

City of God

FILM SYNOPSIS

City of God is Brazil's most critically acclaimed film of recent years. Based on the book of the same name by writer Paulo Lins, which in-turn was based on a true story, City of God (Cidade de Deus) is a violent, fast-paced movie that tells the tale of the residents of this Brazilian favela (slum). Events are seen through the eyes of Rocket, a poor black youth who is too scared to become an outlaw but too smart to get saddled with an underpaid, menial job. He grows up in an extremely violent environment and watches as many of his peers are easily sucked into a life of crime and drugs. It seems the odds are against him.

The film follows the lives of many characters that live within this small, ramshackle shanty town. In particular we see two small boys grow up to take two very different paths: one a photographer, the other a drug dealer.

THE DARK SIDE OF PARADISE

There is a great deal more to Rio de Janeiro than just Copacabana Beach, Sugar Loaf Mountain and hordes of sunbathing tourists. Tucked away behind the five-star hotels and the endless beachfront restaurants, lies an altogether different place. It's the dark side of the city that the government tries hard to hide.

Director Fernando Meirelles and his team provide a glimpse into this otherwise out of bounds world. 'Cidade de Deus', which rather overoptimistically translates to 'City of God', is an example of Rio's seaside favelas, built in the 1960s to move poor people, mostly black, as far away from the wealthy beaches as possible.

Riddled with a corrupt police force and an out of control drugs and gun culture, these notorious favelas were governed by their own rules and were a society in their own right. Youth gangs took over the slums during the 1960s and didn't relinquish their stronghold until the mid-1980s. Unfettered by the law, the City of God's youth quickly took up armed robbery, graduating to cocaine dealing in the 1970s, and to mass gang warfare in the early 1980s.

ACTIVITIES

- What evidence is there in the film that the provisions in the City of God are poor?
- Who do you think is to blame for the residents living in these conditions?
- Why do you think the slum was called the City of God?
- What should/could be done to change life in the City of God?

LIFE IN THE CITY OF GOD

During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the young and jobless lived alongside families and the elderly. The poor quality of living standards, lack of space and privacy would have had a massive impact on the quality of life for the residents. During these three decades, there were significant changes in the living conditions within the slums, as more people moved in and families grew, causing the living space to become more cramped, pressured and dangerous. There were also mass changes in social behaviour, with people moving on from just stealing and petty crime to drug dealing and all-out gang warfare.

ACTIVITIES

Do some research into what life would have been like in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in Rio de Janeiro. Who was in government? What was the average wage? What did people do in their spare time? How was life different for people of different ethnic backgrounds?

Use your own research and your notes from the film to create a picture of what life would have been like for a sixteen-year-old boy from the City of God in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Answer the following questions:

- What would he have looked like/worn e.g., hair, clothes, car etc.
- Would he have gone to school?
- Would he have gone to church?
- How old would he have been when he used his first gun?
- Would he have taken drugs?

There are obvious examples in the film of how things changed for the different generations.

- There are only a handful of female characters in the film. What would life have been like for the women who lived in the City of God? Split into pairs and each choose a decade that the film spans. Write a diary extract for a female living in the slum in a certain decade. Include thoughts on what they like and dislike about living there and what their hopes for the future are. Compare your extracts: how are they different?

CITY OF GOD - CHARACTERS

Rocket and Lil Ze

The film has a whole host of strong, real-life characters that face dangerous, hard and frightening situations. Each generation has their own difficulties and it seems with each year they get more serious and life threatening.

The characters Rocket and Lil Ze were both from the same place, born with the same advantages and disadvantages but took two very different paths in life.

Rocket tried hard to keep away from crime and drugs. When he did succumb to temptation he found himself liking his intended victims which prevented him from carrying out the robberies.

Lil Ze/Lil Dice on the other hand was tempted by the power and thrill of firing a gun and the excitement of drugs and gangs. As the story unfolds, the characters experience different challenges and deal with them in very different ways. Rocket looks beyond the favela for a good life, with money, a career and safety, while Lil Ze is almost blind to the world outside the slum. He is more intent on becoming the most respected and powerful man within the City of God and grades success with guns, drugs and the admiration of his peers.

ACTIVITIES

Imagine Lil Ze is going into a school to talk to a group of students about his experiences and to try and convince them to turn against crime and drugs. What might he tell them? What examples of his experiences might he use to illustrate the harm and danger that drugs and guns create?

- What questions might the students ask him?
- Split your group in two. One half of the group writes a list of questions they would ask Lil Ze, the other half should use their notes from the film to write thoughts and ideas about what Lil Ze would say to the students. Now present the questions and answers as a whole class.

THE RUNTS AND THE NEXT GENERATION

Throughout the course of the City of God, it becomes apparent that each generation is learning from the last. In many ways Rocket and Lil Ze looked to the Tender Trio as role models, just as The Runts looked to Lil Ze to see what they should aspire to. At the end of the film when Lil Ze has been shot, the new generation talk of who they are going to kill next to gain control of the favela. They are so uneducated that they ask each other who can write so they can make a list of people who they plan to kill.

Using the table below compare your life in the UK to the lives of young people from the City of God

	Young people in the U.K.	Young people in the City of God
Standard of living		
Education		
Sport/recreational facilities		
Health		
Career		
Life expectancy		
Family life		

If Rocket was going to come and stay with you for the weekend, where would you take him, what would you do with him? What things do you take for granted that he might never even have seen? Think back to the film when Rocket goes to the journalist’s apartment when he has a hot shower for the first time.

Using magazines, newspapers and the internet plan a weekend’s activity for you and Rocket. Put together an itinerary of places to take/show him and things to do.

DRUGS AND GUNS

The City of God deals with just a small slice of life in Rio de Janeiro. Although the film was set over twenty years ago, the same issues and problems still exist today. Research done in Brazil back in the late 1990s showed that one person dies every half an hour from a gun shot in Rio and ninety per cent of those shot are from high calibre guns. Drug trafficking in the city employs over 100,000 people, the same number the city has on its payroll.

Drugs and guns have become an engrained part of Rio’s culture, as has violence to tourists. There are frequent stories in the news about holidaymakers being robbed and beaten.

With the city’s police reported to be as corrupt as the drug dealers themselves it seems there is no simple solution to this escalating problem.

ACTIVITIES

GUNS

In the City of God guns are a common and accepted part of life. Children as young as five years old know how to use and fire a gun, and don't stop to think about the consequences of what happens when you pull the trigger.

- In one scene, Lil Ze shoots two of The Runts in the foot, and then forces another younger boy to kill one of them. This is a powerful scene and one that shows the extent of the problems. Discuss how this scene makes you feel. What do you think about young children using guns?
- Write a script for a one-act play from the point of view of the young boy who was forced to kill his friend. How does he feel towards guns now? What does he think about Lil Ze and all the other people in the favela? Has the power of pulling the trigger made him want to do it again or put him off it?
- What do you think could have been done back in the 1970s and 1980s to prevent the gun problem getting so bad?
- How bad is the gun problem in Rio in the twenty-first century? Research and write an article for a national newspaper on how things have changed in Rio's slums since the days of the City of God.

DRUGS

In the City of God, director Fernando Meirelles has provided front row seats to see how illegal drug rackets are created, funded and maintained. In the film the drug dealers have the support of the whole community and everyone gets involved. From the dealer at the top to the young children who run errands for them, there is a job for everyone. Like any other industry people can work their way up. Even the police can be bought off.

During his narration of the film, Rocket says 'If dealing was legal, Lil Ze would have been the man of the year.' Having killed off all the competition, Lil Ze was viewed as a successful businessman.

ACTIVITIES

As a drugs worker sent into the City of God to try and re-educate users, where would you start? Who would you go to first to gain support: the police, young children, parents, Rocket or Lil Ze?

Research drug help organisations in the UK. How do they target people in this country? Look at the information/literature that they produce. How might you be able to adapt it to be used in the City of God? Make a flyer that could be handed out around the city.

- Can you think of any other techniques you could use?
- Could Rocket and his position at the newspaper help?

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