

Critique

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***Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* (Radu Jude, 2021):
Morphology of a “Sick Joke”**



A Review of Golden Bear -Berlin (2021) Winning Romanian film

Cinema and popular culture in the 21st century have persistently imagined and reimagined dystopic visions of the human social order. While sinister dictatorships, zombie apocalypses, alien takeovers and various other fictional threats inhabit our screens, the rise of authoritarian populism across the world has brought us close to a real-life dystopia. The global pandemic has changed how humans live, work, travel or communicate while increasing economic and social disparities. Authoritarian regimes across the world have used the pandemic to strengthen surveillance and biopolitical governance, while racial distrust and hatred have resulted in the proliferation of conspiracy theories. “*Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*” – the latest film by Romanian director Radu Jude tries to make sense of the absurdity of the contemporary world in the grip of an unprecedented crisis. It is an angry, provocative and unusual cinematic exploration of social pathologies. Bristling

with indignation and armed with sharp cinematic intelligence, Jude interrogates both our everyday conduct as well as the grand narratives that shape them.

At 44, Jude is considered one of the significant voices in contemporary European cinema. He worked as an associate to Cristi Puiu in *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* (2005), which to date, is considered the most emblematic film of what we now know as the Romanian New Wave. This film movement also includes the works of Corneliu Porumboiu, Cristian Mungiu, Cristian Nemescu, Radu Muntean and several other exciting filmmakers who have dominated film festivals over the last two decades. Romanian New Wave and its aesthetics grew out of the widespread precarity and despair of the late-communist and is associated with a certain form of minimalist cinematic practice. Made with modest budgets and small crews, the filmmakers mostly

prefer to film in real locations, with cleverly staged long takes, often heavy on dialogues and sounds from noisy locations, a style suited to the complexities of the world the filmmakers wish to expose. Laced with black humour and irony, these films confront the gloomy, banal and sordid aspects of Romanian life, revealing apathy and hypocrisy. Radu Jude, like most of his colleagues from the movement, is unabashedly political and is obsessed with history and Romanian national identity. He seems well-versed in critical theory and philosophy, weaving them together with pop-cultural references as a discursive framework to his contemporary narratives. Stylistically, Jude is like a chameleon who moves from realism to expressionistic melodramas, to mockumentaries, constantly shifting styles based on contexts and themes. Sometimes he brings together contradictory impulses, deploying a mishmash of styles within the same film. For example, his 2018 film *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* brings together dramatized scenes, historical reenactments, archival footage, photomontages, in a complex, self-reflexive critique of holocaust denial and anti-Semitism by Romanian nationalists.



Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn continues with Jude's preoccupation with national identity, re-examining it in the troubling backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and how a global medical crisis has brought disturbing historical forces to the surface. The film centres around an awkward but explicit sex video filmed by a seemingly unadventurous, monogamous, heterosexual couple in the privacy of their bedrooms. One can surmise that the young, middle-class couple is seeking an escape from the boredom of lockdown and isolation. The video is explicit and filmed with a cell phone camera – an example of so-called “homemade porn”, a hard-core version of the “softer” voyeuristic videos which crowd YouTube. There is nothing in the bare

narrative to suggest that the video was created by the couple with a commercial interest in mind. As emphasized by Emilia, it was a private erotic media produced by two consenting adults for self-consumption. Unfortunately, the video leaks out and gets uploaded to adult sites on the internet, triggering moral outrage and eventual public humiliation.



The bare narrative of a woman teachers humiliation hides a complex stylistic bricolage of visual styles, discourses and themes reminiscent of *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians*. Apart from the sex video which begins the film, *Loony Porn* has three sections constructed in separate and distinctive styles. The first section is preceded by the intertitle which says, “no one understands that the world is sinking on the ocean of Time that is so deep and infested with those crocodiles called decrepitude and death.” This quotation is taken from Shanti Parva of Mahabharata (Chapter 28:3). Shanti Parva, as you know, follows the Kurukshetra war. Yudhishtira becomes the king, there is general peace and reconciliation. There is also a lot of philosophizing about ethics, spirituality etc, notion of right and wrong. One should not read too much into this invocation of the Indian epic apart from it being a signpost on what is to follow. This section called *One-Way Street* shows Emilia walking around Bucharest in the immediate aftermath of the leaked video. It is a cityscape that has been scarred by the pandemic. People are angry and impatient, even hostile and highly abusive to their fellow citizens. Emilia is both a victim and a witness to scenes of rage spilling out into the streets. She is anxious and worried because of the ramifications of the sex tape. She tries to buy an anti-anxiety drug from a pharmacy

where elderly citizens quibble about the ethics of organ transplant or how churchgoers were spared of COVID-19 despite sharing a spoon at the Eucharist.



Amidst the anxious exchanges, the camera scans the decrepitude of post-socialist Romania – it is chaotic, noisy and polluted streets, garish billboards, crumbling architecture and angry citizens remind us of Hollywood zombie movies. It is a city where noise overpowers meaningful communication, civic decency is undermined by obscene outbursts. In this section, Jude deploys *plan sequence* or one-shot sequence associated with Romanian New Cinema. But he deviates from the classical aesthetic of *plan sequences* by shifting the focus back and forth between people and things as if to give them equal weight. The camera dwells on buildings, roads, crowds, vehicles even after Emilia has entered or exited the frame, making viewers acutely aware of the city, as well as the passage of time.

The second section titled *Small Dictionary of Anecdotes, Signs and Miracles* is Brechtian in essence, disrupting the diegesis with a brash discursive intervention. The film moves away from Emilia's crisis into an expository mode. The topics of this exposition are history, society, cinema, sex, fascism, phallogentrism of language and speech. In this section Jude cobbles up a montage of archival footage, still images, lurid visual parodies, and superimposed explanatory texts, telling us about the issues which are at the root of Emilia's predicament. The references are sometimes intertextual, largely alluding to Romanian history, sexual politics and gender. Perhaps the most illuminating part is this

segment where Jude invokes the myth of Medusa and likens the cinema screen to the polished shield in which Perseus witnessed a dangerous monster. Society is like an "unfathomable horror", which like the face of Medusa, cannot be gazed at directly. It is through the cinema screen which we can witness the horror, which is otherwise inaccessible to us.

The final section titled *practices and innuendoes: sitcom brings* us back to Emilia's story. It is the most dramatic, polemical and perhaps the most bizarre part of the film. It is made up of a 42-minute scene in which Emilia is put to trial by a group of near-hysterical parents who mount an indecent, no-holds-barred attack on Emilia. The parent's main grievance is that Emilia has lost her moral right to continue as a teacher in the school. Parents also hold her responsible for "ruining the innocence" of her middle school students, ignoring Emilia's defence that children should not have access to such videos in the first place. There is also a cynical, albeit a single voice among the parents who keep on questioning the premises of the witch hunt. He keeps intervening with philosophical nuggets from eminent 20th-century thinkers. Is the video public or private? If there is no commercial intent, is it still pornography? Are children completely asexual beings? Does watching nudity or a sexual act spoil juvenile innocence? These are some of the troubling questions which are drowned by a vulgar crescendo of allegations. The film closes with three alternate ends as if to suggest that this absurd drama cannot have a concrete closure. In the first conclusion of the 3 conclusions the parents vote to retain Emilia in the job, in the second they vote to expel her and in the third Emilia turns into a vengeful superhero who torments her tormentors with a massive dildo.



Beneath the apparent madness and clutter of *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* are some brilliant performances from an ensemble cast, especially in

the final section set in the school. The cast manages to portray the middle-class outrage of the parents with fascinating energy and accuracy. We see lascivious men who attack a woman with cuss words and yet are worried about their daughter's innocence; women who degrade other women while complaining about mansplaining; the devout who believe that they are protected from COVID by the will of God. They represent people who are in every society. The actors such as Katia Pascariu (as Emilia), Alexandru Potocean (as Marius) and Andi Vasluianu (as Mr. Otopeanu) are veterans from films by New Wave Masters Christian Mungiu and Christian Nemescu. They bring to the film the sharp and improvisational acting associated with long take filming.



Romanian New Wave has, in the recent past, become somewhat repetitive with younger directors emulating the work of the bigger names such as Mungiu and Cristi. Radu Jude avoids this trap by both exploiting as well as critiquing the dominant style of the Romanian New Wave by using the techniques self-reflexively. In doing so he has managed to reaffirm his position as a filmmaker who continues to question the established canons of cinema. And by

bagging the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival (2021) *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn* has ensured that Romanian cinema remains a force to contend with in the art cinema circuit.

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