

**FILM REVIEW**

FILM REVIEW; The Sad Before and After Of a Hostage Crisis in Rio

Oct. 8, 2003

"Bus 174" was shown as part of this year's New Directors/New Films Series. Following are excerpts from A. O. Scott's review, which appeared in The New York Times on March 27; the full text is online at nytimes.com/movies. The film, in Portuguese with English subtitles, opens today at the Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, South Village.

The Brazilian documentary "Bus 174" 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 work explores a crime 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 do 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, poverty and social malaise that bedevil modern Brazil.

Again and again Mr. do 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. 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.

Why did Mr. do 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 might have been among his obvious intentions, his deeper one might have been suicide.

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