

LA  
CINÉMATHÈQUE  
**FILM CLUB**



Latin American Film Series  
Fall 2019

Walter Salles  
b.1956  
Brazil

Central Station  
1998

# Central Station

Roger Ebert • December 25 1998

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/central-station-1998>

3/4 Stars

The tone of life in Rio de Janeiro is established in an early scene in Walter Salles' "Central Station," as a train pulls alongside the platform and passengers crawl through the windows to grab seats ahead of the people who enter through the doors. In this dog-eat-dog world, Dora (Fernanda Montenegro) has a little stand in the rail station where she writes letters for people who are illiterate.

A cynic, she destroys most of the letters. One day a mother and son use her services to dictate a letter to the woman's missing husband. Soon after, the mother is struck and killed by a bus. The kid knows one person in Rio: Dora. He approaches her for help, and her response is brief: "Scram!" The key to the power of "Central Station" is in the way that word echoes down through most of the film. This is not a heartwarming movie about a woman trying to help a pathetic orphan, but a hard-edged film about a woman who thinks only of her own needs. After various attempts to rid herself of young Josue (Vincius de Oliveira), she finally sells him to an adoption agency and uses the money to buy herself a new TV set.

There's not a shred of doubt or remorse as she settles down before the new set. But the whole story is known by her friend Irene (Marilia Pera, who played the prostitute who adopts the street kid in "Pixote"). "Those children aren't adopted!" she cries. "They're killed, and their organs are sold!" As if it is a great deal of bother, Dora then steals Josue back from the "orphanage," and finds herself, against her will and beyond her comprehension, trying to help him find his father, who lives far away in an interior city.

"Central Station" then settles into the pleasures of a road movie, in which we see modern Brazil through the eyes of the characters: the long-haul trucks that are the lifeline of commerce, the sprawling new housing developments, the hybrid religious ceremonies, the blend of old ways and the 20th century. Whether they find the father is not really the point; the film is about their journey and relationship.

The movie's success rests largely on the shoulders of Fernanda Montenegro, an actress who successfully defeats any temptation to allow sentimentality to wreck her relationship with the child. She understands that the film is not really about the boy's search for his father, but about her own reawakening. This process is measured out so carefully that we don't even notice the point at which she crosses over into a gentler person.

The boy, 10-year-old Vincius de Oliveira, was discovered by the director in an airport, shining shoes. He asked Walter Salles for the price of a sandwich, and Salles, who had been trying for months to cast this role, looked at him thoughtfully and saw young Josue. Whether he is an actor or not I cannot say. He plays Josue so well, the performance is transparent. I hope he avoids the fate of Fernando Ramos da Silva, the young orphan who was picked off the streets to star in "Pixote," later returned to them and was murdered. I met de Oliveira at the Toronto Film Festival, where, barbered and in a new suit, he looked like a Rotarian's nephew.

It's strange about a movie like this. The structure intends us to be moved by the conclusion, but the conclusion is in many (not all) ways easy to anticipate. What moved me was the process, the journey, the change in the woman, the subtlety of sequences like the one where she falls for a truck driver who doesn't fall for her. It's in such moments that the film has its magic. The ending can take care of itself.

## Central Station

Todd McCarthy • February 8, 1998

Article sourced from Variety: <https://variety.com/1998/film/reviews/central-station-1200452950/>

*A sensitive art film of the old school, Walter Salles' "Central Station" is a melancholy Brazilian road movie shot through with gently stressed cultural commentary. Strongly reminiscent of the work of Vittorio De Sica, with whom current producer Arthur Cohn worked several times, this handsomely crafted study of a search for family connections and, in a larger sense, personal and national hope, doesn't quite manage the climactic emotional catharsis at which it aims, but will involve and move most viewers nonetheless. Well received at its Sundance world preem and set for competition in Berlin, this will be a solid specialized attraction for discerning audiences internationally.*

Salles' first feature, the 1995 "Foreign Land," was one of the top Brazilian pics in recent years and played widely on the fest circuit. A former documaker, helmer here sets a highly intimate story about the often troubled journey of a young boy and an aging woman against the backdrop of a country in transition. While well judged and credibly played, the film drops dollops of meaning that are, if anything, rather too carefully and gingerly planted, leaving nothing to chance in a work that at least partly means to be open to accident and the randomness of human experience.

Vibrant, unusual opening sees Dora (Fernanda Montenegro), a dour, disagreeable-looking older woman, writing letters for a succession of customers at a little stand in Rio de Janeiro's teeming central railway station. Among Dora's patrons, who are members of Brazil's poor and illiterate class, is a woman whose 9-year-old son, Josue (Vinicius de Oliveira), wants to meet the father he has never known. But after dictating two letters to the father, who is said to live somewhere far to the north, the mother is struck by a bus and killed, leaving the stranded Josue to wander aimlessly around the train station.

Although Dora is the opposite of a kindly, maternal old woman – she considers most of her customers "trash" and systematically throws out most of the letters she writes even though she's been paid to compose and mail them – she feels she has no choice but to take the boy home, at least for the night. Dora lives in a cramped apartment overlooking the train tracks, and she often spends her evenings with her neighbor friend Irene (Marilia Pera), going through the purgatory drawer of undelivered letters and debating which, if any, to actually send.

To resolve Josue's dilemma, Dora places him with people who purportedly specialize in finding foreign adoptive parents. But when Irene tells her that their real business is selling kids who are then killed for their organs, Dora daringly rescues Josue and whisks him on board a bus.

Even though Dora turns out to have a speck of feeling for her charge due to the fact that her own mother died when she was his age, she has no intention of assuming true responsibility for Josue. Trying but failing to ditch him at a roadside stop, she hitches a ride for them on a truck driven by a religious man who surprisingly inspires Dora's latent romantic yearnings.

Left once again to their own devices, Dora and Josue make their way farther across the scrubby, increasingly dusty landscape on a truck carrying white-garbed worshippers. After one attempt to locate the boy's father goes for naught, the film delivers its biggest set piece as the pair find themselves in the middle of an enormous rural religious pilgrimage. Penniless, Dora thinks she's reached the end of the road, but in an

entrepreneurial burst, Josue suggests that she begin writing letters again, and Dora receives a windfall from the devout who are anxious to send missives to saints.

Journey's end comes at an enormous mass housing development on the new economic frontier, and even if Dora and Josue don't achieve the sought-after resolution to their quest, they find a viable one that might suffice. Understated ending appears intended to create more of an emotional swell than it does, as it seems both muted and overly calculated.

But then, the entire film feels a tad too cautious and minutely controlled. The land-voyage format and entirely on-location lensing approach pay homage to the neo-realist/Cinema Novo tradition, but Salles' fastidious style doesn't allow any spontaneity to creep into his exquisitely composed frames and concentrated dramatic scenes. As a living mural of life across a certain section of Brazil, pic hardly lacks for interesting things to observe and absorb, but its somewhat airless quality prevents it from fully realizing its potential in its hallowed genre.

All the same, the film is affecting and pointedly unsentimental in its portrayal of the often grudging relationship between the gruff, callused Dora and Josue, who only abstractly grasps the importance of the search they've undertaken and doesn't realize, as the audience does, that its result will determine whether he will join the ranks of the country's millions of street kids or manage to get a shot in life through a family connection.

Long one of Brazil's leading stage and screen actresses, Montenegro carries the film superbly with her portrait of gritty strength being worn down to a state of tattered vulnerability, while newcomer de Oliveira, a shoeshine boy who won the role over 1,500 other aspirants, is engagingly natural and happily doesn't beg for viewer sympathy.

On a precise but restrained symbolic level, "Central Station" speaks in a cautiously hopeful manner about the possibilities for Brazil's future, suggesting that the deep scars left by the social ills of the recent past might somehow be survived and surmounted by a creative union of the old and the new Brazils.

Film is immaculate technically, with outstanding widescreen lensing by Walter Carvalho. Script by Joao Emanuel Carneiro and Marcos Bernstein, based on an idea by Salles, won grants from the Sundance Institute and NHK as well as from the French Ministry of Culture.

**RODUCTION:** A Sony Pictures Classics (in U.S.) release of an Arthur Cohn production in association with Martine and Antoine de Clermont-Tonnerre (MACT Prods., France), Videofilms (Brazil), Riofilme (Brazil) and Canal Plus (France). Produced by Cohn, Martine de Clermont-Tonnerre. Executive producers, Elisa Tolomelli, Lillian Birnbaum, Donald Ranvaud, Thomas Garvin. Directed by Walter Salles. Screenplay, Joao Emanuel Carneiro, Marcos Bernstein, based on the original idea by Salles.

**CREW:** Camera (color, widescreen), Walter Carvalho; editors, Isabelle Rathery, Felipe Lacerda; music, Antonio Pinto, Jaques Morelembaum; production design, Cassio Amarante, Carla Caffè; set design, Monica Costa; costumes, Cristina Camargo; sound (Dolby), Mark A. Van Der Willigen, Jean-Claude Brisson, Francois Groult; associate producer, Paulo Brito; assistant director, Katia Lund; casting, Sergio Machado. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Premieres), Jan. 19, 1998. (Also in Berlin Film Festival - competing.) Running time: 110 MIN.

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

## Filmography as Director

- **The Man in the Rockefeller Suit** (announced)
- **Rust** (pre-production) TV series
- **Terra**
- “When the Earth Trembles” segment of **Where Has the Time Gone?** (2017)
- **Jia Zhangke, A Guy from Fenyang** (2014) documentary
- **Venice 70: Future Reloaded** (2013) documentary
- **On the Road** (2012)
- “Voyage” segment of **Stories on Human Rights** (2008)
- **Linha de Passe** (2008)
- “A 8 944 km de Cannes” segment of **To Each His Own Cinema** (2007)
- “Loin du 16e” segment of **Paris, je t’aime** (2006)
- **Dark Water** (2005)
- **The Motorcycle Diaries** (2004)
- **Guns and Peace** (2003)
- **Castanha e Caju Contra o Encouraçado Titanic** (2002) short
- **Behind the Sun** (2001)
- **Somos Todos Filhos da Terra** (1998) documentary short
- **Midnight** (1998)
- **Central Station** (1998)
- **Socorro Nobre** (1996) short documentary
- **Antonio Carlos Jobim: An All-Star Tribute** (1995) documentary
- **Foreign Land** (1995)
- “Jorge Amado” episode of **Un Siècle d’écrivains** (1995) TV series documentary
- **João & Antônio** (1992) TV movie documentary
- **The Knife** (1991)
- **Chico – O País da Delicadeza Perdida** (1989) TV movie documentary
- **Marisa Monte** (1988) TV movie documentary
- **Krajcberg – O Poeta dos Vestígios** (1987) documentary short
- 4 episodes of **Japão – Uma Viagem no Tempo** (1986) TV series documentary