

**FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW**

FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW; Dissection of a Crime Leaves Brazil Exposed

Bus 174 | NYT Critic's Pick | Directed by José Padilha, Felipe Lacerda | Documentary, Crime | R | 2h 30m

By A. O. Scott

March 27, 2003

The Brazilian documentary "Bus 174," which will be shown tonight at 6 at Alice Tully Hall as part of the New Directors/New Films series, is so wrenching and absorbing that you can easily lose sight of the sophistication of its techniques. Using a combination of video taken for Brazilian television and ex post facto talking-head interviews, the filmmakers, Felipe Lacerda and José Padilha, have made a deceptively straightforward film that has the force of tragedy and the depth of first-rate investigative journalism.

Their film explores a crime that took place in a leafy, affluent section of Rio de Janeiro on June 12, 2000. A young man, brandishing a gun and apparently high on drugs, tried to rob the passengers on a bus and ended up taking them hostage. There followed a long, frustrating standoff as the hostage-taker, Sandro de Nascimento, issued ranting and

incoherent demands and challenges, threatening murder if they were not met, and the police stood around ineffectually.

The drama has a lurid fascination, and there is a queasy, guilty thrill in watching it unfold. But the filmmakers use this slightly questionable appeal and the inherent suspense of the hostage drama to investigate the violence, the poverty and the social malaise that bedevil modern Brazil. The police and the former hostages, calmly recalling their ordeal, offer insights into the psychological triangle that developed among the captor, his captives and his pursuers. The survivors speak with impressive analytical detachment, dissecting each moment of their trauma with articulate precision. The police officers, including SWAT team members, one of them speaking from behind a ski mask, his voice electronically altered, offer a dispassionate and devastating account of their appalling tactical failures. Again and again Mr. de Nascimento, who was born in 1978, presented snipers with an easy target, sticking his head out of the bus windows and waving his pistol around recklessly.

Not only did the police decline to end the crisis with firepower; they also proved utterly unable to read their adversary's motives and behavior. The filmmakers, talking to social workers and sociologists as well as friends and relatives of the hijacker, compensate by producing an extraordinarily detailed, horribly sad portrait of a life shaped by the cruelty and indifference that seem endemic in urban Brazil.

When the hijacker was 10, he witnessed the murder of his mother, a shopkeeper in a working-class neighborhood. After that he drifted into street life, joining the legions of children who roam Rio's slums panhandling, sniffing glue and committing petty crimes. He survived the notorious police massacre of street children sleeping outside a church in the Candelária district of Rio in 1992. After that he served time in the city's nightmarish prisons, but even after his incarceration he tried, with the help of an aunt and an older woman who was a kind of foster mother, to set his life on a more stable course.

With novelistic thoroughness, Mr. Padilha and Mr. Lacerda take the audience on a tour of the slums, the courts and the jails, composing a portrait of the hijacker and the world that formed him. The patience and compassion of the hostages and the critical good sense shared by the social worker who tried to save him and the policemen who confronted him suggest a powerful strain of decency amid chaos and deprivation. Not powerful enough, of course, but sufficient to provide at least a glimmer of humanity in this story of brutality and waste.

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There is also a deep, poignant humanism in the way the film devotes so much care and attention to a damaged and wasted life, restoring the fragile individuality of a young man who had appeared on Brazilian television as a monster. His actions are not so much explained or justified as demystified, given a context and a set of possible causes.

"Bus 174" is worth comparing to "City of God," Fernando de Meirelles's ultraviolent melodrama set among Rio's youth gangs. The children in that movie are thoroughly amoral; killing comes naturally to them, a source of kicks as well as a means of survival. But this film suggests that even in a violence-saturated society, killing is never easy, and that even the most degraded souls retain a primal moral sense.

Why did Mr. de Nascimento do what he did? What did he want? He told the police he wanted revenge for the deaths of his friends in Candelária, and more guns. While I stared at his angry and defiant face in smeary, grainy video, as he threatened to kill his hostages and repeatedly declined to make good on his threats, it occurred to me that while vengeance, robbery and some kind of gangster media glory may have been among his obvious intentions, his deeper intention may have been suicide.

BUS 174

Directed by José Padilha; in Portuguese, with English subtitles; directors of photography, Cezar Moraes and Marcelo Guru; edited by Felipe Lacerda; music by João Nabuco and Sacha Ambak; produced by Mr. Padilha and Marcos Prado; released by Zazen Productions in association with HBO/Cinemax Documentary Films. Running time: 122 minutes. This film is not rated. Shown tonight at 6 p.m. at Alice Tully Hall and tomorrow at 9 p.m. at Walter Reade Theater, 165 West 65th Street, Lincoln Center, as part of the 32nd New Directors/New Films series of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the department of film and media of the Museum of Modern Art.

Bus 174 NYT Critic's Pick

Directors José Padilha, Felipe Lacerda

Writers Bráulio Mantovani, José Padilha

Stars Sandro do Nascimento, Rodrigo Pimentel, Luiz Eduardo Soares, Anonymous, Maria Aparecida

Rating R

Running Time 2h 30m

Genres Documentary, Crime

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