

City of God

A new motion picture is in town that looks at the ultimate example of kids without parental supervision: it's the harrowing, if fascinating, *City of God* ("Cidade de Deus"), a tough but compelling import from Brazil (in Portuguese with subtitles).

The heavily ironic title (God seems light years away from this place) identifies an infamous Rio slum (locally called a *favela*) which was founded in the early 1960's with deadly tract housing for the city's burgeoning poor and grew immensely during the 1970's and 1980's into a teeming suburb of several hundred thousand denizens of the Brazilian underclass. The film traces the *favela*'s history through the lives of several members of the juvenile gangs who thrived in the Cidade, with overvoice narration coming from one young man, nicknamed Rocket (Alexandre Rodrigues), who has decided early on to be an observer of rather than a participant in the city's vicious crime life.

The film follows over a dozen years a cluster of young boys who become men--or at least mugs--in a world without parents, without school, without love, without hope. To replace these we have gangs, guns, drugs, violence--and guns. We eventually see a major struggle develop over the slum's cocaine business between rival gangs led by Lil Zé (Leandro Firmino de Hora) and Carrot (Matheus Nachtergaele), the first a seething stone killer since childhood, the second a more pragmatic hustler trying to retain his turf. Added to the mix is Lil Zé's life-long buddy, Benny (Phellipe Haagensen), who wants to leave the business for the lush life, and the older Knockout Ned (Seu Jorge), an ex-boxer who's trying to go straight but gets embroiled in the gang war when his girl is defiled. Rocket, ever the observer, is our witness to these events and serves as our camera, too, as he begins to fulfill a childhood dream of becoming a photographer.

This story of hardcore delinquency has been told before, even for slum kids in Brazil (the film *Pixote*, from 1981, covered similar territory), but perhaps rarely with such energy. The film's director, Fernando Meirelles from Sao Paulo, had principally made music videos and commercials but was captured by the subject through reading the extensive novel on which the film is based, "Cidade de Deus" by Paulo Lins. It meant boiling down a 700 page novel, moving to Rio to shoot, and, most importantly, molding a cast of 100 boys between 12 and 19 to create his urban netherworld. He did the latter by forming a workshop for hundreds of *favela* kids and shaping them into an effective ensemble.

The film--it deserves a hard "R" rating--is tough to take at times, especially one scene where some very young boys are tested by Lil Zé, but it contains much less gore than, say, the current *Gangs of New York*, and less overt violence than any number of American action flicks or even TV cop shows. What it exhibits instead is an ever present threat of menace, an edgy tension brought on by boys with their ever present guns. That tension is heightened even more by the way Meirelles shoots *City of God*. Hand-held cameras and quick cuts are constant, mimicking the spasmodic acts and feral natures of the kids, and these are usually appropriate, though at times the jump cutting is just distracting. One most effective sequence, which opens and closes the film, is shot from the viewpoint of an escaping chicken, racing for its very life through the *favela*'s streets to evade these fierce youngsters. As an audience member, you will have no difficulty identifying fully with that runaway chicken!

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