

Nanni Moretti's *The Caiman*: in the end, a chilling exposure of Berlusconi

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The Caiman, directed by Nanni Moretti

Nanni Moretti's *The Caiman* (*Il Caimano*) is an eclectic and at times frustrating movie which satirises former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, makes some limited observations about the Italian film and television industry, and explores the personal and professional crisis of a C-grade filmmaker.

Moretti is a household name in contemporary Italian cinema, having produced a number of popular but lightweight social-comedic observations. These include, *I'm Self Sufficient* (1976), *Ecce Bombo* (1978), *The Mass Is Ended* (1985), *Red Lob* (1990), *The Thing* (1990), *Dear Diary* (1994) and *April* (1998). In 2001 he won the Cannes film festival's Palme D'Or for *The Son's Room*, an overrated drama about the impact of the death of a teenage son on his family.

In February 2002, Moretti, who had been moved to take a more direct political role by the election of the Berlusconi government, addressed a mass rally in Rome organised by the Democratic Left (DS), the parliamentary alliance initiated by the former Stalinist Communist Party of Italy in the 1990s. But instead of confining himself to denunciations of Berlusconi, the filmmaker was cheered by thousands when he launched a broadside against the DS for refusing to seriously challenge the government. Moretti, along with various artists, filmmakers and academics, went on to organise a series of national protests that year against the Berlusconi regime and its attacks on democratic rights.

Twelve months later, Moretti started working on *The Caiman*, which was completed and released in over 300 Italian cinemas just before this year's April elections and clearly aimed at undermining Berlusconi. Caiman is Spanish slang for an alligator and is one of the former prime minister's nicknames.

Not unexpectedly, Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) and its political allies viciously denounced the movie. Michele Bonatesta, a leader of the fascist Alleanza Nazionale, for example, denounced it as an "ugly film" and claimed that its final sequence was "the quintessence of envious malice, resentment and hatred".

The central fictional figure in *The Caiman* is a movie producer, Bruno Bonomo (Silvio Orlando), whose personal life is a disaster and getting worse. Separated but not yet divorced from his wife, Bonomo is known in the local industry as the maker of hopelessly bad action-adventure movies with titles such as *Cataracts*, *Mocassin Assassins* and *Maciste versus Freud*.

Bonomo and his wife Paola (Margherita Buy), who has starred in these hapless films, have not yet informed their two young sons about the marriage breakup. The boys are told, instead, that Bonomo is sleeping at the studio because he is working on a movie. But Bonomo, a likeable and somewhat vulnerable figure, has not made a movie in

several years. Moreover, the director of his next feature—*The Return of Christopher Columbus*—clashes with Bonomo and decides to walk out, taking the film with him.

As the production company heads toward bankruptcy with debts of more than €40,000, Bonomo meets a young director, Teresa (Jasmine Trinca), who hands him a script and urges him to produce it. The politically naïve Bonomo thinks it is a thriller, but then discovers that it's about Berlusconi, for whom he once voted, an action he now regrets.

As Bonomo re-reads the script, he begins visualising some of the future film's scenes and some of the better-known aspects of Berlusconi's criminal career and his rise to political power. A younger Berlusconi (played by Elio De Capitani) is shown as a Milan property developer with secret Swiss bank accounts, the recipient of Mafia funds and the dispenser of political bribes. One memorable sequence has the budding media tycoon expounding his sordid views on entertainment programming to a television audience of old-age pensioners. Berlusconi's performance takes place against a backdrop of scantily-clad dancing girls.

Bonomo, who later views footage of Berlusconi in the European Parliament likening a German social democrat to a "kapo" or concentration camp guard, is enraged and decides to throw himself into Teresa's movie project. This, he believes, will restore his professional standing and somehow help him patch up his personal life. But finance and casting pose innumerable problems as executive producers and actors, who either support the Berlusconi regime or are afraid to challenge it, refuse to get involved.

Bonomo finally locates a Polish financial backer and then a movie star, Marco Pulici (Michele Placido), prepared to play the part of Berlusconi. Pulici claims to have left-wing views, but backs out after some initial work and decides instead to work on *The Return of Christopher Columbus*.

Bonomo's bankrupt studio is eventually bulldozed but he has just enough money to film one day in the life of Berlusconi and decides to press on. Teresa's movie and *The Caiman* itself end with a dramatised trial of Berlusconi, this time played by Moretti, during which he is found guilty of bribery and corruption.

Weaknesses and problems with Moretti's *The Caiman* are easy to identify. The movie is overburdened with competing narrative and emotional threads—the marriage breakup, Bonomo's jealous rage against his wife, his doting on his children—and other secondary issues. These elements, unfortunately, are given equal weight in the overall plot, which leads to some odd and disruptive shifts in the movie's tone and tempo.

Discussions between Bonomo and various film executives and

financiers, who have no intention of challenging Berlusconi, are amusing and certainly ring true. But Moretti's trademark flippancy, his reverential nods to great Italian directors, such as Federico Fellini, Dino Rosi and others, and various in-jokes about C-grade movies etc., add little. Likewise, most of Bonomo's angst about his marriage could have been cut back.

Despite this, the movie's final sequence, which intercuts between the courtroom and Berlusconi's limousine, is chilling and clearly designed as a wake-up call, not just about Berlusconi but the right-wing trajectory of the entire political establishment.

In line with Berlusconi's real persona and his right-wing anti-democratic agenda, he rants against the judiciary, which he denounces as a "caste", and "communists in disguise". When the chief prosecutor states that "all are equal before the law," Berlusconi responds by declaring that he is "more equal" than everyone else, because he was elected prime minister.

After being found guilty of paying-off magistrates and other corrupt activities, Berlusconi addresses a press conference on the courthouse steps. Turning reality on its head, he claims that the judges have no real authority and are attempting to circumvent his basic rights.

"The moment has come to stop them... You have the right to resist using every means," he declares. And as the judges leave the court, right-wing protestors begin hurling petrol bombs at them. The film ends with a close up of Berlusconi's face as he is driven away.

Moretti's decision to take on Berlusconi—this is the first feature about the former prime minister and Italy's wealthiest individual—is courageous and clearly derived from the filmmaker's deeply felt concerns. As Moretti has explained in several interviews, Berlusconi is not an aberration but another dangerous indication that fundamental legal and democratic rights are under serious assault.

Berlusconi's political interests grew out of a range of illegal financial practices and with early support from Socialist Party leader Bettino Craxi. As one of the characters in *The Caiman* explains, he entered national politics to stave off bankruptcy and criminal proceedings.

Faced with countless charges of cooking the books, perjury, Mafia links and tax evasion, Berlusconi claimed he was being subjected to a political vendetta and used his parliamentary majority to change the relevant laws and escape prosecution. The judiciary, or anyone who dared criticise him, came under ferocious attack.

With overwhelming control and ownership of the Italian media, Berlusconi ensured that television programs were axed, editors and reporters forced out, and artists, playwrights and journalists silenced by multi-million dollar defamation threats. Such was the political intimidation directed against journalists and artists that Reporters Without Borders ranked Italy 53rd in its world index of press freedom.

In 2002, state-owned RAI axed two of its most successful television programs—"Il Fatto" and "Sciuscia"—for being critical of Berlusconi. In April that year, the prime minister accused "Sciuscia" journalists of making "criminal use of public television" after they investigated alleged links between the Mafia and one of Berlusconi's closest associates.

A special episode of RAI's satirical program "Blob" was pulled that year because it lampooned Berlusconi and in 2003 the network suspended another show "RAIoT—Weapons of Mass Distraction" hosted by Sabina Guzzanti, who specialises in masquerading as the prime minister. RAI broadcast one episode and was hit with defamation claims by Berlusconi's Mediaset company. Guzzanti was charged with libel, slander and vulgarity.

As Moretti recently explained to one journalist, "Giving just one citizen three of six public channels, a situation made possible by a loophole in the law and confirmed by a bill passed especially for the occasion, is totally unacceptable and has to be challenged."

Commenting on the disappearance of political cinema in Italy, he added: "In the 70s, political cinema was widespread, it became a genre, almost a money-spinner. I don't know whether it's the result of self-censorship on the part of writers, directors and producers or the fact that some of a film's financing comes from TV, or the difficulty of recounting the changes in our country, or finally from the fact that the reality of Italian politics goes way beyond the most fertile imagination.

"In any case, in my own modest way, I try to do it. Through cinema, I try to recount a reality that we are no longer able to see, to perceive. I think that our problem is one of habit: we grow to accept people and situations which, in fact, should be truly unthinkable in a democracy."

Moretti's insinuation, however, that ordinary Italians have just "accepted" the escalating attacks on democratic rights due to apathy or "habit" is false and covers up the political role played by the now-dissolved Stalinist Communist Party of Italy (PCI) and its various offshoots—the PDS (Party of the Democratic Left) and the PRC (Communist Refoundation Party).

In and out of power during the 1990s, various centre-left governments, with the backing of the Stalinists and their affiliated unions, attacked the jobs, conditions and living standards of ordinary Italians. This created tremendous political disorientation in the working class and prepared the conditions for Berlusconi's election victories.

Moretti is well known for his public criticisms of the "lefts" over their refusal to fight Berlusconi, but on this question *The Caiman* is silent, with no real satirical barbs thrown in their direction. As a result, the political reasons for the rise of Berlusconi and his apparent strength are left a mystery.

Despite these significant problems, *The Caiman*—in particular its final chilling scenes—is a welcome change from Moretti's rather complacent previous works. It demonstrates that he is capable of producing serious and affecting cinema.



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