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| **Tier 2 Vocabulary** |  |  |
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**Knowledge Organiser Film Studies Component 2 – Global Filmmaking Perspectives Section A – Global Film – *City of God***

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| **A: Context** | |
| **1. Social Context** | a) The film is set in a Brazilian favela (slum) in Rio de Janeiro, between the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '80s, and loosely based on real events.  b) ‘Cidade de Deus’ (‘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.  c) 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.  d) 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. |
| **2. Historical Context** | a) Brazil was colonised by Portugal in the 16th Century resulting in almost genocidal subjection of the indigenous people. Rio de Janeiro was founded by the Portuguese in 1565. The country struggled for independence from Portugal, which was gained in the 19th century.  b) Brazil’s economy was partly founded on the transport of huge numbers of slaves from the west coast of Africa. In 1888 slavery was abolished and freed slaves migrated in large numbers to Rio. The word ‘favela’ originated in the first low income residence to be constructed for primarily ex-slaves who were not capable of integration into the city’s economy.  Their multi-ethnic communities are today made of the descendants of these slaves, together with immigrants from all over the world. |
| **3. Production Context** | a) *City of God* is an example of Brazilian national cinema. It is also an international film that secured worldwide distribution and critical acclaim.  b) As such, it has an ambiguous relationship with mainstream Hollywood cinema: on the one hand, it contains many elements that are typically mainstream and ‘Hollywood’, but on the other, it uses many filmmaking techniques that are experimental and subvert the typical Hollywood approaches.  c) Its setting in a Rio favela are authentically Brazilian and the language is Portuguese, but there are enough genre characteristics to invite comparisons with Hollywood gangster films.  d) The film was financed by TV Globo, Brazil’s biggest TV channel, and O2 Filmes, Brazil’s biggest commercials company. The international distributor was Miramax, the company founded by Bob and Harvey Weinstein, who already had a reputation of being involved with some of the most interesting and challenging films of the 1980s and early 1990s. |

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| **B: Key Elements of Film Form** | |
| **4. Cinematography** | a) The shaky camera, loose compositions, digital zooms and fast pans create an amateurish, documentary-style feel for most of the ‘present day’ sequences.  b) A number of innovative cinematography techniques, including the spectacular 360-degree circling shot of Rocket and the deep focus, fixed wide angle shot used in the Story of the Apartment, a marked contrast to the highly mobile style of most of the film.  c) A high number of extreme high angle / bird’s eye view shots are used, both alienating the viewer and emphasising the increasing encroachment of the walls and barriers of the favela over time as the characters become more hemmed in by their environment.  d) Depth of field is often used for significant effect. Deep focus is used to give an exaggerated perspective where figures appear large in the foreground, small in the background, while shallow focus is often used to augment the unemotional, detached depiction of violence. |
| **5. Mise-En-Scene** | a) The film depicts the changing nature of the favela, and the setting itself features as a major character that grows and changes. The open environment where there are spaces to play football gives way to the closed one with the cramped and narrow streets confined by apartment blocks, tin roofed shacks, and graffiti-spattered walls.  b) The changing mise-en-scene reflects the key theme of decline: the romantic, warm imagery and sepia tones of scenes set in the late 1960s contrasting with the cramped, oppressive setting of the 1980s with its colder colours and darker lighting. |
| **6. Editing** | a) The use of new digital editing allowed editor Daniel Rezende to experiment. He claims that many of the interpretations of the characters were created at the editing stage.  b) The ‘restless’ style, characteristic of the film, announces itself from the start with the opening montage which is fast-paced and chaotic, just like life in the City of God.  c) The film has an unusual and complex narrative structure: a non-linear or fractured narrative which could also be called an episodic narrative (as each ‘story’ is introduced with its own chapter title), and a circular narrative (as the film starts and ends with a framing device). |
| **7. Sound** | a) The use of the first-person narrator places us in a particular position in regard to what we might describe as the narrative “truth” of the film; there is often a disjunction between the image we see on screen and what we hear Rocket say.  b) Diegetic music documents the era and often acts as in a similar way to Rocket’s commentary, as a seductive counterpoint to the violent images. As in many films the music underscores the mood of the drama played out on the screen. A tense, violent or emotional moment will be signalled and echoed by the sounds we hear. Benny dancing to James Brown’s *Sex Machine* emphasises his new found persona. *Kung Fu Fighting*, played at Benny’s farewell party, is an ironic counterpoint to the violence that erupts there. |
| **8. Performance** | a) Meirelles had no experience of the favelas and needed someone who knew their way around and could negotiate with the people who lived there. Co-director Kátia Lund helped with the character development and supervised the crew. Together they started a workshop project for boys from the favelas, choosing 200 who they trained to be actors in the film.  b) The only professional actor with any experience was Matheus Nachtergaele, who played the supporting role of Carrot. Most of the remaining cast were from real-life favelas, including Alexandre Rodrigues (who played Rocket) who was from the real-life City of God. A lot of improvisation was used, creating an authentic, gritty atmosphere. |

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| **D: Characters** | |
| **11. Rocket** | The film’s narrator and central character, a quiet, honest boy who dreams of becoming a photographer, and the only character who manages to prevent himself from being dragged down into corruption and murder. This is Rocket’s story, the narrative of one young man who is exceptional in that he manages to escape from the slums. However, as a narrator Rocket is also an observer of other people’s stories, a character with a privileged position from which he is able to watch other narratives unfold. Although this film may be Rocket’s story, he is continually secondary to, or on the edge of, a series of further narratives taking place around him. The status of being an observer fits well with Rocket’s chosen profession of photographer. Before his eyes (and therefore before ours) human relationships involving short, energetic lives and brutal deaths are played out against an essentially unchanging social backdrop of extreme poverty. |
| **12. Li'l Zé** | A power-hungry, sociopathic drug lord who takes sadistic pleasure in killing his rivals. Originally called ‘Li'l Dice’, he changes his name as an adult in a Candomblé ceremony, a religion of African origin. Soon takes over the favela and ironically oversees a period of relative peace and prosperity as he makes it safe for wealthy visitors from Rio to buy cocaine. The only person Zé seems to care about is Benny, and when Benny is killed it pushes him even further over the edge. There is little explanation for Zé’s psychotic sadism; it seems to be just his nature, although it is suggested he is too ugly to get a girlfriend and he struggles to talk to women, which is possibly why expresses himself through violence as his gun becomes a symbol of masculinity and power. |
| **13. Benny** | Zé's longtime friend and partner in crime, Benny is “the coolest hood in the City of God” and is liked and respected by everybody. Despite being a gangster from the slums he becomes a ‘Groovy’ – the name for the middle-class, mostly white, Hippie kids from the inner city. Benny is the only person who can keep Li'l Zé under control and the only person who can unite all the different groups with the favela. Like his older brother Shaggy he fancies himself a sort of Robin Hood, and eventually wants to lead an honest life with his girlfriend Angélica. His tragic death during his leaving party is the pivotal moment in the film, as it sparks the rage of Zé and pushes him over the edge, and also means there no-one who can prevent Zé going to war with Carrot. |
| **14. Carrot** | A smaller-scale drug dealer who is friendly with Benny but is constantly threatened by Zé. Carrot’s gang war with Zé becomes the inevitable, climactic chapter of the film. |
| **15. Knockout Ned** | A handsome, charismatic ladies' man, Ned joins forces with Carrot to retaliate against Zé after Zé rapes his girlfriend and kills several members of his family. Knockout Ned appears to start from the position that motivates the classic Hollywood western hero: revenge. He puts forward a moral outlook which centres on the naïve notion that nobody who is innocent should be killed. Of course, he quickly becomes enmeshed in the unstoppable cycle of killings and ends up being killed by Otto, who ironically is motivated by the same sense of ‘justice’ that had originally driven Ned himself (“I want to get my father’s murderer”). |
| **16. The Tender Trio** | Shaggy, Goose and Clipper, a group of Robin Hood-like thieves who share their profits with the population of the City of God. Goose is Rocket’s older brother who is later killed by Li'l Dice. Clipper later gives up crime and joins the church. Shaggy is the older brother of Benny and the leader of the Trio. He is a romantic who falls in love with Bernice and attempts to escape the City of God and live an honest life. His tragic death scene is tinged with pathos and subverts the typical ‘Hollywood’ ending of driving off into the sunset by cruelly pulling back into the favela to reveal his dead body. |
| **17. Angélica** | A friend and love interest of Rocket, and later Benny's girlfriend, who motivates Benny to abandon the criminal life, echoing the earlier story and fate of Shaggy and Bernice, who also fail to make it out. |
| **18. Steak ‘n Fries** | A young boy, originally one of the Runts, who joins Zé's gang in one of the most shocking scenes in the film, when he is forced to choose which one of two children from the Runts he wants to shoot and kill. We are faced with his indecision coupled with his detachment from the situation he is placed in. Steak is later depicted in the house of Carrot’s rival gang being questioned as to why he wants to be involved in the gang warfare, and says: “I smoke, I snort. I have killed and robbed. I’m a man” – words which are echoed in voiceover when he is shot and killed later. |
| **19. Blacky** | A manager of Carrot’s who becomes the eventual owner of The Apartment before his operation is taken over by Li'l Zé. He later attempts to shoot Zé during Benny’s farewell party but accidentally shoots Benny instead, whose death sparks the climactic gang war. |

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| **C: Meaning and Response** | |
| **9. Aesthetic** | a) The film has two contrasting aesthetics, which reflect the two main time periods depicted: the end of the 1960s (the ‘Tender Trio’ era) and the early 1980s where the majority of the story takes place.  b) See ‘**B: Key Elements of Film Form’** and ‘**E: Key Scenes**’ for more on this. |
| **10. Representation of People & Communities** | a) The only families we see are those of Rocket and Ned and both play very minor roles.  b) The characters are in many ways incomplete and two-dimensional stereotypes; we know nothing, or next to nothing about their background, and there is very little attempt to explain their natures.  c) Consider for example how the characters of Rocket, Li'l Zé and Benny are all from the same place, born with the same advantages and disadvantages but take very different paths in life and we are given practically no reasons for the differences between them. The characters, it seems, are what they are because of their individual psychological make-up; essentially, they have been born this way. |
| **10. Representation of Gender** | a) This is a film that centres on an aggressive definition of toxic masculinity, with the mantra of “Kill: be respected” central to the idea of ‘becoming a man’. The gun is a phallic symbol; an expression of male virility, power and control.  b) The opposing depictions of alpha masculinity in Knockout Ned and Li'l Zé is also interesting: Ned has lived outside the favela, served in the military and has an honest job. His appearance contrasts with Zé’s, a fact commented on by Rocket: whereas Ned is tall, handsome and assured, Zé is short, ugly and aggressive. Even the seemingly-heroic Ned becomes a false hero though, motivated by revenge and transformed by his quest, which eventually leads to his death.  c) The female characters have passive and peripheral roles. The women in the film (Shorty’s wife, Dona Zelia, Blacky’s unseen girlfriend and Ned’s girlfriend) are there to be the recipients of male violence and are attacked, murdered and raped. Bernice and Angélica may reject this violence but they are sucked into it as observers and mourners. They disappear from the narrative and what happens to them afterwards is of no consequence. |

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| **E: Key Scenes** | |
| **20. Opening Scene** | a) Editing is the essential element to focus on in this scene: it is a framing device; a narrative technique meaning we start at the end and will return to this sequence during the film’s finale.  b) The film begins not with the customary establishing shot but with flashes that illuminate a series of close ups - knife, hand, and stone – with a cut to black between each shot.  c) This montage, a series of tight close ups zooms in and out on further fragments of street life - faces, a guitar, a tambourine, hands with tumblers of drinks, hands scraping and chopping carrots, chicken feet and chickens being lowered into the cooking pot. The images are of blood and instruments of death. The sounds are piercing, threatening and ominous.  d) The scene focuses upon a chicken and its attempts to escape the violent death that inevitably awaits it. The shots are of the chase, the pursuit, and the desperate attempt to escape. We end the scene with the chicken being replaced by Rocket, positioned between two equally-threatening heavily-armed groups: Ze’s gang from the slums and the police.  e) The themes of the film and the nature of the characters’ experience of life are clear from the beginning: the awareness of one’s fate (the likely early death that awaits in the City of God), and the favela as an inescapable trap and a “no win” situation. The chicken’s story is a microcosm of the story of the City of God; it will be repeated again and again throughout the narrative. The chicken is not only symbolic of Rocket, but many of the other characters also. There is a message that life in the favelas is unchanging and reflects this cycle over and over for decades.  f) We end the scene with the spectacular circling shot which will morph Rocket from a young man to a boy, and the favela to its former days of low-rise shacks and open spaces… |
| **21. The Story of the Tender Trio** | a) Note the mise-en-scene change during this first time-shift: the romantic, warm imagery and colour palette represents a lost time of outlaws and social ‘Robin Hood’ style bandits: the Tender Trio are depicted stealing gas from a lorry to distribute to the local community. There is a sense of innocence which comes to an abrupt end just fifteen minutes into the film.  b) The golden hues and sepia tones signify a more innocent time, as though ‘looking back through rose-tinted lenses’. Spatially, the favela in this sequence contrasts with later scenes: more open than the cramped, labyrinthine favela of later years, suggesting a more open, less oppressive society and more of a sense of freedom. The identical one-storey shacks, all on the same level and contrasting with the hierarchical, multi-storey favela of the present, suggest a sense of community and equality which is reinforced by the Tender Trio’s actions.  c) The scenes with Shaggy and Bernice evoke period romance, which the film ultimately subverts with Shaggy’s untimely death, in a cruelly ironic subversion of the typical ‘happy ending’: the camera pulls back and tracks their car in a wide angle as it drives off over the horizon, until the abrupt arrival of the police car prompts the camera to change direction and pull back into the favela, framing Shaggy’s dead body in a bird’s eye view and bringing this sequence (and time period) to an end. The message: this isn’t Hollywood, and no-one gets out of the City of God alive. |
| **24. The Story of the Apartment** | a) In this stylistically-unique scene, a static camera frames the apartment in a deep focus wide angle, while a series of dissolves tell us the stories of the apartment’s different occupants in a series of brief tableaux. The quick dissolves through time evoke the key theme of short, brutal lives played out over a never-changing backdrop and an endless cycle of crime and violence.  b) The thing that does change is the mise-en-scene / décor of the apartment, reflecting the different occupants and their businesses which inhabit it, and also communicating the theme of decline: as the crimes worsen, the apartment deteriorates. The walls change colour (warm to cold), the furniture moves (and gradually disappears), and the lighting gets darker.  c) Rocket’s narration holds it all together and again communicates the key theme of the brevity and cyclical nature of life in the favelas. |
| **25. Steak’s Initiation** | a) The scene where Steak is handed his first gun by Zé, and is given the choice of who to kill in order to prove his manhood, is a powerful scene. The shaky camera and loose compositions create a very raw, amateur, documentary feel to the scene which communicates the gritty reality of the context and an honest, almost objective presentation of the violence.  b) Power relationships are shown with a shot-reverse shot of Zé and his gang (and later Steak) framed at a low angle from the Runts’ POV, and a high angle of the Runts from Zé / Steak’s POV.  c) One of the runts bursts into tears, and with a close-up shot of his face and an incredibly naturalistic performance (he is clearly crying for real!) we are immediately drawn to his extreme fear of the situation, as well as his age, which could not be more than 5 years old. Close-ups of Steak display a conflicted, ambiguous and finally detached emotional state which makes simple moral judgements difficult: we are not told how to feel towards characters and events.  d) The gun (a phallocentric symbol) represents power, status and masculinity, and the idea is that Steak ‘comes of age’ or ‘becomes a man’ by killing, also emphasised in the dialogue.  e) Depth of field / shallow focus is used powerfully: in the shots from Steak’s POV before he shoots the boy, the foreground is out of focus and the background in focus, so we can see the terrified Runts and their reactions. This is reversed at the moment Steak pulls the trigger, so the next shot has the background blurred, as if to detach or disassociate Steak from his actions. It remains this way until the end of the scene, when a lingering shot of the back of Steak’s head causes us to ponder whether or not he is looking at the boy he killed, and how he feels about it.  f) An important aspect of the manner in which this scene is shot, and a characteristic for which the film has received much criticism, is that of detachment. How the viewer feels towards the acts of violence and the characters they are enacted upon is a metaphor for how society in Rio de Janeiro feels towards the favelas: unemotional, detached, and separate.  g) The final shot of the stray dog eating a scrap of chicken is also symbolic, representing a ‘dog eat dog society’ or the idea of doing what you must to survive. Steak has chosen to be a dog in this scene. Perhaps most people face the choice to become either a dog or a chicken in the City of God? (The film clearly loves its symbolic animals!) |
| **26. Benny’s Farewell** | a) Energetic, fast-paced editing to give an impression of the huge crowd and how popular Benny is, and also foreshadows his death at the end of the scene and the serious implications of this.  b) This is the last really upbeat scene in the film and the last to convey a sense of unity within the City of God. It is also the last time we see the sepia-toned ‘Tender Trio’ aesthetic in a brief flashback to young Benny and Li’l Dice, the recollection of a lost more innocent time. The quick cuts to the flashing disco lights occur with increasing frequency as the scene progresses towards its inevitable, tragic conclusion, and convey the recurring theme of brief lives, ‘over in a flash,’ further reinforced by the strobe lighting effect during the scene’s climax.  c) Consider Rocket’s ‘journey’ in this scene, both in terms of blocking and framing: he begins the scene high up in the DJ box, looking down on the rest of the crowd, and ends it literally on the floor, looking up in a low angle at Li'l Zé who has just thrown him there. Symbolises Rocket’s changing fortunes with the death of Benny and the ‘unfettering’ of Zé.  d) Lingering close-ups on Li'l Zé (often from a slight high angle) convey a sense of vulnerability not seen in any other scene.  e) The confrontation between Zé and Benny is shot with the two in the foreground and Angélica in-focus in the background, literally placed between them.  f) The ironic audio cue (Kung Fu Fighting) just after Benny tells Ze: “I don’t want to fight anymore. I’ve had enough.”  g) The final shot of Ze distraught over Benny’s dead body – an extreme wide angle which alienates any sympathy the audience had for Zé earlier in the scene. His firing of his gun into the air (the only way he can express himself emotionally) also ominously foreshadows the violence to come now that Benny is not around to keep Zé in line. |