

1999 Sydney Film Festival

Outskirts and Checkpoint: two films from Russia

Richard Phillips
17 July 1999

The liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991 impacted dramatically on Russian filmmakers. The once-giant film industry, which trained and provided employment for hundreds of actors, scriptwriters, directors and technicians, is now a shell of its former self. Studios have been privatised or closed outright, finance available for film production has been drastically cut and the number of films produced reduced to a fraction of the previous output.

Clearly volume has little to do with quality or artistic integrity but the destruction of film production facilities in the former Soviet state has created technical and artistic problems that will take time to overcome. Many of those employed in the Russian industry today are producing low-grade action adventures, romances and comedies. Only a handful of filmmakers are attempting to deal with the social and political problems prevailing in the former Soviet state. *Outskirts* directed by Petr Lutsik and *Checkpoint* by Alexander Rogozhkin, shown at this year's Festival, lifted the curtain on some aspects of contemporary Russian life.

In *Outskirts* a group of collective farm workers decide to find and then exact their revenge on all those responsible for selling their farm to business operators and oil speculators. *Checkpoint* follows the fortunes of a squad of Russian soldiers in war-ravaged Chechnya.

Alexander Rogozhkin, the director of *Checkpoint*, has directed 10 feature films and is probably best known for his *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* (1995), a comedy about a Finnish academic who travels to Russia to study hunting traditions. The academic becomes involved with a bizarre hunting party of high-ranking Army generals and others, who spend their time drinking vast quantities of vodka and engaging in

all sorts of buffoonery. No hunting ever actually takes place and the academic returns to Finland.

His latest film is a moderately engaging portrayal of the demoralised state of the Russian military and the impact of the Chechnyan conflict on rank and file soldiers. There are no panoramic battle scenes or acts of heroism, only point duty at a desolate mind-numbing checkpoint, life interrupted by sniper fire and risky liaisons with the local inhabitants for sex, drugs and other activities. The squad has been posted to the checkpoint as punishment after one of them shot a distraught mother during a raid on a local village.

While Rogozhkin appears to possess a healthy hatred for the upper echelons of the Russian military and the insanity of the bloody intervention in Chechnya, his film does not take a passionate anti-war stance. In fact, one wonders whether Rogozhkin is greatly concerned about the fate of his characters. The film's final tragedy is predictable and the soldiers are portrayed as little more than fun-loving young men out for a good time. *Checkpoint*, which has more than its fair share of army barracks humour, tries to find an easy path to its audience rather than grapple with the more complex issues posed by this subject.

Outskirts, the first feature by director Petr Lutsik, who jointly wrote the screenplay with Alexei Samorijadov, is a more interesting film. The highly stylised movie, visually inspired by early Soviet cinema and filmed in black and white, makes an obvious warning to the Russian government, bureaucrats and businessmen that their impoverishment of millions of workers will inevitably produce a violent reaction. The film appears to have unsettled the powers-that-be in Russia, where it has not been widely distributed or

shown on television.

This is not the story of handsome, high-powered individuals but a black-comedy about a group of mainly elderly farm workers from the Urals who realise that the land they have lived on and worked for generations has been sold out from underneath them. And like most of the Russian population now confronting the consequences of privatisation, they have no clear idea how this happened or where the money exchanged, if there was any, went.

The film opens with an explanation that local residents rioted when they discovered that their land had been sold. Thugs quash this initial resistance and drive off the villagers who reluctantly accept the takeover.

A group of three—an old farmer, a former World War II hero and a reluctant and very anxious young man—decide that this is unacceptable and resolve to do whatever is necessary to track down all those responsible for selling the farm. They have no strategy—this will be worked out along the way—only some old rifles and a grim determination to regain control of their land.

The chairman of the collective farm refuses to cooperate until he is immersed for a lengthy period in the icy waters of a nearby lake. Virtually dead, he is revived and tells the farmers that some businessmen secured ownership after they promised fabulous profits. But these profits were not forthcoming and the "enterprisers" disappeared leaving him with nothing.

Information gathered from the chairman is used to track down the next culprit and so the film follows the farmers on a determined and unforgiving mission to locate the businessmen, Stalinist bureaucrats and Mafia types involved in the sell-off of the collective farm. The sordid story of the farm's sell-off unfolds through the capture and torture of those responsible.

The grim trio eventually makes its way to Moscow where they find the oil company boss who now owns and controls their land. The corporate head, surrounded by security guards and a large array of oil samples, boasts about his company profits. The farmers overturn the luxurious office, kill the oil king and his thugs and regain control of the land leaving Moscow in flames. Their crusade complete, the film ends with them back on the collective farm, ploughing the land together.

Sparse dialogue delivered with comic restraint by a

caste of veteran Russian actors, and excellent cinematography by Nikolai Ivasiv combine to produce a strange and disquieting film. The humour has a shadowy menacing quality, the farmers' gruesome actions contrasted by a naïve belief that nothing can stop their mission.

In the blackest and probably the most amusing scene in the film the farmers capture a former party boss and then dispassionately discuss the best method to torture him. Should they "boil him, tenderly" or slowly cut off his head "tenderly". They finally decide to place him under the house with one of the group, who says he will "gnaw him tenderly" until he talks.

The farmers' happy return to the past, a place where simple determination solves all problems, is trite and somewhat ridiculous even for a comedy as black as this. But despite this weakness, *Outskirts* is a commendable directorial debut and an indication that some Russian filmmakers are attempting to produce movies, albeit in comic form, that attempt to come to grips with the horrendous consequences and social implications of capitalist restoration. The film has won awards at the Berlin and Chicago International Film Festivals.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact