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Marte Um

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Marte Um

Abstract

This is a film review of *Marte Um* (2022), directed by Gabriel Martins.

Keywords

Brazil, Racism

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Author Notes

Sheila J. Nayar teaches at the University of Utah, in the department of Film and Media Arts. Her research interests include the interplay of narrative and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. She is the author of several books on that subject, including *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* and *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religions Film*, as well as articles in such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Currently, she is working on a book project on secularism and Hindi popular cinema.



Marte Um (2022), dir. Gabriel Martins

Gabriel Martins dramatic feature *Marte Um* (Mars One) is unusually provocative in a number of ways. At its center are the Martins, a black lower-middle-class family living in urban Brazil, the sort rarely showcased in that country’s cinema. Nor do drugs or crime, or *favelas* play a part in this narrative. Instead, this is a lovingly crafted drama about a close-knit family trying to make it in the world—or worlds, rather.

Tércia, the mother, travels in one bus, then another, to houseclean for a rich, flamboyant celebrity, whose own life consists of travels to Paris, bubble baths, and watching recordings of his television appearances. Events while navigating the city to reach his skyscraper world lead Tércia to believe that she has become cursed—something her husband, Wellington, finds amusing. As for Wellington, he works diligently as a janitor at another high-rise residence, at turns cleaning its pool, tending to its gardens, and, on occasion, feeding the pet of one of its “reactionary” residents (as his co-worker refers to

them) who has the means to jet off for vacation but pays Wellington for his extra labors with sacks of flour. (“Don’t hate the player, hate the game,” said resident remarks.)

Their daughter, Eunice, about to graduate college, is in the hidden throes of her first real love affair—with another woman—culminating in her desire to move out and live with her conspicuously wealthier partner. Meanwhile, her bespectacled younger brother, Deiveinho, has their father’s zealous ambition to worry about, for Wellington wants nothing less than for Deiveinho to become a soccer star. And he is really that good. But Deiveinho also has his own burgeoning dreams, ones directed toward another world entirely—outer space. If Deiveinho aspires to become the first astrophysicist to settle the surface of Mars, he has the scientific curiosity and the agility of mind to succeed; he even builds his own telescope with parts shrewdly gathered from a family memorabilia box to a recyclables yard. But what are the chances for a boy from this income bracket to succeed in such an achievement? Wistfully at the outset, Eunice refers to her brother’s ambitions as “beautiful dreams.”

Marte Um’s remarkability is in the way all four Martins possess their own fully realized story arcs. While their private lives and ambitions will eventually conflict, we experience these on the characters’ own terms: Eunice’s (very non-male gaze) sexual awakening on a nightclub dance floor; Wellington’s enthusiastic pursuit of someone who can get Deiveinho seen by soccer scouts, while also managing his sobriety; Deiveinho’s computer searches for the Mars One project and people who look like him who have made it (American astrophysicist Neil Degrasse Tyson figures prominently); and Tércia’s grappling with an urban environment that can feel just as alienating and hostile as Mars. Yet, every day, they come together at the dinner table for eating meals, for playing cards,

for paying bills—and often captured in a frontal manner that equalizes each Martins’ presence.

If family relations are the heart of *Marte Um*, one vena cava of the film is most definitely social critique. The Martins are trying to make it in a Brazilian world, after all, that has just found itself under the uncertain specter of a recently elected right-wing reactionary leader. Trepidation for what that might mean punctuates the film from the outset. The film opens with coffee boiling in a can on the Martins’ stove, as a radio newscaster reports that Bolsonaro has been elected. This is followed by Eunice, in class, learning that her country has the world’s third highest prison population—and an incoming president who supports privatizing prisons.

But *family* is the planetary nexus in the vaster outer space of national politics, with its non-histrionic herald that comes by way of rich saturated colors, warm skin tones, and even the way a cinderblock wall can be ritually transformed: hung with colorful balloons for a birthday party that includes inter-generational dancing; as the workspace backdrop for Wellington’s fixing of an heirloom chair for Eunice’s new apartment; and as the perfect locale for telescopically examining the stars. In contrast, the overriding color of the upscale establishments is white: white painted walls, white tiles, white as a signifier of clinical cleanliness—and perhaps desired erasure by reactionaries of Brazil’s multihued citizenship.

Ultimately, we wonder if Deiveinho’s “beautiful dreams” will turn out to be obtainable—or maybe they will turn out not to be the dreams that really matter. What *does* matter, though, what carries the Martins through, is their commitment to each other. As

Wellington says, the family will “figure it out” as they always do—and that includes weathering the regime of Bolsonaro.