

Aquarius: Personal resistance and isolation in Brazil

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13 December 2016

Written and directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho

Brazilian director Kleber Mendonça Filho's film *Aquarius*, set in the northeast coastal city of Recife, is an intimate portrait of Clara (Sonia Braga), a retired music critic in her 60s. Clara is thrown into a struggle to defend her apartment and her memories against a real estate developer bent on demolishing her building to make way for a luxury complex.

Filed prior to the culmination of Brazil's protracted economic and political crisis in the impeachment of Workers Party President Dilma Rousseff and her replacement by the most right-wing government since the end of Brazil's two-decade-long dictatorship (1964-85), the film has since become an artistic point of reference (and a target) in the continuing turmoil wracking the country.

The film premiered to acclaim at the Cannes film festival last May during the same week that Rousseff was ousted from the presidency at the beginning of the impeachment process. The cast and crew of *Aquarius* staged a protest, carrying signs and banners in Cannes denouncing the impeachment as a "coup."

In apparent retaliation, the government gave the film the equivalent of an X-rating, supposedly for its depiction of sex and drug use. A right-wing critic, who denounced *Aquarius* without having seen it because of the Cannes protest, was then placed on the committee to choose Brazil's submission to the Oscars. *Aquarius*, the critical favorite—having won best-film prizes in Sydney, Mar del Plata and elsewhere—was snubbed in favor of a family drama. Three other filmmakers withdrew their own works from consideration over the apparent rigging of the process.

Much of the movie's success is undoubtedly due to the sensitive performance of veteran lead Sonia Braga, best known to global audiences for her role in Argentinean-Brazilian director Héctor Babenco's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985). But the film's power is also a function of the director's unflinching, and one might say social realist, take on the sharp social contradictions that characterize contemporary Brazilian society.

This sensitivity, and the humanity imparted to Clara by Braga, greatly enrich an otherwise unpretentious story. Clara lives in the 50-year-old Aquarius building in Recife's upper-middle-class beachfront district of Boa Viagem (also the setting of Mendonça Filho's first feature length film in 2013, *Neighboring Sounds*), which is targeted for demolition. The last resident in the otherwise empty building, she rejects the developer's offer to buy her apartment without even looking at it.

Living alone, with occasional visits from friends and family and the daily presence of her maid and confidante, Ladjane (Zoraide Coletto), Clara is subjected to an escalating campaign of harassment by the company owner's heir and project leader, Diego (Humberto Carrão). Having proudly returned to Brazil with a business degree from the US, he is determined to "make money and prove his worth" and does not intend to allow Clara to stand in the way of his first great success. His tactics grow ever more grotesque and threatening.

As the film starts, we are introduced to the young Clara, in the twilight of Brazil's military dictatorship in the 1980s. Recently recovered from

breast cancer, she attends a party in the Aquarius apartment building in honor of Tia Lucia (Thaia Perez), the family's matriarch, who had been imprisoned because of her political activism in the 30s and 40s and proudly announces to the gathering that she is also a veteran of the "sexual revolution."

As iconic Brazilian popular music of the legendary composer Gilberto Gil enlivens the party, the camera follows Clara downstairs, bringing the building's doorman a portion of the feast along with a somewhat formal invitation to spend some minutes upstairs with her family.

Back in the present, we see Clara, following her usual beach routine with a "laugh therapy" session on the sand—upper-middle class and largely middle-aged men and women lying with their heads on each other's stomachs chortling uproariously. The scene changes with the arrival of three black, working class youth who happily—but disagreeably to many of the participants—join the game, provoking a moment of embarrassed silence from the latter.

This is the first break in the "cordial" relations between Clara's peers and the film's working class characters. It brings to the fore the fact tacitly recognized by everyone, that Brazil's vast social inequality feeds a latent social anger with destructive daily consequences.

As *Aquarius* progresses, so do the methods of harassment employed by the real estate developers. The resentment toward Clara felt by some of her former neighbors, who had hoped to reap a windfall from the property deal, also deepens.

Clara, who is widowed, had a successful career as a music critic, with published works on, among others, Brazil's most prominent classical composer, the modernist Heitor Villa-Lobos, which lends her an aura of respect among her peers in Recife's aging intellectual elite.

At the same time, her music-driven routine, her intellectual dedication and her fierce attachment to the apartment where she has lived a rich life anger her children, who see her attitude as one of hopeless idealism or, worse, the onset of senility. "You're so stubborn!" her adult daughter (Maeve Jinkings) yells tearfully at Clara. "You're like an old lady and a child!"

It is evident that for the children, it is neither safe nor proper that a 65-year-old woman should be living alone in an older and otherwise empty building. She belongs, they obviously feel, in a secure, gated and guarded development. No doubt, the prospect of a hefty payoff from the developer also influences their thinking.

Aquarius pays the greatest attention to Clara's soul-searching associated with her determination to stay in the apartment. The powerful emotional attachment is bound up with her own history of intellectual accomplishment and, in a sense, the history of Brazilian society, which are both a matter of indifference not only to the real estate sharks, but also her own loved ones and a broader upper-middle-class milieu that has in many cases turned to the right.

Her fierce defense of her own self-worth is portrayed movingly in a scene in which a date with a potential partner abruptly ends when the man

learns of Clara's mastectomy and rejects her. She finds a "transactional" solution in the form of paid, but passionate, sex with a younger man.

But Clara's isolation is not overcome, and the movie's finale is an inconclusive, semi-allegorical and quixotic personal protest against the real estate company, which appears to pay tribute to a branch of Brazil's *Cinema Novo* (New Cinema) movement from the 1960s.

The quixotic element of Clara's experience is certainly a major source of attraction in the present political environment, in which the idea of "resistance" goes hand-in-hand with demoralization among a broad layer of generally "left" artists and intellectuals who may believe that they, like Clara, cannot do much else. But in the particular context of *Aquarius*, it also says more than was probably intended, being one of the film's most "realistic," if not conscious, elements.

The drive to expel Clara, a privileged, if not terribly rich woman, is only the tip of the iceberg of Brazil's economic development under the governments of the Workers Party, with soaring land prices driving millions of working class families, including many lifelong squatters, out of the country's inner cities. Often this involves collusion between developers and the police in setting fires to destroy tenement houses and shanty towns. Invariably this form of "social cleansing" is accompanied by the most brutal police violence, as in the lead-up to the Olympics in Rio.

The film's director, Kleber Mendonça Filho, having worked in Recife's movie industry for more than 20 years, is certainly familiar with this process. Recife is the 500-year-old capital of the state of Pernambuco, one of Brazil's culturally, scientifically and politically richest and most active regions. A center of slavery, it was also, by the 1800s, a hotbed of constitutional thinking, republicanism and abolitionism, and of opposition to the backward elements who controlled the central government in Rio de Janeiro.

The many progressive uprisings in the city are to this day celebrated in popular music. Partly responsible for a recent growth of cinematic output in the state, the federal Joaquim Nabuco foundation is named after the eloquent, Pernambuco-based, abolitionist. Mendonça Filho is one of many directors working in the state who participate in the international movie circuit, having directed the Nabuco foundation's film branch for 18 years. The foundation's museum in the city stands at the epicenter of one of Brazil's high-profile artistic communities, as well as a major center for squatters, Recife's abandoned docks, now a rapidly gentrifying district.

The court battle over the privatization of this area has gone on for eight years, with heavy involvement from the city's artists. In a visual protest, some buildings recently erected as part of this privatization-driven development were digitally removed by Mendonça from an aerial shot of the city's skyline, to the reported applause of local audiences. Nonetheless, the process has been advancing, as in most cities, with no organized political opposition.

Against such a backdrop, Clara's isolation has more than personal significance. The character belongs to the "engaged" middle class, which in Brazil in the 1960s committed itself—as in the rest of Latin America—to the struggle against dictatorship and even "armed struggle," with the well-known tragic consequences.

This layer also produced committed popular musicians, many from relatively privileged backgrounds, who set themselves the task of not only achieving the highest artistic standards, but also of giving a voice to social and political opposition like no other cultural or even political trend. As a result, a number of the artists were censored, jailed or forced into exile.

In considering the fate of this generation, with which Clara's own personal history is so closely interwoven, one cannot help but recall the image of legendary singer-composer Chico Buarque, walking side by side into the Congress with Dilma Rousseff and Lula during the impeachment. Buarque was uncritical of the politically criminal role played by the PT in preparing the present sharp turn to the right and in initiating the ever-

escalating social attacks on the working class.

This is not only a generational issue, a case of conformity that comes with age, and it goes well beyond the more immediate deep demoralization that has undoubtedly followed the debacle of the PT. While many of "the generation of 68" were infatuated with the PT during its rise to power, disillusionment grew as a result of its wholesale corruption and defense of foreign and Brazilian capital.

There are definite class issues. The right-wing turn of Brazil's affluent middle classes, mirroring the worldwide process of social polarization that has accompanied the growth of financial speculation—in which real estate values play a prominent part—is the main social reality underling Clara's solitude.

What passes for the left in Brazil offers no answer. This year's nationwide local elections saw left-leaning youth flock to Rio de Janeiro to support the ultimately unsuccessful mayoral candidate Marcelo Freixo of the pseudo-left PSOL (Socialism and Freedom Party), whose campaign brought to mind Bernie Sanders' "political revolution" in the US. The candidate was virtually mute on the massive abuses committed by property development in Rio. Freixo would also probably say that Clara was insane and that "times have changed."

The ideological response of some of the better-off "left" sections of Brazil's middle classes to these developments has been associated with the conception of the "right to the city" inherited from—and to an extent an anticipation of—the "Occupy Wall Street" movement and its ideologues, such as David Harvey. This involves a deeply pessimistic world outlook advocating "resistance" to capital until more "humane" projects, usually with cultural tokens like museums and "independent" cafes, are offered by developers. This is a movement of the "99 percent," that is, a movement to corral the working class behind the interests of the layers who make up the top 10 percent.

More than once, the *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed out: art cannot save itself. That Mendonça Filho, his cast and his crew have shown such sensitivity to the immense class divide and historical contradictions in contemporary Brazil, even if not in the most politically conscious way, is a healthy development, in line with the efforts of other "social realist" Pernambuco filmmakers.

At the same time, the Brazilian masses stand at a crossroads. Attacks that began under PT rule will only deepen after an impeachment amounting to a declaration of class war by the ruling class. One certainly hopes that the social struggles to come will allow filmmakers to find a more conscious, historically informed path.



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