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CAST AND CREW

Sônia Braga ... Clara
Maeve Jinkings ... Ana Paula
Iranthir Santos ... Roberval
Humberto Carrão ... Diego
Zoraide Coletto ... Ladjane
Carla Ribas ... Cleide
Fernando Teixeira ... Geraldo
Buda Lira ... Antonio
Paula de Renor ... Fátima
Bárbara Colen ... Clara em 1980
Daniel Porpino ... Adalberto & Rodrigo
Pedro Queiroz ... Tomás
Germano Melo ... Martin
Julia Bernat ... Julia

Written and Directed by **Kleber Mendonça Filho**
Produced by **Emilite Lesclaux, Saïd Ben Saïd** and **Michel Merkt**
Co-Producer **Walter Salles**
Directors of Photography **Pedro Sotero** and **Fabrizio Tadeu**
Edited by **Eduardo Serrano**
Production Designers **Juliano Dornelles** and **Thales Junqueira**



THE CHARACTER FLASHING THROUGH SPACE

by Sophie Monks Kaufman

“The three of us are worried about you all alone in this ghost building.” Anxious adult-child Ana Paula (Maeve Jinkings) has succeeded in rattling her mother with this comment. Clara (Sônia Braga), 65, previously as intractable as stone and as regal as a queen, senses in her daughter’s words an intervention and a betrayal. The jolt extends beyond the parameters of the fictional world affecting narrative scope. It signifies the ground trembling beneath a central character’s will which, until this point, had been the film’s true north.

Ana Paula is right in more ways than one to say that her mother lives in a ghost building. She is literally right: every other resident of the utopian Aquarius complex (overlooking Boa Viagem beach) has sold up and shipped out. She is emotionally right: Clara, a retired music critic, can conjure deceased companions. When she plays an LP, the years melt away and suddenly she’s dancing with her husband and other long-gone friends and relatives. This space has been her home for so long that memories coat the place. They are lodged within record sleeves and inside the atmosphere itself. This is where they partied to celebrate her Aunt Lucia’s 70th birthday and toasted Clara surviving breast cancer. When, in the present day, a grandfather-and-grandson property developer duo knock on her door, armed with toadying smiles and information packs, Clara stands defiant against them. They need her to be bought out like everyone else so that they can build their ‘New Aquarius’. But she has no stake in their monopoly game and deflects every proposal with matriarchal firmness.

Then her own child breaks rank. Ana Paula compounds the slight by revealing that she has spoken with the developers and thinks they’re offering a fair price. Out limps the previously unimaginable question: is Clara a hero for opposing greedy housing moguls, or is she a stubborn old King Canute who would be better off surrendering to the forces of inevitability?

As in his feature debut, *Neighbouring Sounds* (*O Som ao Redor*, 2012), writer-director Kleber Mendonça Filho bases the drama in a setting where he grew up and still resides. This would be Recife, the capital of Pernambuco, a coastal region of Brazil, 2,300km north of Rio. Recife is infamous for its shark attacks (between 1992 and 2012 there were 56 attacks, 21 of which were fatal). This is subtly incorporated into the film, as is Mendonça’s awareness and understanding of privilege. He had a maid as a child and so he gives Clara one: Ladjane (Zoraide Coletto). The two women are friends but live on different sides of a pipe that separates the rich from the poor. As Mendonça told *Cinema Scope* magazine in 2012: “I’m interested in a cinema of fiction that’s documentary as well. You see *Taxi Driver*



[1976] today, and it's fascinating because it's fiction, but it's also New York in 1975. You can see how New York was – roads, traffic lights, places that don't exist anymore. It interests me to film scenes that not only function dramatically, but also show the surroundings.”

In perhaps an extension of attentive documentarian leanings, Mendonça is a director fascinated by how people use space and what happens when that space is invaded. On a fundamental narrative level, *Aquarius* is a David versus Goliath turf war, albeit one encoded by class so that pressure is dressed in the civilised words of self-styled businessmen. Most insidious is Diego (Humberto Carrão), the younger of the duo. He has returned from an expensive education abroad to make a name for himself at his grandfather's firm. He has an easy smile that never reaches his narrow eyes and a small paunch pushing beneath his casual shirts.

Life imitated art when Mendonça, his cast and his crew, used the Cannes 2016 red carpet as a platform to show support for Brazil's first female president, 68-year-old Dilma Rousseff, then in the process of being ousted by a coup. She has since been impeached while *Aquarius* was subject to what fellow Brazilian filmmaker Anna Muylaert called a “subtle conspiracy” from the new government – it was slapped with a rare 18-rating and denied its logical spot as Brazil's Oscar submission for Best Foreign Language Film.

On the inverse level of art imitating life, it's an all too perfect time for our hero's antagonists to be a pair of property developers. Anyone who has seen Anthony Baxter's 2011 documentary *You've Been Trumped* – featuring the now American president trying to bully a group of Scottish farmers into giving up their land so he can build a golf resort – will let out a shudder of recognition. Underhand tactics, such as cutting off the farmers' water supply, were used in Aberdeen and underhand tactics are used in *Aquarius*.

The most disturbing, chaotic and sexy stretch of the film shows sound invasion. Diego throws an all-night orgy in the apartment directly above Clara's. Bass throbs in through her ceiling, poisoning her peace, like a naturalistic version of the hands grabbing out of the walls in *Repulsion* (1965). Clara has more chill than the fearful Carol in Roman Polanski's thriller. Her coping strategies include calling in a young rent boy for sex. She combats the lawless carnality that barged uninvited into her space by finding her own pleasure within that fluid atmosphere, but it messes with her mind. The next day her grip on social situations is looser, and there is human excrement on her stairs.

At 150 minutes, *Aquarius* is a roomy character study dotted with elaborations, major and minor, on the theme of space. *Little White Lies* editor, David Jenkins, wrote that *Neighbouring Sounds* is a jazz movie: “These are not movies about or which contain jazz

music (even though they sometimes do), but movies which adopt a structure based on patterns, motifs, moods, variations and digressions which characterise the form.” *Aquarius* is also a jazz movie. It's held together by everyday tableaux, which unfold as gently as a seaside breeze. Viewers are advised to stay alert during the ambling downtime because the film is constantly supplying a daisy chain of related observations. Whether it's a man on a ladder appearing at the kitchen window to startle Ladjane or Clara noticing a coffin being dug up as she walks back from laying flowers on her husband's grave, the point is made in various ways that no physical space is sacred.

Then there is the matter of Clara's space, her home – the dramatic pivot of the film's narrative and an interior that we return to more frequently than anywhere else. Because of her unique housing situation, Clara lives in eerie splendour, like a lone survivor of the *Marie Celeste* or a squatter in Versailles. The stairs and landings of the Aquarius complex have the décor of a villa in a hot country trying to keep itself cool. Walls are painted azure blue and magnolia, while floor tiles look soothing to the naked foot's touch. Light leaks in through patterned bannisters and windows. Once out of the hallway and inside Clara's apartment there is an upgrade in cosiness and sophistication. Here is a lifetime of personal effects. There are books and plants, records and photos, wood-carvings and wall-hangings, a *Barry Lyndon* poster and a huge window overlooking the beach. Beside the window is a hammock. Clara is partial to surveying the comings and goings of those passing by, keeping informed on what's happening in her increasingly unstable slice of world.

The way that Braga moves through space is what gives *Aquarius* a hypnotic pull. Formerly best known for her title role in Hector Babenco's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), she makes a case through Mendonça's film that at the age of 65 her richest acting years are yet to come. A black mane of Rapunzel hair hangs down her back in what *The Telegraph's* Robbie Collin calls a “Modigliani sweep”. Sometimes she clips it up using one deliberate motion. All her motions are deliberate. They are pre-empted by a thoughtful pause that is the mark of poise. Often she establishes eye contact before speaking, unleashing the steel of her gaze ahead of releasing words. Her smile signals friendliness when she shows her teeth and exasperation when her mouth flickers in a closed line. Her voice is low and imperious. All these qualities help to make Clara a star, but they are not the full caboodle.

Mendonça likes showing how people get to where they're going. Not for him rat-a-tat-tat establishing shots or the quick cuts of action filmmaking. In an early scene documenting a niche instructor-led beach activity of ‘laughing while lying on someone else's stomach’, the camera veers away to four youths swaggering over. It's easy presume that their intentions are malign – why flag their arrival other than to signal drama? – but they simply lie down and join the activity, laughing and lying on stomachs with the best of them.



If Mendonça is happy to provoke thought by the way he presents single-serving characters, then he is delighted to watch Braga move around her apartment. Straight-backed and sensuous, she seems to steal pleasure at every step, and the camera captures her private thrill at being alive. She favours flowing clothing. Flowing is an apt descriptor of her movements, because this lady saunters. She holds her head up high and infuses almost every scene with a dignity several storeys above the murky trajectory of the plot. Not that she is designed to be an untouchable goddess. Even the apartment haven contains an uneasy space – the kitchen, or the domestic area, where Ladjane prepares Clara's meals. Clara is not what the kids call 'woke'. She has not checked her privilege, and sees it as natural to have servants.

The class element is not in play to saddle Clara with heavy judgements but to build another layer onto the film's preoccupation with space. Who do we border with, now and in our pasts? We may have enough space but who *doesn't* have enough space? Is our luxury at someone else's cost? Whose lives has Clara touched in the course of her own? "We exploit them and they steal from us here and there," says Clara's sister-in-law. This is a gentle challenge to Clara's irritation on seeing a picture of an old maid, Juvenita (Andrea Rosa), who stole jewels from the family and then ran. Something in that conversation must have provoked a twang of conscience because later Clara has a bloody dream, starring Juvenita and her mastectomy.

There is one type of space that infringes on no one and is deep enough to get lost in. Burrowed, like secret treasures, within Mendonça's visual landscape of heady naturalism are mysterious flickers of the private imagination. Clara and her Aunt Lucia both have fleshy flashbacks to sexual memories. They are at social gatherings when these hot recollections surface and do not betray what is playing in their mind's eyes. Sexual and loving bonds keep people in character's thoughts after they are physically gone. Tactile mementos keep the dead's names in conversations. *Aquarius* is full of photographs. On Ladjane's birthday, after the cake and singing, Ladjane kisses a larger than life picture of her son who was killed in a motorcycle accident. He is no longer taking up space in the real world but he has permanent residence in her head. Is this what happens to people as the years roll by: a life that used to sprawl outwards becomes locked inside one mind?

If so, Clara is not retreating meekly. The evidence of her existence has a home and she is determined to keep that home.

Human history is a history of powerful people forcing out natives justified by the old adage that 'might is right'. Colonisation takes a strange and unsightly form in the finale of *Aquarius*. The ending itself offers mild catharsis but is no assurance that Clara has immunity from

the invading forces that Mendonça has meticulously and manifestly depicted. The film is in three parts: Clara's Hair, Clara's Love, Clara's Cancer. What will happen in part four – Clara's Future? There are so many ways that a person can end up living in a ghost building.

Sophie Monks Kaufman is a freelance film journalist and contributing editor of Little White Lies. She recently made a podcast series that talks about bulimia called 'Spill Your Guts' and her directorial debut, I Do Not Sleep, will emerge soon.





INTERVIEW WITH KLEBER MENDONÇA FILHO

by Tatiana Monassa

Where did this project begin? What triggered the story?

I started out wanting to make a movie about archives, and *Aquarius* may yet prove the first step on the road to a movie about the predilection for keeping objects and the divergence between documents and memories. I found it interesting to have as my protagonists a person and a building that are roughly the same age and both in some way under threat. The film emerged out of a series of events, including a fairly mundane glut of telephone calls I received at home—cold calls selling all kinds of subscriptions for credit cards, health insurance, cable TV or newspapers. I felt under attack from the market, which attempts to force people to buy things that they don't want.

Starting with this idea of being under attack from the market, the film is a direct, though subtle commentary on the wave of property speculation that hit Recife in recent years. Rather than approach the problem in an overtly political way, you choose to focus on the psychological impact on regular citizens.

Yes, the pestering I have just described is particularly aggressive in relation to the property market. Before the recession hit Brazil, they behaved like ravenous beasts. The ballet of excavators and bulldozers that I witnessed in Recife was depressing, as well as fascinating. I recall observing the evolving destiny of a house and its owners. Having seen the occupants move out, I saw a sign go up one day, announcing the construction of a new building. A few months later, I got home to find a bulldozer clearing the land where that house had stood for decades. It had taken barely a few hours to demolish it. I like to apply this process to my films, testifying to change through a viewpoint linked to an individual life. And so, in *Aquarius*, little by little, Clara grasps what is happening to her space and her personal environment.

This confrontation turns out to be a conflict between different lifestyles: on the one hand, ultra-contemporary living, marked by conspicuous consumption and widespread sanitization; on the other hand, that of an earlier generation, based on 'getting along' and a sense of community. Is this a conflict that affects you?

Clearly, the tension it creates is important for the movie, but in my own life I take this conflict with a blend of serenity and irritation. How can they casually demolish so many



houses and buildings that have a story, that are reference points for so many people? In Recife, the city has been completely reshaped in its *modus operandi* by the demands of the market, and nothing has been done to protect the city from commercial interests. I always hear people saying Brazil is a young country without the same bond to history that you see in Europe, for example. It's absurd because a town like Recife, which dates back five hundred years, has a long history. Property speculation seems to have succeeded in destroying whole swathes of a number of Brazil's major cities by offering new constructions that adhere to a specific design and promote an idea of renewal simply by erasing anything 'old.' In the end, with *Aquarius*, we come back to the idea of a film about archives, whether they be material or emotional.

Your previous movie, *Neighboring Sounds*, also featured the attentive construction of a complex microcosm with its web of friendships and alliances. Does this allow you to approach political, social and historical issues specific to Brazil?

I don't think it's possible to depict life and day-to-day events without highlighting their contradictions, whether they are thought-provoking, amusing or sinister. When I'm writing a film, it's difficult for me to ignore these aspects of society, and Brazilian society in particular. I have always been struck by the ideological contradictions of Brazilians from the wealthier social classes: they can have an aristocratic attitude, while supporting abolitionism and leftwing values. The fundamental challenge for me is to depict this society in all its complexity.

The aggressive methods of contemporary management, based on emotional manipulation and potentially extending to psychological harassment, are deployed almost metaphorically in the movie, in a variety of indirect offensives that verge on the absurd. Gradually, a detachment from reality occurs, and we have to wonder if this nightmare is not all in Clara's head.

First of all, Clara's nightmare is very real. She sees herself alone and in a very uncomfortable situation, subjected to strong pressures merely for being home, in the building where she has always lived. She has this impression that somebody has suddenly decided her space is valueless, outdated and must be gotten rid of. With so many opinions against her, even within her own family, Clara occasionally feels like she is losing her mind. She is mentally vulnerable, which opens the door to unnerving feelings. I like the idea that this leads us to mystery and doubt, like a lucid nightmare.

Your flirtation with fantasy and genre movies occasionally rears its head, with scenes that create genuine fear, although we can't identify its origins or the reason for it.

To some extent, *Aquarius* brings to mind a siege movie with no shooting, bows and arrows, or Molotov cocktails. Not literally, at least. The Aquarius building and Clara's apartment are defined spaces—doors, walls, courtyard—and face the imminent risk of invasion. The building is constantly violated, and the apartment, the most intimate part of this environment, is threatened. The open windows contribute to this feeling, playing a fairly classical role in my eyes, that of exterior/interior. There is also the unfortunate fact that in Brazil, open windows remind us of the custom of putting barriers of some kind or another across every window, whatever the floor, to prevent breaking-and-entering. I think that all these aspects of the film are very ordinary and conventional, but there must be something in the framing and cutting that reinforces this apparently fantastical tone.

Was Clara, played by Sonia Braga, always the focus of the story?

From the start, the fulcrum of the film was this woman in her sixties, a widow who owns a very beautiful and simple apartment in an old building. I was never tempted to interweave events at the property developer's offices, or to show Diego, the young entrepreneur, in his private life or in meetings with his staff. As soon as I started writing, the film was devoted to Clara. We had to be with her and the viewpoint, most of the time, is hers. Any contact with other people occurs through her because they knock on her door or talk to her, or because she addresses someone. Sticking close to Clara is what allows us to generate a sense of insecurity or danger.

How did the idea of Sonia Braga playing Clara emerge? Did you write the film with her in mind?

No. When I was writing, I envisioned finding an unknown who could play Clara. We were in pre-production, when Pedro Sotero (the film's co-director of photography) suggested Sonia Braga. Our casting director, Marcelo Caetano, sent the script to Sonia in the US. Within 48 hours, she replied, saying she wanted to do the movie. I went to New York to meet her, and she was fabulous. One of the most wonderful things in all this is that Sonia had been part of my life, as is often the case with great artists, and she became someone I worked with, and now a friend also.



For many people, due to her playing a number of sexually liberated women, Sonia Braga is a sex symbol. Was her public image a factor in the development of the character?

I never really thought about Sonia the 'sex symbol' because for me, more than anything else, Sonia is an instantly recognizable face of Brazilian culture, and her image is one of unforgettable beauty. I was very interested to involve this star in a realistic dramatic situation, where her beauty is called upon and contributes to some extent to the story.

Music plays a very important role in the film, modulating Clara's different states of mind and eventually becoming a character in its own right. How did you develop this dynamic relationship between the storytelling and the various musical styles that feature in the film?

I like the fact that Clara has LPs at home—those she bought over a period of forty years, or those sent to her while she was working as a critic. I also like the idea that, even though she has a vinyl collection, she doesn't refuse to listen to tracks on her phone. It was only natural, since she listens to music, for music to occupy scenes. Music also gives an indication of her tastes and moods.

The film takes its title from the name of the building, reinforcing the idea that the story is rooted in the location. How would you define your relationship to space as a filmmaker?

For me, the question of space is linked to the quantity of information one wants to get across through shot selection and framing. From the beginning, the building was a character in the movie; the challenge for me was to subtly present it as having a kind of dignity. It is a slightly older building, already doomed, but it was important that it should not seem rundown or hazardous. In other words, it is innocent of any crime. It must be clear in the film that its problems come from the outside, not from within, from the structure itself. Similarly, in a kind of game with the audience, we had to show Clara's apartment in sufficient detail for people to be able to sketch its layout after seeing the film. Shooting in a real apartment certainly helped me to think about the space itself and its constraints. The demands of a movie, such as camera angles and the use of doors and windows, pose a series of concrete problems that reveal to us new ideas about real space and cinematic space.

The film's ending will surprise audiences. Can you comment on your choice in this respect?

I'd written two other endings, but I didn't shoot them. They were interesting but the style was closer to a sense of 'wrapping up the story' – conflicts were more or less resolved and we had a pretty good idea of what had happened or not. Sometimes, you are captivated by a film and its artistic personality, but then the ending feels like all the loose ends being tied up and nothing else. It's no tragedy because a lot of these endings work fine. It's just personal disappointment. There is another type of ending, however, which is more difficult to explain or even accept, and which doesn't try to answer every question. Something abruptly happens and the film ends. I always think back to the ending of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), with Leatherface brandishing his roaring chainsaw in a demented ballet as the sun sets behind him. The ending leaves lots of questions open: we don't follow the girl who manages to escape; the police don't arrive on the scene; no ambulances appear; the chainsaw doesn't run out of fuel... But it's an ending that is very effective with its final hard cut to black. In the case of *Aquarius*, it was a decision we made in editing because we felt that the final scene represented a major dramatic leap for Clara with regard to the story. Besides, I love those last three shots and their relationship to the opening shots of the movie.



A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a dark blue top with white sleeves and an orange skirt, stands in a dimly lit room. She is looking towards the camera with a serious expression. To her left is a window with a complex, geometric lattice pattern. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Kevin Lambert

Executive Producers Francesco Simeoni

Technical Producer James White

QC Manager Nora Mehenni

Authoring DCU

Artist Nigel Winfield

Design Obviously Creative

SPECIAL THANKS

James Agnew, Alex Agran, Ian Froggatt, Ian Haydn Smith, Kleber Mendonça Filho,
Tatiana Monassa, Sophie Monks Kaufman, Anthony Nield, Jon Sadler



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