

71st Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

Radu Jude's *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*: Biting satire against obscene conditions in capitalist society

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This is the first of a series of articles on the 2021 Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, which took place March 1–5.

Following the lead of a number of other festivals during the coronavirus pandemic, the 71st Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) took the form of online screenings of selected films to an audience of film industry professionals and journalists. Instead of the normal total of over 400 films, some 166 were made available online to the restricted audience.

The Berlinale has traditionally been the film festival with the highest level of public participation, and in order to accommodate the public, a second so-called “Summer Special” is planned for June. The festival organisers evidently reckon with an easing of the pandemic by early summer, but with the further opening up of the economy and schools, health professionals are warning of a rapid resurgence of COVID-19 infections in Germany.

The 71st Berlinale took place at a time of unparalleled social and political crisis. Over two and a half million people have already died from the coronavirus as a direct consequence of the policy of governments all over the world, who have elevated profits and wealth creation above human lives. The rise in the Dow Jones in 2020 largely runs parallel to the horrendous rise in deaths in America due to the pandemic. Germany's Dax stock index also ended last year on a record high. Across the globe, democratic restraints are being tossed aside as authoritarian and neo-fascist movements, and in some cases governments, seek to resolve the crisis on behalf of the finance and capitalist oligarchs who pull their strings.

The films that reach our screens often require years of work from the original idea to the finished movie. It would be unfair to expect the festival to screen a large number of works that immediately reflect current conditions. But the pandemic has acted as an accelerator or amplifier, it is not the source of the current crisis. This year's Berlinale provided an opportunity for filmmakers to rise to the occasion with contributions expressing

a degree of urgency regarding the growth of social tensions and the emergence of working class resistance.

Amongst the more thought-provoking and emotionally engaging films at the festival were *Mr. Bachmann and his Class* (Maria Speth, Silver Bear Jury Prize), the Hungarian Competition entry *Natural Light* (Dénes Nagy, Silver Bear for Best Director), *Azor* (Andreas Fontana), *The Seed* (Mia Maariel Meyer) and *Je suis Karl* (Christian Schwochow). The WWSW will comment on some of these films in further reviews.

For the first time this year, the main festival jury was a six-member panel consisting of previous Berlinale prize-winners. The jury awarded the festival's main Golden Bear prize to Romanian filmmaker Radu Jude's *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*. To its credit, Jude's film does exude a degree of urgency and anger.

It opens with five minutes of sex play between a teacher, Emi (Katia Pascariu), and her husband, which the couple have filmed. The film is stupidly uploaded to an adult website—presumably by the husband—and enters the public domain. The teacher is a respected staff member at a prestigious Romanian school, but now her career is in danger when parents at the school seize upon the sex tape to demand her dismissal.

Jude's thesis is that there is far more obscenity on view in modern capitalist society than in the sexual escapades of a married couple behind closed doors. In his press notes he writes: “Obscenity is the theme of this film and the viewers are constantly invited to compare the so-called obscenity of a banal amateur porn video with the obscenity around us and the obscenity we can find in recent history, whose traces are all around.”

The film is divided into three parts. In the first, we witness Emi making her way through Bucharest in the summer heat as she learns the sex tape has been made public. En route, Emi confronts a series of vicious insults. When she objects to the fact that she has to walk into traffic to get around one giant

SUV, Emi is fiercely abused by the coarse driver. The camera pans slowly over dilapidated buildings. We see cheap, tacky gifts in a shop window next to a portrait of Jesus Christ and a funeral parlour just a few metres away from a hospital to which coronavirus patients are being brought.

The second section of the film consists of snap shots—video clips of modern life in capitalist society. A secretly filmed video shows a real life boss haranguing his workforce who are demanding to be paid. He demands they wait longer for payment, denouncing them as “f...king peasants.” When one woman speaks up on behalf of the workers, asserting “We are not animals,” the furious boss demands to know who spoke and then tells the whole workforce of “scumbags” to clear out.

The section also features a clip of a young boy on a bed with bruises all over his back. We learn that domestic violence affects six out of 10 Romanian families. Another title notes that the occupants of rural areas in Romania are the poorest in all of Europe.

There can be no doubt about Jude’s discontent with the conditions prevailing in today’s Romania. In one recent interview he declared: “Apart from having a fascist party in parliament, the main problem is having a corrupt party, or other parties which are for austerity measures or neoliberal measures ... There’s no investment and care about education or what is important.”

At the same time, Jude operates in a scattershot fashion, firing off in all directions. While a number of the clips are telling, others are wide of the mark and indicate deep pessimism and even disorientation. A brief shot of a torrent of plastic bottles and sludge plunging down a hill is accompanied with a text noting that “99 percent of all species are now extinct,” implying the same fate awaits the human race. Quoting the German Frankfurt School philosopher Walter Benjamin, a caption in this section reads: “The contemplation of history is more likely to inspire, if not contempt for humanity, then a somber vision of the world.”

One brief sequence makes a reactionary parallel between fascism and Islamism, another includes a joke that implies all Germans supported Hitler. The latter two segments, in particular, open a dangerous door for anti-German and anti-Islamic sentiments.

At yet another moment, Jude draws a parallel between Communism and fascism. A further segment makes a cynical and thoroughly ahistorical comparison between the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Romania in 1989 and the French Revolution, the only significant consequences of which, according to Jude, are French cakes.

The last section of the film is the best of the three. Emi sits in the school’s garden in front of a largely hostile group of parents representing influential layers of Romanian society—a military officer, a priest and a number of privileged middle class fathers and mothers. She draws attention to her work teaching history at the school, but she is repeatedly confronted

with the hypocrisy and prejudices of most of the parents. She shocks her audience by reciting from heart highly sexual verses penned by Romania’s revered poet, Mihai Eminescu.

When Emi relates that on Holocaust Remembrance Day she informed her pupils about the massacres carried out by the Romanian army on the eastern front in World War II, the army officer is outraged and begins to splutter. She is accused of spreading Jewish propaganda.

After acknowledging she had read to her class the short story *Salt* by Soviet writer Isaac Babel describing the horrors of the Polish-Soviet war of 1920 and war generally, Emi is accused of being a Bolshevik. Virulent anti-communism, sexual and national chauvinism, anti-Semitism, religious cant are all on display. The film concludes with three alternative scenes, leaving the viewer the choice of deciding Emi’s fate.

In his press notes, Jude describes *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* as a sketch for a popular film and acknowledges that he worked with the method of film montage advocated by the French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman (born 1953) . Montage—the technique of selecting, editing and arranging separate sections of film to create an overall effect or continuous whole—is one of the essential elements of filmmaking. Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein made montage, somewhat one-sidedly, into the essence of cinema.

In any event, the artistically and intellectually successful use of montage in film requires a worked out, unifying concept and, in the case of the present film, a serious study of the history and legacy of Stalinism. Whether he is fully conscious of it or not, the parallels Jude offers in his film between fascism and communism play into the hands of very reactionary forces and all of those who, following the downfall of the Nicolae Ceau?escu regime in December 1989, argued that socialism had failed and there was no alternative to capitalism.

Jude’s latest Berlinale contribution affirms that anger and moral outrage at the obscene conditions prevailing in modern society are not enough.

To be continued



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