

# city of god

## exploring brazilian cinema

If you're in your first or second year of WJEC Film Studies then your luck's in. For the first time, you can choose to write about one of the most talked about, violent, and genuinely creative films ever to have made it to the screen. **Cidade de Deus [City of God]** is one of the new Close Study film options on the FS5 World Cinema examination paper from



May/June 2005. **Symon Quy** offers insights into the 'national context of production' required by the examiners to support your own textual analysis of the film.

### Latin American cinema – in the shadow of Hollywood

Being so close geographically to the United States of America, we might fairly expect a good number of South American nations to have been portrayed in one of its major exports: movies. It's true that Mexico has long featured in westerns as a quick and easy representation of a place of violence and danger. Mexico is where 'the law' can't reach; where (civilised) America runs out. But filmic excursions much further south are particularly rare. It's as if the United States can't even imagine the countries beyond its immediate neighbour; of a continent so large and various that it might challenge the simplistic ideology of the Western frontier.

The RKO musical, *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), hinted at notions of exoticism in its title. It is one of the rare acknowledgements in Hollywood's back-catalogue of the existence of Brazil: the fifth largest country in the world, comprising half the landmass of the entire South American continent. *Flying Down to Rio* is more concerned with representations of North American affluence, expressed through the luxury of flight, than providing a travelogue within the nation of Brazil. Clearly, if we want stories that attempt genuine depictions of Latin America we need to go for the home-grown product.



### Brazilian cinema history

The history of Brazilian cinema is certainly as chequered and inconsistent as those of other South American nations, despite a promising start. Only seven months after the Lumière Brothers' famous first screening of their 'cinematographe' at the Grand Café in Paris, Brazil was 'at the movies'. On the 8th of July 1896, a crude imitation of the 'cinematographe' was projected in Ouvidor street in Rio de Janeiro.

Just two years later Brazil was, quite literally, 'in the movies'; the first images focused on the bay of Guanabara and some ships anchored there. An Italian immigrant named Afonso Segreto, arriving from Europe with an early Lumière camera, had realised that Brazil's beautiful landscape, and the large quantities of immigrants it was attracting, were subjects worth documenting. Unknowingly, Segreto established two of the major concerns of Brazilian cinema: setting stories in particular landscapes, and the strong documentary tradition that is still a prominent feature of the nation's film production.

For the first decade of the twentieth century indigenous production was held back by limited power supplies. A regular supply of electricity was, and still is, an essential infrastructure for the generation of light, let alone its projection. Once this problem had been overcome, cinemas 'sprung up like mushrooms' in the towns and cities of a nation that wanted to keep in touch with the world. If Hollywood screenwriters' imaginations have rarely able to stretch as far as South America, then those of their business associates certainly have. By the 1920s, the US already held an 80%



market share in Brazil, while indigenous production could manage only 4%. It is this dominance by foreign interests that has been seen as the determining factor in the years after the coming of sound and the decline in Brazilian attempts to tell realist stories.

After the Second World War, Brazil looked to emulate the populist form of the musical and modelled its productions on those that were such an international success for the United States. The *chanchada* has its roots in Brazilian comic theatre and the exuberance of carnival but its low-budget and local aesthetics meant that it was never going to be a successful export. Brazilian film production in the fifties saw it fall further behind in both international markets and the regard of its home audience.



Glauber Rocha was the *enfant terrible* of the **Cinema Novo** movement that emerged in the sixties. This faction emphasised a 'new' direction for Brazilian filmmaking. Taking a cue from the political cinema emerging in France, the **Politique des Auteurs**, Rocha's manifesto *Aesthetics of Violence and Hunger*, argued that film directors should support or become the 'authors' of oppositional practice. Rocha's highly influential commentary cemented particular themes in Brazilian film production that have since remained



present in the mindset of the country's directors and their audiences. Rocha protested that people for whom hunger is a normal condition are suffering violence – the violence of the social system that makes them go hungry. How true these words would ring to some of the characters in *City of God*. To Rocha, the nation's filmmakers have a duty to tell the truth about **the lives of ordinary people**. He argues that Brazilian films should look to **challenge the social status quo** rather than re-create the shallow escapism of the Hollywood movies. **Cinema Novo** films have become known for their tradition of **formal experimentation, social conscience, and stories that represent all classes in society**.

At the start of the 90s, Brazil underwent a new crisis, this time internal. Having lost its state protection, abolished by the Government of Fernando Collor de Mello, the cinema economy became disorganized and film production dropped to almost zero. Things only took a turn for the better in 1993 when a law was passed that created **financial incentives for those who invested in films in production**. Federal Law number 8,565 offers rebates of up to 5% against tax and, to qualify for these concessions, film projects need to be approved by the Government's Audiovisual Department in Brasilia, the administrative capital. Whether approval under this system is a process akin to censorship is debatable. **Should directors have to rely on Government sanction for their funding?**

### Contemporary Brazilian national cinema

No film buff could have failed to notice the resurgence of Latin American cinema in the last few years. *Amores Perros* [*Love's Bitches*] (Alejandro Iñárritu, Mexico, 2000), and *Y Tu Mama Tambien* [*And Mama Came Too*] (Alfonso Cuarón, Mexico, 2001) have both shown that Mexican cinema is prepared to challenge some of the stereotypes created for it by Hollywood.

### Walter Salles Jnr – a Brazilian film dynasty

Brazil, too, has had some notable recent successes in finding a wider audience for films with more **realistic representations** of its residents. *Central Station* (Walter Salles Jr., Brazil, 1998) was nominated for the Oscar for Best Motion Picture in a Foreign Language, alongside its leading actress, Fernanda Montenegro, who was nominated for Best Actress. Salles' idea for *Central Station* came directly from his experience filming an earlier documentary, *Socorro Nobre* (*Life Somewhere Else*). *Central Station* tells the story of a relationship between a young orphan and a poor woman, but it is the real-location backdrops on their journey to the interior that paint such a vivid picture of life in modern Brazil.

Indeed, **Salles** is one name in contemporary production in Brazil that keeps cropping up. Walter's father formed the Brazilian bank Unibanco, but passed his love of film to his sons, despite having to spend time in finance. The Salles family are now probably the nation's most major players in the film industry. They supported the production and distribution of *City of God*. Walter's brother had made *How Angels are Born* (Murilo Salles, 1996) for Canal Brasil, the nation's popular cable subscription channel, developing this theme of childkillers revisited in *City of God*. To Salles, *City of God* is

**about a nation within a nation, about the millions of *olvidados* [the forgotten] that are statistically relevant but scarcely represented on screen.**

Walter Salles cemented his international reputation with *Behind the Sun* (Brazil/Switzerland/France, 2001) and his popularity abroad is evidenced by the finance provided from European countries in this international co-production. Salles is currently in production with another road movie, but this time one with a more overt political edge than has previously characterised his films. *Che Guevara: the Motorcycle Diaries*, shot in Argentina, Peru and Chile, recreates the famous Cuban revolutionary's motorcycle journey through South and Central America. Sleeping rough or staying at leper colonies on the way north from his homeland of Argentina, Guevara claims to have been politicised by the poverty and inhumanity he saw right across the continent. Che Guevara is a global icon of revolution and the movie will certainly bring Salles' cinematic vision to a wider audience.

### The prison movie – a Brazilian genre

If Brazil has one genre that it might call its own then perhaps this would be the **prison movie**. In a nation with such polarisation between the haves and the have-nots, it is hardly surprising that Brazilian directors have found the notorious 'state detention centres' to be suitable canvasses on which to paint the lives of the criminal classes. The Brazilian film following up the success of *City of God* in European arthouse cinemas is *Carandiru* (Hector Babenco, Brazil, 2003). The film is a dramatised version of the 1992 Sao Paulo prison riots and subsequent massacre of 111 of its inmates. In 1992, Babenco had portrayed the lives of the 'disposable' street urchins living in the sewers and slums of the favelas in *Pixote. Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, his 1995 follow-up had seen William Hurt receive an Oscar for Best Actor for his portrayal of the camp convict who shared a cell with political dissident Raul Julia. Taken together, this trilogy provides audiences with some understanding of the realities of incarceration in Brazil – it is no wonder that some of the characters in *City of God* are prepared to go to all lengths to avoid being locked up in such prisons.

*News From a Private War* (Katia Lund, Brazil, 2001), the hard-hitting documentary included on the DVD release of *City of God*, offers further insights into the violent clashes between the police and the drug gangs in the shanty-town favelas where the Brazilian underclass is forced to reside. Katia Lund is credited with co-directing *City of God* and was assistant director on *Central Station*; her documentary confirms that the shoot-outs between gangsters and police represented in *City of God* are based on real events. **There are more than 40,000 violent deaths a year in Brazil.** Arnaldo Jabor, one of the country's most important intellectuals believes that *City of God* has performed a vital role in highlighting this violence:

**it is not only a film. It is an important fact, a crucial statement, a hole in our national conscience.**

### Brazil's digital cinema revolution

Brazil could soon have the largest network of digital cinemas in the world. The world's fourth biggest democracy also has an election system that is 100% electronic. This might seem to be at odds with the image of poverty and under-development that we see in *City of God*, but don't be mistaken. Brazil's cinema network is as impoverished as a good percentage of its citizens – **the country has one of the lowest number of screens per capita in the world; 100,000 people per screen.** So, the national cinema industry is taking some responsibility for depicting the lives of the people of one of the most

polarised nations on earth. As Salles commented:

*City of God* is the depiction of a world where people have been forgotten for too long by the Brazilian ruling classes; a world where the state does not provide proper health or education services. In fact the only thing that it provides freely is bullets.



The film has indeed created heated political debate in Brazil. The nation's current leader, Luiz Inacio da Silva, came to power on a manifesto that promised to address the inequalities of the social system and had publicly urged the previous president to:

**go to see *City of God* to understand the extent of the urban tragedy of Brazil.**



*City of God* then is a **powerful example of how a film can influence the public consciousness.** It might well have been an **agent of social change** in its own country, though some would argue that the humanitarian and civil rights issues that Brazil has to deal with have only been touched upon in the film. Jabor believes *City of God* will cause transformations in the public arena because:

**... it is not only a portrait of our favelas, it is also our portrait, at 24 frames a second, our faces blurred with the faces of 10-year-old children holding machine guns. All the manifestations of our chaos will become visible and the film will be seen by the whole country in terror. MM**

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