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## Cannes 2011: Lars Von Trier Apologizes and Other Political Scandals

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The possible murder of Princess Diana. Bad jokes about the Final Solution. The uprising in Egypt. The corruption that engulfs Big Oil and the ineffective media coverage of the BP oil spill and its devastating effects. A French film which the unflappable French people find a bit shocking because it's about their embattled President Nicolas Sarkozy. And the alleged sexual assaults by the French head of the IMF and one of the leading candidates to replace Sarkozy as the leader of France. Those are just some of the many social issues that have punctuated and defined the 2011 Cannes Film Festival.

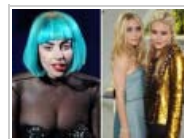
Cannes always features hot-button politics, whether it's priests and nuns protesting *The Da Vinci Code*, Michael

Moore winning the Palme d'Or for *Fahrenheit 9-11* or simply **Lars Von Trier desperately trying to spice up a press conference for his ho-hum movie *Melancholia* by the childish joke of calling himself a Nazi.** But the 2011 fest is notable for having so many different political issues hog the spotlight both inside the movie theaters and on the Croisette.

Von Trier was clearly joking -- albeit in an infantile manner -- when he said that he was a Nazi and understood Hitler and later said his next film project might be *The Final Solution* -- for journalists. (In

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other words, kill all the journalists, which ranks second only to kill all the lawyers, one imagines. The director is known for his provocations and since his new movie seems to be generating indifference, he might have felt especially pressured to perform, as he so often does in the past. It's like going to see Lenny Bruce and being shocked at the language. What did you expect? Yet The Hollywood Reporter headlined a story by saying Lars Von Trier 'ADMITS TO BEING A NAZI.' (They should have said "tastelessly joked," at the very most. Ultimately, the festival proved it too refused to take the words in the context they were given, denounced them and said they had spoken with Von Trier. The official press release added simply, "He presents his apology."

Von Trier later released his own statement via email to the media: "If I have hurt someone this morning by the words I said at the press conference, I sincerely apologize. I am not anti-semitic or racially prejudiced in any way, nor am I a Nazi." End of silly controversy.

Or not. The Festival's Board Of Directors held an "extraordinary meeting" Thursday night, condemned Von Trier's comments again and declared him a "persona non grata" at the Festival, effective immediately. What that means exactly -- can his films come to Cannes even if Von Trier can't? -- is still unclear.

Perhaps the movie likeliest to cause political waves in the US -- if it can reach beyond Greenpeace fans and win a wide audience -- is *The Big Fix*, a new documentary film about the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Director Josh and wife and co-director Rebecca Tickell use that man-made disaster as a jumping off point to illustrate the tentacles of big business stretching out in every direction. They link the oil companies to financial firms and politicians, they show "impartial" commentators on countless media outlets who are compromised in ways both large and small and they even personalize the issue of the spill's impact in a stunning manner. Rebecca Tickell developed serious medical issues just covering the aftermath, prompting her involvement in a class action lawsuit.

The critics were generally positive about the movie, though many felt it piled on so many conspiracy theories and proved so all-embracing in its denouncement of the ways of politics and environmental regulation that viewers might get overwhelmed with details or lost in an explosion of exposes. It will be fascinating to see if its muckraking (in the classic, positive sense of the word) mobilizes audiences the way the filmmakers so clearly long to do.

Earlier in the fest, the hot doc was *Unlawful Killing*, a look at the death of Princess Diana that was funded by Mohamed Fayed, who has repeatedly called the death of Diana and his son Dodi a murder. The grisly lure for some was a photo of Diana, Princess of Wales at the accident that for the first time would be uncensored. It came and went in a flash according to reporters but is sure to be online as soon as a bootleg DVD gets out. In general, the movie was seen as offering some genuinely puzzling details (did it really take three and a half hours after authorities arrived on the scene to get the still-living Diana to a hospital?). But the movie did itself no favors by embracing what was described as a sensationalistic attitude and featuring talking heads like Howard Stern and gossip author Kitty Kelley.



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Two French films created a stir. One was *Pater*, a confusing faux documentary with actors playing at running for office with one as the current President and the other as his protege. It left the non-French scratching their heads. *The Conquest*, on the other hand, is a pretty accessible look at current French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his rise to power. Though some of the ins and outs of French politics naturally went over the heads of foreigners like us, the grab for power and the infighting of political campaigns proved universal and in this light amusing feature, rather funny.

Even when Cannes tries to proactively use its platform to shine a light on the struggle for freedom, it can cause headaches. Egypt and Iran both made waves here. Iranian filmmaker Mohammad Rasoulof's *Goodbye* was smuggled out of Iran -- he's been banned from making movies for 20 years -- and screened to a polite response that empathized with the difficult conditions under which it was made. The film ran in a sidebar because the fest was worried too much attention might create real problems for the director back home. In fact, the opposite happened and Iran lifted Rasoulof's travel ban.

For Egypt, the festival called for ten short films from ten prominent directors about the uprising. A fine gesture that tied in nicely with the trailer that begins the Directors Fortnight: it shows footage from the mass movements sweeping the Middle East and says that in these difficult times they miss the voices of censored filmmakers. Nice. But even the positive gestures created a stir: an email from prominent Egyptian activists and members of the creative community says Cannes recruited two directors to the project who were complicit in working with the corrupt Hosni Mubarak regime. Plus they object to inviting the Egyptian ambassador to France who they say discouraged the protests early on. It's an incredibly thorny problem: how do you decide when someone is merely surviving under oppression versus collaborating with the oppressor to get ahead? Cannes won't answer that question this festival but it's one more probing idea raised by the movies and politics that swirl throughout it every single year.

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