

baby

A film by Marcelo Caetano



63^e SEMAINE
DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2024



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TRAILER

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LOGLINE

São Paulo's streets can offer danger or opportunity, and for Baby, they deliver both

SYNOPSIS

After being released from a juvenile detention center, 18-year-old Wellington (Baby) finds himself alone and adrift on the streets of São Paulo, without any contact from his parents and lacking the resources to rebuild his life. He encounters Ronaldo, a mature man, who teaches him new ways of surviving. Gradually, their relationship turns into a conflicting passion.





DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In *BABY*, the characters are in constant movement, physically and emotionally. They cross the city streets looking for freedom and trying to survive, fleeing from misery and their haunted pasts. The camera walks beside them, watches them from the top of a building and zooms in to single them out from the crowd. The characters dance in the chaos of the city and the camera dances with them.

During the shoot, we had a simple rule of *mise-en-scène*: something has to be in movement, whether it is the camera, the background, or the actors. Movement brings us closer to characters' complexity and their constant adaptation in a life full of unpredictable situations. In our current cultural moment, when we try to fix people in a single identity, I like characters and interpersonal relationships that challenge us to suspend our categorisations.

The connection between Baby and Ronaldo is hard to define. I can read them as "partners in crime", but also as a conflictual passion; protective but also exploitative. Their relationship changes during the film and they are fighting to understand who they are in this clash of opposites. It's boxing and voguing at the same time.

BABY is set in São Paulo's old downtown. I've been filming the same neighborhood for 15 years. São Paulo, with its population of 20 million, embodies the dynamic spirit of a migrant city, where every Brazilian passes by at one point in their lives. It's not a place for settling down, but rather for experiencing the vibrant, as well as tough, life of a metropolis.

I like to imagine the map of the old downtown as a depiction of a body. São Paulo is a city that is always destroying old buildings to raise new ones. The city center is crossed by train lines, tunnels and viaducts.

This organic, yet uncontrolled, development leaves a lot of scars in the city tissue. Modern skyscrapers stand next to neoclassical theaters, bourgeois cafés alongside centres for homeless people. It is a body marked by the past but always going ahead, looking for new things to come.

On the main set of BABY, the house where Ronaldo lives, trains pass almost inside the courtyard. Sounds from the neighbours invade the intimacy of his room. There is constant funk music coming from a favela nearby. It's very chaotic, but sensual at the same time. These are the sounds and images of the neighborhood that I live in. My alarm clock is the metro that passes below my building and softly wakes me every morning. We never feel completely alone, as we are part of this big engine that never stops.

Loneliness is not an option for Baby. To have a dignified life, he needs to create bonds with unknown people or even build temporary families. As I witness the disintegration of community life in Brazil, with neoliberal and individualist ideology gaining control of our society, I like to think that this film is a counterpoint to the recent political wave.

I strongly believe that freedom is not a personal achievement but a collective one.

Baby needs the support of outsiders to live his life the way he dreams of.

Marcelo Caetano

DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

How did the story of *Baby* come about?

In 2017, I began writing the simple story of a boy who runs away from home to live a free life in downtown São Paulo. I conducted extensive research, but at some point, I decided to change perspectives. What if it were ultimately the parents who abandon their son?

This shift in perspective contributed to making the film much more engaging. Who are these families that abandon their sons, and who are these sons? While initially aiming to address family and abandonment while depicting downtown São Paulo where I live, the film evolved into a love story during its preparatory phase.

It's challenging to define the relationship between Baby and Ronaldo. There's a lot of desire and dependency. It's this very complex relationship that I gradually wanted to develop. Family, work, and the city intertwine to construct these life stories and portraits.

The genesis lasted seven years, during which I experienced my country's transformations. We spent four years governed by the far right. The city of São Paulo and the state of São Paulo are still under the grip of this party. When I started working on the project in 2017, I felt that democracy was stronger than it is today. This brought contradictory energy to the film because *Baby* also represents the essence of Brazil.

How did you intend to depict São Paulo in *Baby*, following its portrayal in your previous film, *Corpo Elétrico*?

The street plays a more prominent role in *Baby*. Scenes, even intimate ones, are consistently filled with urban noises. So, the city is always present. You can hear it buzzing through the windows. The majority of the filming locations are within a ten-minute walk from my home. I wanted to represent these neighborhoods that, in the past, were affluent and played a significant role in São Paulo's economy and cultural life.

Today they are somewhat neglected. Despite a process of gentrification, these places have become popular. There's a lot of diversity and life, notwithstanding the impoverishment of the residents.

I enjoy filming the bodies that populate a changing city, even though sometimes the city itself rejects them; these same bodies that some would like to see disappear from public spaces.

What was your method for filming in the bustling streets of São Paulo?

I rehearsed extensively with the actors beforehand to be able to shoot dramatic scenes in the street. I would hide with the camera behind a tree or a car. I let the actors play, while the people passing by watched and listened to them.

I believe that cinema should be a reflection of the moment we are living. I want these fictions, in 40 or 50 years, to somewhat represent the life I filmed. If I had closed off the perimeter, I would have lost the vitality and documentary aspect I was looking for.

This filming process, with hidden cameras, allowed us to capture something more vibrant about the city. We shot with two

cameras. Sometimes we positioned them as close as possible to the actors, sometimes at a distance. We used 120mm and 140mm zoom lenses. The idea was to observe and watch the characters from a bit of a distance.

Chance played a part in the film because you can never predict what will enter the frame. So, this approach always brings emotion and a dose of adrenaline. The shooting was very intense, but both cinematographers and I wanted to let life invade the images.

You use a lot of zooms in the film. What was your approach?

When filming in a city of 20 million people and trying to portray individuals, we zoom in. I live on the avenue where I shot the film. Thousands of people pass under my windows all the time. When I look at the city, it's like I'm zooming in a bit. My attention focuses on someone I find interesting among the passersby. That's what I aim to show in my film: these singularities that disappear and dissolve throughout the day in the crowd.

Baby is a film about the movement of both the city and emotions. The film must be in constant motion. We set it as a rule. If it's not the characters in motion, it's the cameras moving or the backgrounds, with the passing of cars, for example.

That's the film's principle. However, there were scenes where it was impossible to shoot in this way. In this respect, Baby is very different from my previous film, *Corpo Electrico*, which was almost documentary in its observation and therefore didn't involve much camera movement.

In *Baby*, I believe the characters need to walk, to move, not to stay in one place all the time. So, the camera had to keep pace. It was a very physical shooting process for us. We accompanied the characters all the time. We walked, we were in the shot, the camera moved, and the whole team moved with it.

This filming approach really energized me because I was tired of contemplative cinema where the focus is on observing, sitting still, and letting the shots show a reality gradually.

What inspired you to create this story of impossible love?

Baby pays homage, in its form, to Wong Kar-Wai, but also to the 90s films of Pedro Almodóvar and Claire Denis. These passionate love stories accompanied me throughout the entire process of writing and rehearsing the film. I, too, wanted to tell a story of impossible love.

Baby finds someone who helps him. With Ronaldo, they build a visceral relationship of dependence and love, but with such intensity that it becomes difficult to sustain.

In that sense, one film left a deep impression on me: *THE UMBRELLAS OF CHERBOURG*. In fact, the social housing where *Baby* and his three friends live at the end of the film echoes the same colors and spatial ideas as those of Jacques Demy. Wong Kar-Wai's *HAPPY TOGETHER* also inspired me greatly because, in the end, it's not the great love that endures.

Your characters move a lot throughout the film. What drives this movement?

This idea of movement is linked to the situation of my characters, who are not socially established. Ronaldo is a bit like a train. He embodies this force, this energy that propels him forward. He doesn't have many issues with his past; he always moves forward. He teaches resilience to *Baby*, who carries scars and traumas from his adolescence. Ronaldo teaches *Baby* to move forward, to stop living in the past. The learning of movement, a movement towards the future, overlaps with the learning of the couple. In the film, there are very strong emotional movements.

Coming from a provincial family, I myself came to live in São Paulo. It's always painful to revisit one's past, to return to one's family, to go backwards. If we want to survive and be at peace, we must always project ourselves into the future.

Family is at the center of your film. There is Baby's biological family and the one he chooses at the end. Can you talk about this adoptive family and the role of voguing in the film?

I think there are three families in the film: Baby's biological family, the one he forms with Ronaldo, and the voguing family. The latter doesn't offer, like the others, the best because of the lack of economic means. Baby and his friends have to perform small shows on buses or on the street to earn some money. There is no perfect family, but despite the complexity of situations, it is possible to receive love and protection. I don't know if Baby chooses this third family. It welcomed him. Perhaps it will be temporary. This brings us back to the idea of movement. Baby passes through all these families, without knowing where it will lead him. These alternative queer families are representative of a reality in São Paulo and more generally in Brazil. There is a very conservative discourse on the defense of the biological family.

I have always made films against this idea. I think the biological family has its place, but the possibility of choosing other families is also very important.

Your film begins with Baby's release, and throughout the story, it feels like he doesn't want to be locked in, whether in a romantic relationship or even in a place. Was this quest for freedom at the heart of writing the character?

Yes. I think that's the main question. I did a lot of research with young people living on the streets of São Paulo. There are almost 80,000 homeless people, many of whom are trans, LGBTQIA+ members, and Black individuals. I interviewed them and spent time with them. Living on the streets is not a choice. But between being homeless or ending up locked in violent and disgusting families, young people prefer the dangers of the street. When he gets out of prison, Baby doesn't have the means to enjoy his freedom. He will try to experience it in different places, multiplying experiences. I don't know if he succeeds completely. My film sees freedom as an experience, in a world of perpetual change.

How did you find your actors João Pedro Mariano (Wellington/Baby) and Ricardo Teodoro (Ronaldo)?

I work as a casting director, notably on films by Kleber Mendonça Filho. Generally, I put out a call on social networks. For Baby, we received over 2000 applications from young people, between 16 and 24 years old. We started doing auditions with these young professional actors to see if there was chemistry with Ricardo Teodoro, who portrays Ronaldo. I had met him during a previous casting for a TV series I directed. Then we did improvisations to see how it worked with the other characters. The chemistry between João Pedro Mariano and Ricardo Teodoro was obvious. My casting approach is political. I believe I have a responsibility as a director. For me, it's very important to discover new talents. I think it breathes new life into cinema and challenges the Brazilian star system. When you have the power to give jobs to people, why should we always work with the same actors? I find that approach irresponsible. By proposing to discover new talents like João Pedro Mariano, that's when we make a political statement.

You shoot very close to the faces. The camera seems particularly fascinated by Baby's face. Why this choice?

This closeness of the camera placed a lot of responsibility on the actor. During rehearsals, I told him that the camera would always be on his face and that it would never stop watching him. So, he needed to feel and express a variety of emotions in a way that translated onto his face.

Our conversations aimed to evoke feelings in him that he didn't know existed. We talked a lot about his personal life, his experiences, not to use them in the film but so that he could express them with his face.

The camera is also very close to Ronaldo's face, but Ricardo Teodoro has more experience. He has been acting in theater for 20 years and has more resources to find those feelings within himself. This ties into the idea of zooming in on someone, getting closer to them. João Pedro Mariano also did significant research on his own. He visited juvenile detention centers and spent time with the young inmates.

Is Baby meant to be an impressionistic portrait of a city where the rich mingle with the poorest? We think of Baby's wealthy lover who ends up rejecting him. Is it out of fear or class contempt?

No, it's absolutely class contempt. In an earlier version of the script, it was even explicitly stated. But we chose to keep the scene just as cruel where the man wants to retrieve a phone he doesn't need. It's just a matter of power.

During my research, some boys I met on the street were prostituting themselves. They had very wealthy clients who never paid them with money but with fancy restaurants or trips. They treated them as expendable. The relationship between Baby and Ronaldo is also marked by economic dependence. But between them, there's solidarity. Moreover, Baby is indispensable to Ronaldo. When Baby arrives in this luxurious apartment, he chooses to reject Ronaldo. He feels free, but at the same time, the lover imposes his rules on him. So, this freedom is relative.

The character of Ronaldo is ambiguous. Did you want to show all the vulnerability under his masculine facade?

I think Ronaldo is trying his best because he has his convictions, his ideas. He wants to protect Baby. But at the same time, he's completely clueless. He's overwhelmed by his feelings. He doesn't know how to handle it. He tries to maintain control but lacks the resources. At the same time, he's a bit selfish too.

Ronaldo is proof that relationships are complex, and that's what I love about him. There are always asymmetries and power plays. At the same time, showing a macho character with that vulnerability was very interesting.

In the world of prostitution, there is a demand for very masculine men like Ronaldo. The guilt and the fact that he misses Baby greatly weaken him, and that's what touches me a lot about him. The film shows, through these two characters, a duel between femininity and masculinity. Baby's scars result from this femininity. He was a victim of violence at school, in prison, and his family rejected him because of it. He is seen as someone who needs to be beaten up, to eradicate this feminine part of him. Ronaldo is the opposite. He invented a hyper-masculine character to survive.

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Marcelo Caetano, born in the State of Minas Gerais but now based in São Paulo, directed the feature film BODY ELECTRIC which premiered in Rotterdam in 2017. He also directed the TV series HIT PARADE and NOTÍCIAS POPULARES both broadcasted on Canal Brasil.

He has worked on various productions as an assistant director and casting producer, notably on TATUAGEM, BACURAU, AQUARIUS and NEON BULL In 2009, Marcelo co-founded Desbun Filmes.





Crew

Directed by: Marcelo Caetano

Written by: Marcelo Caetano And Gabriel Domingues

Production company: Cup Filmes/Desbun Filmes/Plateau

Produções (Brasil) Still Moving (France) Circe Films & Kaap
Holland (The Netherlands)

Producers: Beto Tibiriçá, Ivan Melo, Marcelo Caetano

Coproducers France: Juliette Lepoutre, Pierre Menahem

Coproducers The Netherlands: Stienette Bosklopper, Maarten

Swart

Cinematographer/Dop: Joana Luz, Dafb, Pedro Sotero, Abc

Set Designer: Thales Junqueira

Editor: Fabian Remy

Sound Editor/Mix: Graciela Barrault A.F.S.I, Lucas Coelho, Max Van
Den Oever

Composer: Bruno Prado, Caê Rolfsen

Cast

- João Pedro Mariano (Baby)
- Ricardo Teodoro (Ronaldo)
- Ana Flavia Cavalcanti (Priscila)
- Bruna Linzmeyer (Jana)
- Luiz Bertazzo (Torres)
- Marcelo Varzea (Alexandre)
- Patrick Coelho (Zika)
- Kyra Reis (Pink)
- Baco Pereira (Dayvid)
- Sylvia Prado (Tia Sueli)
- Arianne Aparecida (Prima Sonia)
- Victor Hugo Martins (Allan)
- Kelly Campelo (Rose, Mãe)

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