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## **Aquarius (18)**

**dir: Kleber Mendonça Filho**

**Starring: Sonia Braga**

**Sponsor: Paul and Helen Hancocks**

*This review contains plot details. It is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine*

**Synopsis:** Recife, Brazil, the 1980s: Clara lives in the Aquarius Building with her husband. She helps celebrate her aunt's birthday. In the present day, we learn that Clara - now single and in her sixties - still lives in the same building, which a construction company (Bonfim) wishes to rebuild. Clara - unlike the other residents - has no intention of leaving and no interest in the bribes offered to her by Bonfim's head. Her stubbornness leads to Bonfim increasing the pressure on her to move out via a series of intimidatory actions. The more these escalate, the more determined Clara is to remain.

Brazil's most exportable films tend to be those that depict working-class or poverty-level life - prominent successes include *City of God* (2002 - shown by LFS), *Elite Squad* (2007) and, most recently, Gabriel Mascaro's *Neon Bull* (2015), about rural rodeo workers. A notable exception was Kleber Mendonça Filho's *Neighbouring Sounds* (2012), an ensemble drama featuring characters of different social and racial origins, but set in the prominently middle or upper-class milieu of Boa Viagem, a beachfront district of Recife in the north-eastern state of Pernambuco. With its multiple plot lines and allusions to Brazil's troubled past, *Neighbouring Sounds* was a panorama film, its desne sound design conveying a sense of how different lives, stories and social spaces pervade each other by way of sonic leakage, either benign (music, the sound of the seas) or invasive (barking guard dogs).

Mendonça Filho's follow-up, *Aquarius*, is in many ways more conventional; it lacks the exuberant shifting from locale to locale, while toning down the stylistic effects (abrupt zooms, fragmented editing) that gave *Neighbouring Sounds* a distinctly modernist edge. It essentially tells a single linear story and focuses in one character, Clara, a well-off widow in her sixties; yet this simple conception allows the director to include much incidental and background material that puts Clara's personal drama in a wider context. For example, the brief prelude, set a quarter of a century before the main action, doesn't serve - as one might have expected, given the mass of faces on screen - to introduce the film's characters; each face we see merely notifies us that everyone at a party to celebrate Aunt Lucia's 70th birthday has their own story, which could just as well be told in this or another film. The only backstory we discover at this point is Lucia's. We hear that she was persecuted at some point - clearly under Brazil's military government from 1964-85 - and glimpse moments of her youthful sex life, as she fondly reminisces in telegraphic flashbacks.

We also learn here that her niece Clara is recovering from cancer - hence her cropped hair, which someone compares to the look of singer Elis Regina. The prelude serves, then, to signal that before the present, there was a past - and another past before that. It gives Mendonça Filho's story historical density - a theme that strongly emerges when Clara shows interviewers a newspaper clipping found in the sleeve of a second-hand John Lennon LP, calling it "a message in a bottle." Later, other fragments of information will be dropped in, more or less unobtrusively, to further sketch in this sense of history - as when Clara's daughter reminds us that, at some point, she left her husband and children for two years. It is the only reference to this episode, but it tells us a lot about the tensions in Clara's family, and about her emotional independence.

Another element providing a sense of history is the central performance by an iconic figure of the Brazilian screen, Sonia Braga. Known



internationally for starring roles in Bruno Barreto's *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (1976) and Hector Babenco's *Kiss of The Spider Woman* (1985), Braga became a national icon in various *telenovelas* of the 1970s, including the disco-themed *Dancin' Days*. She came to embody a Brazilian archetype of the tough, sexually independent woman, and echoes of that image are evident here; her Clara is at once a strong, autonomous intellectual, a sensualist (a lover of the sea, of music and dozes in her hammock) and a compassionate family matriarch. The film stresses her independence, making a strong case for the pleasures of living alone (with a visiting maid to make life easier), while also suggesting a more difficult dimension of solitude.

Braga's charisma highlights Clara's sexual power, with more than one man commenting on her beauty. Clara unreservedly enjoys her night with a gigolo, recommended by a friend - like Sebastián Lelio's *Gloria* (2013), the film stands up for the sexual pleasure of middle-aged to elderly women - though her anxiety about her mastectomy scar makes her back away from intimacy with a silver-fox widower. Clara is proudly aware of her own complexity ("I am an old lady and a child altogether"), a complexity that is palpable, and not just because her musical tastes accommodate Villa Lobos, Gilberto Gil and Queen. Making the most of her regal smile, raspy voice and hawkish profile, Braga's imposing, tender, sometimes playfully mannered performance should by rights have earned her a nomination for the Best Actress award at Cannes.

While *Aquarius* might appear to be exclusively about the experiences of a privileged social sphere - working class characters are less prominent than in *Neighbouring Sounds* - the film nevertheless offers an analysis of the political realities behind Recife's luxurious facade (that the film was not selected as Brazil's Academy contender last year is widely seen as government retaliation for the makers' protest at Cannes against the impeachment of Brazil's former president Dilma Rousseff). *Aquarius* opens with a series of stills showing the district magnificent skyscraper-lined shore, the image of chic Atlantic modernism set to the lush orchestrations of 'Hoje', a ballad by the singer-songwriter Taiguara. But later, walking along the beach with her nephew and his girlfriend, Clara points out of pipe pumping sewage directly into the ocean. This, she says, marks the unofficial border between Recife's rich and poor neighbourhoods.

Without over-explaining, the film suggests that beneath the elegance of Boa Viagem and, by implication, respectable Brazilian society, there runs and undertow of filth - made apparent by the faeces left on Clara's staircase by the property developers pressuring her to sell her apartment. Late in the film, her journalist friend Ronaldo reminds her that they inhabit a profoundly compromised world, her own brother being involved in some kind of political ugliness. Corrupt power is represented by Diego, the handsome, faultlessly charming grandson of construction company head Geraldo; a well-mannered graduate from a US building School, he soon

turns nasty, without ever dropping his smile, as Clara resists the coercive attempts to drive her out of her home (this brutal dynastic business enterprise, with strong church connections, has a distinctly Trumpian flavour). In a magnificently rebarbative characterisation from Humberto Carrão, Diego reveals his true nature when he expresses condescending respect for Clara's family - "a family who fought to get where they are" - before adding, "a darker skinned family".

Sometimes shot in unobtrusively realist fashion, especially in the conversations, the film nevertheless opens up stylistically from time to time, making full use of the widescreen format - for example when the camera moves from events outdoors to pull back, passing over Clara dozing in her hammock, and pans across her flat, showing the interior's porousness to light and sound from the outside world. There are also editing effects such as the repeated Roeg-esque flurries of montage showing Clara with her gigolo, before closing her door and going to bed - moments that give this otherwise linear film an additional layer of rhythm and breathing space.

Giving this stylistic elasticity, it is disappointing that the film ends abruptly with a somewhat crowd-pleasing moment of triumph, temporary at least, when - in a traditionally Loachian way - Clara gets one over on her oppressors. Dumping termites in their office may not solve her problems in real terms, but it provides a buoyant ending, and a striking final image. The earlier revelation of her flat overrun by insects - another of the construction company's ploys - is a horrifying but oddly beautiful moment, their tunnels sneaking over the walls like an elaborate art installation. The final close-ups of the creatures running in and out of their tubes makes a bitterly ironic counterpoint to the opening images of radiant Recife: we finally discover one secret, unacceptable community lying beneath the visible one, and manipulated for its exploitation.

#### Credits

<b>Clara</b>	Sonia Braga
<b>Ana Paula</b>	Maeve Jinkings
<b>Roberval</b>	Irândhir Santos
<b>Diego</b>	Humberto Carrão
<b>Ladjane</b>	Zoraide Coletto
<b>Cleide</b>	Carla Rivas
<b>Seu Geraldo Bonfim</b>	Fernando Teixeira
<b>Antonio</b>	Buda Lira
<b>Fatima</b>	Paula De Renor
<b>Clara in 1980</b>	Bárbara Colen
<b>Ronaldo</b>	Lula Terra
<b>Adalberto</b>	Daniel Porpino
<b>Aunt Lucia</b>	Thala Perez
<b>young Aunt Lucia</b>	Joana Gatis
<b>Director/Screenplay</b>	Kleber Mendonça Filho
<b>Directors of photography</b>	Pedro Sotero, FabricioTadeu
<b>Editor</b>	Eduardo Serrano
<b>Art Direction</b>	Juliana Dornelles, Thales Junqueira
<b>Sound</b>	Nicolas Hallet
<b>Costume</b>	Rita Azevedo
	<b>Brazil/France 2016. 144 mins</b>

#### Another View

*Having made a mark with the thematic and stylistic audacity of his debut, Neighbouring Sounds (2012), Kleber Mendonça Filho continues to expose the fissures threatening Brazilian society in this stately study of one woman's resistance to the march of so-called progress. Some might label this three-part story 'slow cinema'. But Mendonça Filho uses the extended running time to allow the audience to get to know Clara (Sonia Braga) and the values inherited from free-spirited aunt Lucia (Thaia Perez) that underpin her refusal to bow to the intimidatory tactics of American-educated construction heir Diego (Humberto Carrão) and the selfish hopes of the offspring holding out for a mid-life windfall.*

*Despite preferring her vinyl collection to downloads, the sixty-something Clara is open to new sounds. But she is aware of the associational power of music and her determination to protect the emotional investment she has put into her home contrasts starkly with the passive-aggressive Diego's philistine obsession with location, modernity and profit. However, Clara also kicks against the nepotism and corruption of Diego's company, which seem as ingrained in the elitist millennial mindset as racial and class prejudice. Filled with magnificent music, unsettling set-pieces, intimate moments and tiny details, this lament for the transience of existence also celebrates the consolation of memory and the need to live life to*

*the full without making the treacherous compromises that can only lead to lingering regret and the devaluing of one's legacy.*

#### David Parkinson: Empire Magazine

##### Programme news

**The Other Side of Hope**, which was cancelled on March 2nd because of snow, will now be shown on **Saturday May 19th** at 7.30pm and not Thursday May 17th as previously announced. The change of date is the result of a booking clash with a previously arranged event at The Venue

We're still looking for nominations from members for new films to consider for next season's programme. They should have been released in the last 6 months and not previously screened in Lincoln.

Please send us your nominations by Friday April 20th. They can be emailed to [filminlincoln@gmail.com](mailto:filminlincoln@gmail.com). You can also pass on details suggestions to committee members at forthcoming screenings.

Please remember also that we are looking for members to vote for the archive classic to be included in next season's program. Details are on the homepage of a website. Voting continues until April 27th.

##### Membership news

Members are reminded that there will be a new membership registration procedure for the coming season. To comply with new data protection requirements, all members will be asked to join again by completing a new form, available soon. Details will be emailed to members and posted on our Facebook page and other social media accounts.

#### Our next screening: Friday April 20th 7:30 pm Hotel Salvation (India 2016. Cert PG)

Indian cinema makes a welcome return to Film Society with this impressive first feature by director Shubhashish Bhutiani. It's the story of elderly widower Daya who, after dreaming he is going to die, decides to travel to the holy city of Varanasi, where Hindus believe their souls can find salvation. But his plans interfere with the busy lives of the rest of his family, especially his son Rajiv. This gently humorous film, with its magnificent cinematography, is a delightful meditation on matters of life, death, the nature of family and the importance of tradition in 21st century India.