12th Cottbus Festival of East European Cinema

Part 2: Two ways of depicting war

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This is the second and final article on the recent 12th Cottbus Festival of East European Cinema.

The Cuckoo, directed by Alexander Rogozhkin; *War*, directed by Aleksei Balabanov

The Cuckoo by Alexander Rogozhkin, dealing with the final days of the Second World War, was certainly one of the highlights of the Cottbus film festival. *War* by Aleksei Balabanov, on the other hand, was an appalling piece of propaganda for the current Putin-led war in Chechnya.

The Cuckoo is set in September 1944, a few days before Finland signed a peace treaty with the Soviet Union. Prior to the treaty Finland was allied with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union. The opening scene gives an impression of the realities of war on the precarious Russian-Finnish border. Wille is a young Finnish student, commandeered into the war and operating on the front line against the Soviet troops as a sniper. Regarded as ideologically suspect by his German allies, Wille is chained to a rock and left with a rifle to fend off Soviet soldiers. The latter named such snipers caught between the fronts "cuckoos."

Before leaving him chained up, the Germans ask Wille if he will try to shoot them in the back when they leave. "I would never do such a thing," says Wille. "They all say that," replies one of the soldiers. As the handful of troops scuttle off as quickly as they can, Wille assembles his rifle to try and pot them off.

Through persistence and ingenuity Wille is able to free himself from his captivity and then finds shelter with Anni, a young, sturdy and independent Lapp peasant. Anni lives alone on the shore and struggles to make a living at fishing. Shortly after Wille's arrival a third man joins the pair—Ivan, a Soviet captain, who is also a victim of the machinations of his own side. Ivan had been arrested by political officers in his unit on suspicion of "anti-Soviet" sympathies. The sole survivor of a German bombing of the jeep conveying him to prison, a wounded Ivan joins Wille and Anni to establish a small island of quasi-sanity amidst the furore and confusion of war.

Initially, the prospects for the trio are far from promising. Relations between the three are complicated by the jealousy between Wille and Ivan for the favours of Anni. Communication is made almost impossible by the fact that all three speak different languages and can barely understand a word the others say. The final and most fatal hindrance is Ivan's conviction that Wille is a full-blooded Nazi whom he is obliged to eliminate. In fact, Wille was conscripted into the Finnish army, wishes nothing more than to return to his studies and despises both the war and his German "allies" who left him to die.

In the course of their struggle to recover from injuries, overcome prejudices and tragedy, the trio slowly develop a common bond. In a series of warmly humorous and poignant scenes the film gradually fleshes out the characters of the trio who, despite different nationalities, backgrounds and languages, fervently share the desire to put the war behind and return to some sort of normal lives.

The contrast between the profoundly humanitarian themes taken up in *The Cuckoo* and the celebration of bloodlust in *War* could hardly be greater. Director Aleksei Balabanov is one of Russia's most prominent filmmakers and made the films *Brother* and *Brother 2*, which won large domestic audiences. I dealt with the Great Russian chauvinism which runs through *Brother 2 in* my review of the film at the 10th Cottbus Film Festival. After his fanciful treatment of Russian-American relations in *Brother 2*, Balabanov then declared his desire to make a realistic film.

In fact, *War* is about as realistic as Sylvester Stallone's

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Rambo 3. Instead of the American superhero taking on all odds and employing his high-tech weaponry and US marine survival skills, we now have Russian sergeant Ivan Yermakov, armed to the teeth, valiantly taking on the Chechen "terrorists" to rescue a harmless, naked female Western prisoner held by the rebels in a pit.

If the spectator was in any doubt as to the political stance of the film, the opening scene makes clear that the work is nothing more than a piece of Kremlin-inspired propaganda for the brutal war being carried out by the Putin administration against the Chechen people. The film begins with a jeep pulling up at a small fortress. A group of Chechen rebel fighters leap out and immediately begin in gory detail to slit the throats of their Russian captives.

In fact, Balabonov's version of realism is to show vicious and bloody house-to-house fighting with shaky hand-held cameras following the action. The fighting includes the inevitable execution of innocents, "collateral damage," which in the eyes of the filmmaker is the unfortunate, but inevitable, cost of such a war. In reality, the range of military on show—including flypasts by Russian jets and attack helicopters—points less to the low-budget realism of *Dogma* and more to a film carried out with the agreement and tactical support of the Russian High Command.

The plot of the film is absurd, something which will no doubt not prevent the film from serving as a quasi-official manual for Russian tactical war operations. After all, Yermakov reminds his English ally, who he is seeking to instruct in the art of killing: "In war you must survive and in order to survive you must kill." Even in the scenes shot away from the battlefield, the message of the film (echoing *Brother 2*) is the necessity of Russians to break with any namby-pamby, pacifist ideas and accept that the future belongs to the nation with the fiercest warriors.

Returning home, the young Yermakov visits his father in hospital. Yermakov's father has a last message for his son before he dies: "Life is boring, I am glad you went to war, it has made a man of you." The film ends confusedly with one character vaguely calling for reforms on the part of Putin. Based on the content of the film as a whole it is hard to believe that this demand has any sort of progressive content.

To dwell at length on the deficiencies of such a film is not especially productive. But it is worth looking a little more closely at the credo and ideas of Balabanov, who shares them with a social layer, including intellectuals and artists, openly professing their allegiance to Russian chauvinist or even quasi-fascist ideas. (In *Brother 2* the hero Danila buy guns from the armoury of a character called Fascist, with whom he has convivial relations and whose shop is plastered with swastikas.)

On the Russian web site advertising material for his film *Brother 2*, Balabanov takes the opportunity to criticise "political correctness" in the US and comments, "There are a lot of drug dealers amongst the blacks, they are on social security, they do not want to work." Balabanov's standpoint is taken up by his favourite actor, Sergei Bodrov, who starred in *Brother* and *Brother 2* and also plays a central character (Captain Medvedev) in *War*. Bodrov remarks: "The negro problem [sic] is a taboo subject which it is not acceptable to speak out loud about. These days, black people have a huge advantage when looking for a job; if a black person and a white person go for a job at the same time, the black person will always get it. The employer is simply too afraid of being accused of racism." (These quotations are to be found in a critical review of *Brother 2* by Andrew James Horton.)

It is disturbing to hear such racist remarks from Bodrov, who died recently in a tragic accident in the course of shooting his latest film, and played the central character in perhaps the best Russian film to be made about the Chechen war, *The Prisoner of the Mountains* (1996). The film is a reworking of Leo Tolstoy's short story *Prisoner of the Caucasus*, and takes a critical stance on the Russian war in Chechnya.

It is not necessary to speculate on Bodrov's ideological development since *The Prisoner of the Mountains* to recognise that the racist nostrums he shares with Balabonov, together with the latter's glorification of the warrior-ethic, echo the egoism of a layer in Russian society who have got rich quick by ruthless methods, and are prepared to use any and all means to defend their status. While Russian and East European filmmakers are still struggling to find their own voice, Balabonov's *War* makes clear that there are influential forces at work whose own idea of film culture boils down to the cultivation of extreme nationalism and militarism.

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