

A close-up photograph of a metal machine, possibly a frog farm, with a circular opening. Inside the opening, a green frog is visible. The machine has various rollers and a wooden handle on the left side.

CINE LATINO

Stealing From the People or Stealing People?

By Joshua Jelly Shapiro

Photo courtesy of Jason Kohn.

Manda Bala (Send a Bullet)

Sundance Grand Jury Prize, Documentary

Directed by Jason Kohn (2006)

Not yet rated. 85 minutes.

In the opening scene of “Manda Bala,” director Jason Kohn’s much-lauded new documentary about social corruption in Brazil, we are introduced to a “frog farmer.” The farmer jokes, over the din of croaks emitting from frog-filled vats arrayed behind him in the sun, that he loves his amphibious flock more than he loves his wife. “She told me,” he explains with a ready smile: “you choose the frogs, or you choose me; I chose the frogs.” Moments after he makes this crack, however, we watch the farmer’s mood darken. When his off-camera interlocutor asks him about a scandal involving this, the largest frog farm in the world,

the color drops from his face. After a few beats’ silence our farmer recovers his cheer, but says only that *o escandalo* isn’t something he can really discuss.

By the end of Kohn’s film, which the director presented at a special Berkeley screening sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies, we’ve learned all about the scandal (a scheme to launder ill-got public funds through the farm’s private commerce in frogs’ legs). In watching “Manda Bala,” however, it becomes quickly clear that the film’s chief aim is not to trace the lineaments of any particular crime. It is rather to explore the larger context in which thievery takes place — to explore, that is, both the underlying causes for endemic iniquity and the fear that crosses the farmer’s face when he’s asked to speak of it. Built around the inspired metaphor of the frog farm, “Manda Bala,” as Kohn put it in a lively post-screening discussion, is a film about “how the rich steal from the poor and how the poor steal from the rich.”

In telling that story, “Manda Bala” (the phrase means “send a bullet,” or, more colloquially, “kill it” in Brazilian Portuguese) is helped along by a brilliant cast of characters: an articulate, ski-masked São Paulo slumlord who makes a living — and paves the streets of his favela — with ransom money from kidnappings; a puffy and paranoid upper-class Paulista who’s spent a small fortune to bullet-proof his Porsche and wants to insert two movement-monitoring microchips (“in case one fails”) into his body; a plastic surgeon with a Jesus complex who’s developed a procedure to reconstruct the severed ears of kidnap victims out of their own rib cartilage. Hovering above them all is Jader Barbalho, loathsome ex-president of the Brazilian Senate, who’s made his Northeastern state of Pará into a personal fief, funneling nearly \$2 billion of public funds earmarked for rural development into offshore bank accounts.

These characters’ relation to one another is often no greater than their shared membership in a violent economy of inequality. Kohn’s film, in accreting images drawn from their individual stories, builds a kinetic portrait of the corruption — moral, economic, political — bred in a society racked with class divides as stark as any on earth: a country whose largest city, São Paulo, possesses more wealth than the rest of South America combined, but contains upwards of 15 million favela-dwellers who survive on little more than scraps — many of them destitute immigrants from the Brazilian Northeast, one of the poorest regions in the hemisphere.

If the means by which “Manda Bala” “makes its points” are subtle, the images it employs to do so are anything but. Mr. Kohn has a fondness for flesh, human and otherwise, the more grotesque the better. He makes memorable use of slithering frogs in plastic buckets; of a surgeon’s scalpel



Former president of the Brazilian Senate, Jader Barbalho.

incising the subcutaneous fat of a human torso; even of the grainy police footage of kidnappers sawing off a captive’s ear.

That such images are hard to look at is appropriate. They fit the film’s grim subject-matter and lend it a power that helped it garner not only the Grand Jury Prize for top documentary at the recent Sundance Film Festival but also the festival’s award for outstanding cinematography. “Manda Bala” — which, as first-time director Kohn described, was some five years in the making — is that rare documentary

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São Paulo Robin Hood with ski mask.



Photo courtesy of Jason Kohn.

whose concern with form over content doesn't diminish its effectiveness as exegesis of its chosen place and time.

The relentless pulse of Brazilian music that punctuates the film's transitions and paces its scenes augments its aural impact. Indeed the blaring soundtrack, which includes such luminaries as Caetano Veloso, Os Mutantes and Jorge Ben, threatens on occasion to overwhelm what we're seeing on screen. Like Fernando Meirelles' "City of God," Brazil's most successful cinematic export of late, "Manda Bala" feels at times like a music video,

lending the primal glamour of samba to its stylized tale of murder and mayhem.

When asked after the Berkeley screening about prospective U.S. distribution, Kohn explained that gaining licensing permission for all the songs has been difficult. Though one presumes this obstacle will be surmounted and "Manda Bala" will make its way before long to American screens, it's hard to picture the film being released in Brazil anytime soon. (Its opening credits warn us as much: "Manda Bala"...a film that can't be shown in Brazil.") Mr. Kohn has said in interviews that a Brazilian release of the film might put himself and his family in danger (the New York-raised director's mother is Brazilian and his father is a businessman living in São Paulo). Cine-auteurs, of course, aren't beyond corruption's reach.

And indeed there are moments in the film itself when one fears for the director's well-being. In a climactic interview with Barbalho, held at the offices of the potentate's television station in Pará's capital city of Belem, Kohn shifts the conversation from a banal chat about developing the Amazon to ask Barbalho about his role in a certain frog farming venture. Barbalho of course promptly announces the encounter finished and walks out of the room. We do wonder, however, what might befall his impertinent questioner as Barbalho's lackeys escort Kohn's crew from the bossman's lair.



An engineer at a Brazilian armored car factory tests the product with a .38 caliber gun.

Photo: Associated Press.

Not that the scandal depicted in "Manda Bala" is breaking news: when Barbalho's perfidy was made public after a lengthy federal investigation in 2000, he was forced to resign his Senate post. Scarcely two years later, however, the same electorate from whom he'd stolen hundreds of millions of dollars sent Barbalho — who controls not only Belem's main television and radio stations but also its main newspaper — back to Congress.

As its chief villain's reelection underscores, this is a film not about correctible wrongdoing but about the corrosive effects of institutionalized corruption. An exemplar both of cinematic style and social realism, "Manda Bala" carries with it a warning, apparent long before its final scenes, but distilled in its concluding images: disembodied mouths gathered about a last supper table slobbering down frogs' legs glistening with grease; a sink-basin full of tadpoles, the water in which they swim sinking slowly away, the tadpoles squirming blindly against one other as they swirl downwards, each one disappearing, one by one, inexorably down the drain.

Director Jason Kohn presented "Manda Bala" at UC Berkeley on March 23, 2007.

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