



Azor

Director: Andreas Fontana

Country: Argentina

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*A review by Manohla Dargis for **The New York Times**:*

Tendrils of menace creep through the unnerving drama “Azor,” snaking through every room and scene. It’s 1980 and a Swiss private banker and his wife are traveling through Argentina, taking in the sights while he tries to clean up a mess left by a missing colleague. Danger is everywhere — people have disappeared, are disappearing — though you wouldn’t necessarily know it from the mansions they visit, where the Swiss interlopers exchange pleasantries with the Buenos Aires elite, some of whom voice vague warnings. Others just smile knowingly, betraying their loyalties.



A harrowing vision of evil from the inside, the movie tracks the banker, Yvan (Fabrizio Rongione), as he journeys through Argentina several years after armed forces overthrew the government of President Isabel Martínez de Perón. For most of Yvan’s clients, life seems to go on as before, with little to disrupt their cosseted indolence. With the junta ruling the country, the wealthy, murmuring about nothing much, sip drinks by their pools, tended by fleets of servants. Again and again, Yvan apologizes for the behavior of his missing colleague, René Keys (seen briefly in the opening), a

confounding figure intensely disliked by some yet beloved by others.

Written and directed by Andreas Fontana, making a formally precise, tonally perfect feature debut, “Azor” is a low-key shocker. It has you in its cool grip from the opening shot of a shambolic-looking Keys standing in suit and tie before a flat, blurred backdrop of jungle greenery. As the camera holds on him, he seems more ill at ease and his laughing smiles give way to unexplained agitation. He suddenly looks like a man searching for an exit. As the story unfolds, this perturbation suffuses the movie. It shapes every gesture, sidelong glance and oblique comment, turning an outwardly routine business trip into a mystery unlocked only through Keys.

With its swampy air of unease and the figure of the enigmatic missing man, the key to the story as it were, “Azor” vaguely evokes films like Carol Reed’s “The Third Man” (written by Graham Greene), though without the narrative pulse and concerns or Hollywood glamour of that cloak-and-dagger thriller. (The name Keys recalls that of Edward G. Robinson’s claims adjuster, Keyes, in “Double Indemnity.”) Certainly “Azor” has a smattering of suspense-film essentials: hushed conversations, clouds of cigarette smoke, heavily armed soldiers. For his part, the colorless Yvan, with his stiff politesse and old-world firm, presents the very picture of a useful patsy.

Fontana, who is Swiss but has lived in Argentina, takes a sideways, insistently oblique approach to intrigue. Rather than stuffing the movie with incidents, with clever turns and sexy characters, empty moralizing and political grandstanding, he has whittled it to the bone. There are no louche, swaggering spies in “Azor,” no dashing heroes, no swoony villains and very little of what could pass for Hollywood-style action. There is instead a lot of seemingly innocuous small talk, the kind often tucked in amid a movie’s narrative leaps forward. There’s chatter about Swiss schools, fine hotels, family castles, the good old days — all of which helps maintain the veneer of normalcy.

Terrible things happen. Yet, for the most part, Yvan's clients, with their money, landed estates and thoroughbreds seem largely indifferent to the evil informing their lives. The land, of course, was stolen long ago, though no one, Fontana included, puts it like that. Instead, when a sympathetic client (Juan Trench) takes Yvan and his wife, Ines (Stéphanie Cléau), on a ride, he speaks about a stand of trees



planted by his great-grandfather. The client's father called the area the grand boulevards, invoking Haussmann, the 19th-century French official who, in service of Louis Napoleon, remade Paris by razing slums and forcing out the poor. Fontana has landed his blow; the group rides on.

Fontana doesn't bludgeon you with explanations, declare his allegiances (they're a given) or school you on Argentine history, which nevertheless comes into focus through the small talk and devious, sly looks, most notably in a terrifying scene with a Catholic Monsignor (a fantastic Pablo Torre Nilsson). Fontana is asking you to look and to listen, and to really grasp what it means to behave as if the world isn't on fire. Late in the movie, during a gala filled with laughing attendees, a zombie horde in gowns and black tie, Ines talks to an aristocratic doyenne (Carmen Irionda) about the peculiar dialect of Swiss private banking. One curious phrase means "to pretend you haven't seen anything," Ines explains, as she takes leisurely drags on her cigarette. "My husband does it very easily."

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