Film festivals in Cottbus and Neubrandenburg

Realism and nostalgia

Part 1—Documentary films

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The western European and North American media, for obvious reasons, hardly ever treat current conditions in eastern Europe. Thus, film festivals featuring east European film offer a rare opportunity to assess social, ideological and artistic trends in many of the former Soviet bloc countries.

Following the collapse of the USSR and Stalinist bloc countries one and a half decades ago, a profound disorientation gripped many east European filmmakers. The transition of a whole layer of former Stalinist bureaucrats into avid supporters of the free-market economy created the ideological climate in which broad social strata, in particular certain artistic circles, initially embraced capitalism in a largely uncritical manner. US filmmaking was regarded by a host of young artists as a role model for eastern European filmmaking.

Unable to match the budgets for the type of films made by Steven Spielberg, the early 1990s saw the emergence of a number of embarrassing attempts by east European filmmakers to ape the vicious cynicism of US filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino or the introspective moroseness of Woody Allen. It is certainly not the case that the social base for misanthropic Tarantino-type movies has disappeared—as was evident in the film shown in Cottbus, *Dead Man's Bluff*, made by Aleksei Balabanov, director of the *Brother I* and *Brother 2* films.

Nevertheless, any euphoria over the supposed social and cultural advantages of a free-market system have largely dissipated in favour of a much more sober approach towards current conditions, and this year's festivals in Cottbus and Neubrandenburg allowed a glimpse into social relations and problems in a number of eastern European countries.

At the same time, a basic weakness remains common to the work of eastern filmmakers and those in the West who are intervening in eastern Europe to find material for their work. Fundamental historical experiences, in particular the legacy of decades of Stalinist domination of society and the arts in eastern Europe, have not been worked through and understood.

Confronted with the all-too-evident social disintegration taking place throughout Europe today, a number of filmmakers, as we shall see, react by casting a hazy and nostalgic look back at the postwar past and end up, wittingly or unwittingly, rehabilitating aspects of the Stalinist system.

This first article looks at some of the most interesting documentary films on show at Cottbus and Neubrandenburg. A further article will deal with feature films on view at the two festivals.

The focus of the Czech documentary, *Source*, is the oilfields of Azerbaijan. During the course of the film, we meet impoverished and broken "oilmen" and communities embittered by the land grabs that facilitate oil pipeline construction. We also bear witness to the corporate propaganda peddled by the British oil giant British Petroleum (BP), as well as the ineptitude, corruption and greed of the Azerbaijan authorities.

The film opens with shots of the environmental devastation that prevails in the Baku oilfields and then switches to an interview with the president of the Socar company, which runs the Baku oil wells on behalf of foreign multinationals. He boasts of his decades of work in the oil industry. Things and times have changed, he says. "In the days of the socialistic system you had to talk with workers and women." He is obviously relieved that under today's conditions, he is spared this necessity.

The film then switches to interviews with an independent union dissident and oil workers. One oil worker reports that, until losing his job, he was earning just $50 a month working in the appalling, polluted conditions that prevail throughout the oilfields. He shows a heap of rags to the camera. It is the official uniform he received when he started work in the oilfields. "This is the oilman's uniform," he says, "and the pockets are empty."

With $50 a month, the oil workers at least have an income. According to the union activist, 70 percent of all Azerbaijanis live under the poverty line. BP, with the help of funding from the World Bank and the European Development Fund, is the major force behind the world's biggest construction project, a 1,000-mile pipeline running from the Caspian Sea at Baku through Georgia to the Turkish port of Ceyhan.

Glossy advertisements shown on Western television emphasise BP's concern for the environment and willingness to invest in the region's infrastructure. The *Source* filmmakers interview the leading manager for British Petroleum in the region, David Woodward, who then reels off the three *real* criteria that drive the oil industry—the amount of oil produced, the costs of production and the profit that emerges at the end.

As the documentary makes clear, the results of BP intervention in Azerbaijan are an environmental catastrophe, the propping up of an utterly corrupt family dynasty at the head of the state and increasing corruption and social divisions. Azerbaijan, which ranks 125th in terms of corruption practices in a table totalling 133 countries, is ruled by Ilham Aliev, who replaced his father as state president in a rigged poll in 2003. In elections at the start of this month, Aliev junior was confirmed in power by a vote that was again regarded by many observers as thoroughly undemocratic. During the past week, demonstrators protesting the elections were clubbed down by police on the streets of Baku.

David Woodward offers the *Source* filmmakers access to BP film archives for footage of the pipeline construction. Well-made Technicolour film is devoted to anodyne footage of large cranes levering sections of oil pipelines into place. The BP film completely ignores the many villagers and poor farmers who have been physically evicted from their land by police to make way for the pipeline and left without any adequate compensation. At one point in *Source*, we see local police intimidating the film crew itself and seeking to confiscate their equipment as they try to interview victims of the pipeline.

The union activist places her hopes for social change in the sort of

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"orange"-type revolution that took place in Ukraine a year ago. In fact, the Ukrainian "orange revolution" was substantially backed by American organisations such as Freedom House and the National Endowment for Democracy. The domination of the Azerbaijani economy by the Western company BP indicates that the American State Department has less interest in "regime change" in this impoverished but oil-rich state.

Just 70 miles from the Baku-Tiblisi-Ceyhan pipeline across the Caucasus is the war-ravaged province of Chechnya where phoney elections under Russian domination have just taken place. *Dear Muslim*, a film directed by Kerstin Nickig, is one of a rare handful of documentaries that allows ordinary Chechens to describe their lives under Russian occupation. Two other films dealing with Chechnya, *Weiße Raben* (*White Raven*) and *Coca*, are currently on release in European cinemas, but *Dear Muslim* is the only film to show substantial footage of the war from the Chechen side.

The film alternates between the diary drawn up by a Chechen woman, Sacita Chumaidowa, for her young son Muslim, and interviews with Sacita herself as well as her companion the journalist Said-Selim Abumuslimov, together with footage of the carnage and devastation taking place in Chechnya.

Persecuted by the Russian occupation troops, Sacita and Said-Selim have fled to Poland, where they are being held at a holding camp until Polish authorities have labouriously checked their status. After months of detention, the couple and their child hope to stay in the country as political refugees. According to Polish law, refugees awaiting permission to officially stay in the country are liable to a monthly allowance of just 40 zloty (9 euros).

Sacita met the journalist Said-Selim in 1996 when the latter filmed the bombing raids carried out by Russian fighter planes on the nondescript Chechen village where Sacita lived. We observe Sacita emerging from the ruins of a bombed house in August 1996. She has survived the raid and reports that her brother is also well. Later that same day, a second Russian bombing raid kills her brother, a cousin and all of their neighbours.

Film footage shows the devastation left behind by the raids—villagers severely injured by the bombs, an empty suit of clothes formerly worn by a village inhabitant whose body was irradiated by the force of the bomb blast. On that day, Sacita joined Said-Selim in his coverage of the war. As a result, she and her family increasingly became the targets for Russian repression. A young, alert and lively woman in the footage we see from 1996, Sacita's hair has now turned white. She reels off the remaining members of her family who are dead or missing.

Said-Salim explains that the Russian aggression against Chechnya has been going on since 1994. Figures of Chechen casualties in the war vary between 70,000 and 200,000, and half a million Chechens have been forced to flee the country. Sacita now knows only bitterness and hatred for the Russian occupying forces. Said-Salim holds out vain hopes of a peaceful solution through the intervention of peacekeeping soldiers.

The first Chechen war of 1994 was carried out on the basis of "restoring constitutional rights," the second on the basis of the "war against terror." Chechen rebels conduct their struggle on the basis of a backward and unviable nationalism, and have resorted to their own violent attacks on Russian civilians. But as *Dear Muslim* makes clear, the primary source of terror in the Caucasus is the vicious war of occupation being undertaken by President Vladimir Putin's Kremlin, with the open or tacit support of the US and European governments.

Polish film

Films from Poland were amongst the weakest at the Cottbus festival and demonstrated some of the problems confronting younger filmmakers attempting to develop their own ideological and artistic independence. One presumes that a large part of the annual budget for the Polish film industry was taken up by the Italian-Canadian-French-German-Polish co-production *A Man Who Became Pope*, which glorifies—perhaps the word beatifies is better—the life of the recently deceased Karol Wojtyla.

Just as it remains the case that no genuine consensus has been established over the postwar heritage and consequences of Stalinism—certainly not reflected in east European film—the same applies to the role of the trade union movement Solidarity, which emerged in August 1980 as a genuine popular uprising against the country's Stalinist leadership. Following the collapse of the Polish Stalinist hierarchy at the end of the 1980s, the Solidarity movement then emerged as an influential force in national politics and played a leading role in the introduction of the free-market system—in so doing, it largely discredited itself.

In 1997, the main organisation to emerge from Solidarity, Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS), won the national elections with 33 percent of the vote. Four years later, as a consequence of its pro-market policies, the AWS won just 5.6 percent of the vote and subsequently announced its dissolution. The abrupt political decline of Solidarity as a political force is matched by the unpopularity of its main figurehead, former shipyard worker Lech Walesa. Having filled the post of Polish president between 1990 and 1995, he received less than 1 percent of the vote when he stood as candidate for the same post in 2000.

Twenty-five years after its foundation, the decision was made to make a film about the Solidarity movement. Unable to arrive at any agreement on the history and significance of the Solidarity movement, 13 of Poland's most prominent film directors were given a free hand to say what they want. The result, *Solidarity, Solidarity*—a tableau of 13 short pieces, some documentary, some feature—is an uneven and disingenuous compromise from beginning to end.

The opening short film by director Juliusz Machulski sets the scene. A film producer has called his two best co-workers to his office to relate that they have the job of making a short film on the Solidarity movement. Both co-workers, a man and a woman experienced in advertising, lack any enthusiasm for the project. Solidarity is irrelevant to their lives, they argue; they cannot think of anything to say—"What has Solidarity done for them?"

The film producer is adamant: this is a prestige project, we have to be in on it. The squabbling continues until a stranger knocks on the door. The door is opened to reveal a fast-food delivery boy. Both advertising executives give a sigh of relief. They are agreed on what benefits have emerged from the Solidarity movement—personally delivered sushi!

Most of the 13 short films in *Solidarity, Solidarity* are superficial treatments of the Solidarity movement relying heavily on archive film. No attempt is made to examine the political role played by Solidarity after the collapse of Stalinism. The weakest and laziest contributions are from Poland's two most prominent directors. Krzysztof Zanussi explains the embarrassments that arose when he used actors dressed as Soviet troops in street scenes shot for a film (*From the Faraway Country* [1983], another bio-pic dedicated to Karol Wojtyla), as speculation was rife about a possible Soviet invasion of Poland.

Andrej Wadja, who came to prominence in the Western film world for his film (*The Iron Man*, 1981) about the emergence of the Solidarity movement, restricts himself to a thoroughly complacent and uncritical chat on cosy cinema seats with his old buddy Walesa and the two main actors who featured in *The Iron Man*.

One contribution to *Solidarity, Solidarity* by director Jacek Bromski stands out for its honesty. The main character in the film, the elderly Roman, goes to a bank to ask for a loan. Sitting across from him in the bank director's chair is a former leading member of the Polish Communist Party who had condemned Roman to jail in the 1980s as a

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dissident. No hard feelings, the bank director hopes, as he chats casually to Roman. The bank manager goes on to ruminate on the irony of someone like himself, who had so often in the past spoken out against the evils of capitalism but was now a major beneficiary and advocate of the system he once denounced. The bank manager bears no grudges. Roman's application for a loan is turned down strictly on the basis of sound free-market principles.

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