

A filmmaker sides with the unemployed, but

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Mondays in the Sun, directed by Fernando León de Aranoa

By David Walsh
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Behind the credits of *Los Lunes al sol* (*Mondays in the Sun*) we see news footage of workers, evidently fighting for their jobs, battling riot police. The film is a fictional account of the lives and difficulties of a group of laid-off shipyard workers in Vigo, in northwestern Spain.

Three years have passed since the dismissal of 200 workers and the closure of the shipyard (which is apparently to be demolished and replaced by luxury waterfront accommodations). The half-dozen or so men the film follows have coped or failed to cope in a variety of ways. Rico has opened a bar with his severance pay; Almador, whose wife has left him, is drinking himself to death; Reina has become a security guard at the local soccer stadium; Serguei, a Russian immigrant who aspired to be a cosmonaut as a youth, tells a familiar joke about the former Soviet authorities, "Everything they told us about communism was a lie. ... The worst thing is, everything they told us about capitalism was true."

The three principal figures Santa (Javier Bardem), José (Luis Tosar) and Lino (José Ángel Egido) are treated in more detail. Santa, a former welder, is the spiritual leader of the group, a large, imposing man, who kowtows to no one. He is embroiled in a conflict with the courts, in which his pride is primarily at stake, over a streetlight near the shipyard that he smashed. He is the most vocal of the workers, the most bitter about the employers, the most sardonic. Santa knows he has no hope of finding a decent job and pours cold water on the illusions of the others.

Lino has the most illusions. A man in his 50s, he applies hopefully for jobs open to those "20 to 35." He blackens his graying hair. His son is teaching him how to operate a personal computer. Lino continually tells his colleagues that the job interviews have gone well and "they might call." In Rico's bar, the friends' hang-out, Santa finally proposes a toast to "They might call us."

José has stopped looking for work. His wife Ana works in a fish processing plant, sprays herself all over with deodorant to kill the lingering odor and aches in the legs and feet. A bank interview about a personal loan, in which his wife is referred to as the "active person" in the family, brings José's feelings of impotence and uselessness to a head. Ana thinks about leaving him, but stays out of fear that her departure will deliver a final blow.

Mondays in the Sun is cleanly and intelligently scripted, filmed and acted. Bardem (*Before Night Falls*, *The Dancer Upstairs*) is particularly impressive, and appealing. The film treats a serious social issue in a serious manner. Director Fernando León de Aranoa explains in a comment that his film is the story "of a group of unemployed men, the collateral damage in a global economy which looks for quick

results." He continues, "For once let them [working people] be the protagonists, those people who until now have only figured in neighborhood incidents, small local columns. ... Cinema should deal with what it has at hand, with what it may forget because it doesn't see it clearly, because it doesn't want to see it. With local, everyday, prodigious stories."

The tone of the work alternates between the semi-comic and the somber. Santa's disrespect for bourgeois order and propriety provides a good deal of the comic relief. Having arranged to substitute for Rico's 15-year-old daughter, who has a date, as a baby-sitter in a wealthy household, Santa invites his friends over. The group of friends sits around the swimming pool and drinks the owner's whiskey till one o'clock in the morning. José steals a pair of expensive high-heel shoes for his wife.

Reina, the security guard, gets his friends in free to a soccer match, but their vantage point, somewhere in the bowels of the stadium, blocks a view of the goalmouth. They cheer for a home-team goal several seconds after the rest of the crowd and then can only speculate about who scored it.

Santa finally swallows his pride and pays his small fine for the streetlight episode. In the car driving home his lawyer praises his growing maturity and asks him if he doesn't feel better now that the case has been resolved. Santa has his lawyer stop the automobile, gets out and hurls a stone at another light, smashing it to pieces. "I feel much better," he tells the shaken man as he climbs back into the car.

Other moments are not intended to amuse: The scenes of long lines of job-seekers, Santa and his friends included, at the unemployment center. A jobless man sobbing because his benefits have been cut off through some bureaucratic cruelty. Lino literally forgetting his own identity in the process of selling himself to potential employers. Amador's sad fate, withering away in a filthy hole of an apartment. The presumably doomed nature of José's marriage. Santa's essential sadness, in spite of his clowning with his friends and flirting with women. All in all, the film carefully chronicles the humiliations and demoralization of the unemployed. It ends with an act of defiance, based on a real episode.

Yet, despite its numerous admirable qualities, *Mondays in the Sun* (which has won many prizes in Spain and elsewhere) never entirely comes to life, never grips one as it should.

In the first place, one never entirely loses the sense that this is precisely a "careful chronicle," that the work is the product of considerable sociological research, that the characters are composites, each representing a specific social or psychological type. The film's

spontaneity, such as it is, is largely provided by the actors' performances, Bardem's in particular.

Nor, as the director's comment indicates, is condescension entirely absent. One feels on occasion that the film is being rather superior at the characters' expense, in the soccer game episode, for example. As a character Lino is made to look rather foolish, unnecessarily so. A truly intrusive and irritating score, which heavy-handedly underlines every 'poignant' moment, only reinforces this condescending tendency. We are quite firmly called upon and expected to be moved.

This is Aranoa's third feature film. I commented about his second, *Barrio* (1998): "Javi, Rai and Manu are three teenagers stuck in Madrid for the summer ... They're bored, without much money and impatient to get on with their lives, or at least have sex. The film is quite amusing in its own dead-pan manner. ... Unfortunately, the film has a violent ending, somewhat clichéd, which does not flow from the rest of the film."

Aranoa (born in Madrid in 1968) asserts that his films are not "political," they are about "relationships," that "using film as political discourse is a huge mistake" and that its "first obligation is to be emotional." His political sympathies are obviously of a left-wing character. He directed a documentary about the Zapatista guerrilla movement in Mexico, *Caminantes [Walkers]*, in 2001. To his credit, according to *indieWire*, "the filmmaker was instrumental in turning the Goya Awards (Spain's version of the Oscars) into an anti-war rally, including support from Javier Bardem and Penelope Cruz." Moreover, *Mondays in the Sun*, much to the right-wing Aznar government's chagrin, swept the principal awards.

There are traces or hints of various influences in Aranoa's film. At times one is reminded of British director Ken Loach's work; the more light-hearted moments even bring Peter Cattaneo's *The Full Monty* (1997) to mind, for better or worse. While acknowledging his high regard for Loach (and Mike Leigh), Aranoa indicates a preference for Italian Neorealism and "Italian movies from the '50s, especially [director] Ettore Scola." At their most bumbling, the group of laid-off workers bears a passing resemblance to the would-be thieves in Mario Monicelli's *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (1958).

Aranoa has the right to view his films in any manner he likes, "political," non-political or apolitical. Nonetheless, although the director may think that he is simply repeating elemental human truths, his work advances a distinct political perspective, and not a terribly high-level one at that.

The answer to the workers' problems boils down to "solidarity," it seems. Aranoa told interviewer Ryan Mottesheard of *indieWIRE* that a trip to Gijon (in northern Spain) where dockworkers were attempting to defend their jobs, "really shaped the film, really helped me understand their jobs, understand the idea of sticking together, and understand that work is something you have to defend from a group standpoint, not an individual one. It's about treating your job not as work but as part of your essence, as part of the value of one's self."

This is fine as far as it goes—but, in fact, it doesn't go very far at all. Two critical scenes in *Mondays in the Sun* seem to define the film's social outlook or strategy. In the first, Amador, by this time on his last legs, drunkenly goes on to an equally inebriated Santa about the "Siamese twins," who are "stuck together" and thus "fall down together." This is an obvious reference to the workers' situation.

In the second, more extended sequence, an argument breaks out in Rico's bar among the unemployed men. Reina and Rico apparently represent the principle of individualism. Aranoa notes the difference in the interview: "Reina says, 'I come to this bar now, but if the one

in front sells me cheaper drinks, then I'll go there.' And Santa says, 'I'll continue to come here even if they give away drinks over there.'" It seems that Rico and Reina both signed an agreement with the employers, providing severance pay, which the more militant workers, including Santa, rejected.

However, what does Santa (and presumably the filmmaker) offer as an alternative? The parable about the Siamese twins. 'If we had just stuck together...' and rejected management's offer. Santa claims the shipyard was profitable. We even offered to work overtime for free, he contends, in a telling admission, before cursing the "Koreans," presumably for their cheaper-labor shipyards. This is pretty meager stuff, to say the least. Nationally-based, trade union militancy, accepting concessions, subordinating oneself to the profit drive of the employers—in other words, the strategy that has failed workers *universally* over the past two decades in the face of globally-integrated capital.

The thinness of perspective goes a considerable distance toward explaining the overall weakness of the film—its essential tameness, its lack of groundbreaking insight. Because, frankly, it would be exceedingly difficult today to produce a lively, genuinely contemporary, deeply *perceptive* film on the basis of such a discredited approach. A tone of resignation and defeatism, of something *outdated*, is almost inevitable. Aranoa refers to the problem himself, perhaps inadvertently, in his director's comment, when he describes his work as the "story of a present which, for lack of horizons, seems more like the past." Indeed.

Aranoa legitimately makes much of his experience in Gijon and the lessons about solidarity it taught him. However, one wonders, first of all, how many of these struggling "workers" were union officials. Beyond that, honest workers—with any knowledge of recent conflicts and their outcomes—may repeat phrases about overcoming through sticking it out on the picket lines, but, in their heart of hearts, know or *intuit* that such methods are entirely inadequate under the current conditions.

It has to be said that Aranoa is obviously sincere in his sympathy for the unemployed and their sufferings and in his desire to tell their story. In contemporary cinema that marks him out as an unusual and commendable figure. His lack of perspective, or adherence to a failed perspective, is hardly an individual failing. He is merely imbibing and passing on what prevails in the current middle class "left" atmosphere, in Spain and elsewhere.

Mondays in the Sun is worth seeing. The film has obviously found a response with audiences, and for generally healthy reasons.

However, it falls far short as a drama and as a social document, and that too must be said.

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