Directed by Fernando Meirelles
Based on the novel by Paulo Lins
Screenplay by Bráulio Mantovani
Produced by Andrea Barata Ribeiro and Mauricio Andrade Ramos
Original Music by Ed Cortês and Antonio Pinto
Cinematography by César Charlone
Film Editing by Daniel Rezende

Alexandre Rodrigues…Buscapé - Rocket
Leandro Firmino…Zé Pequeno - Li'l Zé
Phellipe Haagensen…Bené - Benny
Douglas Silva…Dadinho - Li'l Dice
Jonathan Haagensen…Cabeleira - Shaggy
Matheus Nachtergaele…Sandro Cenoura - Carrot
Seu Jorge…Mané Galinha - Knockout Ned
Jefechander Suplino…Alicate - Clipper
Alice Braga…Angélica
Emerson Gomes…Barbantinho - Stringy
Edson Oliveira…Barbantinho Adulto - Older Stringy
Michel de Souza…Bené Criança - Young Benny
Roberta Rodrigues…Berenice - Bernice
Luis Otávio…Buscapé Criança - Young Rocket
Maurício Marques…Cabeção - Melonhead


Fernando Meirelles (from Wikipedia)

Meirelles’ father, José de Souza Meirelles, is a gastroenterologist who travelled regularly to Asia and North America (among other regions of the world), which gave opportunities for Fernando to have contact with different cultures and places. His mother, Sônia Junqueira Ferreira Meirelles, is daughter of farmers and worked with landscape architecture and interior design for a long time. Second youngest of four children, he saw his older brother,
José Marcos, die in a car-bike accident when he was only 4 years old. His two sisters, Márcia and Silvinha, graduated in theater and psychology, respectively. Fernando grew up in Alto dos Pinheiros, district of the West Zone of São Paulo, and spending every vacation in farms from both sides of his parents. "Even I have a farm. I don't know why I bought it," he says.

His first experience with cinema was with his father, who often directed 8 mm films during his job at the university. Mostly western and thriller parodies, he used his relatives and friends as actors. At 11, in 1967, he spent a year in the United States, precisely in California, where he got in touch with the hippie movement, which impressed him. At 13, with a borrowed Super 8 camera, Meirelles started producing small films, encouraged by Norman McLaren's animations.

He studied at the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of São Paulo during the 1980s. His graduation work was done in the form of a film, instead of the traditional designs of the other students: he went to Japan and bought professional video equipment to do the job. He presented it and graduated with the minimum acceptable grade. When studying architecture at the University of São Paulo, Meirelles became involved in experimental film-making. After several years in independent television, he became an advertisement film director. He is still one of the partners of O2 Filmes, the biggest Brazilian advertisement firm, which has produced City of God, Domésticas (Maids) and Viva Voz. Along with four friends (Paul Morelli, Marcelo Machado, Dário Vizeu and Bob Salatini), Meirelles began his career with experimental films. Eventually, they formed an independent production company Olhar Eletrônico. Subsequently, new friends joined the group: Renato Barbiere, Agilson Araujo, Toniko and Vizeu and Bob Salatini), Meirelles began his career with several years in independent television, he became an advertisement film director. He is still one of the partners of O2 Filmes, the biggest Brazilian advertisement firm, which has produced City of God, Domésticas (Maids) and Viva Voz. Along with four friends (Paul Morelli, Marcelo Machado, Dário Vizeu and Bob Salatini), Meirelles began his career with experimental films. Eventually, they formed an independent production company Olhar Eletrônico. Subsequently, new friends joined the group: Renato Barbiere, Agilson Araujo, Toniko and Marcelo Tas. In 1982 the company aired TV programs on current affairs, as well as the children series Castelo Rá-Tim-Bum (Ra-Tim-Bum Castle), with 180 episodes. In addition to obtaining high ratings, they also introduced a refreshing humorous informality in news reporting.

By the end of the 1980s, he became increasingly interested on the advertising market. In 1990, Meirelles and friends closed down Olhar Eletrônico, opening an advertising business, O2 Films. One decade was enough for him to become one of the most important and sought-after advertising producers.

In 1997, Meirelles read the book Paulo Lins's City of God. He decided to adapt it to film, which was done in 2002, and decided that the actors in it would be selected among the inhabitants of slums. In a final triage, from 400 children, they selected 200, with whom they worked for the shooting of the film. The filming was done with a professional crew. The film was a national and international success.

In 2004, he was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Director for City of God. Also, at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, the movie received four nominations: Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Photography and Best Editing. With the recognition, he was offered a job in Hollywood. With The Constant Gardener, he again received critical acclaim, receiving several nominations, including for four Academy Awards and the Golden Globe Award for Best Director. Rachel Weisz went on to win the Academy Award and the Golden Globe Award for Best Supporting Actress. Meirelles insisted that the soundtrack be based on the music of African countries, and most of the filming was done in Kenya.

In 2007, he began shooting Blindness, a film adaptation of Nobel-prize winner José Saramago's book, Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira. The film, which was released in 2008, was the opening film of the Cannes Film Festival.

Peter Bradshaw in The Guardian (2 January 2003):

This electrifying picture is part tender coming-of-age film and part gang-warfare epic from the Brazilian slum, or favela, told from the viewpoint of the children who manage to be both its underclass and its criminal overlords. It's a movie with all the dials cranked up to 11, an overwhelming, intoxicating assault on the senses, and a thriller so tense that you might have the red seat plush in front of you – or even some unfortunate's hair - gripped in both fists.

Amores Perros - increasingly the touchstone of the Latin new wave - began with a car chase and a dead animal. Director Fernando Meirelles's City of God, co-produced under the aegis of Walter Salles, has something similar, but invests his images with more overtly mythic qualities, irresistibly potent from the very beginning. A swaggering gangster is about to slaughter a chicken in the middle of the favela; it escapes, and there is a hilarious but still oddly gripping chase sequence as the bird makes its bid for freedom.

As it exits an alley and scampers into the nearest shop, it has to a main thoroughfare, the chicken, with a hundred bullets and cleavers with its name on it, finds itself face to face with the movie's leading character, 18-year-old Rocket (Alexandre Rodrigues), who has every reason to think he is going to be murdered. Behind Rocket appear a number of law-enforcement officers in armoured vehicles making one of their periodic terrified and ineffective forays into the 'hood; in front of him, the gangster and his courtiers all produce weapons. A
wacky, black-comic interlude has morphed with appalling speed into a potential bloodbath.

The sacrificial purpose of the chicken conveys with the force of a blunt instrument how cheap life has come to be in the slum, and how victimhood and aggression have become fused together. The wiseguys, their covering subordinates, their stoic womenfolk and the dead bodies around them are all chickens - and they are mostly all children.

Never before have criminals looked so young: pre-pubescent, in fact. The City of God is like one vast, dysfunctional family, neighbours from hell with no neighbours, with no parents or concerned adults. It is a cross between an orphanage and an abattoir.

The movie tells the story of this slum, a grim housing project for the poor, from the late 1960s to the early 1980s; it tracks the story of both Rocket, a would-be press photographer (and a character whose purpose is probably to ventriloquise the sensibility of Paulo Lins, on whose novel the film is based), and Li'l Dice, who follows his gangster vocation with the passionate severity of a monk - the latter renaming himself, having notionally grown to man's estate, as Li'l Ze (Leandro Firmino da Hora).

Crime and football are traditionally the ways out of the ghetto, and Meirelles raises this second option only to obliterate it. A bunch of kids gather round to play keepy-uppy; but this is abandoned when three hoodlums rush on to the pitch, seeking refuge from the police - and football, the commodity in which Brazil is an unquestioned superpower, is never mentioned again. What is left is the great game of violence, of intimidation and rape, of abject gang loyalty for children for whom the ties of family, church or nationhood are meaningless jokes: seething with rage, resentment and collectively enacting one continuous, unending scattered act of pre-emptive revenge.

The favela known as the City of God has been described as the film's chief "character", and as a location it looks un glamorously real in a way that cannot be approximated by set design. There are some scenes at the beach, but the familiar world of Rio is light years away. At first glance, the dreary rows of jerry-built sheds in the middle of nowhere look very much like sheds for factory-farmed animals, or an encampment for refugees or prisoners of war. It is seen in broad daylight, at night, and at one stage in a glowing crimson sunset. But nothing alleviates its grimness and inhumanity - at the very best it resembles a purpose-built suburb of poverty.

Crime has, in a nauseous reversal of liberal social thinking, almost been "designed into" the City of God, but any foreseeable conventional breakdown of law and order has evolved one or two steps further into the corruption and degradation of children. Li'l Dice, a tiny kid, plans a staggeringly audacious hold-up of a brothel, but in a fit of pique at being relegated to the status of lookout by his older comrades, returns to the scene of the crime to murder every single innocent customer and employee of the "motel" - it is a truly chilling moment of unalloyed evil.

Meirelles’s storytelling rushes forward at a full, breathless tilt, swerving, accelerating, doubling back on itself, amplifying the roles and experiences of incidental characters. A bravura narrative moment reveals itself when he discloses the history of one single apartment, showing how it becomes degraded and denatured as it ceases to be a family home and becomes a drug-dealer’s den. Meirelles’s film flashes and sweeps around you, dizzying, disorientating, intoxicating.

His mastery of his material consists not merely in the adaptation of Paulo Lins's novel, but a direct engagement with the ghetto itself, and his triumphant recruitment of a veritable army of non-professionals is the result of an almost military raid on this dangerous territory. This is something that combines film-making with oral history. It is a compelling piece of work.

Roger Ebert (24 January 2003):

"City of God" churns with furious energy as it plunges into the story of the slum gangs of Rio de Janeiro. Breathtaking and terrifying, urgently involved with its characters, it announces a new director of great gifts and passions: Fernando Meirelles. Remember the name. The film has been compared with Scorsese's "GoodFellas," and it deserves the comparison. Scorsese's film began with a narrator who said that for as long as he could remember he wanted to be a gangster. The narrator of this film seems to have had no other choice.

The movie takes place in slums constructed by Rio to isolate the poor people from the city center. They have grown into places teeming with life, color, music and excitement--and also with danger, for the law is absent and violent gangs rule the streets. In the virtuoso sequence opening the picture, a gang is holding a picnic for its members when a chicken escapes. Among those chasing it is Rocket (Alexandre Rodrigues), the narrator. He suddenly finds himself between two armed lines: the gang on one side, the cops on the other.

As the camera whirls around him, the background changes and Rocket shrinks from a teenager into a small boy, playing soccer in a housing development outside Rio. To understand his story, he says, we have to go back to the beginning, when he and his friends formed the Tender Trio and began their lives of what some would call crime and others would call survival.

The technique of that shot--the whirling camera, the flashback, the change in colors from the dark brightness of the slum to the dusty sunny browns of the soccer field--alert us to a movie that is visually alive and inventive as few films are.

Meirelles began as a director of TV commercials, which gave him a command of technique—and, he says, trained him to work quickly, to size up a shot and get it, and move on. Working with the cinematographer Cesar Charlone, he uses quick-cutting and a mobile, hand-held camera to tell his story with the haste and detail it deserves. Sometimes those devices can create a film
that is merely busy, but "City of God" feels like sight itself, as we look here and then there, with danger or opportunity everywhere.

The gangs have money and guns because they sell drugs and commit robberies. But they are not very rich because their activities are limited to the City of God, where no one has much money. In an early crime, we see the stickup of a truck carrying cans of propane gas, which the crooks sell to homeowners. Later there is a raid on a bordello, where the customers are deprived of their wallets. (In a flashback, we see that raid a second time, and understand in a chilling moment why there were dead bodies at a site where there was not supposed to be any killing.) As Rocket narrates the lore of the district he knows so well, we understand that poverty has undermined all social structures in the City of God, including the family. The gangs provide structure and status. Because the gang death rate is so high, even the leaders tend to be surprisingly young, and life has no value except when you are taking it. There is an astonishing sequence when a victorious gang leader is killed in a way he least expects, by the last person he would have expected, and we see that essentially he has been killed not by a person but by the culture of crime.

Yet the film is not all grim and violent. Rocket also captures some of the Dickensian flavor of the City of God, where a riot of life provides ready-made characters with nicknames, personas and trademarks. Some like Benny (Phelipe Haagensen) are so charismatic they almost seem to transcend the usual rules. Others, like Knockout Ned and Lil Ze, grow from kids into fearsome leaders, their words enforced by death.

The movie is based on a novel by Paulo Lins, who grew up in the City of God, somehow escaped it, and spent eight years writing his book. A note at the end says it is partly based on the life of Wilson Rodriguez, a Brazilian photographer. We watch as Rocket obtains a (stolen) camera that he treasures and takes pictures from his privileged position as a kid on the streets. He gets a job as an assistant on a newspaper delivery truck, asks a photographer to develop his film, and is startled to see his portrait of an armed gang leader on the front page of the paper.

"This is my death sentence," he thinks, but no: The gangs are delighted by the publicity and pose for him with their guns and girls. And during a vicious gang war, he is able to photograph the cops killing a gangster--a murder they plan to pass off as gang-related. That these events throb with immediate truth is indicated by the fact that Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the newly elected president of Brazil, actually reviewed and praised "City of God" as a needful call for change.

In its actual level of violence, "City of God" is less extreme than Scorsese's "Gangs of New York," but the two films have certain parallels. In both films, there are really two cities: the city of the employed and secure, who are served by law and municipal services, and the city of the castaways, whose alliances are born of opportunity and desperation. Those who live beneath rariely have their stories told.

"City of God" does not exploit or condescend, does not pump up its stories for contrived effect, does not contain silly and reassuring romantic sidebars, but simply looks, with a passionately knowing eye, at what it knows.

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