

The Secret Agent—the dictatorship as an “open wound in Brazilian life”

Eduardo Parati, Tomas Castanheira
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The Secret Agent, the latest film by Kleber Mendonça Filho, has gained a wide audience in Brazil and internationally since its release in November 2025. The most awarded film at the 2025 Cannes Film Festival, *The Secret Agent* received Oscar nominations at the 98th Academy Awards this Sunday in the categories of best picture, lead actor, international feature and casting.

Set in Recife, the capital of Brazil’s Northeastern state, Pernambuco, in 1977, *The Secret Agent* was aptly described by *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* as a “thriller with fantastical elements evoking” Brazil’s 1964–85 military dictatorship.

The film follows the runaway protagonist, Marcelo (Wagner Moura), whose true identity and fragments of his own history are revealed as the plot unfolds. He is a former professor and researcher at the Federal University of Pernambuco, now hunted by hired killers at the behest of São Paulo businessman Henrique Ghirotti (Luciano Chirulli).

Ghirotti’s corrupt operations within the Brazilian state-owned energy company, Eletrobrás, clashed with innovative research into lithium battery development led by Marcelo, who resisted the closure of his university laboratory. Over the phone, a friend warns the researcher that Ghirotti has allies within the state apparatus and “pulled some strings” to place Marcelo on a Federal Police watchlist that prevents him from legally fleeing the country.

In *The Secret Agent*, the private interests of the capitalist elite prove inseparable from the state itself and its murderous repressive apparatus, and are immune from any legal or moral constraints. The portrait of the ruling class—marked by an absolute contempt for collective interests, culture and human life—is, without a doubt, the strongest and most universal aspect of Mendonça’s film.

In a context in which the global capitalist oligarchy has effectively abolished all legal, moral, and diplomatic strictures and is proclaiming a new era of exercise of power by force, *The Secret Agent*’s appeal among international audiences reflects a mass political and intellectual shift to the left.

Kleber Mendonça Filho is a journalist by training and a leading figure in the intellectual and artistic circles of Recife, a historic cultural center in Brazil and the setting for most of the director’s works. Pernambuco was the birthplace of the Peasants’ Leagues and the scene of major rural struggles which peaked in the early 1960s, with many participants subsequently massacred by the military regime. The peasant movement founded by Francisco Julião, an advocate of agrarian reform within the framework of the bourgeois nation-state, developed under the direct inspiration of the 1959 Cuban Revolution. These political perspectives profoundly influenced the left-wing intelligentsia and student youth in the country, and their imprint is evident in Mendonça Filho’s worldview.

The persecution of scientists during the Brazilian military dictatorship, as well as the direct collaboration between big capital and the regime’s instruments of repression—central themes in *The Secret Agent*—are widely documented facts.

In 2014, the National Truth Commission (CNV) concluded that more than 80 companies had established active ties with the dictatorship’s repressive apparatus. The case of Volkswagen is the most notorious. The Brazilian courts concluded that the automaker engaged in “persistent and consistent” collaboration with the regime to persecute militant workers. Autoworkers were interrogated and tortured inside the Volkswagen’s factory itself in the ABC region [a major industrial hub] of São Paulo.

The military regime’s repression of scientists was also particularly aggressive. The CNV estimated that between 800 and 1,000 researchers were victims of persecution, which included mass purges of university positions.

The interest of *The Secret Agent*’s filmmakers and audience in the period of Brazil’s military dictatorship stems from an understanding that these historical issues do not belong to a closed past. It is no coincidence that its success follows the international impact of Walter Salles’s *I’m Still Here*, another Brazilian picture about political violence under the 1964 regime, that won the best international feature award at last year’s Oscars.

The final part of *The Secret Agent* features one of the film’s most powerful sequences—and undoubtedly its most moving. In scenes set in the present, we follow the young researcher Flávia (Laura Lufési) as she accesses a historical archive of cassette tapes containing Marcelo’s testimony. It then becomes clear that the gaps left by the narrative regarding the main character are a concrete expression of the erasure of historical crimes. The task of connecting the fragments and extracting the truth from them is taken on as a personal struggle by Flávia, who must confront the extreme limitations of the private research project for which she works and her own precarious material conditions.

In an interview during the BAFTA Awards, Mendonça Filho argued: “I didn’t actually want to create a film about the military regime, but to have it as an inevitable backdrop to the plot.” Referring to the government of former fascist President Jair Bolsonaro (2018–2022), the director continued:

By reconstructing the past, 50 years ago in Brazil, you will inevitably arrive at some reflections on what is happening in Brazil today... Particularly because, over the last 10 years, we’ve seen the far right return to the political scene in a rather brutal way, bringing back some of the same values that the military regime imposed on Brazil.

After winning the award for best actor in a drama at the 2026 Golden Globes, Wagner Moura stated:

The dictatorship is still an open wound in Brazilian life. It

happened just 50 years ago. We recently had, from 2018 to 2022, a far-right, fascist president who is a physical manifestation of the echoes of the dictatorship. So, the dictatorship is still very much present in everyday Brazilian life.

In addition to an award-winning acting career, Moura directed and produced the feature film *Marighella* (2019), about Carlos Marighella, a member of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) and guerrilla leader of the National Liberation Alliance (ALN), who was executed by the military regime in 1969. The Bolsonaro government managed to prevent its release in Brazil for two years in a naked act of censorship.

Moura told *The New York Times*: “Bolsonaro is now in jail, so in the history books he will be the fascist elected by Brazilians who attempted a coup d’état.”

Echoes of the dictatorship

In September 2025, two months before the release of *The Secret Agent*, Bolsonaro was sentenced to 27 years in prison for the attempted coup d’état that culminated in the fascist insurrection of January 28, 2023. Along with the former president, a number of military leaders who formed the core of the coup conspiracy were convicted, as well as more than a dozen officers who acted as the executive arm of the violent plan to seize power. They represent, as Moura rightly said, physical manifestations of the echoes of the dictatorship within the established bourgeois political power structure in Brazil.

Jair Bolsonaro’s administration was marked not only by constant efforts to undermine Brazil’s democratic system, but also by ideological attacks and budget cuts inflicted upon education and culture. Between 2019 and 2022, government funding for universities was reduced by 14 percent.

It is true that the echoes of the dictatorship resonated with particular force during Bolsonaro’s presidential term. However, the repressive and authoritarian tendencies of the Brazilian state and social attacks have continued to advance under the current government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers Party (PT). Lula and the PT’s constant efforts to accommodate the military, the financial oligarchy and US imperialism under Trump have only left the working class in Brazil more vulnerable to the forces behind the 2023 coup.

The conviction of Bolsonaro and his fascist co-conspirators, far from closing a historical chapter, marked an intensification of the explosive contradictions that have accumulated under Brazil’s rotten bourgeois political system. By all indications, the October presidential elections will be dominated by a contest between Lula and Flávio Bolsonaro. Such is the demoralization of the PT’s capitalist administration that the boorish son of the imprisoned former fascist president—whose platform is to continue the coup objectives of January 8, 2023—is in a dead heat with Lula in the polls.

Although it is our opinion that a healthy social and political attitude prevails in *The Secret Agent*, there are definitely problematic aspects to the film. Its artistic and political weaknesses stem from the influence of nationalist ideas, identitarianism and other postmodern theories that produce a distorted image of social relations.

The worst moments in *The Secret Agent* are those in which the director devotes himself to constructing didactic allegories, which are politically vulgar and unconvincing. This is the case with the boarding house run by Dona Sebastiana (Tânia Maria), which shelters Marcelo in Recife.

“It’s so good that we can help,” says Sebastiana as she hands him a room and a wad of cash. The “refugees”—as the residents of this sort of

commune are introduced—are symbolic representations of social groups identified as oppressed by the ruling power: a couple of Angolan exiles, a young LGBTQ person kicked out of their home and so on.

Neither the “refugees” nor the financial and logistical support network behind this highly risky operation have clear political ties or objectives. On the contrary, they seem to be driven by abstract values of solidarity that deliberately transcend politics. “I was a communist, then I was an anarchist. Or was it the other way around? I don’t remember,” says Dona Sebastiana in a rare moment in the film when issues of this nature are even mentioned. This implausible Samaritan community in the midst of the dictatorship is, in reality, a mirror of the current political conceptions of the pseudo-left: its reactionary rejection of Marxism and its demoralized appeals for the suppression of differences of principle and unity around “left-wing” bourgeois fronts to combat the “greater evil” of fascism.

Similar issues arise in the antagonism between Marcelo and Ghirotti. The São Paulo businessman, in all his ignorance, reactionary attitudes, racism and brutality, is a genuine representation of a social type that constitutes the Brazilian elite. However, *The Secret Agent* has little to say about the nature of these abhorrent social characteristics and seems to suggest supra-historical and racialist explanations.

In the same vein, Mendonça Filho’s film exaggerates the historical, economic, and cultural differences between the Northeast and Southeast of Brazil, creating a false and reactionary antagonism. The film suggests, for example, that Flávia’s drive to expose the historical crimes committed against Marcelo is determined not so much by an awareness of their political and historical significance, but by genetic ties; unlike a colleague who abandons the difficult investigation, Flávia—as with a substantial part of São Paulo’s massive working class—is the granddaughter of Northeastern migrants born in Pernambuco.

Marcelo and his technological innovation lab are representations of a developmentalist national project in Brazil that clashed with the military dictatorship’s privatization and “free market” policies. Eletrobrás, the company from which Ghirotti seeks to embezzle for his own private profit, was one of the major state-owned enterprises conceived under the nationalist government of Getúlio Vargas and effectively established during the administration of João Goulart, who was overthrown by the CIA-backed coup of 1964.

The attack launched by Ghirotti against Marcelo’s laboratory appears to be motivated, in addition to personal greed, by an irrational anti-nationalist sentiment. This is not a new theme in Brazilian political history. The portrayal of a false division between a “nationalist” and a “submissive” sector of the national bourgeoisie was a pillar of the Stalinist policy of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), which disarmed the working class and paved the way for the fascist military to seize power. Variations of this failed bourgeois nationalist line continue to be promoted by supporters of the PT.

The working class and youth in Brazil, who are undergoing a process of accelerated political radicalization, will only be able to effectively respond to the violent offensive of US imperialism and the dictatorial turn of the Brazilian ruling class to the extent that they break with a bourgeois nationalist program and embrace the path of socialist internationalism.

We do not attribute to cinema and art in general the task of formulating a finished political perspective for this emerging mass movement. *The Secret Agent*, insofar as it provides genuine insights into social and historical relations and gives some form to the progressive political sentiments that inspire masses of the Brazilian and global population, is a relevant contribution.



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