

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Shooting to Kill in the New Brazilian Cinema

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*Elite Squad 2* (*Tropa de Elite 2*, 2010), playing selected screenings in the United States and available on home video next year, is the most successful film in the history of Brazilian cinema. It was watched by 11 million people in Brazil, more than *Avatar* or any other American blockbuster. In fact, only *Titanic* surpassed it.

A thriller about drugs, violence, crooked police and corrupt politicians, the film has a fast pace but deals with many serious issues. After all, even as the World Cup and the Olympic Games approach, and despite the general improvement of the economy, crime and corruption are still rampant in Brazil: no less than six ministers in the last six months of a new government had to quit their posts, all involved in political scandals. Perhaps this explains the incredible popular success of the main character of the film, Capitão Nascimento, an “incorruptible cop” from BOPE, the special police squad of Rio de Janeiro.

While in the first film, based on real events, the action centered in the police fight against drug dealers, in the second one the enemy are the “militias”, former cops involved in organized crime and extortion acting at the order of political cronies. It is a more ambitious and well-rounded film, and well worth the wait of three years.

I recently interviewed José Padilha and Bráulio Mantovani, respectively the director and the screenwriter of both the original *Elite Squad* and the current sequel. Mantovani is also the man behind the screenplay of *City of God* (2002), another recent Brazilian film which is already a classic.

### **José Padilha, director**

Q – How do you explain the incredible success of *Elite Squad* and *Elite Squad 2* in Brazil? Did you expect it?

A – I think that, in both cases, success came from the combination of a good story with social and political criticism that was relevant to the Brazilian public. The story made the audience identify with the characters and feel emotions together with them. The social criticism caused the film to be discussed not only as a movie, but as part of the whole issue of urban violence in Brazil. This combination gave both films a great strength. But I never expected the films to have such an incredible impact.

Q – You have been working with screenwriter Bráulio Mantovani for several films now. Such partnerships, while common in Hollywood, are still relatively rare in Brazilian cinema. How did you work together?

I like to work with friends and with people whom I consider very talented. Bráulio is both. Regarding the work, in the first *Squad*, I and Rodrigo Pimentel (BOPE chief, main inspiration for the “Capitão Nascimento” character) created the characters and wrote several treatments for the film. After that I asked Bráulio to improve on the next treatment. He read it, gave a lot of suggestions, and ended up writing the screenplay. In *Squad 2*, we did the opposite thing. Bráulio wrote three treatments, and then I rewrote the script for the final version. In both cases, we created the screenplay together and even worked in the final adjustments during editing.

Q – Are there any plans for *Elite Squad 3*?

A – There are no plans for a new *Elite Squad*.

Q – How was the beginning of your career?

A – I started making documentaries. As any other Brazilian filmmaker, I funded my film with the Brazilian tax incentive laws. Despite never having made a film before, I could get funding because of the contact of my family with the business world. But it was not easy. It took a lot of effort and we almost went broke. But in the end we managed to finish the film [the documentary *Bus 174*], and it was shown in Sundance and IDFA, two of the most important documentary film festivals in the world.

Q – Brazilian cinema seems to be in a very good moment right now. How do you see the current situation, and what still needs to be done?

A – In cinema, as in everything in life, people learn with experience. The financing of Brazilian cinema has been steady in the last fifteen years, and because of that many professionals had the opportunity to study, practice and make good films. What we need now is to change Brazilian production to be more self-sustainable, more independent of public financing.

Q – Did you receive any invitation to work in Hollywood?

A – I am working in two projects in the United States. A studio picture and an independent production. [Note: It was recently announced that Padilha will direct *Tri-Border*, a thriller set in the border of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, with a screenplay by Nick Schenk, of *Gran Torino* fame.]

### **Bráulio Mantovani, screenwriter**

Q – What was the major difficulty in writing *Elite Squad 2*, being a sequel? Which of the two movies do you prefer?

A – The difficulties were the same as in other scripts: to find the right tone, the dramatic arch of the character, and a certain dose of didacticism. Both films have a didactic element (just as *City of God*). They explain how the police system works. In the case of the second film, it took a lot of effort to combine the political and didactic elements with the character arch. The process was the same one I do in every film: trial and error.

I consider *Elite Squad 2* a much better film than *Elite Squad*, from screenplay to the final product. In terms of the screenplay, we did what we could not do in the first film: to make Nascimento a real protagonist. The first *Elite Squad* was changed a lot in the editing. The original narrator and protagonist was Mathias. Nascimento only appeared 50 minutes into the film and was a secondary character. We managed to make the film work even without shooting new scenes. And, thanks to the talent of actor Wagner Moura, we could turn Nascimento into narrator and main character. But it was impossible to create a really strong dramatic arch for the character. We could do it in *Elite 2*. And we did.

Q – You also wrote *City of God*, a film that made Brazilian contemporary cinema international news, and it was also your first script. How was that experience?

A – The biggest challenge was to create the courage to do it. I had never worked as a screenwriter for feature films. The novel that it was based on had more than 500 pages and a lot of characters. I realized that the only way to do it was my own way, freely, without fear of contradicting the rules of the so-called classic narrative. I had the luck to work with someone as brave as Fernando Meirelles.

Q – Do you have a model or a favorite screenwriter?

A – I like very much the screenplays of Billy Wilder, Tarantino, Charlie Kaufman and many others. Many screenwriters have contributed to my own way of writing. So I prefer that I don't have a model, but several models.

Q – How is the profession of screenwriter now in Brazil? It used to be that the screenplay was not considered so important before, but this seems to have changed lately.

A – It has changed, it's still changing, but it still needs to change even more. I think we are in an important moment right now. The screenplay is now considered essential in the creation of a film. Before, in Brazil, all people cared about was the idea. Now I think everybody realized that an idea without form is as useless as a refrigerator in the North Pole. What is still missing is to value more the screenwriter. The payments are still low and the screenwriter is still not considered a co-author of the film. But there are many screenwriters now in Brazil who can live just from their writing and are respected as creators.

*Tomás Creus teaches Brazilian Film and Literature at the Spanish and Portuguese Department of UCLA. He was born in Argentina but grew up in Porto Alegre, Brazil. He has directed a short films, and is currently working on a new feature film screenplay.*

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