

The Delinquents: A promising heist film seeks a false escape route

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The Delinquents is an independent film by Argentinian director Roberto Moreno. The film first screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 2023 and is Argentina's official entry for Best International Feature Film at the 2024 Academy Awards.

The film centers on the lives of Morán and Román, dissatisfied colleagues who work in a bank in Buenos Aires. The former robs the bank and later implicates the latter in his plan to hide the money while he is incarcerated. While the story sets off in an intriguing direction, it ultimately degenerates into a utopian romance.

A brief description of the plot: After a routine day of mind-numbing drudgery, the bank's treasurer, Morán (Daniel Elías), steals \$650,000 in cash from the vault, aware that his activities have been captured on surveillance video and it is only a matter of time before he is identified and arrested. That evening over dinner at a local restaurant, Morán asks his unwitting colleague Román (Esteban Bigliardi) to hide the stolen money while he serves his prison sentence and in return, he will split the bounty when he's released: "I want a modest life. I don't want to work anymore, Román. Three-and-a-half years in jail, or twenty-five in the bank."

Román reluctantly agrees to Morán's scheme and hides the money in his apartment. The following morning, the robbery is well-known to the bank's management and all employees are placed under suspicion of complicity. A dogged company investigator, Laura Ortega (Laura Paredes) is brought in to conduct interviews and axe jobs (for "breach of security").

Before long, Román is identified as an accomplice, but his involvement can't easily be proven without exposing the robbery to the bank's important clients.

Eventually, the decision is made to drop the case (the money is insured) and Román is kept at his post to avoid paying him a "big compensation." The bank manager, Del Toro (Germán De Silva), threatens, "The idea is to make your life miserable, Román." Morán is replaced with Vespucio (Agustín Toscano), a recruit who is tasked with needling Román and the other remaining staff. The stresses build up, and Román's personal and professional life begin to unravel. Meanwhile, Morán is taught a lesson in prison etiquette, quickly realising that life behind bars is more brutal than he imagined.

The Delinquents is a sensitively rendered and humane film, especially uplifting in the context where the box office is dominated by juvenile and artificial works that suck the complexity out of life to promote the most backward antisocial moods and conceptions. The unusual narrative structure with its many twists and turns keeps the viewer engaged in the fate of Morán and Román.

The principal actors bring genuine talent and personality to their roles, with Bigliardi as the affable and honest Román particularly moving. The supporting characters also have their charm, each in their own way fumbling through the bank's administrative humdrum. There are understated comical elements laced throughout that add a further dimension of humanity to the drama.

However, the film's second half slowly retreats from the problems touched on in the first half of the film. On a journey to a remote area miles away from Buenos Aires to stash the money in a more secure place, Román encounters a group of bohemians preoccupied with making films about the area's natural beauty. He's taken with the group's whimsical lifestyle, abundant with leisure and art. The clouds also begin to

part for Morán, who finds some solace in a prison poetry class. These encounters of “human quality”—as Moreno describes it—lead Morán, and later Román, toward a series of personal epiphanies.

This is the film’s weakest section, which romanticises the countryside as a supposed bastion of abundance, self-sufficiency and culture. But for all their musings about art and poetry, the bohemians appear to live in an insular social bubble, in a state that seems fixed and complacent, indifferent, overall, to politics and to society in general. The film does not explain how their lives have somehow evaded the economic pressures, which is a universal process no less present in provincial villages than in a sprawling metropolis.

In an interview with the New York Film Festival last year, Moreno explained that his interest in “the relationship and tension between work and leisure” was renewed during the onset of the ongoing and catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic, which he describes in somewhat nostalgic terms. “It seemed to me that what happened in the pandemic was that we believed that the world could be better—and suddenly we stopped working, we were all in our houses watching movies, listening to music, spending time with loved ones, baking bread, eating pizzas.”

“But that quickly turned to horror,” he continued, “when totalitarian states came to war. Today, post-pandemic, it is much worse, wars of hate, resentment, and anger, from presidents of countries like the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Hungary, and Italy. The discourses have become more inhumane, and I think the film should be seen in that context.”

No doubt the “discourses” have become more inhumane, and the film is a protest against that. But the film’s proposed solution—an individual escape from the city to the supposedly more socially enlightened “simple life” is nothing more than a utopian fantasy. It may prove an attractive proposition to a certain section of panicked and disgusted middle-class artists, who, at present, view social problems and their solutions in purely individual and psychological terms which blinds them to a deeper understanding of the social crisis and the collective response by the working class that is urgently needed.

Thoughtful artistic impressions and insights are not enough, and often lead to inadequate or even false conclusions. *The Delinquents* is a case in point. Despite

the film’s aesthetic realism and committed and talented cast, it concludes on a decidedly light-minded and unserious note.

The Delinquents was inspired by Hugo Fregonese’s Argentinian noir film, *Hardly a Criminal* (1949), generally premised along similar lines, but draws a much sharper picture of social reality in Buenos Aires and a very different outcome for Morán. “This is a city on agitated nerves ...” reads an opening title card followed by scenes of chaos and urgency that propels the protagonist toward his violent demise. Both films in their own ways lead the viewer into a dead end, into impossible solutions, and reflect different forms of political pessimism.

Individual escape from the spiraling social catastrophe is impossible. The descent into world war and dictatorship, what Moreno refers to as “totalitarian states” and “discourses of hate,” cannot be overcome through personal enlightenment, a retreat into nostalgic naval gazing, or escaping into a countryside utopia, but through the conscious political struggle by the working class that is beginning to take shape internationally.



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