City of God (Cidade de Deus)

In 2002, the Cannes Film Festival was crackling with buzz, about a film that wasn't in the official competition, was a completely unknown entity, yet was building up a frenzied word of mouth. It would be mentioned with hushed excitement, as if the Brazilians on everyone's lips were going to burst into the room, guns blazing, else whisk you off to a party that, unlike most festival revels, would actually be cool.

Directed by Fernando Meirelles, with Katia Lund as co-director, *City of God* was the year's hot ticket. It would go on to be distributed around the world, and gain four Oscar nominations, including best director for Fernando Meirelles, something quite unprecedented for a Brazilian film.

The title – not a filmmaker's conceit but a town planner's – is a bitter illusion. Cidade de Deus is the name of an actual housing project in Rio de Janeiro, which had turned into an infamous slum, more akin to hell than heaven. The film itself would also defy expectation. Here was an entertainment that was visceral, inventive, funny, dangerous, which could compete for cinematic and narrative flair alongside anything that the young Quentin Tarantino was making at the time, or for that matter even Scorsese. Yet there was another dimension: social content, as audiences could feel the authenticity, and hence the genuine pathos of small boys being herded into a life of crime. This was a Brazil light-years away from soccer, sand and samba.

It starts with a runaway chicken and the swish of a knife and the cut-cut-cut of film to the beat of a whooping whistle, and a stand-off between a gang of youths and the police. Between them stands a loner with a camera around his neck, who is spared his sticky predicament – for now – when the camera makes a 360° pan and retreats into the past.

The film will circle back, having told its story, and end where it began, guns facing guns, boys playing at being men, by which time these youths will have a history and we will have seen enough to accept Walter Salles' interpretation, that 'The chicken caught in the crossfire is not only a chicken. It is the reflection of so many Brazilians trapped in an unjust country.'

What follows has all the *accoutrements* of crime drama – psychotic hoods and tarnished angels, power struggles and needless tragedy – yet is rooted in reality, a reality that we accept as a given every time one of these urchin boys opens his mouth and speaks in the expressive patois of the *favela*.

Its narrative plays with every cinematic trope at its disposal – voice-over, captions, split-screen, flashing backwards, forwards, sideways – yet every trick serves a more intimate storytelling: that of oral history. When we're told, 'It's not time to tell Knockout Ned's story', we could be sitting on an outcrop of a *favela*, glancing over the lights of Ipanema below. And it deals with a world saturated in violence, yet never (despite criticism of the time) attempts to glamorise it, conveying instead a milieu in which a brief life expectancy is stoically accepted, and where there is only one peer group to which to aspire. 'A kid?' jeers the sweet-faced Steak and Fries. 'I smoke, snort, I've killed and robbed. I'm a man.'

Adapted by Bráulio Mantovani in collaboration with Meirelles, from the novel by Paulo Lins (who grew up in City of God), it concerns three phases in the life of

Sound Effects Artist: Samuel Mendoza
ADR: Alessandro Laroca
Fight Instructor: Amaury Guarilha
Cast:
Alexandre Rodrigues *(Buscapé, 'Rocket')*
Leandro Firmino Da Hora *(Zé Pequeño, 'Li'l Ze')*
Phellipe Haagensen *(Bené, 'Beny')*
Douglas Silva *(Dadinho, 'Li'l Dice')*
Jonathan Haagensen *(Cabeleira, 'Shaggy')*
Matheus Nachtergaele *(Sandro Cenoura, 'Carrot')*
Seu Jorge *(Mané Galinha, 'Knockout Ned')*
Jefechander Suplino *(Alicate, 'Clipper')*
Alice Braga *(Angélica)*
Emerson Gomes *(Barbantinho)*
Edson Oliveira *(adult Barbantinho)*
Michel de Souza Gomes *(Bené as a child)*
Roberta Rodrigues *(Berenice)*
Luis Otávio *(Buscapé as a child)*
Maurício Marques *(Cabeção)*
Gustavo Engracia *(newspaper editor)*
Darlan Cunha *(Filé com Fritas)*
Robson Rocha *(Gelson)*
Thiago Martins *(Lampião)*
Leandra Miranda *(Lúcia Maracanã)*
Graziella Moretto *(Marina Cintra)*
Renato de Souza *(Marreco, 'Goose')*
Karina Falcão *(Paraíba's wife)*
Sabrina Rosa *(Galinha's girlfriend)*
Rubens Sabino *(Neguinho)*
Marcos Junqueira (Kikito) *(Otavio)*
Edson Montenegro *(Buscapé's father)*
Gero Camilo *(Paraíba)*
Felipe Silva *(Rafael)*
Daniel Zettel *(Thiago)*
Charles Paraventi *(Tio Sam)*
Luiz Carlos Ribeiro Seixas *(Touro)*
Paulo César (Jacaré) *(Tuba)*
Danielle Ornellas *(Paraíba's neighbour)*
Bernardo Santos, Diego Batista, Diego Ferreira, Marcio Vinicios, Micael Borges, Rafael de Castro, Ramon Francisco, Thiago Wallace *(slum area kids)*
Alexander Cerqueira, Alexandre Tavares (China), André Pires Martins, Antônio Rodrigues, Bartolomeu Braga, Carlos Henrique Avernais, Cláudio César, Cleiton Ventura, Damião Firmino, Euclides Garcia, Fábio Castro Conceição, Felipe Nogueira, Ivan Martins*,* John Lima, Jonas Michel, Leandro Lucas, Leonardo Dias Batista, Lúcio Andrey, Luis Carlos Rodrigues Oliveira, Luís Nascimento, Marcello Melo Junior, Márcio Costa, Mário Luiz Costa Oliveira, Nelson Amaral, Omar Barcelos (Mazinho), Otto Amorim, Peter Soares, Rafael De Souza, Roberto Miguez, Rómulo Sech (Guinomo), Ruy Vitório, Sergio Bispo *(Zé Pequeno's gang)*
Alex Dos Santos, Anderson Bruno Marques, Anderson Lugão, André Luiz Mendes, Antoni Guedes, Bruno Ricardo, Charles Samuel, Éder Júlio Martins, Eduardo (BR) Piranha, Erick Oliveira, Fábio Da Cunha (Dog), Felipe Villela Mendonça, Frederico Lins, Guilherme Estevam, Guilherme William, Harlem Teixeira, Leandro Gonçalves, Leandro Lima, Leiz Moreira, Leonardo Melo, Luis Carlos Oliveira, Marcello Melo, Marcelo Alves (Máscara), Márcio Costa, Wallace Araújo, Wallace Nascimento, Wanderson Lopes (Petão), Wellington Costa Ricardo, Wemerson Gonçalves, Wendel Barros, Yuri Krushewsky *(Cenoura's gang)*
Brazil-Germany-France 2002©
130 mins
Digital

A TFA (The Festival Agency) release

the *favela* – one in the Sixties, two in the Seventies – during which we see the community transformed by increasing poverty, ever-congested living space and, in particular, by crime. The criminal activity develops from amateurish robberies conducted by local Robin Hoods, to drug dealing; and as the drugs become more and more profitable, so the number of guns increases.

Meirelles and Mantovani present an occasional narrator, Rocket, to guide us through their cast of hundreds. Rocket is a rarity in his ability not to be sucked into crime (though he comes close). But the more interesting characters are those knee-deep in the mess: the psychopathic drug dealer Li'l Zé, determined to control the *favela*, his right-hand man and jovial party animal Bené, rival dealer Carrot, and Knockout Ned, a peaceful ex-soldier drawn by circumstance into a war with Li'l Zé.

Unlike most Hollywood crime films, there is a sense here of it being almost academic who lives or dies; if they don't die on screen, they probably will after this tale is over. When we see a small boy murdered, or a family gunned down in its home, our horror is not mitigated by the satisfaction of knowing the culprit will be brought to task and the violence ended; there is no end, merely cycles. And even if the film concludes optimistically for its hero, realism has the last word. 'Who knows how to write?' asks a boy, walking with his friends away from the final carnage. 'Let's make a list and kill them all.'

Meirelles and Lund's decision to cast largely non-actors from the *favelas*, to train boys who would bring their own life experience to the screen, not only lends the film authenticity, but instilled in these kids a realisation that there was an alternative to life in a gang. The school that the filmmakers created to prepare the boys was, on completion of *City of God*, turned into a permanent film school and NGO.

Music fans might be interested to know that Knockout Ned is played by Seu Jorge, one of Brazil's most popular musicians, who won a legion of overseas fans with his soundtrack of Bowie covers for Wes Anderson's *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. Of the boys, Douglas Silva (the young Li'l Zé) and Darlan Cunha (Steak and Fries) – in real life, fatherless children of the *favela* – have become huge television stars with the small screen depiction of the same environment, *City of Men*.

Demetrios Matheou

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit
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