



# Aquarius

**Director:** Kleber Mendonça Filho  
**Country:** Brazil  
**Date:** 2016

*A review by Mark Kermode for The Observer:*

A performance of tremendous wit, vitality and lusty defiance by Sônia Braga drives Brazilian film-maker Kleber Mendonça Filho's remarkable second feature. A portrait of a 65-year-old woman refusing to be bullied out of her seafront apartment by developers, *Aquarius* is both a powerful celebration of its independent heroine and a scathing satire on institutional corruption. Like the writer/director's fable-inflected 2004 short *Vinil Verde*, it is a film fascinated by the magical power of scratchy old records, of mother-daughter bonds, of transformational living spaces. And as with his first feature, *Neighbouring Sounds*, it presents a community haunted by artefacts of the past and the architecture of change, social and personal conflicts seamlessly intertwined.

Retired music critic Clara (Braga) lives in the 1940s-built *Aquarius* apartment block in upmarket Recife. The beach lifeguards are affectionately reverential towards local VIP "Dona Clara", while a newspaper interviewer notes her old-school love of "physical media" – of vinyl albums that contain a "message in a bottle". But Clara's days of happiness are under threat from developers, led by selfie-snapping Diego (Humberto Carrão), who is intent on tearing down the past and building a "new *Aquarius*" where the old one "used to exist" ("The building exists now," Clara tells Diego. "You're leaning on it!"). Soon she is the only tenant left in a ghost building, prey to the developers' covert harassment – from orgiastic parties in the apartment above to shit in the stairwells, bonfires in the car park and worse. Like her home, Clara is under siege from a new generation of entrepreneurial termites, lending an edge of horror to the drama, a tangible sense of creeping dread.

An opening sequence, set in 1980, finds a younger Clara (played by Barbara Colen), sporting an Elis Regina crop after treatment for breast cancer, slamming Queen's bass-popping *Another One Bites the Dust* into the car stereo. Decades later, Braga's Clara will twirl around her apartment to the guitar grunts of *Fat Bottomed Girls*. She is now long haired and widowed, like the adored, rebellious Aunt Lucia (Thaia Perez), who was once described as "a 70-year-old girl". Clara, too, is "an old lady and a child – together!", a heady combination that alarms her children. Yet while they worry that she cannot continue her battles, Clara refuses to be confined by age or circumstance. Instead, she goes dancing with her girlfriends, enlists an escort to satisfy her physically (the film's fleeting sex scenes are refreshingly frank and vigorous) and presents an upturned chin to anyone who dares to defy her. All the while, the camera stays as close as a devoted lover, captivated by Braga's miraculously expressive face and empowering, shoulders-back stance.

A mix of mournful, jazz-inflected tunes and Greek-chorus jukebox selections flows like lifeblood through *Aquarius*. When advising her nephew on matters of the heart, Clara tells him to play Maria Bethânia for his new love to "show her you're intense". During an argument with her daughter, Clara breaks into song ("Are you singing for me?"), the only way to express herself honestly. There's a magical realist element, too, as figures from



the past wander through the apartment (notably the maid/nanny whose name has been pointedly forgotten), triggering uncomfortable home truths about Clara's privileged existence. In one heartbreaking scene, her family react with embarrassment when Clara's long-term home help Ladjane (Zoraide Coletto) shows them a picture of her dead son, reminding us that there is still something awkwardly aristocratic about these left-leaning liberals.

As for Diego, he has studied business in the US and is now back to take whatever he wants. "This is so Brazil!" exclaims Clara of the poisonous cocktail of cronyism, political corruption and religious vice in which she is trapped, political themes with which the film overtly grapples. Indeed, at Cannes last May, *Aquarius* became the focus of heated controversy when the cast and crew held up notices declaring that "Brazil is not a democracy any more", prompting Brazilian journalist Reinaldo Azevedo to call for "people of goodwill to boycott the film".

Yet while politics may be a key element of *Aquarius*, they are not its beating heart. That is Braga, whose character's name inspires the film's triptych headings (*Clara's Hair*, *Clara's Love*, *Clara's Cancer*) and whose electrifying presence reaches out from the screen and touches the audience. The turmoil of modern Brazil may be the backdrop to the drama, but Braga remains our focus – commanding our attention, engaging our sympathies, inspiring our devotion.

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