

Central Station: Road Movie and Transnational Film

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Abstract

A certain genre of film generally has certain formulas, that is codes and conventions that is used to represent its elements. In addition, a film could and mostly belong to more than one genre. Road movie generally tells story of people “on the road” or on journey to places, while transnational film can be described as film that is capable to bring about story that can be rooted on any national culture. This study is then attempt to attest *Central Station* as a road movie as well as a transnational film, which arguably can be done by identifying elements of the film, such as narrative and mode of production, that constitute to a certain genre.

Key words : Film, Genre, Road Movie, Transnational Movie, *Central Station*

Introduction

Central Station (1998), with its original title *Central do Brasil*, was directed by Walter Salles. It achieved great success in box offices when the movie was released in Brazil, putting Titanic and Godzilla in the lower rank for the top ten lists. An impressive number of 1.3 million spectators and over \$17 million of profit worldwide were achieved by this movie by the spring of 1999 (Shaw 2003, p.162). This film also gained successes in film festivals such as winning the Golden Bear from Berlin International Film Festival in 1998, and also winning a BAFTA and nominated for Oscar for best foreign language film. Fernanda Montenegro, who played the main character Dora, also achieved an accomplishment by winning the Silver Bear at Berlin International Film Festival and was also nominated for best actress in the Oscar’s for her performances in this movie (Dennison and Shaw 2004, p. 211). There are many reasons to why *Central Station* received global interest and granted many awards. One of its appealing point lies on its storyline (Shaw 2003, p.163) while another factor arguably is its mode of production that would classify this film as a road movie and a transnational film simultaneously. These reasons will be examined further in this writing.

Methodology

This study will use textual analysis to analyze *Central Station* to attest the central purpose of this writing, which is showing aspects of *Central Station* that makes it an example of both road movie and transnational film.

By doing textual analysis is to read a text, to signify certain codes or indication of the text and then pointing out the meaning that can be perceived from it or how McKee (2003, p.1) describes it, it is to “make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text”. As Hartley (2002, p.227) also said, by doing textual analysis is not to find the “correct interpretation” of a certain text, but rather to comprehend the possible interpretation that can be made out of it. Textual analysis can effectively assist the text reader to examine the information of the text and then perceive the possible meaning.

Traditionally, a text would refer to a medium-bounded system of writing, in which medium is where the writing was written; a sheet of paper, scroll or even stone. But in the present-day, the definition of the term text has broaden greatly, so movies, TV programs, website, photos and magazines are considered as text as well (Hartley, 2002). In the context of film, McKee (2003) suggests that by doing textual analysis, or to be precised the method that he suggests is post-structuralist textual analysis, is to conceive a film not as a “whole work of art” (McKee 2003, p.74), which means trying to comprehend all elements that construct the film, but rather analyzing element of the film that will answer the question that is being investigated. However he did stated that this is only one method of analyzing text and every method bound to have advantages and disadvantages.

In addition, Cook and Bernink (1999, p.322) mention that one perspective to analyze a movie is by examining its narrative, which is “what is told, the represented story” and “how it is told, or the narration”. As they also stated that it would then include describing the subject and the arrangement of the story and the process of how the story is told by a variety of narrating system.

The next factor that should come into attention then is the genre of the film. A certain genre of film generally has certain formulas, that is codes and conventions that is used to represent its elements. A certain act can mean differently in different genre, as how a certain character in films is expected to act according to its genre. Narrative nevertheless also constitute genre (Dixon, 2000). Then by identifying a film to be belongs to a certain genre, we then can examine the elements of the film that constitute that genre. A point that needs not to be forgotten is that a film could and mostly belong to more than one genre. Thus by examining elements of *Central Station*, we would be able to classify this film as a road movie and a transnational film.

Central Station Storyline

As mentioned earlier, the accomplishment of this film is argued to lie on its storyline, which was based on Salles’ idea (Shaw 2003, p.162). The story initiated with Dora working on Central Station in Rio de Janeiro as a writing helper for illiterate people who wanted to send letters to their families and acquaintances. Dora was a retired school teacher, but for one who used to have an honorable occupation, she is a cynical and materialistic middle-aged woman. She usually re-read the letters that she wrote to her friend, Irene, where both of them would then ridicule the content of the letters. Dora would only send a few of the letters but would still keep the sending fee of those she didn’t send. One day, Ana, who was accompanied by a young boy Josué, asked Dora to help her to write a letter for her husband, Jesus, which she had abandoned years ago. The letter was direct and unsympathetic. Dora decided not to send the letter, insisting that Jesus may well be a drunkard man, despite Irene’s sympathy for Josué who is hoping to meet his father through the letter. But a few days later Ana and Josué came back and asked Dora to write another letter, a quite considerate one, for Jesus. But then an unexpected event turns the plot of this film. When leaving the station, Ana was hit by a bus and passed away, leaving Josué literally alone. Wandering alone in the station, Dora then brought Josué to her house. Dora later took Josué to an adoption company who promises to find a foster family for Josué, and gave Dora some money which she spent to buy a new TV set. Irene showed her disapproval of Dora’s acts by saying that the company will probably kill Josué and take his organs, but she paid no attention. However afterward she took Josué back from the adoption company then decides to find Josué’s father. From this moment the film enters a different scheme, where the main character stepped on to the bus, leaving Rio de Janeiro, an urban city, to Bom Jesus do Norte, a Brazilian rural area, where Jesus lives.

This section of the film then consequently follows the characteristic of road movie film genre (Oricchio 2003, p.151). By a series of unfortunate events, in the middle of their journey they ended up being penniless and strayed. Then they met a man, a truck driver and an evangelist, that help them to continue their journey. Soon after, Dora started to develop romantic feelings for the man, but later he unexpectedly fled, leaving Dora brokenhearted. Lost and penniless, they finally manage to get to Bom Jesus do Norte by traveling with the pilgrimage group that was going in the same direction. After they reach Jesus' house, they found out that Josué's father had moved to a different place. Stranded and penniless once again, Josué suddenly has an idea to use Dora ability as a writing helper for the pilgrimage. And this time Dora finally did send all the letters that she wrote. Once their money problem was solved, they continued their journey to find Josué's father. When they finally reach Estrela do Norte, they didn't manage to find Josué's father. Having affection for Josué already, Dora then tells him that he can always live with her. But when they're going to leave the city, they manage to find Josué's half brothers, Isaías and Moisés. By pretending to be Jesus friend without revealing Josué true identity, they stop by at Isaías and Moisés house where Isaías later ask Dora to read a letter that Jesus left before he left the house. In his letter Jesus mentioned that he went to Rio de Janeiro to look for Ana, Josué's mother. He also emotionally express his feeling for his sons, with Dora adding Josué name as well, and left a promise to come back one day. Believing that Josué's future will be better if he stays with his brothers, Dora then left Josué in the house secretly.

Central Station as a Road Movie

Based on its storyline, *Central Station* is an example of a road movie, not just because the character travels between places, but it also tells about a journey to find oneself (Oricchio 2003, p.151). A road movie, as defined by North (2007), is "a vehicle for either one or a small group of individuals who seek to escape the world they are living in and set out towards redemption on the road". It's closely connected with American culture and its impression to the world since the beginning of American cinema (North, 2007). Despite the loose term of road movie, since journey as a theme can be perceived from any film or narrative, as a film genre it is initially labeled for American films that emphasizes the story of people "on the road" in the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. But its narrative can be drawn from the classic literature Homer's *Odyssey* (Grant 2007, p. 417), which Salles (2007) also stated appears to be the basic foundation of the storyline of most road movies, and in America particularly it was also influenced by modern literature such as *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac (Grant 2007, p. 417).

In Hollywood, some aspects of modern road movies were influenced by other genres, such as typical gangster movies in the 1930s and the 1940s that used vivid driving scenes, classical western movies and film noir as a more direct influence (Grant 2007, p. 418), however Salles (2007) points at documentaries as the starting point of road movie genre.

The period after the Second World War was the time when road movies really began in America. When soldiers coming back from war learned that "fortune has been made", the society that they once knew has changed, it compelled them to travel to places that offered residence and possession. A film noir, and a road movie all at once, *Detour* (1945) was a ground-breaking example of the road movie in this era (North, 2007). A small number of comedies combined with road movies then came into view in the 1950s. But it was *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), a fugitive couple story, and *Easy Rider* (1969) that was marked as a starting point for American modern road movies. The beginning of the 1970s was the golden age for American road movies when a large number of these movies were made. Many

different themes were later included in road movies in the 1990s, for example violent outlaw films combined with horror by using a traveling serial killers as its main character. A pair of women were also put behind the wheel in *Thelma and Louise* (1991), another outlaw film, as a variety for this genre (Grant 2007, p. 418-419).

Road movies have been used in different types of films, nevertheless it is still possible to recognize some characteristics that were used in road movies. First of all, the characters were normally shown driving a car or riding a motorbike, however taking a bus or train as their mean of transportation or simply on foot were also common (Grant 2007, p. 417), just like in *Central Station* where Dora and Josué is traveling by using a bus, and in a brief part of the film by using a truck.

Road movies generally develop around two narratives that remain exist; “the quest” and “the outlaw”. The quest narrative “meander and probe the mysterious experience of discovery” while the outlaw used crime as the driven power that made the character run from law enforcement and hit the road (Grant 2007, p. 418). But unlike the majority of films, road movies narrative generally doesn’t follow the standard three act structure of film screenplay. For example, usually it was inner conflict rather than outer disputes that drove characters to take action in the road movies (Salles, 2007). Just like Dora, it is her self-consciousness, or more likely guilt, that finally drove her to take Josué back from the adoption institution. Burdened with Josué’s fate, Dora then set on a journey to look for Josué’s father. Road movie narratives will also be likely to be open-ended (Grant 2007, p. 418), which it is also the case for *Central Station*’s ending.

In general, Latin American road movies differ from American by being more concerned with characters and their community rather than individuality of the star. Its narrative tends to be about a quest rather than an outlaw story, and it is related to national issues such as the dichotomy of urban and rural, and North-South disparity (Grant 2007, p. 421). In *Central Station*, the urban and rural area were somewhat devilishly and romantically visualized, with the two main characters to some extent also represented by them (Shaw 2003, p. 169). Despite the use of road movie narrative, *Central Station* still holds the theme of social conscience with filtered social politic agenda, that was also the characteristic of New Latin American cinema in the 1960s and the 1970s (Shaw 2007, p. 4), that gives it apparently transnational sense by being able to show that a film “can be rooted in a national culture while falling within generic conventions associated with Hollywood” (Shaw 2007b, p. 80).

Shaw (2003) also shows that *Central Station*, while its narrative is very much romanticized fiction, it also offers elements of documentary in it. For instance is the letter writing scene at the station and scenes that showed the pilgrims at Bom Jesus do Norte. The scene that was shown was not an artificial act; it was based on a real event (Shaw 2003, p.165). The representation has become the thing itself (Salles cited in Shaw 2003), so this movie gives a mixture between fiction and reality. Just like Salles (2007) also points out that road movie may be the film genre that is able to place itself easily between the margin of fiction and documentary.

An issue that calls for attention next is whether a road movie can still continue to exist in this era of globalization, where everything seems to be present and distance ceases to exist. In which Salles admits that he has doubts as well. But then he argues that a road movie is principally about the process of encountering or undergoing, it is about journey. It is concerned with what people can learn from others who are unlike them (Salles, 2007). Just as the character Dora, a cynical, materialistic grown up is able to win back her humanity by taking a quest together with an innocent young boy Josué. Furthermore, Salles stated that especially in this globalization era, where economic reason makes people all over the world travel whether they wish for it or not, road movie is the genre that can portray this reality on

screen better than any other genre. As he puts it, “It’s more proof that road movies are as necessary as ever to tell us who we are, where we come from and where we’re heading” (Salles 2007). This motivation is probably what made Salles directed and continue directing many road movies other than *Central Station*, such as *Foreign Land* (Terra Estrangeira 1996), *Midnight* (O Primeiro Dia 1999), *Behind the Sun* (Abril Despedaçado 2002) and *The Motorcycle Diaries* (Los diarios de motocicleta 2004) (Williams 2007, p. 15). He also directed a film adaptation of *On the Road*, an influential American literature, in 2012.

Central Station as a Transnational Film

In 1990 Brazil went through its worst period of cinema making industry. Collor de Mello, the president at that time, halted all State sources and closed Brazil’s state-funded film institution, Embrafilme. Merely thirteen films were made in 1990, and in 1993 this number decreased to three. But in 1993, with the affirmation of Audiovisual Law that allowed tax reduction for companies that invested in films, and the new regime in 1994, Brazil cinema was resurrected. Audiovisual Law also permits film distributors from overseas to invest their taxes, equal to 70%, in Brazilian film industry, which leads U.S corporations such as Columbia, Warner and Sony to take this favorable chance (Shaw 2003, p.161). Thirty-five to forty films were being made in the latter part of 1990, but since the financial support was mostly coming from non-state funds, there was pressure to make the films, instead of being an art, to become a commercial success by attracting more audiences. This condition has brought film critics to make comments on it (Shaw 2003, p.162). *Central Station* then perhaps comes as a response to it. It achieved success not just commercially, but also released broadly in many art houses, which arguably makes it a creation of art as well (Shaw 2003, p.162).

For national audiences, a particular aspect of *Central Station* that is used for the theme of *sertão* or backland may be reminiscent of *Cinema Novo*, as three of the most important *Cinema Novo* films were using *sertão* as their its background (Oricchio 2003, p.140). But while *sertão* in *Cinema Novo* is used as “obvious expression of social divisions, conflict and discord”, the *sertão* in *Central Station* is used as a site for settlement (Oricchio 2003, p.153). *Cinema Novo* is Brazil’s cinema movement in the 1960s that “conceived to create a ‘Brazilian cinema’ in Brazil, to reveal the country’s true face and to contribute to its transformation” (Shaw and Dennison 2007, p. 81) and *Central Station* is arguably also inspired by this tradition (Oricchio 2003, p.150). Salles (cited in Falicov, 2008) stated that *Central Station* is concerned with the identity of Brazil. There are many allegories presented in this movie, for example the cynicism of old Brazil is represented in the character of Dora while young Josué stands for “the possibility of a certain innocence, of refusing a deterministic future and granting yourself another destiny” (Salles cited in Shaw 2003, p. 157). Its concern about modern Brazil community is probably what makes this film a good example of Brazilian contemporary national cinema.

Higson (2006, p. 18-19) then argue about the limits of the national cinema notion. He argued that national cinema is inclined to think that national identity is set in a certain area, and borders are somewhat impermeable. But in fact this is not so, and it is the crossing between them that brings about the concept of transnational. The film industry has worked regionally, nationally and on transnational bases for quite some time. This can be seen by looking at cinema in two aspects, first is the production and the movement of the filmmakers. The co-production of film that uses different resources from another nation state has been done at least since the 1920’s (Higson 2006, p. 19). *Central Station* managed to gather \$2.9 million budget fund (Shaw 2003, p.162) and was made by the co-production of two Brazilian companies, Videofilms and Riofilme, and French companies MACT Prods and Canal Plus

(Falicov 2008). The second factor is the distribution of the film. A lot of films have been distributed not just in the state of its production but also in more extensive places (Higson 2006, p. 19). The development of technology such as DVD, and other recent digital media and the increasing accessibility of filmmaker and audience to these technologies also facilitate the spread of a film (Ezra and Rowden 2006, p. 1). Another way to distribute and present a movie is through film festivals (Ezra and Rowden 2006, p. 3), in which *Central Station* has been participating and winning in many of these (Dennison and Shaw 2004, p. 211). The audiences reception of a film is also one way to look on how cinema works on a transnational basis. As Higson (2006, p. 19) implies, when a movie travels, audiences from different cultural background may perceive the movie differently. For example, by showing the actual event of pilgrimage in the pilgrim scenes in *Central Station*, it gave “folkloric power” (Shaw 2003, p.165) that may be comprehended as an engaging display for Brazil’s rural public, but for large-scale viewers the impression of “cultural tourism” (Shaw 2003, p.165) that it brings may also appeal to them in different ways.

Other reasons why this film attains such popularity is probably set on its story. As it had been mentioned before, one of the key successes of *Central Station* lies in its narrative, which has “a universal appeal” in it. As Shaw words it, “the death of a mother and the developing maternal/filial relationship between Dora and Josué are guaranteed to move the audiences. The theme of the search for the father is at once realistic and mythical and allows the film to be read on various levels” (Shaw 2003, p.162-163).

With the achievement that *Central Station* had, an agreement with distributors that would then influence the number of people that would be able to access their movie will no longer be a major difficulty for the next Brazilian filmmaker. Walter Salles, which is said to be the man behind the success of *Central Station*, was then considered as an influential person in bringing about the international popularity of current Brazilian cinema (Williams 2007, p. 12). Salles’ other films, that followed *Central Station*, such as *Los diarios de motocicleta (The Motorcycle Diaries)* that was released in 2004, which is funded by different production companies and involved crews from different nationalities as additional points that made this film “a truly pan-American film”, also achieved a great success internationally. And his production company, Videofilmes, was also involved in the co-production of another internationally successful Brazilian film *Cidade de Deus (City of God)* that was released in 2003 (Williams 2007, p. 11-12), making Salles maybe truly one of a few significant people that brings contemporary Brazilian cinema, in particular, and Latin American cinema, in general, to its current level of global popularity.

Conclusion

Central Station has managed to employ the road movie narrative, which is “seems distinctly American” (Grant 2007, p. 420) in the Brazilian context, and successfully customized it to a more global audience. Its storyline was focusing on Brazilian identity (Falicov 2008), but the issues that were brought up in this movie could be applicable to a broader margin than just Brazil as a nation. Its method of production, by co-producing between Brazil and French companies (Falicov 2008) and its distribution, through digital media such as DVD and by participating in film festivals (Dennison and Shaw 2004, p. 211), were other factors that made this film transnational. Walter Salles himself, by breaking through the boundary of national film making procedure and continues making and contributing in production of other transnational films, also played a great role in making *Central Station* a transnational film.

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