

'The Secret Agent' Review: Cinema of Necropolitics

The Secret Agent, directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho, is both a meditative and enthralling piece on the political ramifications of living and dying in northeastern Brazil. The director's focus on Recife continues to shape Brazilian cinema as exciting and dynamic.



Taking place in 1977 Brazil, the story follows Marcelo (Wagner Moura), who is on the run from scrupulous actors. He takes refuge in Recife, north-eastern Brazil, living with other refugees on the run from one thing or another. From there, he wishes to escape the country, but must find his mother's death certificate to obtain a passport due to complex bureaucratic procedures. As things begin to unravel and chaos ensues, we see how the past continues to inform the present in a small town during carnival season.



The film is visually breathtaking, no surprise there. Director of photography [Evgenia Alexandrova](#) gives the piece a vintage quality through Arri Alexa Panvision cameras—you don't need title cards to know that this is 1970s Brazil. With rich cinematography and even richer production design, the audience is transported into the director's imagination of another time. Playing both director and writer, Kleber Mendonça Filho takes on a character study of Marcelo, a man determined to survive the harsh conditions of dictatorship and corporate greed. At first glance, you assume Marcelo, aided by the title, must be a spy of some sort—but rather, he serves as a

vessel for the audience to observe the realities of everyday life under a corrupted state.



In its exposition, the film meanders slightly in its world-building, taking its time to set up the political realities in which the main character is entrenched. The pacing is slow, occasionally feeling like a series of misconstrued vignettes laced together. Only until the second act does it feel as if the film really begins. However, at its most climactic moments, the film shines, a masterclass in the creation of suspense and intrigue. As events unravel, it becomes emotionally evocative and powerfully kinetic.

The dialogue is incredibly well-done, providing the naturalism needed to bring the world to life. Each cast member gives a strong and significant performance, further bringing the local community to life through kinetic individuals. Though only present in a single scene, Fatima (Alice Carvalho), Marcelo's wife, is a powerhouse and commands the screen with ease. Her performance is so impactful that you instantly miss her presence.

Death enshrouds Marcelo and the characters he meets along the way, and is one of the most poignant themes of the film. Brazil was governed by a dictatorship between 1964 and 1985, something that Brazilian cinema has always explored. Recent international standouts like last year's *I'm Still Here* reveal the impact of dictatorship and how it still lingers in the country's consciousness, despite the changes in Brazilian society. But while *I'm Still Here* considers how corruption and disappeared persons impact a single family, *The Secret Agent* explores how corruption not only destroys lives, but also community and places, dissecting the ongoing issues around uncovering the stories of people lost in the dictatorship.



The film does a phenomenal job in creating a dialogue between the past and the present. As we follow Marcelo in the 1970s, two researchers in the present day are listening to tapes of Marcelo, transcribing his story. This helps the audience to understand that the impact of the time period in Brazil was not so far into the past that it cannot be felt now.

Verdict

The Secret Agent is a strong addition to Brazilian cinema. It is well performed, directed and edited. Despite its many characters, you do not get lost once, and no character falls flat. The director's documentary sensibilities only move to enhance the filmmaking, setting viewers in the realities of 1970s Brazil and conveying the way death pervades everyday life.

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