

Not So Secret, Not Much of An Agent

A *O Agenta Secreto (The Secret Agent)* Review

By: Adam Dombrow

Out of all of the movies nominated for Best Picture this year, *O Agenta Secreto (The Secret Agent)* was the one that I knew the *least* about. The only thing I had heard about the movie was the praise that it garnered at Cannes this year, but aside from that I hadn't seen a single piece of promotional material, so I went in completely blind. I feel that, oftentimes, films from foreign markets hit differently than American productions for a variety of reasons, and it always fascinates me to see how filmmakers from around the world view any given topic, and how they approach their craft differently from American filmmakers, who often work on/with much larger budgets. Even without knowing *anything* about the movie, I was excited to see what all of the hype was about. Obviously with a title like *The Secret Agent* you would figure that the film has to do with secrets, espionage, etc, and to a degree it does... but it's a very small degree.

I'm sad to report that, in my opinion, *The Secret Agent* is a 161 minute movie that you could easily turn into a short film and still achieve the same effect.

Let's start with the good: the acting on display from Wagner Moura. American audiences will recognize Moura from his portrayal as Pablo Escobar from Netflix's *Narcos*. Moura has a stunning screen presence that is different from most actors: he has this stoic strength, and these ultra intense stares—which reminded me of the memes of Escobar from *Narcos*. It's almost uncanny how much you can pick up about what is going on inside of Moura's character's minds just through his eyes and the way he stares at the camera or at his costars. All stares aside, Moura

gives a truly heartbreaking portrayal here as a quiet man who has been done dirty by corrupt politicians, and who simply wants to make it out of the ordeal *alive* and with his son. Moura is the lifeblood of this movie no question. Special kudos go out to actress Alice Carvalho, and the late, great Udo Kier as well; Carvalho only has dialogue in one scene, and it is *extremely* brief, but her intensity in that single scene sticks with you. Likewise for Kier—sadly appearing in his final scene on film here—portraying a Holocaust survivor who gets chided into showing off his war scars.

The other aspect of the film that is pretty neat is its kind of *grindhouse* aesthetic. Set in Brazil during Carnival, you almost expect a lot of lavish colors and the outdoor street scenes associated with Carnival, but cinematographer Evgenia Alexandrova opts instead to go with a much more muted, natural color palette throughout the film. The color palette paired with the urban setting makes the film *feel* very uncomfortable. The film itself has this grainy visual style, which adds to the feeling that you are seeing something you are not meant to see, which does a great job creating a tense atmosphere.

I wish the film's plot and pacing better capitalized upon its look and mood, and they are the two real sticking points for me that drag the production down.

The plot is pretty straightforward, but the movie does such a *weird* job deciding what to show the viewer that it amounts to a pretty muddled affair. The movie focuses on strange subplots (particularly one with a severed leg that goes around beating up homosexuals—the leg being a metaphor for the government) as opposed to the main plot, and squanders a lot of the

film's runtime while doing very little. I feel *The Secret Agent* had the exact same problem as fellow Best Picture nominee *Sinners*—there is no need to beat the audience over the head with metaphor if the metaphor is straight forward enough **AND** itself is depicted **IN THE MOVIE!** This might just be something that rubs me the wrong way, because I enjoy when filmmakers respect the audience's capabilities to understand complex themes, thus diminishing the need to “hold our hands” in order to drive their point home by beating us over the head with it.

Building off of that, maybe it also helps me better understand why I feel both *The Secret Agent* and *Sinners* suffer from *terrible* pacing issues as well. By beating me over the head with metaphors, but not allowing me to draw my own conclusions as to what they are supposed to represent, both films denied me that added little mental aspect or *game*, forcing me to focus entirely on what I am being shown. Besides an interesting opening scene, *The Secret Agent* is *really* slow for the next hour and a half; coupled with the film's lackluster level of character development, I really felt like *The Secret Agent* was a bit of a slog.

The Secret Agent had the potential to be an interesting political thriller complete with a strong performance from its lead actor as well as cool visuals; that potential is sadly squandered though by a plot that chooses to hand hold the audience, and pacing issues which leading us on a rather slow, mundane journey with a **very** anticlimactic climax.