

7 Prisoners from Brazil and modern slave labor

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Directed by Alexandre Moratto; written by Moratto and Thayná Mantesso

7 Prisoners by Brazilian director Alexandre Moratto, scripted by Moratto and Thayná Mantesso, is a gripping film dramatizing the reality of slavery and human trafficking in contemporary Brazil. The film is produced by well-known directors Ramin Bahrani (*Chop Shop*, *99 Homes*, *The White Tiger*) and Fernando Meirelles (*City of God*).

In a global society whose productive capacities and technological advances could create harmonious and comfortable conditions for everyone alive many times over, human slavery nonetheless remains a scourge. Tens of millions are trapped by capitalism in this primitive and brutal condition, and some of them in major urban areas.

7 Prisoners, streaming on Netflix, had its world premiere at the 2021 Venice film festival and its North American premiere at the 2021 Toronto film festival.

In the opening sequence, 18-year-old Mateus (Christian Malheiros), an agricultural worker in the poverty-stricken Brazilian countryside, bids goodbye to his family and scolds his mother for spending “a month of groceries” to buy him a shirt for his journey to the big city. He leaves in a van driven by a man whose smile is as phony as his promises.

Mateus and the other boys he is traveling with—Samuel (Bruno Rocha), Ezequiel (Vitor Julian) and Isaque (Lucas Oranmian)—arrive in the Oz-like metropolis of São Paulo filled with eye-popping sights and astonishing wonders. It’s a rude awakening, however, when their destination is a giant junkyard in the city’s underbelly.

Mateus soon realizes that the pledges that enticed him and the others to the city were a pack of lies. Abysmal living quarters, substandard food, a cruel boss, Luca

(Rodrigo Santoro), and his sadistic henchmen, ensure that their job, stripping copper wire from salvage, is made a living hell. At least one of the other boys cannot read or write—eventually Mateus assumes leadership of the group.

Physical abuse and degradation are the primary weapons in this machinery of exploitation. Moreover, behind Luca stand the police and the political apparatus—the real puppet-masters. Mateus, believing that he has the smarts to outwit Luca and engineer an escape for himself and his comrades, instead becomes coopted himself. Slowly and unwittingly, he is seduced and molded into Luca’s protégé, learning at one point that his cunning boss has sent \$4,000 to his mother. The tipping point occurs when Mateus gets a cut of the payment for helping to transport and discipline a new lot of shackled immigrant labor for the junkyard. It’s an episode that also involves trafficking females for another sweatshop.

When Mateus asks Luca where the fresh bodies come from, his mentor coldly replies: “Planes, buses, shipping containers. Like everything else we buy enough to keep everything running ... Your work powers the whole city.”

Mateus’ moral core is slowly eroding—something he could never have imagined. But Luca’s siren song—perks, privileges, parties—is stronger. Luca is employing the same perfidious methods that were used on him.

One political overlord hypocritically explains to Mateus that he entered politics to leave children “a better country.” In reality, enslaving children is making him rich and powerful!

7 Prisoners is a deeply disturbing movie, featuring a committed and accomplished cast. João Gabriel de Queiroz’s cinematography provides a relentlessly dark

and somber atmosphere. As director Moratto told *Deadline*: “It’s not just happening in Brazil. It’s a global issue. There’s 40 million people, by UN estimates, who are in situations of human trafficking and enslavement in the world today. That’s a lot of people. And it’s in every country and it’s hidden from view.”

The United Nations’ International Labour Organization reports that nearly 200 million people are victims of modern slavery or child labor around the globe. Nearly one in ten children, or 151.6 million people, are subject to exploitation as laborers.

In an interview with *screenrant.com*, Moratto describes his reaction to seeing, on Brazilian television, a man forced to work in a factory in São Paulo in chains: “When I saw that, I was completely shocked. I couldn’t believe that this was happening right now, and it’s hidden from view. I started to really dig; I started to read every book, every article I could get my hands on...I shadowed a friend of mine, who had partnered with the UN and Brazil’s Department of Labor, to speak with over 60 survivors of human trafficking and modern-day enslavement.”

The filmmaker continued: “It was really humbling to hear their stories firsthand, and to meet them and look them in the eye. When I saw their strength and their courage to really overcome what they had been through, and still want to talk about it to raise awareness, that’s when I said, ‘Absolutely, I have to make this film, and it has to be a priority right now.’”

Accordingly, his film justifiably seethes with anger and disgust. If one were to raise any issue with *7 Prisoners* it would be the following:

Mateus—initially, just to survive, and later to feather his own nest and that of his family—becomes an accomplice in the exploitation. There are such types, they exist. But in São Paulo and everywhere else, they are the exceptions. The restive working class in that city of more than 12 million has demonstrated its combativity in more than one enormous struggle.

In recent years, tens of thousands of municipal teachers, public employees and teachers have fought against the Brazilian government’s homicidal COVID policy and assaults on their rights. In 2018 and 2019, there were significant strikes and demonstrations by São Paulo’s municipal employees. The film’s tendency to see the horrific conditions it presents as

permanent facts of life and the exploiters and their allies as *omnipotent* runs counter to these realities.



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