

Los Angeles Times

José Padilha, Brazil's equal-opportunity agitator

The director, whose new film 'Elite Squad 2: The Enemy Within' opens Friday, has drawn praise and scorn from both conservatives and liberals.

By Reed Johnson, Los Angeles Times
November 17, 2011

Conservatives accuse him of being a bleeding-heart apologist for criminals. Lefties have branded him a fascist.

So José Padilha figures he must be doing something good.

"I never think in terms of 'left' and 'right,'" said the Brazilian director, who relishes his role as an equal-opportunity provocateur and perpetual thorn in the conscience of South America's largest country.



Director Jose Padilha

Indeed, the director's movies defy simplistic political labels, including his latest, "Elite Squad 2: The Enemy Within," which opens in L.A. on Friday. Padilha's debut feature, the 2002 documentary "Bus 174," recounted a real-life incident in which Sandro do Nascimento, a young man from one of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, or giant urban slums, bungled a robbery and hijacked a bus.

The movie, a ringing indictment of Brazil's social inequalities and corrupt criminal justice system, drew praise from one U.S. reviewer for having "the force of tragedy and the depth of first-rate investigative journalism." Brazilian leftists embraced Padilha as a Marxist hero.

Then came Padilha's semi-fictional feature, "Elite Squad" (2007), an ultra-violent yet sympathetic portrayal of a Rio special-forces police unit that cracks down on *favela* drug dealers with torture, intimidation and outright murder. While "Elite Squad" won the Golden Bear award at the 2008 Berlin Film Festival and is one of the top-grossing Brazilian films in history, Padilha earned the wrath of some of the same leftists who'd gushed over "Bus 174."

"They said, 'What happened? How come this nice, left-leaning intellectual became a fascist in two years?!'" Padilha said, chuckling over breakfast at a Beverly Hills hotel recently. "There were vicious attacks but there were also vicious defenses, even from people in the left. So it was hugely polemical."

Padilha wanted "Elite Squad 2" to be not merely a sequel but a complex, morally nuanced film — albeit with several fanboy-friendly shoot-'em-ups — that would transcend polarizing political perspectives

In it, the main character and narrator of "Elite Squad," a vigilante police captain played by Brazilian star Wagner Moura, discovers that his true enemies aren't the drug gang overlords but rather his fellow corrupt officers and the crooked, cynical politicians they serve. If "Bus 174" was Padilha's "Dog Day Afternoon," "Elite Squad" and "Elite Squad 2" together suggest a Brazilian "Dirty Harry" that morphs into "Serpico."

Like its predecessor, much of "Elite Squad 2" was shot in Rio's *favelas* (there are an estimated 1,300, some with as many as 200,000 people). Padilha and his crew had to negotiate with police, politicians and the

narcotics gangs for permission to enter the slums. Many residents were hired as extras, crew assistants or security guards.

Sometimes real gunfire rang out during the filming of "Elite Squad." A production van loaded with fake guns got hijacked.

"What he [Padilha] did, when I look back, I think it's ... crazy," said Moura, who trained with police officers for his role. "But all the time we really thought that we were working on something very important. The people who live in the *favelas*, they are the real victims of the violence."

Padilha regards "Bus 174" and the two "Elite Squad" films as forming a trilogy about the way that systemic corruption breeds brutality and exploitation across Brazilian society. "Elite Squad" includes scenes of poorly trained, badly paid cops slogging through a humiliating, dehumanizing "boot camp."

"The state generates violent individuals on one hand by mistreating small-time criminals and street kids, and on the other hand by mistreating people who want to be cops," said Padilha, who has been tapped to direct the "Robocop" reboot.

Caio Junqueira, who plays a rogue officer in "Elite Squad," said in an interview that entertaining but socially conscious movies such as Padilha's and Fernando Meirelles' international hit "City of God" (2002) are reshaping Brazilian's expectations about cinema and television.

"The people got used to this fake universe that the *telenovelas* created," Junqueira said, referring to Brazilian soap operas. "Serious films reflect the reality of the population. Because of that, the people are no longer putting up with the invented reality that the *telenovelas* have always tried to push."

Fernanda Machado, who plays a college student in "Elite Squad," said in an interview with The Times shortly after that film's release that she hoped viewers at least would think twice about their personal role in maintaining the drug-violence status quo.

"Everyone who buys an illegal drug is sponsoring or is helping traffic," she said. "This is a fact, quite simply, and there are no arguments against facts."