

## ***'Bonditis: Kisses and shots in the hayloft'***

by Dr Adrian Smith

'A bar – a blonde. An automatic pistol – a bed. Frank Born, threatened, undressed, seduced... He is suffering from BONDITIS!'

Over a decade ago I met a seller at a small film event in London who had an intriguing packet of materials relating to a long-forgotten Swiss spy film. It contained, amongst other things, dozens of behind the scenes and publicity photos, a dubbing script, Front-of-House stills and a pressbook. I was the first person to ever show any interest so he sold me the lot for £10. He then invited me to visit his office at Pinewood Studios where he had plenty more. I was there like a shot. He had been holding on to this material for around 20 years since he had been asked to empty out a storage unit in Soho and throw it all in a skip. Thankfully for me, and for film history, he kept it all, and now it was mine. This was how I began to suffer from 'Bonditis,' and my quest to become the holder of the world's largest *Bonditis* archive began. I would talk about the film to anyone who would listen, I wrote magazine articles about it, I shared images on social media, and I even included the film in my PhD thesis.

*Bonditis* is truly unique: Its complicated plot involves an international delegation in a small Swiss village where decisions are to be made about aid for Nigeria. Watching the proceedings are spies from China, Russia, America and various non-specific European countries who are all trying to get hold of an egg containing hidden microfilm. The entire world has descended on a small Swiss village "the size of a postage stamp." The James Bond experience of exoticism, Orientalism, rampant sexuality and cold war interplay is found in microcosm in Margogün.

Just what was 'Bonditis,' and where did it come from? It appears that in the trade the term 'Bonditis' was being used to describe the global enthusiasm for James Bond well before this Swiss film was even in post-production. A 1965 article discussing the publicity for *Thunderball* (Terence Young, 1965) in West Germany uses it, alongside the term "Bonomdania," (German for 'Bondmania?') to describe how the film was "the fastest record grosser in native history."<sup>1</sup> It was used again in 1967 when discussing

the popularity of Ian Fleming's novels, stating that they "probably got a shot in the arm when it was 'revealed' that President Kennedy was fond of the character as light reading."<sup>2</sup> The term was even used in jest in an article in the *Belfast News-Letter* in 1966 when discussing attitudes towards the fictional spy with residents of Bond Street in that city.<sup>3</sup> So perhaps Karl Suter had read about it somewhere and the term had lodged in the back of his mind (thankfully, not "Bonomdania"), ready for his company Turnus Film to show the world what 'Bonditis' really was.

*Bonditis* came at a crucial time for the Swiss film industry. Not only was it an innovative first film project for Turnus Films but it helped break a two-year slump: Allegedly Switzerland had produced a total of zero films in 1965 and 1966, at least as reported in the US trade press, although they appear to have been focused only on German-language films.<sup>4</sup> By the end of 1967 when it was finally out, *Bonditis* was only the second Swiss German-language feature film to be released there that year, the other being *Polizist Wäckerli in Gefahr* (*Policeman Waeckerli in Danger*, Sigfrit Steiner).<sup>5</sup> *L'Inconnu de Shandigor* (*The Unknown Man of Shandigor*, Jean-Louis Roy, 1967) was also released in 1967, having played at the Cannes Film Festival.

After a screening at Cannes in 1968 the UK-based independent distributor Compton Films picked up the worldwide rights for *Bonditis*, although in Switzerland itself the rights had been sold to Paramount the previous year, who distributed it under their Zurich-based Star-Film subsidiary to some degree of local success. The article reporting this also suggests that they planned to have a premiere at the Berlin Film Festival.<sup>6</sup> It is unclear as to whether that happened or not, or why Paramount did not themselves secure the global release at the time. It was reported in March 1969 that John Henderson, the buyer for Compton (although by now being reported as Cinecenta, the group that took over after Compton dissolved in 1968), was in New York to secure the rights. It is not entirely clear why: perhaps he was negotiating with Paramount?<sup>7</sup>

To further confuse the issue around who had distribution rights, in Austria Turnus appear to have negotiated a deal with Iris-Film, based in Vienna. *Bonditis* was retitled *Küsse und schüsse am heuboden*, which translates as "Kisses and shots in the hayloft." The poster design for this version of the film attempts to pass it off as a

Heimat-style sex comedy and the tagline states that it is “der heimatfilm für starke nerven,” or “The Heimat Film for strong nerves.”

The poster art which was created by Compton was striking is now considered a classic in 1960s poster design. Featuring a large image of Marion Jacob in a bikini holding a weapon, and with the *Bonditis* lettering being overlaid by a hand-drawn gun next to the black silhouette of a naked woman, it skilfully combines the two main elements of audience appeal in a spy film: violence and sex. Publicity material and other evidence exists to suggest that *Bonditis* was seen overseas (I have posters from the USA, Australia and Portugal in my collection, and there is at least one 35mm print in existence, currently to be found in South Africa), but it is difficult to find published reviews, or even evidence of cinema listings. If it was seen anywhere, it was certainly not by journalists. Perhaps when Compton was becoming Cinecenta the company took its eye off the ball where some of their current slate was concerned, so wide publicity did not happen, and the film sadly did not experience the international success it deserved. The US trade paper *Variety* did run a review in 1968, but this was based on a screening at a film festival in Vienna, probably organised by Iris-Film, rather than something domestic. *Variety* complemented the Technicolor and Techniscope cinematography but found the acting and script lacking: “The whole thing gives the impression of a stretched-out cabaret sketch.”<sup>8</sup>

With no local press coverage, ratings certificate or contemporary reviews, there is very little evidence that Compton/ Cinecenta attempted a release of *Bonditis* in the UK either. However, a review in *The Times of India* from their overseas film correspondent in 1972 appears to be describing a recent screening held at the Regal cinema in London (although which Regal it is difficult to say). The reviewer notes that the ‘improbably, impossible, oft-repeated feats of the super-spy of fiction James Bond’ had clearly inspired some ‘subtly satirical horseplay’<sup>9</sup> in the film. How this screening happened, why it happened in 1972, and why its only review is in a newspaper published in Mumbai is a mystery that not even Bond himself could solve.

The only hard evidence that *Bonditis* was ever seen in the UK is the VHS release through the Intervision label in 1983.<sup>10</sup> The box featured promotional stills on the rear, alongside a brief plot synopsis, but the front cover image is new and strikingly incongruous: A man in a white tux and black bow tie is grinning as he strangles a

denim-clad criminal with a shotgun in the stairwell of a grubby factory. It looks like it belongs on a Cliff Twemlow film poster and has nothing to do with the suave adventures of Frank Born whatsoever. With this tough image, combined with the '15'-rating they gave it themselves (there is no evidence that the BBFC [British Board of Film Classification] ever saw *Bonditis* but there's no way it would be rated '15') Intervision seem to have been trying to attract the entirely wrong audience for a light-hearted spy comedy from 1968, and once again *Bonditis* suffers a great disservice.

Over the last decade, the film has started to receive more attention. As well as my own evangelising and several blog posts, it has a positive entry in *The International Spy Film Guide*, where it is described as a 'Sprightly, silly, sexy, Swiss spy spoof' which is "good natured fun."<sup>11</sup> And now, after so many years of unavailability, I am so happy that filmo.ch and the Cinémathèque Suisse have given us a brand-new restoration. The world will hear of Frank Born again!

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<sup>1</sup> 'Even the Violence is Funny,' *Variety*, 29 December 1965, p.5)

<sup>2</sup> 'Pictures: PIX ENVY BOOK PUBS 'BREAKS,' *Variety*, 17 May 1967, p.5

<sup>3</sup> 'No Thunder for James in Bond Street But 'Ernie' is Slipping Too,' *Belfast News-Letter*, 6 June 1966, p. 2

<sup>4</sup> 'Swiss resuming Pix Prod. After 2-Year Hiatus,' *Variety*, 17 August 1966, p.17)

<sup>5</sup> 'Cash Film Aid Keeps Swiss Picture Business Barely Alive & Kicking,' *Variety*, 26 April 1967, p.136)

<sup>6</sup> 'Par Gets 'Bonditis' for Swiss Market,' *Variety*, 19 April 1967, p. 5

<sup>7</sup> 'Pictures: 'Henderson in Brazil,' *Variety*, 26 March 1969, p. 7

<sup>8</sup> 'Bonditis,' *Variety*, 10 May 1967, p. 21

<sup>9</sup> 'ON THE FOREIGN SCREEN: Call-girls' world,' *The Times of India*, 6 April 1972, p. 10

<sup>10</sup> 'Video Releases,' *Broadcast*, 16 December 1983, p.51

<sup>11</sup> Davies, R. R. 2016, 'Bonditis' in *The International Spy Film Guide 1945-1989*, The Kiss Kiss Kill Kill Archive: Haverfordwest, p. 122