

At the Pan African Film Festival

## *Executive Order* probes the humor and deadly seriousness of racial politics

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*Directed by Lázaro Ramos; written by Lusa Silvestre, Aldri Anunciação, Elísio Lopes Jr. and Ramos*

Among the films screened at this year's Pan African Film Festival, which was held virtually in February, *Executive Order* (2020) stood out not only for addressing identity politics, but also for approaching the subject with a combination of humor and seriousness.

Based on a 2011 play called *Namibia, No!*, the Brazilian film exposes the absurdity and reactionary logic of a perspective that elevates race above all other considerations. But as thoughtful and refreshing as the film is, it is unable to articulate a progressive alternative to racial politics precisely because it does not reject them completely.

Brazil's particular approach to race has been shaped by the country's history. The Portuguese settlers were mainly men, not families as in North America. These settlers often paired with indigenous or African women, and mixed-race children became common. Although Brazil was the largest importer of African slaves, it never had race-specific laws or official segregation. Until recently, the received wisdom was that Brazil was a "racial democracy" where racism was minimal or entirely absent.

*Executive Order* is set in an "enlightened" Brazil of the near future, where people of African descent are no longer called "black," but "high-melanin" individuals. Antônio (Alfred Enoch of *Harry Potter* fame) lives in Rio de Janeiro and belongs to the Association of High-Melanin Lawyers. The earnest Antônio believes in justice and in the law's ability to settle disputes rationally.

As the movie opens, Antônio argues that reparations

should be paid to high-melanin Brazilians. Soon after, the government issues Executive Order 1888 to make amends for the country's history of slavery. The order establishes a program under which the government will pay high-melanin individuals, and all those whose features are even remotely African, to move to Africa if they wish. Notably, the number of the order is also the year in which Brazil abolished slavery. A kindly government minister, who bears a striking resemblance to former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, appears on television to encourage people to take advantage of the program.

Antônio discusses the controversial order with his wife Capitu (Taís Araújo), who is a doctor, and his cousin André (singer Seu Jorge), a journalist. André uses every opportunity to ridicule the program. He attends a public meeting about it expressly to tell a prim bureaucrat that he will travel to Africa if he wants to, but only on a return trip and on his own dime. Others jump at the chance, including white people trying unconvincingly to pass as high-melanin Brazilians. Meanwhile, the issuance of the order unveils pockets of previously hidden anti-black racism.

André and others treat the order as a joke, but things turn serious when the government abruptly changes the voluntary program into a system of forced deportations. Black-clad soldiers swarm the streets and violently apprehend people who are to be exiled. Parents and children are separated, and a few white people inform on their black neighbors. All the while, the minister appeals for calm and cooperation, emphasizing the government's benevolent intentions. It later emerges that the goal of the order is to establish an all-white Brazil.

Antônio realizes that the law prevents soldiers from entering people's homes without permission, and he and André hole up in the former's apartment. Frightened and incredulous, André asks how they could have been naïve enough to laugh at talk of high-melanin people and other such things. As days pass, Antônio and André become increasingly isolated, and their situation more desperate.

Capitu is at work when soldiers burst into the hospital to conduct a raid. She manages to escape, only to emerge onto a street crawling with more soldiers. After a breathless flight, she bumps into a small group led by Ivan, who promises to lead her to safety. Ivan's gang brings Capitu to a hideout full of black people who have fled deportation. Capitu likens the place to a *quilombo*, a settlement of escaped slaves and other Africans that was common in Brazil before the 19th century. She receives the deadpan admonition that the residents prefer the term "Afro-bunker."

As they carry on daily life as well as possible, the refugees debate how to respond to the government's repression. Some argue that black people must find a way to show how much white people need them. Others say that they have adapted too much to white society and should reject it.

The refugees also study, and one passes a copy of *Between the World and Me* (2015) to another. This reactionary memoir by Ta-Nehisi Coates explores race relations in the United States from a postmodern, misanthropic perspective. It provides little historical context and no class analysis. Ramos's tacit endorsement of the book is evident in the care that he takes to ensure that we can clearly see its title when it is passed along. He has endorsed the book in another way, as well. Two years after Coates, Ramos published his own slim memoir-cum-racial-commentary entitled *Na Minha Pele* (*In My Skin*).

The movie benefits from good performances, particularly from Jorge. As André, Jorge has a strong physical presence that pulses with life and spontaneity. His lighthearted jokes, his defiance toward government officials and his impulsive (and inopportune) eating reflect various sides of a genuine, fully realized character. Enoch as well makes a believable transformation from upstanding lawyer to desperate rebel shouting from his balcony. In addition, the music of Samba legend Elza Soares livens the film.

*Executive Order* also evokes a sense of community. Almost every scene includes small or large groups of people talking, dancing, arguing, or simply going about daily life. We get a sense of the vitality of social living and the pleasures of extroversion.

But despite its amusing and sometimes sharp criticism of racial politics, the film offers no concrete response to them. Instead, it counterposes racial pride to racial prejudice. The movie raises many questions without offering conclusions, as Ramos admits in his director's statement. "It's a call to action," he says, without specifying what action is demanded. "I don't have the answer, but the provocation is quite clear."

Although some of this is disappointing, *Executive Order* remains a lively, intelligent and funny movie that is worth seeing.



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