

The Good Boss: A film, unfortunately, that Bernie Sanders would also like

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Written and directed by Fernando León de Aranoa

The Good Boss (*El buen patrón*) is the latest work from Spanish filmmaker Fernando León de Aranoa, responsible for *Mondays in the Sun* (2002), *A Perfect Day* (2015), *Politics, Instructions Manual* (2016) and *Loving Pablo* (2017).

The title of the new film refers to Blanco (Javier Bardem), the owner of Blanco Scales, manufacturer of industrial scales in a provincial Spanish town. Blanco is pulling out all the stops to ready his factory and his workforce for an imminent visit from a committee that will decide which local firm collects a prestigious business excellence award.

However, Blanco confronts a number of obstacles in his path: a laid off worker waging an angry, noisy protest just outside company property; a manager with marital problems who commits one costly production error after another; an older veteran employee with a racist thug of a son; and a new intern, with whom Blanco begins a casual affair, who turns out to be the daughter of an intimate family friend with a long-term crush on him!

The various dilemmas seem to mount, intertwine and conspire against Blanco's determination to present the facility to the award committee as efficient, equitable and trouble-free.

His response is to meddle in a serious and ultimately dangerous fashion in the lives of his employees. Blanco bails out the thuggish youth Salva (Martín Páez) and puts him to work at his wife's boutique. He attempts to convince his production manager Miralles (Manolo Solo), unsuccessfully, to stop worrying about his wife and concentrate on the factory. In that effort, he takes the unhappy man to a bar where they encounter the smitten intern Liliana (Almudena Amor) and a friend. The sexual adventure has consequences for Blanco. After learning that the alluring young woman is someone he knew as a little girl, he brusquely breaks things off, prompting

Liliana to take action on her own.

In regard to the "downsized" worker José (Óscar de la Fuente), who takes full advantage of a megaphone, signs and banners to blacken Blanco's name and damage the company's reputation, the company chief attempts one maneuver after another to rid himself of the man. The police refuse to chase José off public property, nor do cajoling and bribery succeed ("I will not move"). Eventually, the increasingly anxious factory owner turns to more drastic means.

Blanco pursues his aims, in his own mind, from the best of intentions. The company employees are like "children" to him. We are "one big family," he tells them. And even when the measures to be taken are unpalatable ones, Blanco likens himself to a surgeon who doesn't want to amputate but has no choice.

Liliana, on the other hand, advances the Uncertainty Principle. She argues that when you measure something (with a scale, for example) or come closer to another human being, you inevitably introduce change and unpredictable change at that. Along those lines, Blanco's perpetual efforts to achieve a perfect balance, in his life, in his factory, through more and more dramatic interventions, have the contrary effect. The director argues that one "is always the first victim of one's actions."

Aranoa further explains, in a director's statement, that he wants "complex and artistically ambitious cinema," which leaves a record "of who we are, of the moment in time in which we live; and that at the same time amuses, intrigues, and moves us." Cinema, he explains, that also uses humor, "at times even being light-hearted, with an edge; but without renouncing engagement, truth or poetry. Cinema that examines the very roots of who and what we are in search of the hypothesis of what we will one day become."

This is ambitious, and perhaps admirable. Unhappily,

Aranoa does not achieve it.

The Good Boss has certain recognizable and identifiable characters and situations. There are amusing lines and scenes. The actors perform competently, even honorably. Aranoa certainly proves that Blanco is not to blame for the semi-tragic way things turn out; he is as much a victim of objective circumstances as anyone else. His economic imperatives, and the psychological state associated with them, drive the proprietor inexorably in specific directions. In the general sense, it is true that from his point of view, Blanco has no choice.

The biggest problem is not that the drama in *The Good Boss* unfolds from the vantage point of a factory owner. Or, at least, it is not the biggest problem *as such*. The wealthy and powerful have been placed at the center of many novels, plays and dramas with considerable success, have even been made sympathetic figures, *if* the works in their entirety are carried off with sufficient criticism and urgency. It is certainly possible to depict the terrible, “unavoidable” things a factory owner must do, for example, and the psychic cost the individual in question pays. Oscar Wilde has not been the only one to understand that wealth and power are immensely degrading and demoralizing. Wilde argued, with his customary taste for the paradoxical, that “we must get rid” of private property “in the interest of the rich.”

This is not what Aranoa is about, however. He is operating at a much lower, far less conscious level. The filmmaker wants “complex and artistically ambitious cinema,” but he has not actually generated it. *The Good Boss* suffers from superficiality, social and psychological. The characters are efficiently developed but not profoundly. They act more or less as we expect them to. Nothing here is deeply moving or disturbing. The film has too much the character of an “instructive” parable told by a slightly patronizing do-gooder.

The parable is rather insipid. The director also explains, “Of all the challenges we faced, perhaps this one, the challenge of setting the right tone has been the riskiest. Humor and pain: the precise measure on each dish of the scales.” But Aranoa failed on this score. The film has almost the precisely opposite tone of what it should have.

The Good Boss is excessively facetious, even flippant. The protesting worker is made out to be a ridiculous figure. His battle with being laid off is portrayed as foolish, hysterical, self-pitying. We are made to feel: Why doesn’t he simply pack it up and go home? After all, isn’t it a bit overdone?

Such an attitude suggests a rather self-satisfied petty

bourgeois, who has never been out of work for long, with a middle class family somewhere and perhaps some savings too.

The Spanish working class faces life-and-death questions: the fight against resurgent fascism, the betrayals of the “left,” new and old, the ever-deepening war against Russia, the vicious anti-immigrant campaign of the establishment, the climate disaster, the destruction of jobs and living standards. There is hardly a hint of any of this in *The Good Boss*, ostensibly a film about class relationships!

Aranoa desires that his film “grow darker ... without losing the smile.” There is laughter, and there is laughter. Here an amused, gentle benevolence envelops, weighs down the events. The filmmaker is not nearly severe enough with himself or with others. The situation is far more advanced than he imagines. In fact, his own work has become more complacent. *Mondays in the Sun*, 20 years ago, was not a major work, but it was generally more compelling, more disruptive. We are with Wilde, who argued that “disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion.”

Aranoa’s is a safe sort of criticism, a criticism of secondary matters. That he devoted his 2016 documentary to Podemos, the party of the Spanish upper middle class “left,” which is now part of a coalition government in Spain, is not coincidental.

In regard to that film, *Politics, Instructions Manual*, *Variety* commented approvingly that Podemos was probably the Spanish party that “socialist” Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Party charlatan and ardent defender of capitalism, “likes best, and this is a film that Bernie Sanders would like.” *Variety* is probably correct on that point, but we, for our part, consider the comment a scathing criticism.



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