

## **Berlinale 2017 Highlights**

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## BERLINALE 2017 HIGHLIGHTS: DIANE A. RODGERS

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Berlinale 2017 was my first experience of both an international film festival outside of the UK and Berlin itself; as a Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University I got to help oversee a trip that saw thirty Media, PR and Film students gain from this valuable and exciting experience.

With my own cinematic interests and expertise being fairly broad, with a leaning toward cult, independent and alternative media, I made it my mission to see a wide variety of films at the Berlinale. These included films from this year's Science Fiction retrospective, animation, horror, drama, political arthouse, comedy, LGBTQ documentary and even children's cinema from countries including Germany, China, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK, USA and Romania.

Most of the films I saw were interesting, quirky, intelligently made and thought-provoking but here are three that, for me, stood head and shoulders above the rest:



### EL BAR (THE BAR)

Dir: Álex de la Iglesia / Spain / 2017 / 102 min

I saw this film in the stunning Friedrichstadt-Palast theatre; a venue with historical roots in circus and vaudeville theatre. This is reflected in the impressive exterior of stained glass panels and neon lights which, at night, is suggestive of a row of beautifully gauche jukeboxes. The interior is the largest cinema I have even been in, seating almost 2000 audience members, and boasts the widest proscenium arch in Europe.

I was excited about El Bar, having very much enjoyed Álex de la Iglesia's earlier raucous black comedies *Acción Mutante* (*Mutant Action*, 1993) and *El día de la Bestia* (*The Day of the Beast*,

1995). *El Bar* is set in a café bar on a square in central Madrid, on a very ordinary day, with ordinary customers going about their business, until one of the customers is shot and killed as he leaves. Another customer rushes to his aid and he, too, is shot and killed before suddenly and inexplicably all the people in the square outside disappear. The remaining customers find themselves imprisoned together in the bar, left to speculate on events outside and become suspicious of one another. Whilst remaining firmly in the modern age (with good narrative use of dating apps, smartphone battery life, digital media, fears of terrorism and biological warfare) the spirit of the film celebrates some of the best B-movie horrors from the 1950s and 60s, such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), with delightful cameo references to such films. A variety of two-dimensional character stereotypes are employed here; a 'battle-axe' bar owner, a scruffy alcoholic prophetic tramp, a middle aged woman addicted to gambling, a bearded hipster - but each character gets their opportunity to develop, be under suspicion, and shine (or otherwise) as the pressure of the mystery mounts. The people trapped in the bar have to work together, be combative with each other and, at turns, try to either escape or hide. Though the film follows a fairly simplistic, tried and tested plot structure, it does have surprising twists and turns, providing its own unique angle - but to reveal any more would take away the joy of the necessary continual guesswork on behalf of the audience. The film is both very funny and very nasty at times; witnessing a cinema audience of almost 2000 people squeal in comic horror at scenes watched through their fingers is a thing to behold. The style of comedy is reminiscent of *The Evil Dead* (particularly the recent TV series); it's fast-paced, witty and mischievous and, where there are moments of violence and gore, they are planted to both shock and amuse, with a darkly comic tongue planted very firmly in Álex de la Iglesia's cheek.



HAO JI LE (HAVE A NICE DAY)

Dir: Liu Jian / People's Republic of China (Mandarin) / 2017 / 75 min

Walking up to the Berlinale Palast, the venue for this particular screening, I double-checked if I was allowed to be here, as this turned out to be a fancy red carpet event, the likes of which are usually only witnessed via either in the movies or TV. Cameras were snapping filmmakers, cast and producers arriving, with TV cameras and journalists documenting the event, audience included, as we entered the cinema. Surrounded by a huge outdoor screen, and plenty of lights, camera and action, it was hard not to be caught up in an element of glitzy excitement of what turned out to be the world premiere for this film.

Hao Ji interested me as I have been a long-time fan of Asian cinema, from Japanese Yakuza movies, traditional arthouse and horror, to Hong Kong cinema from modern masters such as Wong Kar-Wai and Chinese cinema from the fifth generation and beyond. The fact this was also an animated feature, billed as a black comedy, appealed to the comic book and Manga fan in me also.

The narrative focuses on a kind of bungled robbery following a bag containing a million yuan, being tracked with varying degrees of success by gangster bosses, hit-men and ineffectual wannabe crooks. With a healthy element of Shakespearian mistaken identity and drily laconic humour, the sparse dialogue is punctuated with moments of violence, often with deadpan comic timing - reminiscent of Beat Takeshi's early films. An overarching capitalist ideology is ever present; protagonists follow their own greed and selfish aspirations against a backdrop of garish advertising, consumer products and reliance on digital culture.

Although director and animator Liu Jian studied Chinese landscape painting (clearly an accomplished artist), this is somewhat of a pop-art masterpiece, with kitschy visual reference to Communist signs and symbols, and uses surrealist art in places, whilst quite firmly remaining a unique and contemporary indie film - the artwork and subtle animation is incredible. The style is somewhat comparable with Katsuhiro Otomo's graphic novel *Domu* (best known for creating *Akira*, 1988), maintaining a visual simplicity whilst never lacking in detail. Character expressions and mood are especially impressive, with subtleties of thought and feeling captured clearly, and apparently effortlessly, in the animation. This thoroughly enjoyable film is engaging and entertaining on a number of levels; I wanted to watch it again immediately just to appreciate the artwork all over again. How wonderful to be able to heartily applaud a film at its premiere, knowing that the creators were actually in the audience to hear.



## SELBSTKRITIK EINES BÜRGERLICHEN HUNDES

(SELF-CRITICISM OF A BOURGEOIS DOG)

Dir: Julian Radlmaier / Germany / 2017 / 99 min

The viewing of a film these days is so rarely pertinent to the exact time, location and circumstances of the screening, but my experience of this film screening proved to be a perfectly fortuitous Berlinale moment, despite the venue being one of the least remarkable picture houses. The CinemaxX multiplex is much like any other multiplex and the screening followed an unexpected (to me) 40-minute long award ceremony held entirely in German (many presentations at the Berlinale are in both German and English; I have since learned that financial support and mentoring were being awarded to local German film talent). However, the film proved worth the wait.

This is the third film by Julian Radlmaier, who writes, directs and stars in this clever, political comedy which demonstrates the light and artful touch of the early works of Jean-Luc Godard and Wim Wenders alongside the indie sensibilities of Wes Anderson. The narrative construction is multi-layered; Radlmaier plays a (presumed) version of himself as Julian, a young hipster director who pretends that taking a summer job as a fruit picker is actually research for a communist fairytale film project - in a hapless attempt to impress a Canadian girl he likes called Camille. The truth is his latest project has actually been rejected by every funding institution around and he is threatened with his unemployment benefit being stopped.

We follow Radlmaier's journey from Berlin city life to summer work on the apple farm, where labour is clearly being exploited; Camille follows him, believing in the film project and throws herself into the work, befriending others far more easily than Julian. The film is very political with characters who closely resemble Russian and Chinese communist party members often discussing ideologies and agreeing that the best type of Communism is "one without communists"; the workers even

attempt something of a socialist coup of the apple farm. The film is also very funny and surreal: it includes Julian's inexplicable transformation into a bourgeois greyhound (dog-Julian introduces the film), moments of pure slapstick and an apparently demented monk with magical powers. Greyhound-Julian's self-reflective narration resembles Werner Herzog's documentary tone and, of course, we are not only watching the film that Radlmaier deliberates upon but we also see him complete the film within the film - in which characters ponder if they are 'just characters in a film after all'.

This being my first time in Berlin, I had done some sightseeing over the days I was there; it was both wonderful and jarring to see a film in Berlin, set in Berlin, presenting the exact sights on screen to me that I had only just seen in real life the days before the screening. Particularly serendipitous were the opening scenes which take place in and around the Gemäldegalerie; an art museum in Berlin. Seeing characters standing in front of the exact same paintings, in the exact same spot I had been standing only hours before seeing them represented on screen, in a film already presenting a number of levels of reality, certainly added to the uncannily recursive effect. The conclusion of this film (and this is not a spoiler) seeing Julian present his film to an audience at an international film festival paralleled the aesthetic reality of this particular screening; the effects of which continued once the actual film ended as Radlmaier appeared on stage to receive applause and questions from the Berlinale audience. This was a wonderful parenthesis for my experience of this film, and made the screening unique - but the film is so joyful, intelligent and funny, with many political and artistic points to make, that it will be worthwhile viewing under any circumstances.

Short Bio:

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Lecturing in Media, Arts and Communications at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK, I specialise in teaching alternative and cult TV, films, music and comics, and am currently conducting PhD research in 1970s British Film and Television folk-horror. I have worked extensively as a professional editor in film, video and games content for a number of well-known media producers, independently released alternative music and sing and play guitar in my own art rock bands Black Light Ray and The Sleazoids. I adore Godzilla, science fiction, drawing comics, 1960s garage punk, collecting Viewmaster reels and vintage Vox guitars.