

CINEMASCÓPIO, MK PRODUCTIONS, LEMMING FILM, ONE TWO FILMS

PRESENT



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2025 OFFICIAL SELECTION
COMPETITION

THE SECRET AGENT

A FILM BY Kleber Mendonça Filho

2025 – BRAZIL, FRANCE, GERMANY, NETHERLANDS – THRILLER, PERIOD DRAMA –
PORTUGUESE – 158'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Brazil, 1977. Marcelo, a technology expert in his early 40s, is on the run. He arrives in Recife during carnival week, hoping to reunite with his son but soon realizes that the city is far from being the non-violent refuge he seeks.

INTERVIEW WITH KLEBER MENDONCA FILHO

Is this a film you've been thinking about for a long time? It seems to be in conversation with many of your other films.

A very long time. Initially, I had the title, *The Secret Agent*, for a different story, which I tried to write but it never worked as a script. I kept the title when I turned to other ideas. It's really a mix of many different impulses. Partly it was the desire to do some kind of thriller. Partly it was the challenge of going back in time and doing a period piece, which I had never done other than one sequence in *Aquarius*. Partly it came from the work with documents and archives that was basically the seven-year process of making *Pictures of Ghosts*.

What made you decide to set the film in 1977?

I think it's the first year I can actually remember, for a number of reasons. There was a family crisis, my mother's health situation, which led to my young uncle, Ronaldo, taking my brother and me away from the problems. Suddenly we were at the cinema all the time. It was a moment of intense applied filmgoing for reasons I only found out about years later. The films from that moment helped me establish a memory of 1977. If I had made a film about 1877, it would have been a very different process of research. But I remember the smells of 1977, I remember the texture of the time, how Brazil felt. It's been 50 years, so a lot has changed, but ironically, in the last 10 years, it feels like we have gone back in time in terms of how society behaves. I observed it in Brazil and it's happening now in the U.S., a certain theater of the absurd. It looks like justice is being served, but justice is being played like in a theatrical performance, and it's a really scary thing. People behave in a theatrical way because they're supposed to play roles, because somebody told them they had to. The situation is better now in Brazil, but from 2016 until 2022, things were strange. I found myself in some kind of spotlight as a filmmaker, given microphones and having to answer questions. You feel like you're some kind of agent: you play the part of the artist who has made the film, and now you're supposed to play the part of the diplomat whose words are not really appreciated. Some people protect you, and others attack you. That's where some of the ideas for the film came from, even though it's set in 1977.

How did you think of *The Secret Agent* in relation to other films that have dealt with the politics of the time, specifically the legacy of the military dictatorship, which lasted from 1964 to 1985?

Everytime I told people the film would be set in 1977, the first word that comes out is "dictatorship." Which is fine, but in Brazilian cinema, and Argentinian cinema as well, there is a subgenre of the dictatorship movie. The challenge was to make a film about the logic of that time without ticking all the boxes of the dictatorship movie. I'm not against those films. In fact, we just had a very strong and beautiful film in Brazilian cinema, *I'm Still Here*, by Walter Salles, which did wonders for many young people who were not even aware of that moment in history. But with this film, it's very much about the atmosphere, the fumes. I'm

interested in the logic of things — the logic of Brazil, or the logic of being in love with films. Here I wanted to capture the logic of the period.

Would you say there's something about the opening sequence that crystallizes this logic that you're talking about?

Yeah. I remember many situations as a child when I saw dead people in the street, victims of accidents or violence. We know that society is still violent today, but it's not something you see now, someone dead on the street, just in a very matter-of-fact way. The situation that opens the film is fictional, but I remember stories about people who were forgotten, whose bodies were never picked up because it was a national holiday, particularly during Carnaval, which is an amazing time, but a crazy time. Some people who have seen the film have asked why there would be a dead body just lying there, but this is way out in the middle of nowhere, at a time communication was more problematic, and the police would be overworked or simply fed up. So yes, there is a certain logic of that time in that sequence. The logic of each society is a fascinating theme for me. We take this logic for granted, but every time we travel, every time the scenery changes, it's something we have to deal with.

It's striking that the film starts in the past and then we're suddenly thrust into the present day with a flash forward, which reframes everything we've seen.

The flash forward for me is almost like awakening from a dream. When I showed the script to some friends, one of them said that the cassettes and the tape recorders are the time machine of the film. That tape from 1977 ends up in the hands of these two young women in Sao Paulo in 2025. I wanted to capture that feeling of working with archives, actually touching them. I was lucky to be at the University of Indiana about 10 or 12 years ago, and spent two mornings going through the boxes of Orson Welles. My mother, Joselice, was a historian, and part of her work was to record oral history, I remember her working with a Panasonic tape recorder. I still have many of the tapes that she recorded in the late '70s, and many have been digitized at the foundation where she worked. She did a series of interviews with the filmmakers of the 1920s in Recife, who were in their eighties when she interviewed them.

There is a clip of your mother, Joselice Jucá, in *Pictures of Ghosts*. She's being interviewed on television and she describes oral history as the work of collecting information that's been "left out of history."

As a historian, I think you're always concerned with what has been discarded over time, and with what could be rediscovered and reevaluated. It's a strong theme for me. Brazil is a place where so many people have been forgotten. It has to do with class, it has to do with politics, it has to do with violence. When you're working with archives, sometimes what's not supposed to be in the shot is what catches your attention. Somebody is being interviewed on the street and talking about inflation or whatever, but you look behind them and you see the cars of that era. The same when you listen to tapes of someone being interviewed and

wonder what is being left out. The young historian in this film, Flavia, becomes interested in something that the university that is employing her would rather not keep because some of the information is unpleasant or sensitive. For *Pictures of Ghosts*, I spent a lot of time digging into the public archives of Recife, and looked really closely at old newspapers, and it was interesting to see how language has changed, to see the classified ads and movie ads of the time, the narratives about crime and the narratives about politics, because each piece was carefully edited so as not to anger anybody in the military. This is how some urban legends emerged, through this very local, anarchic, Pernambuco kind of irreverence. The story of the “Hairy Leg” that you see in *The Secret Agent* is basically the military and the police being violent and repressive with people who were having sex in parks or smoking pot, or they were going after the LGBT community or people with long hair. I was while editing *Pictures of Ghosts* that I unlocked the key for the script for *The Secret Agent*. The more I worked on one, the more I found the other.

You open the movie with a series of archival photographs, which is a gesture familiar from several of your other films.

With every film, I think of it as you coming to my house, and maybe before dinner, I’ll show you this photo album, it could be a family album or photos from when I was at university or on a film set. I think that’s what a film may be. You hope somebody will find this little collection of pictures interesting in some way. This time, there are some iconic images from Brazilian film, television and music in the 1970s. They are all very dear to me, some very well known, others less so.

You mentioned 1977 as a formative moviegoing year. Which films made an impression on you at the time, and which were you thinking of in the process of making *The Secret Agent*?

I think I was quite lucky, historically speaking, because I remember seeing two films that year that reshaped popular cinema as we know it: *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I also remember Franco Zeffirelli’s *Jesus of Nazareth*, which was made for television, but it was a huge film in the cinemas at the time. I saw *Orca: The Killer Whale*, one of the Herbie films, I can’t remember which one, one of the *Pink Panther* films, maybe *The Pink Panther Strikes Again*, which was a riot. We saw a film called *The Big Bus*, a kind of a comedy disaster film that I have never heard of again. In making the film, I thought a lot about Nelson Pereira dos Santos. I’ve always felt his connection to his country was as open as his connection to making films. It might sound a bit harsh, but with so many filmmakers, it’s almost like their country is separating them from the film. Hector Babenco also made an amazing film, *Lucio Flavio*, from 1977. Most of the Brazilian thrillers I had seen didn’t seem comfortable being Brazilian. It felt like they wanted to be something else, usually American. But *Lucio Flavio* is an amazingly Brazilian thriller, it’s raw and dirty and brutal and incredibly honest, and it was a blockbuster. John Sayles is often on my mind, through his film *Lone Star*, which has been a recurring reference since *Neighboring Sounds*. I also couldn’t stop thinking of Robert Altman and Brian De Palma because we shot in anamorphic Panavision, which we

also used in *Bacurau*. I enjoy working with those lenses, also because they have a history, like the cassettes in the film. They have a very specific image, which I love, they have personality, they're little time machines for this idea of cinema. I like the challenge of working on compositions which are already set in the camera to a wide frame. The tension between this very Brazilian film and this classic American image from a certain time is something that I'm very interested in.

Did you write the film with Wagner Moura in mind for the lead role?

Yes, and this was the first time I wrote something specifically for someone. We had been trying to work together for a number of years. I've always been curious about Wagner, not only as an actor but as a person. We've become good friends now but it started when we shared some tough times as Brazilian artists from the left, and we kind of supported each other without knowing each other very well. Wagner's most famous role is as this tough policeman in *Elite Squad* (2007) in the favelas of Rio, and it's a very violent film. I thought of it almost as a challenge to create a very relatable man, a classic hero type but also a nonviolent character who says a couple of times that he doesn't carry a gun. Most people I know do not have guns and have never fired a weapon in their lives. But you can still be an agent of chaos, finding yourself in a situation where things happen around you. Many of us who made the film, and not just me — we went back to our own families to research this period. There was a beautiful moment when I visited our costume designer, Rita Azevedo, and she had a very large board with pictures of clothing from the time, and I realized they were from her own family. So many of us, we went back to our family, uncles and aunts and cousins and grandfathers, and Wagner too, he drew on his family, some uncles, his father. It was like a beautiful 3-D model coming together and there is a lot of truth in it.

ABOUT KLEBER MENDONÇA FILHO

Kleber Mendonça Filho was born in Recife, in north-east Brazil. A graduate in journalism from the Federal University of Pernambuco, he has had a long career as a film critic and programmer. He oversaw the cinema section of the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation for 18 years and has written for the *Jornal do Commercio* in Recife, as well as for other magazines such as *Revista Continente* and *Folha de São Paulo*. He is artistic director of the Janela Internacional de Cinema in Recife and chief film curator at the Instituto Moreira Salles.

As a filmmaker, he moved from video in the 90s, trying his hand at fiction, documentary and music videos, to digital and 35mm in the 2000s. His first short films (*A Menina Do Algodão*, *Vinil Verde*, *Eletrodoméstica*, *Recife Frio*) won over 100 awards in Brazil and abroad. His first film was the documentary *Crítico* (2008).

In 2014, he directed *The World Cup In Recife*, a 15-minute documentary for Canal SportTV and Casa de Cinema de Porto Alegre.

Neighboring Sounds (2012) is his first feature-length fiction film, selected for over 100 international festivals, released in 14 countries, and winner of 32 awards. The film was Brazil's representative at the 2014 Oscars and was considered 'one of the 10 Best Films of the Year' by The New York Times.

Aquarius (2016), his second feature-length film, has enjoyed an even more prestigious career, having been launched in more than 100 countries.

In 2018, he co-wrote and co-directed, alongside Juliano Dornelles, *Bacurau*, which was presented in competition at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2019 and won the Jury Prize. The documentary *Ghost Portrait (Retratos Fantasmás)*, his fifth feature film, had its world premiere at the 76th Cannes Film Festival in May 2023. The film is the fruit of seven years' work and research, filming and editing, and was presented in a Special Screening.

KLEBER MENDONÇA FILHO FILMOGRAPHY

Caged In (Enjaulado, 1997, Betacam, 33 mins)

The Little Cotton Girl (A Menina Do Algodão, 2003, Mini-DV-35mm, 6 mins)

Green Vinyl (Vinil Verde, 2004, stills/35mm, 16 mins)

Directors' Fortnight (Cannes Festival), Tampere, Toulouse, Biarritz, Barcelona...

Eletrodoméstica (2005, 35mm, 22 mins)

Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival, Rotterdam Film Festival, Hamburg Short Film Festival, Festival Luso-Brasileiro de Santa Maria da Feira... 40 awards.

Friday Night, Saturday Morning (Noite De Sexta, Manhã De Sábado, 2006, Mini-DV/35mm, 14 mins)

Brasília Film Festival, Rio de Janeiro Curta Cinema International Short Film Festival, Festival de Cinéma Luso-Brasileiro de Santa Maria da Feira (Portugal), Rotterdam Film Festival.

Crítico (2007, Mini-DV / 35 mm, documentary, 75 mins)

Mostra de Cinema de Tiradentes, BAFICI (Buenos Aires, Argentina), Curta SE (Aracajú), FAM (Florianópolis), Festival de Gramado.

Luz Industrial Magica (2009, HD, documentary, 7 mins)

Curta Cinema International Short Film Festival (Rio de Janeiro), São Paulo Short Film Festival.

Cold Tropics (Recife Frio, 2010, HD / 35 mm, fiction, 24 mins)

Brasília Film Festival, Mostra de Cinema de Tiradentes, Rotterdam Film Festival

Neighboring Sounds (O Som ao Redor, 2012, drama, 131 mins)

Rotterdam Film Festival (In Competition Tiger Award, Prix FIPRESCI), New Directors New Films (New York, USA), Copenhagen International Film Festival (Best Film), San Francisco International Film Festival (USA), Indie Lisboa (Portugal), Sydney International Film Festival, Los Angeles International Film Festival, New Horizons International Film Festival (Poland, FIPRESCI Award), New Zealand International Film Festival, Locarno International Film Festival, Melbourne International Film Festival, Gramado Film Festival (Brazil, Critics' Award, Audience Award, Best Director and Best Sound), Rio Film Festival - Brazil Premiere (Best Film, Best Screenplay), BFI Film Festival (London), Mostra de São Paulo (Brazil, Best Film), Festival Panorama Coisa de Cinema (Salvador, Brazil, Best Film), Vienna International Film Festival, Gijon International Film Festival, Mar Del Plata Film Festival, Festival des 3 Continents, International Festival of New Latin American Cinema (Cuba), Cinema Tropical Awards (Best

Film), Göteborg International Film Festival, Istanbul International Independent Film Festival (Turkey, Best Film)...

A Feira (2013, 9mins, art installation for the Cais do Sertão Museum, Recife)

The World Cup In Recife (A Copa Do Mundo No Recife, 2015, documentary, 13mins)

Rotterdam International Film Festival, Mar del Plata Film Festival, São Paulo Short Film Festival

Aquarius (2016, drama, 144mins)

Cannes Film Festival (Competition), Sydney Film Festival (Best Film), Biarritz Film Festival (Best Actress, Special Jury Prize), Cartagena Film Festival (Best Film), Dublin Film Festival (Best Film, Critics' Prize), Havana Film Festival (FIPRESCI Award, Best Actress), International Cinephile Society Awards (Best Actress), Lima Film Festival (Best Actress, Special Jury Prize), Mar del Plata Film Festival (Best Film - Audience, Best Actress), Palm Springs International Film Festival (Directors to Watch Award), Premios Fénix (Best Actress, Best Director), San Diego Film Critics Society Awards (Best Actress), Prêmios Platino (Best Actress), World Cinema Amsterdam (Best Film), Transatlantyk Film Festival (Best Film), Panama Film Festival (Best Film - Audience), Nomination for the César for Best Foreign Film

Bacurau (2019, drama, 131mins)

Cannes Film Festival (Jury Prize), Munich Film Festival (Best Film), Lima Film Festival (Best Film, Best Director, Critics' Award), Montreal New Cinema Festival (Audience Award), Sitges Film Festival (Best Director, Best Film - Youth Award, Critics' Award), Málaga University Fantastic Film Festival (Best Film, Critics' Choice Award), Noir in Festival (Italy, Best Film), Havana Film Festival (Best Soundtrack), Brazilian Film Grand Prix (Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Editing, Best Actor, Best Visual Effects)

Pictures of Ghosts (Retratos Fantomas, 2023, documentary, 93mins)

Premiere at the Cannes Film Festival (Special Screening), New York Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, Sydney Film Festival, Munich International Film Festival, Vienna International Film Festival

CAST

Marcelo	WAGNER MOURA
Elza	MARIA FERNANDA CANDIDO
Bobby	GABRIEL LEONE
Alexandre	CARLOS FRANCISCO
Fatima	ALICE CARVALHO
Euclides	ROBERIO DIOGENES
Claudia	HERMILA GUEDES
Sergio	IGOR DE ARAUJO
Arlindo	ITALO MARTINS
Flavia	LAURA LUFESI
Hans	UDO KIER
Augusto	RONEY VILLELA
Tereza Victoria	ISABÉL ZUAA

CREW

Director	KLEBER MENDONÇA FILHO
Screenplay	KLEBER MENDONÇA FILHO
Producer	EMILIE LESCLAUX
Coproducers	NATHANAËL KARMITZ, ELISHA KARMITZ, FIONNUALA JAMISON, OLIVIER BARBIER, LEONTINE PETIT, ERIK GLIJNIS, FRED BURLE, SOL BONDY
Cinematography	EVGENIA ALEXANDROVA
Editing	EDUARDO SERRANO & MATHEUS FARIAS
Music	TOMAZ ALVES SOUZA & MATEUS ALVES
Director Assistants	FELIPE FERNANDES & LEONARDO LACCA
Sound Design	TJIN HAZEN
Sound Engineer	MOABE FILHO & PEDRINHO MOREIRA
Sound Mixing	CYRIL HOLTZ
Color Grading	DIRK MEIER
Production Design	THALES JUNQUEIRA
Production Manager	MARIANA JACOB
Costumes	RITA AZEVEDO
Make-Up	MARISA AMENTA
Casting	GABRIEL DOMINGUES
Executive Producer	BRENT TRAVERS
Line Producer	DORA AMORIM

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