

---

From The Times Literary Supplement

January 17, 2003

# City of God

Marlowe Fawcett

---

CITY OF GOD. Various cinemas.

From the US-Mexican border (El Mariachi) and Mexico City (Amores Perros, Y Tu Mama Tambien), to Brazil (Central Station) and Argentina (Nine Queens), Latin American cinema is resurgent. Perhaps we have television to thank for this; during the 1980s, television colonized South America as it had the US in the 1950s and Europe in the 60s. The latest film-maker to graduate from the small screen is Fernando Meirelles, and his film, City of God, is possibly the best Brazilian movie of the past ten years. Walter Salles, director of Central Station (1998), is one of the film's producers, and his own brand of social realism is everywhere apparent in City of God; but where Salles used his camera as a passive observer, with an almost patrician detachment, Meirelles turns his into a character. The camera and crew, though off-screen, are ever present.

Awareness of the camera lends the film a documentary feel and gives it its dynamism and pull.

Based on Paolo Lins's book of the same name, City of God charts the rise of drug gangs in Rio de Janeiro's infamous favelas, from the early 1960s to the late 70s.

Salles believes that "Brazilian reality has surpassed the majority of attempts to portray it in fiction", and that "the acceleration of social decomposition has transformed violence into a banality". But Meirelles, undaunted, has found a way of presenting that reality on film. With co-director, Katia Lund, and Guti Fraga, who founded and runs an acting and theatre school in the hillside favela of Vidigal, he set up a studio at Rio's Fundicao Progresso to find and train children for the hundred or so roles needed for the film, and named the group, "We From the Movies", in homage to Fraga's school, "We From the Hillside". But, as in Lins's book, the film's main character is not a person but a place - one of Rio's worst favelas, the City of God. The film was shot on location and uses only natural lighting. The actors are mainly non-professional kids from the favelas. The script was used only to guide, not dictate, the dialogue. As a result, the audience is deeply involved in the story: we are participating witnesses to the descent into violence and anarchy.

But the chaos is regulated. The film is divided into three distinct acts. We open with the climax, swiftly interrupted by the narrator, Rocket, an aspiring photographer, who takes us back forty years to the City of God as a new development, where life is still simple, and the crime relatively innocent.

Meirelles uses conventional angles and composition, 40mm lenses and tripods; the actors are given strict marks; Cesar Charlone's cinematography is warm. As the first act draws to a close, the stationary camera slips its moorings in a deadly police chase through the streets.

In Act Two, the favela has become a concrete maze. Violence is on the rise, though the drug dealing is limited to marijuana. Handheld cameras, 16mm and Technicolor film add to the urgency. The actors have been given fewer marks and more freedom to improvise their lines. Meirelles, too, indulges himself, stretching cinematic grammar with semi-animated sequences reminiscent of Fight Club. The transition to the third act is telling: a vibrant, colourful nightclub is reduced to a strobe-lit stage with the lone figure of a gangster standing over his dead friend.

Chaos reigns in the final act. Cocaine has replaced dope and the results are frenetic and dangerous. The camera

swings wildly, the actors have no marks. We end where we began, with a knife being sharpened, limbs dancing, a ground level chase of a chicken through the streets, and Rocket's dilemma: should he save himself and hide, or seize the opportunity to document the tragedy's final scene?

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your advertisement.

**Times Online Services:** [Dating](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Property Search](#) | [Used Cars](#) | [Holidays](#) | [Births, Marriages, Deaths](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [E-paper](#)  
**News International associated websites:** [Milkround](#) | [Globrix](#)

Copyright 2010 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

