

Central Station

Walter Sallas

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study guide

by Rachel Thunder

Central Station

(Central Do Brasil)

Director	Walter Salles
Producer	Arthur Cohn
	Martine de Clememt-Tonnerre
Screenplay	Marcos Bernstein
	Joao Emanuel Carneiro
	based on an idea by Walter Salles

Cast

Fernanda Montenegro	Dora
Marilla Pera	Irene
Vinicius de Oliveira	Josue
Soia Lira	Ana
Othon Bastos	Cesar
Otavio Augusto	Pedrao
Stela Freitas	Yolanda
Matheus Nachtergaele	Isaias
Caio Junqueira	Moises

Crew

Cinematographer	Walter Carvalho
Music	Jaques Morelembaum
	Antonio Pinto
Editors	Felipe Lacerda
	Isabelle Rathery
Production Designers	Cassio Amarante
	Carla Caffè

Introduction

At the 1996 Sundance Film Festival a special award was presented to celebrate the 100th birthday of cinema: the “Cinema 100 – Sundance International Award”. An international jury considered over 2000 filmmakers and their projects for the award. Five film directors would be chosen who, according to Sundance, “best represented the next generation of creative talent in their countries and around the world”. Walter Salles and his project *Central Station* won the “Cinema 100 – Sundance International Award” for Latin America.

The film centres on the relationship between Dora, an ex-school teacher, who writes letters for the poor and illiterate who inhabit the world of the Central Railway Station in Rio De Janeiro in Brazil. One letter is written for a mother and her child, who are attempting to make contact with the boys’ father. With the death of the mother, Dora is compromised into undertaking a journey, into the interior of the country, to re-unite the boy with his father. This journey affects them both, irrevocably.

Initially working as a documentary maker, Salles made his debut feature film in 1991. Thematically, the search for identity is crucial to all his work. Using the vast social and technological changes Brazil has underwent in the recent past as his canvas, Salles work chronicles the damage inflicted on the lives of the ordinary people who are swept along in the midst of a tide of overwhelming change.

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Central Station aka *Central Do Brasil*

dir. Walter Salles

1998, Brazil, 106 mins



Walter Salles Biography

Walter Salles made his directing debut filming documentaries about the writer Jorge Luis Borges, the painter Marc Chagall, and the film directors John Huston and Federico Fellini. His work, both as a documentary and fiction filmmaker focuses on the theme of exile, displacement, and the search for identity. In 1991 he made his first full-length feature film 'High Art'. His second feature film 'Foreign Land' (1995, co-directed by Daniela Thomas), played an important part in the rebirth of Brazilian cinema. 'Foreign Land' won seven international prizes and was selected for screening by over thirty film festivals. In 1996 it was named Best Film Of The Year in Brazil, where it played in cinemas for over six months. It received high praise when it was screened in the U.S. in 1997.

Salles' documentaries include 'Life Somewhere Else', and 'Krajcberg, The Poet of the Remains'. Both have won awards at a number of international film festivals, including the Fipa D'or at the Festival International des Programmes Audio-Visuels, and the Best Documentary and the Public's Prize at the Festival dei Popoli in Italy. Previous to this he made a five hour documentary about the conflict between modernity and tradition in Japan. He has also made a series of documentaries about Brazilian painters and sculptors and the history of Brazilian music.

Since completing 'Central Station', Salles has directed 'Midnight' (again with Daniela Thomas), a short film for the series '2000 Seen by...' for the French-German television station Arte and a documentary called 'Short Lives' about children who enter the drug-dealing networks in the slums of Rio.

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Watching The Film

The Story

Dora (Fernando Montenegro), a retired schoolteacher, makes a living writing letters for the illiterate people who pass through Rio de Janeiro's main train station, Central station. Each day they commute to the city from the impoverished suburbs and hope that through these letters they will contact lost family members, reach lovers, and relate the hardships of their lives. Charging a dollar per letter, Dora promises to post them if they pay an extra dollar. Among her clients are Ana (Soia Lira) and her nine year old son Josué (Vinicius de Oliveira), who is longing to meet his father for the first time.

Dora has become indifferent to her customers and takes very little interest in the trust they place in her. Instead she plays God and decides whether to post their letters or not. Each evening, in her apartment in the suburbs, Dora along with her neighbour and friend Irene (Marilia Pera), recites the letters she has written that day. Those which she considers important are mailed, but the large majority are simply thrown in the bin. If Dora and Irene disagree about a particular letter it is put in a drawer to be dealt with on another occasion. This is what happens with Ana and Josué's letter.

Life alters dramatically for Dora next day. Ana and Josué return to Central station and after Ana has dictated a second letter to Josué's father she is hit by a bus and dies. Josué, now homeless and alone, wanders aimlessly around the station for a few days until Dora finally decides to approach him.

Her motives appear mixed. Initially she seems concerned and willing to help but after a difficult night in her apartment where Josué discovers the letter to his father, she decides to sell him to a dubious adoption agency. Her delight in her newfound spoils is evident in the purchase of a brand new television with remote control. However after being reproached by Irene, who warns her of Josué's fate in the hands of the adoption agency, she steals him back and, now on the run, decides to accompany him on his journey to find his father in Brazil's remote Northeast. For Dora and Josué this is a journey both physically and spiritually into unknown territory, and one which will change their lives dramatically.

Historical Context

“Few countries have suffered as many traumatic changes in the last thirty years as Brazil. A late industrialization created a huge wave of internal migration that, in turn, brought chaos to the cities, unprepared to accommodate so many new arrivals. The absence of land reform and successive droughts in the northern states led to a continuous exodus to the south of the country.

In the 1970’s, millions of migrants from the northeast abandoned their homes, families and cultural traditions, attracted by the illusion of an economic miracle announced by the military government. But promises were unfulfilled, unemployment rates soared and so did violence in the overpopulated Brazilian cities of the south.

In the beginning of the 90’s, the country plunged even further into a state of chaos. After recently-elected president Collor announced an outrageous new plan to restructure the economy, more than 800,000 young Brazilians opted for exile, in search of the opportunity denied them in their homeland. For the first time since its discovery 500 years ago, Brazil became a country of emigration.

A few years have passed. We are now on the verge of a new century, and somehow, the country has matured. We know that the economic miracle that would immediately solve all our structural problems was a fallacy. We know that mass exile is not a possible solution. We are finally confronted with ourselves, with what we really are, so distant from the image created by official statistics and by national television, entities that have both been so efficient in controlling and defining Brazil’s recent past”

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Walter Salles on Brazil



Looking at the Film

The director comments on the film

"Today, an important quest is surfacing: the desire to find another country, one that may be simpler and less glorious than previously announced, but aims to be more compassionate and human. A country where the possibility of a certain innocence still remains.

This latent desire to rediscover a country, to redefine ourselves, coincides with the rebirth of Brazilian cinema, with the necessity to continue a cinematic tradition that was brutally interrupted for political and economic reasons – perhaps because it depicted faithfully what took place in Brazil, in contrast to what was shown on television.

'Central Station' aims to talk about this country searching for its own roots. This is a film about a boy wanting to find his own identity (Josué), but is also about people striving to maintain a contact with their past (the illiterate migrants who dictate letters to Dora)."

Discussion

- (1) *Salles, in utilising a single storyline, set in the context of a whole country, attempts to tell that country's story in his film. Do you think he achieves this?*
- (2) *Is the single storyline, that Salles uses, enough to give us a full picture of the social change within the country as a whole? Is a single storyline an effective way of communicating the recent history of Brazil?*
- (3) *What images or story elements in the film most refer to the country as a whole?*
- (4) *If, as one critic suggests, Josué 'represents Brazil's future', what does the character of Dora represent? At the end of the film, do you think the future of Josué (and Brazil) is an optimistic one?*

The Making of Central Station

According to the director Walter Salles the film's core idea came about as a result of a documentary he directed called 'Life Somewhere Else' (Socorro Nobre), based on the written correspondence between a half-literate prisoner and an elderly sculptor named Franz Krajcberg. "The woman prisoner, sentenced to 36 years in jail, had found a reason to resist and survive her ordeal with the help of these letters she wrote – and the responses she received from Krajcberg. Having sensed how much one's life is changed when a simple letter is received, I started to wonder what could happen if a letter did not reach its destination..." (Salles)



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On both Central Station and Salles' previous feature film 'Foreign Land' half the crew had never worked in cinema before. With the exception of Fernanda Montenegro (Dora) and Marília Pera (Irene), the majority of the actors were making their debuts. It was also the first time for the art director, the screenwriters, costume designer and casting director. "The mixture of professionalism and experience from the crew, and the desire and enthusiasm of those that were discovering filmmaking made Central Station possible. More than that it made the filming of the story an extremely enjoyable experience." (Salles)

Both of the films were rehearsed like a play before being filmed which allowed a lot of improvisation during the shoot. "This blend of preparation and respect for 'on the spot' intuition were vital for Central Station. It also allowed us to finish the film before schedule, working within a specific budget, essential factors in independent production." (Salles)

The film opens in Rio, but instead of using a well-known image of the city, like the Copacabana beach, it begins in the main railway station and immediately reveals the realities of life for the average Brazilian. When the crew set up Dora's table in the station on the first day of the shoot, several people approached her to

write letters. Salles decided to film these people as they dictated their letters His experience as a documentary filmmaker allowed him to shoot the scenes with a smaller camera without drawing attention to it. Many of these people appear in the film. “Those people really needed to dictate letters and most of them were camera-innocent... we realised that the letters they came out with had a much more raw and honest quality – or should I say poetry - than the ones in the screenplay... theirs were dictated by a need to be heard and they brought an incredible emotional charge we never expected”. (Salles)

The sense of a documentary is also apparent in the pilgrimage scene. Instead of working with extras he decided to use real pilgrims attending an actual pilgrimage.

Task

- (1) At times Central Station seems more like a documentary on life in Brazil than a fiction film. What other sections of the film (other than those above) would suggest this.*
- (2) In the making of such a film, is a documentary style of film-making useful or a hindrance? Why would the director film actual events rather than stage the action? Why does the director use a relatively untrained cast and crew in the making of the film?*
- (3) Do you know of any other film-makers who would use this documentary technique for a fiction film?*

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The Opening Sequence

The opening sequence, or the first images, we see in a film often provide us with clues to what film is about. It sets the scene. The opening shots in Central Station immediately set up the realities of life in Rio de Janeiro. The vast station, the crowded trains, the letter senders, the street sellers, the noisy bustle, all contribute to exposing the harshness of life and the need to fight to survive in this chaos. We are aware that illiteracy is widespread, that religion is important, that human life is unimportant and that, in particular, the children are insignificant. Within Rio's Central Station they have their own rules, a thief can be shot dead without a trial, he is simply another statistic, a nuisance. Better to kill him for stealing a cheap clock than to have him steal again.

Task

- (1) In 200 words describe how you felt while watching the opening sequence of Central Station. What is the director telling us about Brazil? What is he telling us about the film we are about to watch?*
- (2) Look at the opening sequence of another film and describe how it sets up the story in terms of place, time and style (genre) of film – i.e. is it going to be a thriller, a horror, a road movie etc. How are the main characters initially presented to us and what clues are provided to describe them?*

Central Station (Walter Sallas)

The Road Movie

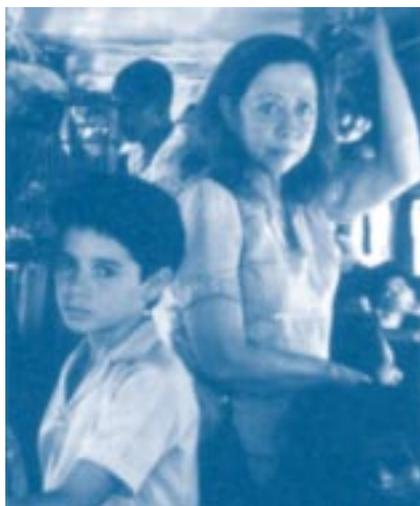
Road movies, as the term explains, are films in which the protagonists are on the move. Generally the viewer is provided with certain visual motifs which disclose that this is a road movie, e.g. a car, a tracking shot, wide and wild open spaces. One of its themes is discovery – usually self-discovery. The road movie follows chronological time and the narration of a road movie usually follows an ordered sequence of events which lead inevitably to a good or bad end. Up until recently the protagonist in the road movie was most often male in gender.

“When you do a ‘road movie’ you are constantly coming into contact with the unknown. I love road movies because they allow the characters to change as they are confronted with things they can’t control. They abandon their initial perception of the world and face up to things they don’t understand. When you’re on the road you either accept what reality and destiny bring you or you fight against it, which is suicidal.” (Salles)

Task

- (1) *What are the visual motifs in Central Station which indicate that it is a road movie? Compare it with another road movie you may have seen.*
- (2) *Did you find that the characters as they moved into unknown territory, abandoned their fears and allowed destiny to take them on their journey or did they fight against it? At what point in their journey did they switch from being hostile towards each other to accepting their situation and each other?*
- (3) *Can you identify any other films which you could classify as a road movie? Can you name any film with female protagonists in a road movie?*

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Imagery

1: The Letter

Throughout the film we are constantly reminded of the high rates of illiteracy in the Brazilian world of the Central Station and this is reflected of the importance of letter writing. It seems that Dora is perhaps the only literate person in the story. The film opens with a sequence of straight-to-camera shots of people reciting their woes, wants, and desires, to loved ones, enemies, lost friends and relatives, and to god and the saints. The letter is their only means of making contact and therefore the letter writer is crucial to their lives.

Task

- (1) Write a short essay on the importance of letter writing to the Brazilian people in the film.
- (2) What is Dora's attitude to her job as a letter writer? How does her attitude change during the film?
- (3) Why do you think there are such low rates of literacy the community around the station?
- (4) For Josué the letter is an essential tool in his search for his father, and at the end of the film his parents letters to each other become the uniting factor of the family. Discuss.
- (5) Communication (by using different methods) is central to all societies. Compare the merits of a phone call against that of a letter against that of an email as a means of communication. Do each of these media allow the communicator to 'voice' their message in different ways?

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2: Religion

Religion is not a driving force for the characters (Dora and Josué) in the film, but it is always in the background. It seems that wherever they turn they run into an icon, a statue, a pilgrim. From the opening shots, where we are presented with the people who send letters to God and the saints, to the religious fervour of the pilgrimage. We are constantly reminded of the faith that the Brazilian people place in prayer and God

Task

- (1) Describe the scenes in which religious iconography are present. What do you think is happening during the night ceremony at the pilgrimage?
- (2) Why do you think Dora faints in the shrine? What has changed between Dora and Josué after this occurs? Does their relationship improve or deteriorate? Discuss.

Characterisation

Characterisation is fundamental to film narrative. Each character is presented with particular traits of personality which contribute to the story or plot.

Dora is portrayed as a woman who has lost patience with society and with life. She is disheartened and knows that her only means of survival is through selfish acts. She profits from the needs of others and is unconcerned by their dependence on the letters she writes for them. Her appearance is hard and, at times, seems almost ugly. However as the film progresses and she begins to rediscover her heart, she becomes beautiful both in her appearance and her attitude.

Josué represents the future of Brazil. His dignity and his faith in finding his father, although occasionally undermined by Dora's negativity, are constant and reveal his belief in his future (and in turn in that of Brazil's). With the death of his mother, he is quickly hardened to the cruelties of life. His obstinate determination to find his father often comes across as pure naivety but in the end he has convinced Dora that there is hope.

Early in the film Josué's anger towards Dora is understandable, particularly after she sells him to the agency, however gradually the barriers between them are broken down. Perhaps the pivotal point in their relationship occurs after Dora has fainted in the shrine. The following scene shows Dora asleep with her head on Josué's lap. It seems that the roles of parent and child, or guardian and ward, have been reversed and so has the anger between them. They seem to have finally decided to accept their fate.

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Task

- (1) Pick one of the characters, either Dora or Josué, and write a short essay describing their character traits. Look at their appearance, their clothes and their attitudes. Look at the environment through which the journey, from Rio to the settlements in the northeast, and describe how it effects their character. Include examples of scenes from the film.*
- (2) Film-makers often use contrasting characters to develop the element of conflict in a plot. Chose another film and describe the main characters; look at how they contribute to the plot and how they compare and contrast with each other.*

Cinema Novo and Brazilian Cinema

The most important and influential era in the history of Brazilian cinema occurred between 1960 and 1972. This was the time of Cinema Novo, the first truly indigenous Brazilian cinema. Prior to this filmmaking in Brazil was largely influenced by North American and Europe.

In the late 1940's the Vera Cruz film company was founded by the industrial bourgeoisie of Sao Paulo and was modelled on the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios in Hollywood. Vera Cruz, through its themes, genres, and glossy production values, achieved the look of First World cinema, i.e. Hollywood and Europe. In many films, the physical characteristics of the actors (imitation blondes in particular), the decor, the costumes and the music evoked a European ambience. Vera Cruz produced eighteen feature films, the most famous of which was Lima Barreto's 'O Cangaceiro' (1953), a double prize winner at the Cannes Film Festival and a world-wide success. The company became known as tropical Hollywood, but it lacked the financial support of the First World cinema and in 1954 it went bankrupt.

The Vera Cruz film company, with its upper class values, totally ignored the interests, tastes and real situation of the Brazilian people and was subsequently overturned by Cinema Novo.

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Cinema Novo

The first signs of a new awakening in Brazilian cinema coincided with the bankruptcy of the Vera Cruz studios. Cinema Novo began to emerge in Brazil in the 1950's and was initially influenced by Italian neo-realism. In 1953 Alex Vianny made 'Needle in the Haystack', and for the first time attempted to put the lessons of neo-realism into practice in Brazil, by using natural settings, non-professional actors and a simple style of filmmaking. Nelson Pereira dos Santos' film 'Rio 40 Degrees' particularly contributed to the establishment of Cinema Novo, with its emphasis on independent production and its critique of Brazilian social structures. The films produced at this time were primarily documentary in style and concentrated on the lives of ordinary people.

In the '60s, Cinema Novo became more radicalised and a cinema co-operative was formed. Filmmakers in this co-operative included Glauber Rocha, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Carlos Diegues and Ruy Guerra. The journal *Metropolitano* of the Metropolitan Students' Union became a forum for critics and filmmakers who opposed commercial Brazilian cinema, Hollywood films, Hollywood aesthetics and Brazilian cinema's control by Hollywood distribution companies.

They sought to create a style of film which reflected Brazil in the 1960s. The majority of the population were affected by poverty and only the very few enjoyed

Central Station (Walter Sallas)

an affluent lifestyle. Cinema Novo was both populist – because of its blend of history, myth and popular culture, and revolutionary – because it sought to advocate the rights of the disenfranchised and landless peasants. It attempted to expose Brazil's social contradictions by focusing on the problems of the urban and rural lower classes who were confronted each day by starvation, violence, religious alienation and economic exploitation. Dos Santos' film 'Barren Lives' (1963) deals with the oppression of peasants by landowners, Glauber Rocha's 'Barravento' (1962) exposed the alienating role of religion in the fishing community.

Rocha in his manifesto on Cinema Novo, 'An Aesthetic of Hunger' (1965), contrasts Cinema Novo and its "gallery of starving people" with what he calls "digestive" cinema "... films about rich people, with pretty houses, riding in luxurious automobiles". Rocha goes on to say: "hunger – for the European, it is a strange surrealism. For the Brazilian it is a national shame. He does not eat yet he is ashamed to say so; and yet he does not know where this hunger comes from."

By the early 1970's Cinema Novo was suppressed by the military government that had taken power in 1969.

Walter Salles and CINEMA NOVO

Walter Salles was Guest Curator at the Cinema Novo and Beyond Conference at the University of Minnesota, October, 1999. The conference focused on films from the Cinema Novo period and those which contribute to the renaissance of Brazilian cinema in the 1990s.

"Cinema Novo put Brazil's face on the screen. It plotted a physical and human geography that is our own. It exposed our contradictions, our desires, our fears, and our convulsive energy. An anti-industrial movement par excellence, Cinema Novo incorporated the lessons of neo-realism already evident in the early film, 'Rio, 40 Degrees' (1955) by Nelson Pereira dos Santos – which was banned by censors who alleged that in Rio temperatures never reached 40 degrees Celsius (100 degrees Fahrenheit)! But above all, Cinema Novo formulated an aesthetic theory that went beyond the principles of the neo-realists or the Nouvelle Vague – the concept that all you needed in order to make a film that could reveal reality, was a handheld camera and an idea in mind.

Cinema Novo was, more than anything else, a revolutionary movement: "Wherever there's a filmmaker, whatever his age or origins, ready to place cinema at the service of the causes of his time, that is where you will find the core of Cinema Novo. It is the opposite of industrial cinema, which deals in lies and exploitation," said Glauber Rocha, who along with Santos was the movement's leader.

It was the reinvention of Brazilian Cinema, at a time in which the whole country began to become aware of itself, of its creative potential. A new capital city and new architecture were born – Brasilia. Literature, poetry, and bossa nova conquered the world.

Some of the movement's most significant films, were influenced by two works

that preceded it – ‘The Assault on the Pay Train’ (1962) by Roberto Farias and ‘The Given Word’ (1962) by Anselmo Duarte – both deeply anchored in realist traditions. They were followed by the foundation work of Cinema Novo – ‘Barren Lives’ (1963) by Santos, one of the finest films in the history of Brazilian cinema, along with Rocha’s quintessential ‘Black God, White Devil’ (1964).

Little by little, Cinema Novo was suffocated by military censorship. But such a instinctive movement does not die, it undergoes a continuous metamorphosis, be it at the hands of its own creators (as in the outstanding ‘Memories of Prison’ by Santos, a film about the necessity to recover the country’s ethical axis), or the young talents... who seek to outline contemporary Brazil or review, in a modern way, the myths of the past.

About 40 years after the appearance of its most vigorous cinematographic movement, Brazilian cinema has found a new breath after several years of forced silence. Current production is perhaps more regionally diversified than in the Cinema Novo years. We have no single line of thematic development nor an aesthetic creed common to all filmmakers. But we are once again united to reveal the country’s heart and soul... we tirelessly roll the rock to the top of the mountain, having already grown accustomed to our economic instability – and to the resulting instability in film production. But you can be sure of one thing: we will not renounce our right to make films, and put Brazil’s face on the screen”.

Final Task

(1) Looking through this Study Guide, you will have come across various new terms and references. Find out what the following terms mean: (a) auteur (b) Avant-Garde Cinema (c) Nouvelle Vague, (d) Neo-Realism (e) tracking shot.

More Information

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