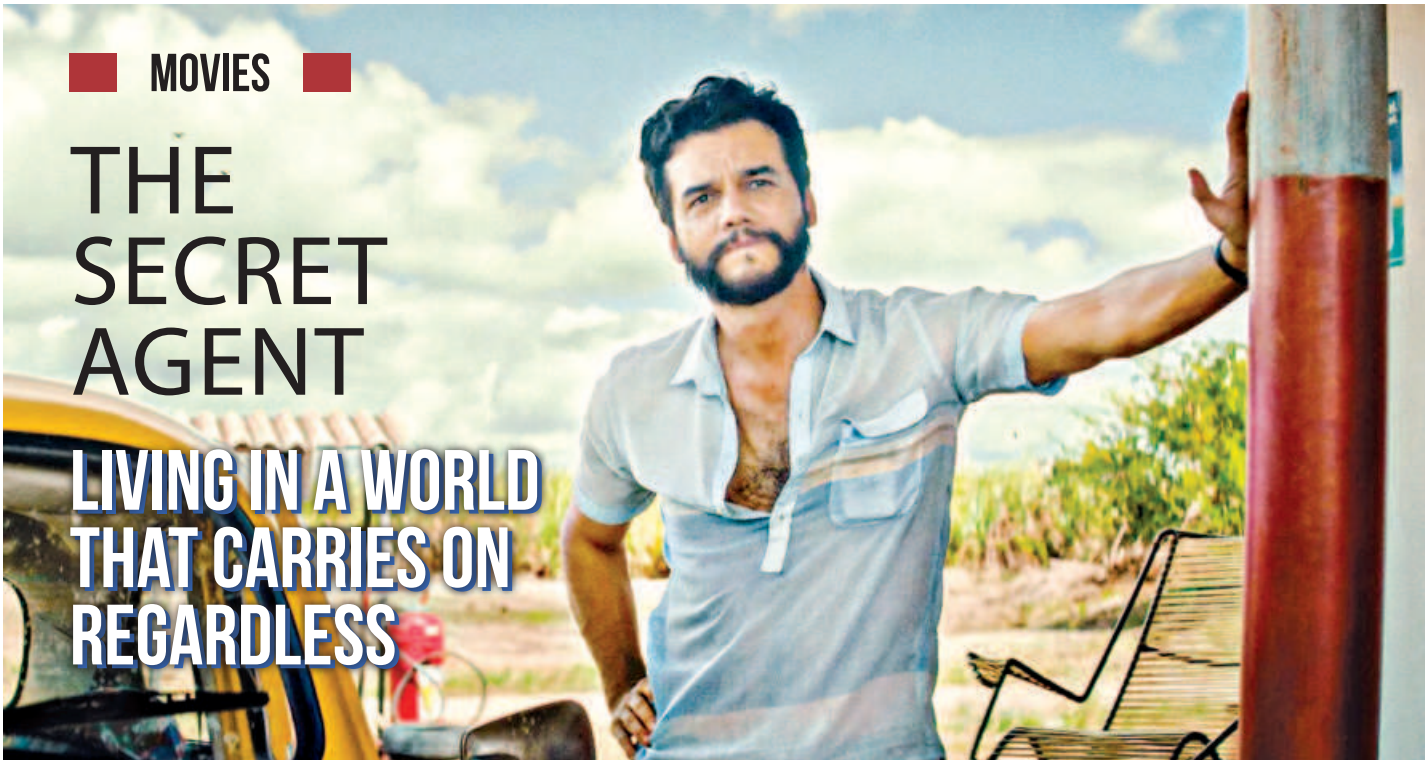


MOVIES

THE SECRET AGENT

LIVING IN A WORLD THAT CARRIES ON REGARDLESS



AZRA HUMAYRA

There is something faintly perverse, and therefore, rather wonderful, about a film that opens on a rotting corpse and then refuses to make that the most alarming thing in the frame. *The Secret Agent*, directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho, is set in 1977 Brazil. The man at its centre, Armando Solimões, played with an almost frightening composure by Wagner Moura, is not a secret agent at all. He is a widower, a father, and an academic who has had the bad luck of irritating the wrong minister.

This is quite enough, in a military dictatorship, to turn one's life into a prolonged act of evasion. And so, he adopts the name 'Marcelo', who arrives in Recife in a bright yellow Volkswagen Beetle, which feels

like exactly the wrong colour for someone trying not to be noticed. But nothing in this film behaves quite as expected.

Recife itself is in the throes of Carnaval, all water guns and confetti, while somewhere not very far away, bodies are being disposed of with great efficiency. The contrast is not hammered home. It simply exists, which is what makes it so unsettling.

The plot unfolds in three parts, each teasing out another layer of Marcelo's predicament. There is his reunion with his son and his job at an identification office, a delicious irony given that he is living under an assumed identity. Lastly, there is the slow tightening of the net, as corrupt policemen and hired killers drift in and out of his orbit with casualness.

In *The Secret Agent*, the cinematography

has a way of appearing almost too relaxed for its own good, and that is precisely why it works. Mendonça Filho favours wide, densely populated frames that allow life to spill over. Crowds drift through Carnaval streets, interiors hum with small, telling movements, and even moments of danger unfold without visual hysteria. The script is similarly unhurried, almost novelistic in its structure. It loops through characters, detours into minor incidents, and lingers on processes that would be discarded in a more dutiful thriller.

Moura holds everything together with a performance that is all restraint and buried panic. Marcelo is not a hero in the conventional sense. He is simply a man trying to stay alive, to protect his son, and to hold on to some idea of himself.

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