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Going Down in Rio

Amor Bandido's vision of the lower depths is less devastating than Pixote's, but the voltage is sufficiently high to hard-boil any sentimentality. It's a vivid, unsettling 95 minutes.

By J. Hoberman 11/9/82 Voice

AMOR BANDIDO. Directed by Bruno Barreto. Written by Leopoldo Serran. Produced by Luiz Carlos Barreto. Released by Analysis Film Releasing Corporation. At the Cinema III.

Frantic eroticism has been the trademark of recent Brazilian imports, but Bruno Barreto's *Amor Bandido* gives this heat a context. High-powered filmmaking on the American model, the movie is often electrifying in its carnality. Barreto's follow-up to *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (the most successful film in Brazilian history), *Amor Bandido* is a love story of a totally different order. A teenage go-go girl cum hooker and an even younger male hustler play out a doomed romance against a backdrop of wanton murder, police manhunt, and the tawdry nightlife of Rio's Copacabana district.

The film's milieu is a tropical blend of Times Square and Sutton Place. Mixed-use zoning with a vengeance, it's an overcrowded quarter of high-rise apartments, rubble-strewn lots, and raunchy bars. The ambience is mercenary and Darwinian. Newsstands peddle porn inside Donald Duck comics, and a sociopathic young mugger justifies blowing his victims' brains out by coolly explaining that "there's not room for everybody." The city's cab drivers take to the streets to protest a brutal string of unsolved robbery-murders, while the ineffectual cops loaf around their station house giving each other hotfoots or watching *Kojak* on TV.

Local color aside, *Amor Bandido* stands or falls on the conviction one reads into its lovers' consuming passion. Sandra (Cristina Ache) is a lissome live wire still young enough to find whoring glamorous and believe that her favorite movie star is singing just for her. She meets her swain Toninho (Paolo Guarnieri) when he breaks into her apartment to destroy the evidence of his affair with her late roommate, a transvestite named Marlene who just threw himself off the roof the day before. Toninho's first impulse is to rape Sandra, and she's deciding to maybe go with the flow when her estranged father shows up at the door. Attraction, repulsion, and hatred of the superego set the agenda for their romance as it spirals through the lower depths like a lurid neon comet.

Actually, the relationship is a triangle whose apex is Sandra's father (Paulo Gracindo). A tough, sadistic old cop who threw her out of the house when she was 14, he compulsively visits the club where Sandra performs—her specialty is a lascivious pseudo-lesbian minuet with another G-stringed dancing girl—picks up her partner, and takes her home for some investigative pillow talk. Sandra's middle-class origins give her degradation a psychological richness; Toninho, by contrast, is a São Paulo slum kid who's been educated by the streets. However, they're equally creatures of impulse and both weirdly romantic. Toninho watches Sandra's nightclub act with something like a schoolboy crush. With her in his life, he

doesn't need the movies. The kids may blow their money on fancy hotel rooms (there's a great shot of them screwing on silk sheets with the TV, strobe lights, and disco transmitter blasting), but it's as much puppy as physical love. When not otherwise engaged, the pair loll about the spectacular Rio beach, wishing themselves in exotic Hawaii.

Supposedly based on a true story, *Amor Bandido* suffers a bit from overcontrivance. Its chickens come home to roost with remarkable efficiency. The film's vision of horror is less devastating than *Pixote's*; still, the voltage is sufficiently high to hard-boil any sentimentality. Extremely professional, it's a vivid, unsettling, taut 95 minutes.

