

# Film Essay 2: City of God

Friday, May 24, 2019 8:21 PM

*City of God* is a visceral film by Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund about the Rio de Janeiro favela by the same name. The movie follows a variety of characters as they grow up in this difficult neighborhood. It is here, just like in the slums of many growing cities across the world, cities such as Dhaka, Bangladesh, that people emigrate in the face of a changing world. Most people in human history have lived in relatively quiet agrarian societies, but as less manpower is needed to feed the world, more and more people are being forced into the cities in search of new opportunities for themselves and their families. Despite the difficult conditions many of these new urbanites find themselves in, for them it is their best option.

Right from the start I begin to agree with criticism from Jaime Do Amparo-Alves, who, when talking about violence in the film, states that it is "dehistoricized, depoliticized, and decontextualized." (Amparo-Alves, 2009) So, to, is the general story of the people living in the City of God. Why are they here? What did they leave behind? What do they want to gain or achieve? *Why in particular did they come to and remain in the City of God?* Throughout the film, it seems like the pursuit of a life outside of the favelas is a matter of simple choice (another criticism by Alves). Rocket, the narrator, simply decides one day that his favela is too dangerous, and easily procures a job delivering newspapers outside of it. Why did he only choose to do that then, especially when we already see his struggles in becoming a photographer? Benny, the second in command of the neighborhood's leading drug gang, simply decides one day to run off to a farm with his girlfriend. Granted, I'd expect less challenge in this considering the sizable piles of money and connections he has, but if Benny could simply run away, what was keeping him there in the first place? What were his aspirations, and what makes him willing to leave them now?

Furthering on the *depoliticizing* point in regards to the police; the film shows them as violent and corrupt, perhaps as much as any gang member. They take bribes, they kill people carelessly, enemies and friends alike, if they happen to be in their way. This is one reason I'm not sure if I agree with Alves conclusion of the movie depicting black people as inherently and naturally more violent than others, at least not purposefully which Alves suggests. *City of God* seems to be commenting more on general human nature than that of any specific racial group. Quite pessimistic commentary, I might add. Despite this, the movie seems uninterested in the more structural elements of poverty that this police state engages in.

This fits with Marta Peixoto's description of the movie as being "ultimately unchallenging, the film repeats - true, with consummate skill - positive and negative stereotypes about the favela." (Peixoto, 2007) In terms of broad picture stuff, all *City of God* tells you about the City of God is that it's a bad place where bad things happen because of bad poor people and occasionally some bad police. Peixoto follows, "It makes no mention, for instance, of the dictatorship in effect at the time...". Instead it focuses on small, individual choices about greed, lust, evil, anger, and hatred.

Now, this isn't something a movie necessarily has to move beyond. If the goal is to tell an interesting story with interesting characters, then *City of God* has certainly achieved it. But when it's sort of set as being a "this is how life really is" kind of movie, and one representing a generally unrepresented population in media, it would be nice to engage in some more poignant political messages. Instead the movie takes a character-study approach. I think there's a lot done well by the film in this lens, but unfortunately I'm going to focus on the negatives because it makes for an easier essay in this case.

First: the depiction of women. "...the novel's perspective is relentlessly male...Women characters, mostly sexual objects, disappear after their husbands or lovers die." (Peixoto, 2007) The first major female character is the lover of Shaggy, member of the small gang the Tender Trio. Honestly I'm not even sure

she has a name, I just went back to try and find it but had no luck. In any case, she decides to leave the neighborhood (again, questions of how or why are left unanswered), and Shaggy is killed during the escape. We never hear from her again. Later we meet a girl Rocket has a crush on. Eventually she leaves her boyfriend for Rocket, and then eventually leaves him for Benny (seemingly on amicable terms, given later interactions). The movie doesn't dwell on her concerns about these relationships or the rest of her life, we find only that she wants to move away to a more peaceful life, before Benny is killed and she is shooed away by Lil'Ze. We never see her again. Lil'Ze then finds and rapes a woman we've seen briefly before, Knockout Ned's girlfriend. We see glimpses of her during the scene but we never face the repercussions from her perspective. The only word on this horrific and deeply personal act is said by Knockout Ned, who states that he can't look her in the eye anymore. But she herself is never seen again. The final major woman in the movie is the reporter towards the end, who has a brief interaction with Rocket before the two of them do it in her apartment. After this scene she is never seen again. There's a pattern here that I'm noticing. The film treats women as plot devices rather than full characters - they're meant to be wooed, eloped with, after which they often have everything ripped from them and are then discarded - and for a movie that does some exceptional work with characters, it's a real shame that they didn't give women the same treatment as the men.

I could talk about some other characters to get back to Alves's criticism, but I'm already running out of space here so need to move onto discussing the built environment. When we first (chronologically) see the City of God, it's comprised of a few small shacks in an open desert-y area. There are wide spaces where children play, and we see a small quiet bar of sorts (at least quiet before the Tender Trio ram their stolen car into it). At this point, it seems that the place is relatively peaceful, the Tender Trio is the only on-screen criminal presence. But as we jump ahead in time to the denser, grungier City of God that we see through most of the movie, instead of a minority of characters being criminals, a minority of characters are not. They make up everything from crime empires to small roaming groups of scary children. The favela has obviously become a much rougher place as the population grew. Although ironically, at the height of Lil'Ze's power, the neighborhood was unusually peaceful. He smartly avoided outside attention by keeping violence down and by offering bribes to keep the police placated. Like many other regimes actually, despite the constant fear and corruption, it's during the rise and fall - the transitions - of authority that the most violence occurs (maybe this would be another place for interesting political juxtaposition? Compare to the greater Brazilian dictatorship? I'm just spit balling here). We catch few glimpses of the world *outside* the favela, all we really learn is that Rocket's reporter friend has running hot water while he's never seen it. But we know what's going on outside during this period, and still in the world today. The disparity between rich and poor is becoming wider, the walls between communities are becoming higher. It's no wonder we don't see much outside the City of God, because everyone outside of it would much rather wall it off and ignore it than deal with it properly.

This is where *City of God* leaves us. In a broken place. A city sundered down the middle leaving broken people on either side. And really it's unfair to call them broken, but the overall pessimism of the film doesn't seem to agree. The last shot involves a new group of children plotting the rise of a new crime empire and the death of all the people they dislike, including the Red Brigade, possibly a facsimile for the real life gang the Red Command, hinting at future wars just like the one in the climax of the film. The circle of violence begins anew. Which, the film may have a certain point about that, violence is a cycle. But in ignoring the structural elements of this cycle, the focus on the kids at the end does seem to suggest violence is inherent, so perhaps I agree with Alves's criticism after all. I can't wrap this analysis up in a bow as much as I could the last one, so I guess I'll simply leave with an agreement with the general criticism from the readings, in that, while the movie is powerful and well made, and personally I think it worthy of the hype I found about it on the internet in terms of dramatic visual story telling, it should not be the be-all-end-all of how we interpret the favelas or the people living in them.

## Citations

Amparo-Alves, J. D. (2009). Narratives of violence: the white imagiNation and the making of black

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Peixoto, M. (2007). Rio's Favelas in Recent Fiction and Film: Commonplaces of Urban Segregation, 122(1), 170-178.