

1999 Sydney Film Festival

A conversation with Petr Lutsik**"To show there is still something alive in the soul of the people"****Richard Phillips**
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*Petr Lutsik, the 39-year-old Ukrainian born film director of *Outskirts* began his formal education in the film industry after he had graduated from the Moscow Institute of Steel Technologies in 1982. Lutsik enrolled at the Moscow Film Academy, specialising in scriptwriting, and went on to work as an assistant director and administrator for the Uzbekfilm Studio in 1984-85 before collaborating with Alexei Samorijadov on scripts for eight feature films. *Outskirts*, released in 1998, is his directorial debut.*

Richard Phillips: Introducing your film at the Festival yesterday, you said that the problem in the Russian film industry was not lack of money but a lack of ideas. Could you elaborate?

Petr Lutsik: In Russia everyone complains that there is no money. Of course films are complex products and cannot be produced like making a table, which anyone can do if they have the time and basic materials, so obviously finding finance for films is a real problem. What I meant was that just because fewer films are being made in Russia doesn't mean that they have to be badly made. Filmmakers must do their job properly and with the highest standards.

I think the main problem is that we don't have a real film industry as such in Russia. We used to have a phenomenal industry in the late 1920s and 1930s and on a par with Hollywood. They learnt from us and we learnt a lot from them. I don't mean that we watched and copied everything, but the industries developed simultaneously, alongside each other.

Filmmaking was very powerful in Soviet times because we had a rich producer—the state—that knew exactly what it wanted. The state knew that people went to the movies and the state wanted people to see their dreams. In fact, Stalin used to watch all the films made and read all the scripts submitted. There was nothing more under more scrutiny than filmmaking in Soviet Russia, but professional and artistic standards began to decline. In recent years this has dropped completely.

The earth cools, they say, but filmmaking is in a constant process of dying and getting old. The beauty of this process is that it is renewed every so often with new blood, so it is possible that it might not die in my country.

There is an old picture called *Chapayev*, a classic film about the legendary Red Army general Vasily Chapayev. Today when I watch this film, although it was about a Red Army officer it could have been a White. What I find interesting is the intensity of the filmmaking and its emotional content. Emotionalism seems to have been lost in today's films. Old films—not just Russian but American and European movies—were much more emotional.

I am still trying to assess what we've lost from when the Eisensteins were around, but paying more money to technicians won't resolve the problems in Russian filmmaking or make people better at what they do. It's like a beat-up old car. You can do a beautiful paint job on it and put in

the best petrol but it is still won't go very far. Of course I am trying to learn how to recreate this emotional content and have only had one picture to try it. At the moment I've talked more about it than done it and in actual fact I will probably need to make 100 films before I can talk about this subject properly.

RP: You raise the 1930s but this was a period of tremendous repression by the Stalinist bureaucracy—a period of artistic decline—where the state, under the banner of socialist realism and the glorification of the bureaucracy, had almost total control.

PL: Yes, I know this history, and it is true, but I am not interested in the old ideology that dominated then. Today we have the freedom to shoot whatever we want and there is all this technology to play with. The technology is extraordinary, but if you compare any contemporary Russian film with a film from 1932 or even 1949 you can see how well made these older films were. As a scriptwriter I notice how well constructed the scripts were. Scriptwriters understood what a twist was; what a climax was; and how to develop character. And irrespective of the horrific ideology, whatever the characters were saying, these films have the ability to catch you emotionally.

I know that Eisenstein, Alexandrov and others had an incredibly difficult time—every day they thought it could be the end, they could be arrested—but they did their work on such a high level. The ideology and what the artist had to do and go through at that time—we can get over that—we can understand what they had to do and yet still learn from their technique.

Now in Russia every television channel shows the old Soviet movies. There was a time in my life when you could not see them at all. Today young people, old people, everybody wants to watch them because the emotion is so intense and much more interesting than the new Russian cinema.

RP: As well as Eisenstein, whom else would you regard as the most important Russian directors? Dziga Vertov?

PL: Yes, Vertov of course, Alexander Dovzhenko, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and others that I am just becoming familiar with. In fact, I've never heard of a lot of the directors whose films I've seen and like on television. Even if you tune into these older films halfway through the story, the characters are alive and you are there.

RP: And the international filmmakers you've been influenced by?

PL: Well it took a while before we had access to international films. Gradually we got videos and could see contemporary European and US films. We saw Fellini films—not just *La Dolce Vita*, which had been released in Russia—but others including *Cassanova* and also Pasolini's films. This process began before the collapse of the Soviet Union with the availability of video players. In fact, it was video that broke down the barriers in cinema.

Just as in the old days, the bureaucrats brought in jazz records and their children got to hear this music. Later, in the same way, they would bring in rock albums and their kids got to hear that. I was in Year 7 or 8, in 1974 in Tashkent and we had the old reel-to-reel tape recorders and copied Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin for each other. It was bad quality, but we got to hear it. The same thing happened with video. All the Soviet bureaucrats that were able to travel brought back videos and people would duplicate the films and pass them round.

We knew little about Coppola and although we had seen *The Godfather* we knew nothing about *Apocalypse Now* or his other work. When I was at film school we saw a limited selection of Hollywood classics. We saw *Grapes of Wrath* and *Intolerance* and had screenings at the State Archives. As a student you could book films for special screenings. There were also special restricted showings at the House of Cinema in Moscow.

Of course I know very little about classic European and American films from the 1930s and 40s and I try to buy tapes so that I can learn more about these films. I am saddened that we have lost the craft from this period. This is very hard to recreate and revive because filmmaking is not like writing or painting where you can sit by yourself and learn how to perfect your craft. It is a complex large-scale enterprise where every tiny thing is important. It's like me saying, once upon a time Russia made good tanks or rockets, but how can I go and learn how to make a tank on my own?

RP: In the years since the liquidation of the Soviet Union there has been a tremendous destruction of the productive forces. Could you explain how this is reflected in the film industry?

PL: There are a number of sides to this. Let's start with the end. In order for a market to exist someone has to spend money and go to the cinema. Many people said no one would go because they didn't have enough money for bread. In fact, a strange thing has happened. The new cinemas, where ticket prices are similar to other countries, are packed. People don't discriminate, they watch Hollywood movies or new Russian films, and whatever is available. And even though ticket prices are much cheaper at the old cinemas, people don't go. They would rather see *Titanic* at the new cinema.

There are a few reasons for this. One is that they want to go to a clean shiny venue. Everyone is dressed up and it is a night out to see a spectacle with good quality sound and projection. In the old cinema maybe the toilet will be blocked or broken, or you could be robbed, and so many of these old cinemas have been turned into car showrooms or things like that.

The other problem is from the industry point of view. The biggest studio was Mosfilm; in fact it was the biggest studio in the world. In Soviet days the studio would produce say 35 films a year, and there were 16 sound stages of various sizes but today only two of these sound stages are functioning. Another two are warehouses for film, others are used for something else, and a few are completely destroyed. The conditions are horrendous with most of the production facilities in a state of collapse. At the same time there are some small positives: there is state of the art lighting equipment from Italy now available in Moscow and any kind of camera is available, if you have the money.

There used to be 50 assistant directors at Mosfilm, now there are four. Of those 50 from the old days you could only really work with those four. These are the ones who have stayed on and it seems that only the strongest survive. It is a bit like the animal world—the strong ones remain, the weak ones are pushed out. The same rules tend to apply to the film profession and either we die out or we are going to have to make films that are more precise, accurate or authentic in what they portray.

RP: What has been the reaction to your film?

PL: Reactions have varied but no one is indifferent. It was released on the day of the financial crash in Russia last August so a very limited number of copies were made available and it doesn't have wide distribution. The television stations will not show it—they seem to be

afraid of it—but practically all the newspapers have written about it.

Newspaper response has been varied to the extreme. There were "open letters" demanding that the film be banned: this film must never be shown to the people because the people will misunderstand and misinterpret it and if they understand it, then that is even worse. It was just like the good old Soviet days.

On the other hand there have been some OK comments. There was a festival screening in Kiev and it was a very young audience—mainly students. They were laughing, stamping their feet, screaming and I was told that I made a film for teenagers. This surprised me because while I was making the film I thought it would mainly interest older people that young people would take one look and leave the cinema. And with this film it's very simple: some will come to the cinema and leave immediately when they see it is about the land and in black and white. Those that remain for the first minutes, stay till the end.

RP: At the Festival yesterday you said that you always wanted to make a film about ordinary people but this was a very complex task. Can you explain?

PL: It is like the war. We've been told about all the heroes that did this or that brave deed. They had medals to prove it and their portraits are all over the place, but how many others were like them or even braver that we haven't heard about? Just because these people are not known doesn't mean they didn't exist.

I consider myself an ordinary person but I just happened to become a professional scriptwriter and filmmaker. There is no real difference between me and someone working in a factory and there is no way that I am any better or more complicated than that person. He has the same cosmos, or chaos, inside him; he, just like me has his own kind of madness, his own view of the world.

Why did I choose farm workers as the characters for my film? Everyone today is making films about gangsters, spies or bankers but I think these ordinary people are a lot more interesting, or frightening, than any gangster and I wanted to show that there is still something alive in the soul of the people.

I was really trying to understand what goes on very deep in people's souls and to show that their true nature is a combination of tenderness and anger. This quality has always been there. I think Dostoevsky really confused everybody on this issue. He really mixed everything up. In Russia people have always been very immediate about making decisions. If there is something to be done, then let's go out and do it; if there is a war to fight, then let's go and do it and never doubt your actions. This is not because people are stupid but is the nature of life and therefore is a strong and recurring quality in the characters in my film.

RP: The film has a dark, almost fairy tale quality about it, and a hint about what the future may bring.

PL: I think I've really hit a nerve with this film. Even in Russia today there are people who stupidly believe that everything has been worked out. They forget that the people are still very much alive and have not yet had their say. Of course there are those in charge who divide everyone into categories and work it all out: you be the president, I'll be the prime minister or a banker, and you can own the TV stations. But aside from those who decide these things there are a whole lot of other people who are silent for the moment and can declare at any moment, "We don't care what you have decided". This element, although underneath the surface, is very much present in Russia and I have tried to remind people of this.

It is a strange thing but there is a film director—Stanislav Govorukhin—who is a member of parliament with the Communist Old Guard who has just released a new film. The film is about a worker's daughter who has been raped and the worker goes off to kill the son of a banker who did it. It's done all very naturalistically and so doesn't really engage anyone. My film disturbs people because it deals with something deeper, more unconscious. For someone to pick up a gun and kill a banker

is not unusual in Russia but for simple farm workers to go out and find the people who sold the land out from underneath them is unsettling. There is a strange determination and strength about them.

There are few films made in Russia today. Because of this they are all screened on television. My film has not been shown. This seems to be an admission that I've touched a nerve somewhere and indicates that I must have succeeded in some way.



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