



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*Central Station [Central do Brasil]* by Martine de Clermont-Tonnerre; Arthur Cohn; Walter Salles, Jr.; Marcos Bernstein; Joao Emanuel Carneiro; Walter Salles

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## Film Reviews

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CENTRAL STATION [*Central do Brasil*]. Produced by Martine de Clermont-Tonnerre and Arthur Cohn; directed by Walter Salles, Jr.; screenplay by Marcos Bernstein, João Emanuel Carneiro, and Walter Salles, Jr. 1998; color; 115 minutes. Brazil. In Portuguese with English subtitles. Distributor: New Yorker Films.

The Brazilian film *Central Station* is not based on historical events. Unlike such recent highly acclaimed films as *Elizabeth*, *Life Is Beautiful*, or *Shakespeare in Love*, it does not seek to recreate the dynamics of a bygone era, nor does it attempt to comment on or to imagine what such dynamics might have been like at some given moment in the past. *Central Station* is, nonetheless, an important film for students of history for three reasons. First, it marks an important moment in Brazilian film production when Brazilians are rediscovering their country's geographic diversity (although economic uncertainty accentuated by the devaluation of the *real* in early 1999 may limit this development). *Central Station* looks inward, discovering the potentials of the interior of the country. It is, to paraphrase Luigi Pirandello, a film in search of a country. Second, *Central Station* engages in a dialogue with Brazilian filmography, particularly the films of *cinema novo*, the aesthetically and politically compromised movement that emerged in the late 1950s determined to focus on Brazilian social reality and its underdevelopment. Finally, while the film does not travel through time, it does travel across space and in so doing comments on our notions of time and progress. At the center of *Central Station* is the historian's quintessential preoccupation: the search for information and the uncovering of truth, however fragmented it may be.

The film's plot centers on two main characters: Dora (Fernanda Montenegro, the *grande dame* of Brazilian theater), an elderly retired schoolteacher who purportedly transcribes and mails letters across the country for many of the illiterate citizens of Rio de Janeiro, and Josué (a young boy whom the director met begging in the airport), the son of one of Dora's clients, who finds himself abandoned when a city bus strikes down his mother near the train station where Dora works. These two characters are products of Brazilian urban malaise, which has cultivated individuals who are lost,

exiled, alienated, and often unscrupulous. Josué has lost his innocence, and Dora is pathetically corrupt.

*Central Station* takes its name from the busy subway and train stop in the heart of Rio's working-class district. One end of the station is the gateway to the Praça da República (the Plaza of the Republic), one of the outer landmarks of the bustling downtown area. Another serves as a gateway to the bus terminal, which takes passengers to neighborhoods farther afield. The title thus recalls at once a central and specifically urban locale and becomes a metaphor for a crossroads in Brazilian history. The film underscores the coming together of two distant generations, one represented by Dora, a grandmother-like figure, and the other by Josué, a child of about ten. Together, they flee the urban confusion and find friendship and redemption as they search for Josué's father. In their travels, they discover themselves and a vast country full of beauty and mystery.

Walter Salles's inspiration for the film apparently came from an actual relationship that developed between a female prisoner and the sculptor Franz Krajcberg after she wrote a letter to him. This uncommon relationship became the subject of the documentary *Socorro nobre* (Noble Help) of 1995. The power of that letter intrigued Salles, who wondered what would have happened if the letter never arrived. This premise was developed into a fictionalized script for *Central Station*.

*Central Station* represents an important development in the filmmaker's career as well as in Brazilian filmography. Salles's first major film, *Terra estrangeira* (1996), dramatized the era in Brazilian history under the corrupt President Fernando Collor de Mello, when disillusioned Brazilians were leaving for Europe and the United States in record numbers (see *AHR* Film Reviews, April 1998). Salles, the son of a Brazilian diplomat, spent many years living outside Brazil and was eager to depict that perspective. In *Central Station*, which takes place in the present, the young director provides a more optimistic view. Brazilians are in the process of self-discovery, and it is no coincidence that this occurred precisely at a time when Brazilians were enjoying unprecedented economic and political stability. The film argues that the answers to Brazil's problems lie within, and this is symbolized by the interior dry lands, the *sertão*.

The interior of Brazil, particularly that of the north-eastern state of Bahia, has long held a mythical place in Brazilian history. In his classic *Rebellion in the Backlands* (1902), Euclides da Cunha provided a vivid and often sympathetic portrayal of life in the north-eastern interior while documenting the famed millennial rebellion at Canudos. Many modernist writers of the 1920s and 1930s described the interior as the cradle of Brazilian civilization. Filmmakers associated with *cinema novo* focused on the interior and the northeast to raise consciousness about Brazil's underdevelopment and poverty. For example, Glauber Rocha, one of the major ideologues of the movement and author of the manifesto "An Aesthetic of Hunger" (1965), focused on the northeast in his film *Barravento* (The Turning Wind, 1962). Other films, such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Vidas secas* (Barren Lives, 1963), accentuated the devastating poverty and isolation of life in the backlands. The agenda of *cinema novo* in the 1960s established a discourse that continued to influence Brazilian cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. One poignant example was Hector Babenco's internationally acclaimed *Pixote* (1980), which employed street children rather than professional actors to document and dramatize their brutal lives in urban Brazil.

*Central Station* borrows much from *cinema novo*, but Salles is less dogmatic and less brutal in his depiction of poverty. Brazil is plagued by poverty and illiteracy, to be sure. They are both part of the urban landscape and integral to the rural environment. They affect the old and have an impact on children. But Brazil is also a country of celebration and beauty. Salles employs techniques of the road movie to explore Brazil and to allow his alienated protagonists to escape into the sunset. Dora and Josué travel by bus, and their poetic sunset is the heart of the *sertão*. The various bus stops become moments for reflection as they move further and further away from the city. Although the *sertão* is every bit as poor as the city, Salles celebrates the humanity of the old-fashioned life of the interior (as seen in the way that Josué's brothers eventually accept him). The celebration of the nobility and innocence of "the unexplored" or uncorrupted territory goes back at least to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the mid-eighteenth century, and, like Rousseau, Salles's vision is both romantic and utopian.

The film's voyage through Brazil's underdeveloped geographical space is a lesson in history. The Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier remarked on several occasions that, as a culture born from symbiosis, from cultural, political, and social intermingling, Latin America represented the spirit of the baroque. It is, as he also said, a culture that possesses a marvelous reality (*lo real maravilloso*), where the extraordinary is often routine. *Central Station* gives us a glimpse of Brazil's baroque. The tough urban lifestyle exists within the same national boundaries as the archaic, almost medieval existence of the northeast. This is a large country with many resources, but it is also a country where high levels of illiteracy still have many people paying others

to write letters for them. Brazil is a place where religion—long dismissed in many urban centers—continues to play a significant role in the lives of people. The Protestantism of the truck driver, who ironically reawakens Dora's dormant sexuality, and the religious celebration in the small town, where hundreds of believers pray and give thanks to saints, are two examples. In Salles's Brazil, remnants of feudalism coexist with some of the most advanced trends of capitalism. Poverty and beauty are interconnected in ways unimaginable to many in the West.

At times, Salles's discourse borders on exoticism, a criticism not unfamiliar to those who promote Latin America's unique baroque nature. In some ways, the *sertão* serves the same function as Egypt in *The English Patient* (1996), although without the colonial discourse, or Italy in *A Room with a View* (1986), although Salles's characters are more subtle. The "other space" is constructed in an *almost* orientalist fashion that does not reflect the dynamic quality of the day-to-day life of "ordinary people" or the role of their rituals. Here, the filmmaker faces the same challenge as the historian: how to reconstruct the truth of "ordinary people."

While the film has some documentary qualities, Salles chooses to present one specific interpretation of Brazilian reality. Through the eyes of two urban travelers, we gain a perspective on the tensions in Brazilian life. Salles accentuates these tensions without being didactic. The film raises many questions and treats important conflicts and issues, including age and gender, poverty, and the urban-rural dichotomy. In addition, this important work situates itself within the debates on progress and national identity.

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WELCOME TO SARAJEVO. Produced by Graham Broadbent, Damian Jones, and Paul Saroni; directed by Michael Winterbottom; screenplay by Frank Cottrell Boyce. 1997; color, 102 minutes. UK/USA. In English and Serbo-Croatian. Distributor: Miramax.

THE PERFECT CIRCLE [*Savršeni krug*]. Produced by Sylvan Burztejn, Dana Rotberg, Peter Van Vogelpoel; directed by Ademir Kenovic; screenplay by Ademir Kenovic, Abdulah Sidran, and Pjar Zalica. 1996; color; 110 minutes. Bosnia/France. In Serbo-Croatian and French. Distributor: Les Films du Losange, Paris/Parnasse International.

THE WOUNDS [*Rane*]. Produced by Dragan Bjelogrić; written and directed by Srdjan Dragojević. 1998; color; 103 minutes. Yugoslavia (Serbia)/France, in association with European Film Promotion, an initiative of the European Union's Media Program. In Serbo-Croatian. Distributors: Le Studio Canal +, Paris; Cobra Film Department/Pandora Film, USA.

THE POWDER KEG [*Bure Baruta*]. Produced by Dejan Vražalić and Antoine de Clermont-Tonnerre; directed by Goran Paskaljević; screenplay by Dejan Dukovski,