

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



DISCO BOY

(Language: French, English, Ibo, Russian, Polish)

Director: Giacomo Abbruzzese

UK Release: 2024

Running time: 92 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 20 November 2024

“Italian director Giacomo Abbruzzese makes a really stylish debut with this visually thrilling, ambitious and distinctly freaky adventure into the heart of imperial darkness, or into something else entirely: the heart of an alternative reality, or a transcendent new self. This is bold film-making: a movie that wants to dazzle you with its standalone set pieces, but also to carry you along with its storytelling.

Franz Rogowski, a German actor who always brings a compelling sort of chemical instability to his films (like a piece of smoking sodium exposed to the air), here plays Aleksei, a guy from Belarus who has arrived in Poland with his buddy Mikhail (Michal Balicki) and a bunch of other Belarus nationals on a short tourist visa, supposedly to see a football match. But first chance they get, these two sneak off the bus, hitch a lift from a friendly truck driver heading west and then get into France, a terrifyingly dangerous and illegal journey across water which is to have an eerie echo with Aleksei’s professional life.

Meanwhile, in a parallel universe – in Nigeria in fact – Jomo (Morr Ndiaye) is a charismatic guerrilla fighter who with his sister Udoka (Laetitia Ky), leads an insurgent paramilitary group in the Niger Delta: the two have a strange identifying mark: different coloured eyes.

Utterly alienated from his homeland, Aleksei dreams of joining the French Foreign Legion and becoming a French citizen. He and Mikhail idolise France, yearning for “Bordeaux” and the “vache qui rit”; he tells the Legion recruiting sergeant that he learned French from the movies. After a brutal training period supervised by his deadpan commanding officer Paul (Leon Lucev), Aleksei takes part in a terrifying sortie into the Niger Delta, to rescue French hostages being held by Jomo and Udoka.

Dynamically shot, sometimes in the infrared of the legionnaires’ night-sights, this sequence becomes something like a hallucinatory nervous breakdown for Aleksei. And back in Paris, with his victorious buddies, it isn’t so much that he is overwhelmed with imperial guilt but ecstatically infected by the existence of that other person with whom the cosmos brought him into contact. As for Jomo, he once mused on what he would have been had he been born into the

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prosperous white developed world. Perhaps he would have been a dancer, a “disco boy”, an idea which gains its own kind of mysterious reality simply by being said out loud by Jomo, a spore of existential possibility, and then carried to France in the host of Aleksei.

Any movie about the French Foreign Legion might find itself being compared to Claire Denis’ classic *Beau Travail* with its ambiguous reverence for men’s bodies; perhaps Abbruzzese has taken something from Denis, but perhaps also from Gaspar Noé or Nicolas Winding Refn in the sense of confrontational spectacle and narcosis. The electronic score by Vitalic AKA Pascal Arbez-Nicolas) throbs in its own incantatory trance and Hélène Louvart’s cinematography is a thing of beauty. It’s quite a trip.”

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 20 February 2023

“It won a Silver Bear in Berlin for “outstanding artistic contribution,” whatever that means, so somebody must have considered the bizarre curiosity *Disco Boy* worth sinking some money into for an understandably limited New York run. They were wrong. I seriously doubt if more than ten people will bother to check this one out, but since it stars Germany’s Franz Rogowski, hot on the heels of inexplicably and undeservedly winning the 2023 Best Actor award from the New York Film Critics Circle for an obscurity called *Passages*, I guess it’s worth mentioning.

In *Passages*, he played a “lost” bisexual loner who cannot commit to a relationship with a partner from either sex. In the genre-defying *Disco Boy*, he tries to find a new identity as a member of the French Foreign Legion but fails. In the end, he becomes a “disco boy”, broke and without a passport, with his future in limbo, living illegally and dancing half-naked in a seedy Paris nightclub. It’s a debut feature by director Giacomo Abbruzzese, who displays a fondness for odd camera angles and an abhorrent disregard for narrative coherence. Rogowski plays an undocumented immigrant from Belaurus named Aleksei who arrives in France after an arduous journey from Poland, seeking refuge from oppression, but all he has is a three-day tourist visa. His best friend and traveling companion drowns on the way and now, with no money, identification, or legal papers of any kind, Aleksei is lonely, terrified and desperate. The Foreign Legion will welcome anyone from anywhere, regardless of what kind of trouble they’re in, so he enlists with nothing to offer but courage, a willingness to take risks, and some basic French he learned from the movies. After following him through a rigid training program, the film then moves to Nigeria, where the local rebels are fighting to save their people from

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slavery and political corruption at the hands of foreigners. The ensuing battle sequences are filmed in ultra-violet light, with pieces of bodies highlighted in red, making it impossible to see who is fighting whom and for whatever reason. A lot of people die in the escalating violence, and you never know who they are, while Aleksei is plagued by compassion, resisting orders to protect women and children, taking the time to bury his victims, and risking his future career as a soldier. It's routine war footage, except you never know who anyone is or what side they're on.

When the soldiers go to Paris on leave, the girls and the discos are equally routine, but more fun than the front lines and Aleksei doesn't have to wonder about things like motives. Everyone is there for the same reason—money. The lecture to the men when they're standing at attention is unconvincing: "In war, we are the peace. In disorder, we are the light. In doubt, we are the reason." The Legion, his brigade is told, is your new birth. The Legion is your only family. The movie doesn't do a very forceful job of proving the words or making them come true. Aleksei gets it for a while, but he likes discos better—and the rock music that goes with them. It is here that the film introduces two peripheral characters: an exotic dancer named Manuela and Jomo, a Nigerian terrorist fighting to help his fellow natives in the Niger Delta survive. From the jungles of war to the nightlife of Paris after midnight, Udoka (played by Laetitia Ky) and Jomo (Moor Ndiaye) become objects of obsession in parallel stories to Aleksei's struggle, and their destinies merge across borders as they try in their distinctly different ways to forge new identities. Eventually, Aleksei's dream of redemption as a Legionnaire fails, loftier ideals are abandoned, and hope for the future is symbolized by the cacophony of music. He's a disco boy, at last, and for the first time in the movie, he faces the camera and smiles.

This conclusion is too cynical to make me smile, too. Rogowski's performance is too focused on understatement to make much of an impact. The writing is too vague, the direction too deliberately avoids any commitment to coherence, and if there is a deeper meaning in *Disco Boy* than what is seen on the screen at any given time, it eludes me totally."

Rex Reed, *Observer*, 2 May 2024

"Giacomo Abbruzzese's *Disco Boy* is a daring film about the myths and errancies that Europe make (im)possible, dipping in and out of traditional modes of storytelling and dreamy flights of fancy. At times, it seems more devoted to its poetic interludes, from uncanny dance sequences to ghostly encounters, than to moving its plot along, and excitingly so.

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Early in the film, Aleksei (Franz Rogowski) and his friend Mikhail (Michal Balicki) slip away from a group of fellow Belarusians on a trip to Poland, after which it's revealed that the pair seeks to reach France and rebuild their lives. Mikhail will have died by the time that Aleksei, now more broken than he was before, reaches Paris. An opportunity to be a soldier for the French Foreign Legion arises and he seizes it, along with the promise of becoming a French citizen in the distant future. But not before engaging in warfare in the Niger Delta, where he's forced to kill in the name of France, or Europe, or some other, face-less neocolonial power.

Lack of clarity, it turns out, is what makes *Disco Boy* so enjoyable, and imbues it with gravitas. Not because Abbruzzese aims to confuse us, but because he wants the film to mirror the rhythms of the human mind as a person goes through life, enduring its mysteries. Though there are daytime sequences in *Disco Boy*, its atmosphere is suggestive of a never-ending night, as if the story could only move forward inasmuch as it traverses the circularity of trauma.

Having killed traumatizes Aleksei, and Rogowski's face proves to be the perfect vehicle for conveying indescribable wounds. It's ambiguous, unpredictable, even treacherous in the subtlest of ways, alive to all that's kicking beneath the surface of his character's being.

Of course, Rogowski's is not the face of Rudolph Valentino or Greta Garbo, capable of causing riots and suicides or the kind of feverish commotion that Roland Barthes describes in his renowned essay *Leaving the Movie Theatre*. His is a rawer face, somewhere between the ordinary and the uncanny, the banal and the tragic. Here it isn't the eyes that are "two faintly tremulous wounds," as Barthes said of Garbo's. Rather, his entire face suggests a faintly tremulous wound, emanating the trace of history—of violence—from his scarred lip outward.

Abbruzzese allows Rogowski's presence to fill up the frame, emptying out the screen of distracting elements that would, in almost any other film, craft the atmosphere of an all-functioning world. Rogowski is allowed to move through the space of *Disco Boy* in much the same way that Alain Delon's Corey wandered around Paris in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Cercle Rouge*, where a beige trench coat cemented Delon as a generational icon of cool, beauty, and the sublime. In *Disco Boy*, our hero also wears a jacket, only here its fabric is black, suggestive of Abbruzzese's refusal to render Aleksei and his intentions transparent.

There's no real stillness in the cinema of the kind that Abbruzzese accomplishes with *Disco Boy*, which deploys its magical-realist flourishes, in the Nigerian

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woods and on a Parisian dance floor alike, with striking confidence. These scenes are rife with pathos, even if, at times, they're also a little bit messy—particularly a few problematic sequences, accompanied by Vitalic's aggressive electronic score, that depict shamanic dances around bonfires in the village that a revolutionary named Jomo (Morr Ndiaye), and his sister, Udoka (Laëtitia Ky), call home.

In the spectral world of the film, each scenic element gains symbolic status, evoking the profundity of surfaces in dreamscapes. Aleksei's jacket is made of leather—hard, matte, and pointedly creaking like machinery as he walks through a nightclub. There, he orders two glasses of Bordeaux, silently toasting the dead Mikhail, before encountering a woman (also played by Ky) who suggests a projection of Udoka, who he never met in the Niger Delta. Wearing a sequined dress on the dance floor, she casts a spell on him so well cast that he doesn't stand a chance—a spell that recalls Freud's famous remarks about the “shine on the nose.”

It's the sort of *je ne sais quoi* detail that sucks one into irrational attraction, despite everything else stacked against potential lovers. The figurative shine on Aleksei's nose is akin to the shine of the dress, which is made up of chains of silvery disk-shaped ornaments—mirrors, really, for him and the audience to peer into. It's a great departure from the opacity of Rogowski's leather vest, which reflects nothing apart from the hardened injuries of a worn-out body.

Although not as hardened as that, as the astounding final sequence (think Gene Kelly on an acid trip), which helps give *Disco Boy* its title, testifies. The woman with the glistening costume reappears in front of Aleksei on the dance floor after he goes looking for her in a hotel room. Is she a ghost, a reverie, a figment of his imagination? Either way, she renders Aleksei's body supple, as if fleetingly cured from the malaise of life, freed from the toll that the reality takes on those who aren't allowed to dream—and who do it anyway.”

Diego Semerene, *Slant Magazine*, February 23, 2023