

Film Review

- *Amigo Secreto*, directed by Maria Augusta Ramos. Brazil, Germany and The Netherlands, 2022¹

In March 2014, the Brazilian Federal Police initiated what would become one of the most mediatised and polarizing criminal investigations in Brazilian history. Headed by the then-federal judge, Sergio Moro, Operation Car Wash (in Portuguese, *Operação Lava Jato*) would, in the next seven years, investigate a corruption scandal involving the country's state-owned oil giant, Petrobras, and various Brazilian politicians and businessmen. In 2019, however, the operation itself was put on trial when journalists published leaked private chats revealing the judge's illegal collaboration with prosecutors handling the case. This journalistic investigation, which became known as *Vaza Jato*,² is at the core of the documentary *Amigo Secreto*. The 98-minute-long film at once challenges the legitimacy of Operation Car Wash and celebrates the role of journalism in keeping democratic institutions in check.

Amigo Secreto chronologically retraces the parallel developments of Car Wash and *Vaza Jato*, starting with the imprisonment of (then-former) Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2018 and reaching the final year of Bolsonaro's presidency in 2022. To convey the intricacy of these intertwined investigations, archival material of court hearings and relevant political events is combined with new footage of the journalistic work behind *Vaza Jato*. Specifically, the film follows four journalists – Leandro Demori from *The Intercept* and Carla Jiménez, Regiane Oliveira and Marina Rossi from *El País* – during their routines inside the newsroom. By showing the sensitive decision-making and ethical challenges involved in *Vaza Jato*, the film paints a clear picture of the complexity of reporting on the illegal texts exchanged between Judge Moro and the prosecutors in the Telegram group “Amigo Secreto” – which became the inspiration for the title of the film.

The camera also captures the journalists interviewing their informants. All interviews depicted in the documentary are conducted by the journalists themselves for their respective outlets. With this, *Amigo Secreto* features the perspectives of a wide range of characters, from jurists and representatives of the Oil Workers Union to high-ranking figures such as Supreme Court Justice,

Gilmar Mendes, and former Odebrecht executive, Alexandrino de Alencar. The latter, for example, admits he was pressured by prosecutors to testify against Lula, confirming the existence of an “industry of turning state’s evidence,” as lawyer Tofic Simantov explains in the documentary. This is but one of the many malpractices of Operation Car Wash that *Amigo Secreto* unveils. Journalist Leandro Demori describes the “news-producing machine” created by Car Wash prosecutors, who would feed journalists their press releases and give them little time for fact-checking. With this, much of the Brazilian press would simply relay the prosecutors’ version of the facts. In the film, we see how Demori, Jiménez, Oliveira and Rossi became disillusioned with the political interests behind the accusations filed by the Brazilian Federal Prosecution Service and worried about their own potential naivety when trusting the institution as a source. Ultimately, *Amigo Secreto* claims that all these questionable mechanisms were part of a larger political agenda against Lula, who, once arrested in 2018, became ineligible in that year’s presidential election.

In many ways, *Amigo Secreto* is a coherent addition to the solid filmography of the award-winning Brazilian director, Maria Augusta Ramos. In the 2000s, the director already embedded herself in the Brazilian judicial system, first revealing the inner workings of a Brazilian court in *Justiça* (2004) and later addressing juvenile criminal law in *Juízo* (2007). In more recent films, Ramos has brought this interest closer to the Brazilian political landscape. Before *Amigo Secreto*, the filmmaker directed *O Processo* (The Process, 2018), which analyzed the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff. Stylistically, too, *Amigo Secreto* follows the same observational approach that has become Ramos’ trademark. Commonly referred to as direct cinema, this filmmaking method strives for minimal intervention from the director: reality should be captured as it is, and the filmmaker should adopt an almost non-participatory role in the process. This is evident not only in the aforementioned use of journalistic interviews but also in the lack of a voice-over throughout the film.

However, while this stylistic choice infuses the documentary with the sobriety and seriousness that the topic deserves, it also gives it a (perhaps too) measured pace that almost contradicts the urgency of the investigations unfolding on screen. More importantly, though, this non-didactic stance assumes considerable prior knowledge from the spectator. Although some contextualization is provided at the beginning, in the form of text, Ramos seems to throw in many puzzle pieces that are left for the viewer to assemble – a task that requires a certain degree of familiarity with Brazilian governance and its main political actors. While this might work well for specialized audiences, it is the question of whether the film’s arguments come across as persuasive to the general public.

Still, *Amigo Secreto* provides important documentation of a crucial moment in Brazil’s recent history. In the film’s final sequence, we see, against a black screen, a haunting summary of the last year of Bolsonaro’s presidency, includ-

ing 675,000 COVID-related deaths and a million hectares of deforestation in the Amazon. Shortly after, this is replaced by a message framed in a more hopeful tone: that Lula had all Car Wash lawsuits against him annulled and was leading the 2022 presidential race. The film both serves as a reminder of the fragility of Brazil's political institutions and a testament to the power of journalism in upholding democratic ideals.

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Notes

- 1 The film is available for rental and/or purchase at various online streaming platforms.
- 2 Although roughly translated as “Car Wash Leaks”, *Vaza Jato* is a word play with “wash” and “leak”, translated in Portuguese as the phonetically similar words *lava* and *vaza*.