

WJEC A Level Film Studies Essay

City of God has been highly praised for raising awareness whilst also criticised for exploiting suffering. Where do you stand on this debate?

Fernando Meirelles' 'City of God' remains an energetic and vivid depiction of crime, violence, and death in the poverty-stricken areas of Rio de Janeiro. The complex tales of stolen adolescence and threatened innocence have long maintained an overwhelming effect on audiences; through explicit confrontation of such disconcerting issues the film has attracted a rather mixed selection of critical acclaim. The film offers no justification or explanation for the events contained within its subject matter but, does it really need to?

A common criticism attached to the film is its supposed tendency to treat its characters with too much detachment. The characters are for the most part seen as though from a distance. They are largely two-dimensional, lacking psychological definition. The all-dominating violence is considered passively presented. This tends to inure the audience to the brutalities and, as a result, the film fails to generate much sympathy for its victims. Leading on further from this is the idea that we as an audience may well romanticise and thus memorialise the gangsters; for example, we do feel a strong sense of loss when Benny is killed despite the pain we know he has inflicted on others. In quasi-documentary style, flashbacks are used, together with frenetically edited jump cuts. Slow-motion shots and whirling camera work, as well as rapid colour transitions and jittery close-ups, give the film its intended slick look. The combination of these elements, however, works to create an inappropriate coolness that erects barriers to any serious involvement with the film's protagonists. The result is a certain glamorising of the violence and a dehumanising of the film's subjects. Collectively, arguments such as this advocate an exploitive film and indicate that the social ills presented are being used merely for entertainment. To an extent this can be considered true; we, as an audience, extract a certain pleasure from watching the film. It is 'entertaining' us and we want to watch it; however, this does not necessarily mean the suffering is exploited. In contrast it may be argued that this contemporary portrayal of torment and anguish is the most effective way to promote awareness and communicate with a mainstream audience.

Personally I believe that although the arguments put forward above are valid, they are not correct. The broad canvas of characters brings a real sense of history whilst maintaining a strong sense of realism. The intermittent stories spanning the lives of so many characters are a reflection on life in the favelas; the possible inability we have as an audience to relate to them reveals the cheapness of life in Brazil and forces us to confront this issue. In terms of glorifying the violence I believe that Meirelles shows us clearly and clinically its consequences: a single vicious rape, for instance, sparks full scale warfare. The rape itself, although fantastically important, is not shown. The stylisation attributable to the film could not be further from the miserabilist neo-realism of earlier Latin American urban cinema: I believe the stylised aesthetics of the production are a mere realisation of the demands of contemporary audiences. For example, at Benny's farewell party, enjoyment and fun give way to brutality as carnage breaks out to the jerky rhythm of the strobe. It is the reinforcement that life outside this inner circle of hell is not even imaginable or tangible for the characters and thus we are made to empathise with this. Meirelles emphasizes to this day that he had no political agenda when making the film; he wanted the production to be non-judgemental. I think that he achieves this; certainly we are not compelled to feel either way when watching 'City of God' it is our instincts that make us react to what is on screen. We see the children being forced to choose

between their hand and foot and there is no sense that this is wrong; Meirelles provides no explanation or justification which exemplifies dominant ideology. The film renders social drama palatable to a mass audience. The film must also be celebrated for its cast: the children and teenagers were taken largely from favelas and trained for a year. Thus in its espousal of the idea of 'rescue through culture' the film's production became part of the very process it takes as its themes.

In conclusion I believe it understandable to class the film as a means to make money through anguish but, I do not really consider this to be the case. Why should a mainstream audience not be exposed to such pain and if they weren't through this showcase then how else? Film is a dominant form of media and has significant effect on modern audiences; 'City of God' simply recognises this and takes advantage of it. Its visual style may be considered unnecessary but again is an effective way of presenting a very real issue. Interestingly, the film is never criticised for its take on reality; this perhaps reinforces the strengths of the production. If it tackles reality efficiently then it should be commended not condemned.

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Teacher Assessment

This topic raises issues around representation, audience and the global nature of cinema. 'City of God' is specified as a text within WJEC A level Film Studies specifications.

This very fluent essay addresses the question in a personal way, whilst showing high levels of familiarity with the film. Confident use of a range of concepts is demonstrated and some interesting points raised around social realism. Ideology could be further explored, perhaps considering the representation of 'normality' for the slum dwellers and how this might contrast with the values of a European audience. A personal point of view is clearly sustained, whilst fuller use of references to critics or evidence of social conditions would be valuable to support the argument. Despite this, the essay contains sufficient debate around concepts, discussion of the film and response to the title to receive grade A at A level.