timeframe is absent in *City of God*. For Meirelles, politics is an "abstraction"—"mere smoke"—i.e., extraneous to the exposure of this blight!

Did none of this have an impact, directly or indirectly, on the social and psychological conditions of the youth portrayed in *City of God*? The failure of the Brazilian working class leadership to point a way out of the crisis, the victory of the military, the closing off of possibilities, the conditions of mass repression, the growing social misery—none of this played a role in the daily lives of the film's characters? To ask the questions is to answer them. To make a "historical" film entirely without history.... Few have ever taken on this impossible task before our time, with its specific ideological confusion and difficulties.

The filmmaker sees his story as "the beginnings of drug dealing in Rio de Janeiro, a violent story, *without hope*, which took place entirely inside a favela" [emphasis added]. The *favelas* exist as a moral vacuum, offering only gangsterism, an early death or the rare escape into middle class life (Rocket). Given the limited scope of the director's vision, he cannot avoid romanticizing the young gangsters and their "camaraderie," despite the "rawness" of the film.

A January report in *Aljazeera.net* regarding children of the *favelas* involved in Brazil's drug wars presents a more rounded and concrete picture. Rafael, who at age 15 was a drug soldier, explained: "I carried an assault rifle. If the police came, we had to shoot them; kill them or they would kill us. The government wouldn't do anything for us, so we took things into our own hands. We lived in a poor community with day-to-day violence and drugs, police shootings and bandit shootings. My hero was a drug dealer (traficante). I saw him every day, armed and committing assaults. The traficantes help the community in a way that the government doesn't. When my family didn't have bread or money, it was the traficante who helped. So I became an armed soldier [for him]."

Undoubtedly, *City of God* is sincere in its desire to call attention to the monstrous inhumanity perpetrated against Brazil's youth "of the abyss." However, by virtue of its political and historical omissions, Meirelles's work runs the risk of reinforcing a social mood that views the conditions of the poor as wrenching but unalterable. This works against a genuine understanding of the *essence* of life in the *favelas*, a prerequisite for pointing the way to the abolition of the social conditions that breed them.



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