

The 73rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

Disco Boy: A remarkable anti-war film from Italian director Giacomo Abbruzzese

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This is the second article on the 2023 Berlin International Film Festival, held February 16 to February 26. The first was posted on February 22.

Disco Boy, which had its world premiere at this year's Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale), is a remarkable anti-war film. It stands out against the blatant militarist propaganda that shamefully dominated the opening of the festival, where a public platform was provided for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is nothing more than a puppet of the Western powers.

The film's young Italian director Giacomo Abbruzzese (born 1983) is known for a series of award-winning short films, including *Archipel*, *Fireworks* and *Stella Maris*, as well as the César-nominated documentary *America* (2020).

His new film relates the story of Aleksei from Belarus (Franz Rogowski). Aleksei travels to Poland with his friend Mikhail (Micha? Balicki) and a group of football fans on their way to France. "La France!" they cheerfully shout from the window of a truck that takes them to the border, "Bordeaux! Pain au Chocolat! Camembert!"

The attempt by the pair of friends to cross a border river on an inflatable mattress ends tragically. Mikhail dies when a patrol boat opens fire. Aleksei travels onward alone and subsequently applies to join the French Foreign Legion, which permits him a temporary residence permit for five years. After that period, the prospect of French citizenship beckons.

"I don't care who you were," says the Legion instructor, "here everyone gets a new chance if you are intent on becoming French with all your heart and muscles." What that means soon becomes clear. Aleksei gains new friends and comrades, but they are trained to carry out brutal missions and drilled to kill.

Then, the film makes a quick change of perspective—to a

rebel leader in the Niger Delta in his village in the jungle and swamp. On the horizon, we see the fumes from the pipes of a large oil refinery complex.

Jomo (Morr Ndiaye), the same age as Aleksei, leads a group from MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) fighting the oil companies who, in league with the corrupt Nigerian government, are ravaging the region and enslaving its inhabitants.

Unlike his sister Udoka (Laëtitia Ky), who prefers to leave the village and go to the city, Jomo is intent on mobilising resistance. At a meeting of his comrades-in-arms, he shouts: "We no longer want to turn our cheek like our ancestors. We don't want to be slaves." He refers to the destruction of the villagers' livelihoods by the oil companies. Soon, he says, all that will be left is a devastated landscape.

Jomo knows what he is talking about. Experts describe the situation in the Niger Delta as catastrophic. They estimate that during the past 50 years more than 2 million tons of crude oil have leaked through defective pipelines and drilling rigs to pollute the ecosystem in this area. The life expectancy of the 30 million inhabitants has fallen by ten years as a result.

Disco Boy rejects the usual clichés in official media and blockbuster films that portray all such groups as backward looking and religiously fanatic. An American journalist seeking to conduct an interview is led by the nose by Jomo's group. They pose in the desired fashion: full combat gear, with hoods, Kalashnikovs at the ready. A few martial words from Jomo, then one youth shoots into the air and the journalist flees in panic. The youths then take off their hoods and burst into laughter.

Like Aleksei, Jomo is a bright, fun-loving young man, full of hope for a better future.

He navigates the waters in a boat with a friend. The two

jokingly chat: “What would you do if you were born white in a city, had money and a good education?” his friend asks. Jomo laughs, “I don’t know,” he says, “maybe I would like to be a dancer, a disco boy.” It is not by chance that this remark has become the title of the film: It counters the cruelty of war with an appeal for freedom and *joie de vivre*.

After executives of an oil company are taken hostage, the fates of Aleksei and Jomo become intertwined. During a mission by the French Foreign Legion, the two are pitted against each other. Abbruzzese’s portrayal is masterly. Rather than depicting a naturalistic bloody display of violence, a thermal camera creates a surreal image of Aleksei diving into the nighttime waters: the ghostly, pale jungle is background to a wild whirlpool of red and white spots.

Jomo dies and Aleksei pulls him ashore. The wide-open eyes of Jomo in close-up, changing colours, bore into Aleksei—and the audience—until Aleksei gently closes his eyes. With one ear on the mobile device that connects to the mission control helicopter circling above, he begins to remove earth by hand to bury Jomo.

Aleksei is haunted by what had happened after he returns to the barracks. During the boisterous dance of his comrades in a Paris disco, he separates himself and looks for a girl who had performed a mysterious African dance in the night club. He imagines her to be Jomo’s sister Udoka.

In the end, Aleksei makes a courageous decision. When he refuses to join in the singing of Edith Piaf’s song “Je ne regrette rien” during a troop march, his commander reprimands him and tries to extol the virtues of war. After all, he would get a French passport in five years’ time, could fall in love with a French woman, have children and send them to a good school. Aleksei turns his back on him, places his temporary residence permit in his locker and lets it go up in flames, along with his uniform.

Back in the disco, he dances dreamily in the foreground of a surging crowd to electronic rhythms. It’s Udoka and Jomo’s dance, the same swaying movement, full of tension, extending from head to toe. Udoka descends from the stage. Her swinging body forms a unity with Aleksei’s.

The anti-war theme is clear enough—freedom and a positive perspective for the young generation means dancing or, figuratively, working together rather than allowing oneself to be pitted against another for the purposes of war. *Disco Boy* exudes an appeal for international unification and against nationalism. War

serves only to further the interests of the super-rich minority in corporations and financial markets, like the international oil industry in the film.

In a statement written for the Berlinale, Giacomo Abbruzzese declares: “We are used to war being told from a single point of view. The other, the enemy, rarely exists as a complex entity.” He continues: “I wanted to show the horror of war by giving both camps the same emotional dignity. I wanted to get away from the stereotypes of masculinity and violence that characterise many war films.”

He explains his cinematic method, declaring that his film unfolds “in a porous present under the constant pressure of the past, which sometimes reveals itself psychologically, sometimes in the form of hallucinations, dreams or supernatural events, defying categorisation.”

Abbruzzese spent several years in countries dominated by wars and civil strife. Born in Taranto in Apulia in 1983, he studied in Bologna and at the Le Fresnoy national film school in France. He worked as a photographer in the Middle East, served as artistic director of the Palestinian television station AQTV and later taught scriptwriting and film editing at the Dar Al-Kalima College in Bethlehem on the West Bank.

His film *Disco Boy* is more serious and honest in its approach than some other anti-war films. It rejects the demoralised view that the effort to end war is hopeless.

With sensitivity and impressive artistry, *Disco Boy* poses the possibility of overcoming borders and ethnic differences, while exposing the forces that oppose such a development—the powerful corporations that seek to assert their interests by military means.

At the Berlinale awards ceremony, H  l  ne Louvart’s cinematography was deservedly awarded a Silver Bear for outstanding artistic achievement. In this reviewer’s opinion, however, the film also deserved a Bear for direction and screenplay. In doing so, however, the International Jury would have had to reject the Berlinale’s official orientation, which leads it to propagandize for the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia.

To be continued



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