



# Lincoln Film Society

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**Friday September 26th, 2025**

**Motel Destino (I8)**

**Dir: Karim Aïnouz**

**with: Iago Xavier, Nataly Rocha, Fábio Assunção**

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**Synopsis:** After messing up a gangland hit, 21 year-old Heraldo goes on the run from both the police and the gang he let down. He finds himself at Motel Destino, a roadside sex hotel run by the boorish Elias and his frustrated, beautiful wife Dayana. Dayana finds herself intrigued by Heraldo and lets him stay, but as the two navigate a dance of power, desire and liberation, a dangerous plan for freedom emerges.

Like Visconti's erotically charged directorial debut *Ossessione* (1943), *Motel Destino* can in part be seen as a loose version of James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934). Director Karim Aïnouz sets the action in the province where he was born, Ceará on the north-eastern coast of Brazil; together with cinematographer Hélène Louvart (*Pina*, 2011; *Rocks*, 2019; *La Chimera*, 2023) he portrays an equatorial landscape fundamental to the film's story. Waves break on stone-flecked sand and the relentless heat is barely touched by a restless wind in the palm trees. Everyone's half-dressed and everything is moving as, on the eve of his departure for São Paulo, young buck Heraldo (Iago Xavier) play-fights and frolics in the deep blue sea with his big brother Jorge (Renan Capivara).

It's an undeniably homoerotic set-up. Aïnouz escaped homophobic Brazil to come of age in early 1990s New York as part of the New Queer Cinema scene. His debut feature *Madame Satã* (2002) premiered in Cannes with a content warning for its explicit depiction of gay sex; the complex female lead characters of his subsequent work saw this versatile filmmaker labelled a director of 'women's pictures'. A propulsive and compelling Latin American melodrama-cum-sexual thriller, *Motel Destino* encapsulates all of this, while evoking Aïnouz's European influences (he has long been resident in Germany). We feel the presence of Pasolini and Fassbinder – particularly the latter's stylised, colour-saturated *Querelle* (1982), adapted from Jean Genet's novel. Like Ali, the central figure in Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), Heraldo is an outsider eroticised both for his youth and the colour of his skin.

The motel of the title is a swinging hotspot that becomes both sanctuary and jail as Heraldo, grieving his dead brother, hides out from a feral, vengeful drugs gang presided over by imposing matriarch Bambina (Fabiola Liper). Having proved his worth as a handyman, Heraldo is adopted by the motel's proprietors, the



ageing, macho Elias (Fábio Assunção) and his wife Dayana (Nataly Rocha), plus their night porter Môco (Yuri Yamamoto). It's a family unit of sorts, inflected by lust, betrayal and violence, with each character wanting something different. Elias is a frustrated patriarch with no children, his sexuality ambiguous; Dayana wants freedom. Having grown up without a father, Heraldo unzips his residual anger as he relates a brutal story from his childhood. The tension of this terrifically acted film rests on the question of who will survive the unsustainable oedipal tryst.

With gorgeous art direction by Marcos Pedroso, the motel is a neon-hued version of the prison setting of Genet's only film, *Un chant d'amour* (1950), in which every cell contains a sexual scenario. Like Genet's prison guard, Elias prowls the corridors watching his clients through the hatches in the doors. Signs say 'SILENCIO' but sound designer Waldir Xavier punctuates the film's soundtrack with rhythmic gasps and cries of fucking. "You hardly ever hear a man moaning," Elias says, going to investigate. This sensuous sound design is interwoven with a score by composer Amine Bouhafa at times fittingly reminiscent of Ry Cooder's music for *Paris, Texas* (1984), and ending in a rave explosion playing out over an unmissable psychedelic end-credit sequence.

Into the motel strays a bestiary of cats, goats, rutting donkeys and a huge cobra found coiled in a bathtub. The magically strange animal imagery evokes the midnight movies of Alejandro Jodorowsky or David Lynch, as do the nightmarish visions of Bambino's gang that haunt Heraldo. Having literally dug their own graves, the star-crossed lovers escape back into civilisation naked, like Dorothy Vallens at the end of *Blue Velvet* (1986); gentle with animals, our hero is blessed by a miracle in the form of a white horse on the highway. It's a heady brew of symbolism, which contrasts with idyllic memories and fantasies signposted by the texture of a home-movie style; colourists are the industry's unsung heroes for the way they make a film look, and here Dirk Meier has excelled.

Sharing a European arthouse bloodline (and some key crew, such as editor Nelly Quettier) with the works of Alice Rohrwacher, Gaspar Noé and Claire Denis, *Motel Destino* premiered in Competition at Cannes 2024 alongside Sean Baker's *Anora*. In repertory cinema heaven, I can imagine the two films double-billed for their mutual

vision of sexual pleasure palaces where life can be brutal but with neon beauty to be found between the cracks.

Credits

Heraldo	Iago Xavier
Dayana	Nataly Rocha
Elias	Fábio Assunção
Jorge	Renan Capivara
Bambina	Fabiola Liper
Marta	Isabela Catão
Môco	Yuri Yamamoto
Rafael	David Santos
Carol	Jupyra Carvalho
Maxime	Bertrand de Courville
Ed	Jan Moreira
Claudio	Edgle Lima
Novaes	Katiana Monteiro
Lena	Vanessa Cardoso
Fernanda	Adna Moreira
Director	Karim Aïnouz
Screenplay	Wislan Esmeraldo
Cinematography	Helene Louvart
Editor	Nelly Quettier
Music	Amine Bouhafa
Brazil/France/Germany	
2024   115m	

Take 2

As he runs freely across the sprawling dunes of Ceará, flitting back and forth between the crisp water and the blazing heat of the Brazilian sun, it is hard to imagine why Heraldo (Iago Xavier) would want to leave this slice of paradise. Alas, things are rarely as idyllic as they seem – even more so in small towns where one is hidden away from the rest of the world but never sheltered from prying neighbouring eyes.

In Heraldo’s case, he’s always under the heavy gaze of his drug boss, an artist who splits her time between painting colourful canvases and taking care of late-payers. Her crowded house is the closest thing Heraldo ever had to a home, made even more intimate by sharing it with his older brother who sings promises of a future living in quiet lawfulness, raising their children close together, brothers made fathers and uncles made godfathers. Those dreams uttered under the vast skies of the Brazilian Northeast are cut short by a violent crime that sends Heraldo into hiding at the titular seedy motel.

The same destiny that lends its name to the shaggy establishment off the highway has seldom been kind to the downtrodden 21-year-old. Such kindness comes naturally to the cheery Dayana (Nataly Rocha) who, taken by this man who is everything her abusive husband Elias (Fábio Assunção) isn’t, agrees to let Heraldo stay in the motel in exchange for acting as the motel’s handyman. And, boy, does he prove handy.

*Motel Destino* sees Brazilian-Algerian filmmaker Karim Aïnouz return to the language – both in theme and form – of earlier works like *Madame Satã* and *Futuro Beach*, prodding at the undercurrent of desire that clouds an already frail sense of morality. It does, however, crucially lack the tangible yearning of such films, much due to newcomer Iago Xavier being miscast in this love triangle that never quite joins its corners. This teasing unravels as a frustrating

withholding in a film that sets out to comment on notions of power and possession but can’t keep up with its own throbbing, sensual rhythms.

Still, *Motel Destino* is shot beautifully by Aïnouz’s frequent collaborator Hélène Louvart, a tropical neo-noir that does away with darkness in favour of a riveting spiral of colour and sweat. Yellows meet purples meet blues, lime green bikinis lying against orange hammocks, and sweat-drenched bodies slithering under a curtain of crimson. The workers at the motel eat, clean and sleep to a soundtrack of constant groaning and panting, the loud, chaotic nature of want and ecstasy as natural to them as the pages on an accounting book. In this depraved Eden, deep moans casually cut through ordinary conversations as two donkeys fornicate outside and chickens peck happily at tufts of dry grass – Aïnouz’s gaze as free of judgment as his characters.

The director is an expert in this precise kind of world-building, one intricately related to yearning – for another, for belonging, for redemption. If Xavier is a misfire, unable to tap into the kind of rogue unpredictability required of a character like Heraldo and never quite grasping the volatile nature of the love triangle at its core, Assunção and Rocha prove the opposite. The actress channels the great Sônia Braga in her easy-flowing seductiveness, untamed hair sticking to the sweat dripping from her chest, a cheeky smile always looming at the corner of her mouth. Assunção makes for a great sleazeball with trunks just as short as his temper, whose inflated sense of self barely manages to keep him afloat. The pair is one of the many pleasures of Aïnouz’s latest, a homecoming that isn’t without its flaws but one that will prove kind to those willing to walk into its grimy, frisky arms.

Rafa Sales Ross: Little White Lies

Our next screening

Friday October 10th, 7.30pm  
On Falling (Portugal/UK 2024. 15)

Aurora is a slave to the algorithm. Working round the clock at a vast warehouse in Edinburgh, she is desperate to build a rich and meaningful life, but is trapped between the confines of her workplace and the solitude of her flatshare, enjoying only the briefest of exchanges with her co-workers and flatmates.

Set against a landscape dominated by an anonymising gig economy and the wider social and technological forces that often seem designed to keep us apart, director Laura Carreira’s impressive first feature *On Falling* (reminiscent of the work of Ken Loach and produced by his company 16 Films) explores the reality of today’s world of work for so many.