Donbass

Director: Sergei Loznitsa
Country: Ukraine
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A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian:*

"What was that flying circus all about?" says one of the many dead-eyed, cynical functionaries in Sergei Loznitsa's macabre new social-realist portmanteau movie about the civil war in eastern Ukraine; the film is set in the Donbass region. The echo of Monty Python is maybe deliberate. This man had just received a deputation from a devotional group wishing for cash for the public veneration of a certain icon, part of the religious nationalism that is fuelling the split between pro-Russian Putinites and independent Ukrainians whose sympathies are with Europe and the west. It is a vicious conflict in a place where there are still memories of the second world war, tribal loyalties concerning the Russia that saved Ukraine from Nazi Germany and fascism – but also, on the other side, the Stalinist terror-famine visited on Ukraine before the war.

The extraordinarily prolific Loznitsa (whose previous picture A Gentle Creature was in Cannes only last year) has created a freakish kaleidoscope of bizarre scenes and nightmarish vignettes. Here is the horror, the violence, the bureaucracy and the Orwellian propagation of fake news and an eternal war hysteria to nourish patriotism. The scenes are fragments from an explosion of fear. This is the world of Novorussia, loyal to the motherland.

Donbass starts with what looks like actors being made up, grumbling and chatting, ready for an appearance in a film. When they are ready, the actors are led across what looks like a very realistic urban war zone in an action movie – but actually they are bit-part players in a fraudulent TV news broadcast, playing shell-shocked civilians whose job is to denounce the outrages perpetrated by the "f ascist" traitors. And at the end of this, these extras will themselves need to be got rid of. Elsewhere, at a local council meeting, a minor official has a bucket of shit poured over his head by a woman complaining about the way she has been libelled in a newspaper report. A free press, or an inconvenient and unpatriotic press that is insufficiently enthusiastic about the war, can be attacked with impunity – and so can those hapless politicians who appear to defend it.

A blandly sycophantic state official takes careworn hospital workers on a tour of a crumbling and chaotic medical facility, boasting of how it has been cleaned up and a certain corrupt chief doctor shamed and fired, but a later scene reveals him to be in cahoots with another official. We see a grim underground shelter for civilians seeking refuge from the shelling in the city. A German journalist attempting to interview the various soldiers is fiercely attacked for his links to the great fascist enemy: "If you aren't a fascist. then your grandfather was!" barks one. At a roadblock, a woman officer orders all the civilians off the bus and harangues them for being supposed pro-fascist traitors; evidently the toxic masculinity of war extends everywhere. A hapless businessman is shown not quite comprehending that his car is being requisitioned by the army. In another scene, someone is subject to the traditional, brutal Russian military punishment of running the gauntlet, made to stumble past a line of soldiers who beat him with sticks, as in Tolstoy's story After the Ball.

Most horribly, there is a Nazi-style "placard shaming" scene in which a supposed traitor, accused of being part of a foreign-backed "extermination squad", has a sign revealing this Sellotaped to his chest and is tied to a lamppost where passersby are encouraged to jeer, spit, and throw things at him, pose for sadistic selfies with him, and finally beat him to death. It is an almost unwatchably grisly sequence, reprised in a later grotesque scene when a soldier gets married and his rowdy comrades show up at the reception and show him the smartphone video of this man being tortured.

Some of Loznitsa's grotesquery doesn't quite work, or works in ways that only make you to want to know more, to sympathise more, about the human victims involved. But there is an incredible kind of cold energy and steely control in the way all this has been orchestrated. After the film had finished, I realised what it reminded me of: Emir Kusturica's 1995 film Underground. Loznitsa's icy, non-musical film is the opposite side of the coin to Kusturica's roistering vision of the chaotic war in former Yugoslavia. Donbass is a flawed, but vivid achievement.

From: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/10/donbass-review-cannes-2018-sergei-loznitsa

***"The director's cut" – an article from* The Economist:**

THE OPENING scene of "Donbass", the latest feature film by Sergei Loznitsa, a hotch-potch group of extras gather in a makeup trailer. The shaky footage follows them as they are escorted to the site of a staged mortar attack in Russian-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine (see picture). There, for the benefit of a separatist news crew, they bemoan the depredations of the Ukrainian army. In the film, the explosion is a stunt, but the damage is genuine—much like the real-life conflict.

With its vertiginous spiral of fakery, the invented but plausible scene captures the essence of Russia's hybrid onslaught against Ukraine. After the revolution of 2013-14 Kremlin-controlled television stations spewed poisonous lies into the disaffected, Russian-speaking Donbass; next, militants and army units rolled in to "defend" the region from phantom Ukrainian fascists. Like a mirror, Mr Loznitsa's film reflects and inverts that process, using fiction to expose the wounds inflicted by the annihilation of truth. Not surprisingly, "Donbass" has been banned in Russia.

The boundary between reality and lies, fiction and history, is one of the world's most contested borders. It runs squarely through the propaganda-warped badlands of eastern Ukraine—and through Mr Loznitsa's powerful oeuvre. In both his feature films and documentaries, his aim is the opposite of the propagandists': to present the essential truth of what happened, and—an even harder task—diligently to make clear what did not happen, too.

Often his uncompromising films lack linear narratives, even protagonists. He is not interested in heroes, but in the crowd; in the audience on the square, not the politicians on the stage. In his documentaries, his impersonal camera does not probe inner lives but simply records: the space, the movements, the soundscape (snatches of pop and folk songs, anthems, tolling bells), the flow of time and ultimately of history. There is no voiceover or catharsis. Instead, Mr Loznitsa allows the absurdity and tragedy of life to speak for themselves. "He is not a hunter," says Mikhail Iampolski, a critic and historian of Russian culture at New York University. "He is a trap, patiently waiting for whatever gets caught in it."

The camera, for Mr Loznitsa, is more than a piece of kit—it is a way of seeing. "When we look in front of us, there are things we don't see," but which can become visible afterwards, he says. The result may be "something that I could never have imagined, let alone invented". He cites an aphorism of Alfred Hitchcock's: "In feature films, the director is God. In documentaries, God is the director."

Now 52, Mr Loznitsa was born in Soviet Belarus and brought up in Ukraine. He learned his craft in Russia and now lives in Germany. Like many others, his life has been shaped by the fracturing of the Soviet Union and the Russian empire before it; his work chronicles the political—and moral—disintegrations that followed. His subjects have included the failed coup of 1991 that preceded the Soviet collapse ("The Event", 2015) and Ukraine's revolution ("Maidan", 2014). Today's world, he says, provides "no firm ground under your feet". Just as fact and fiction have bled together, it can seem that "there is no good or bad."

This moral predicament is captured in a scene in "Donbass" in which thugs tie a Ukrainian soldier to a telegraph pole and entice the crowd to lynch him. "I wanted to show the mechanism for working people into a state of ecstasy," Mr Loznitsa says. The scene reconstructs a real video posted on YouTube, and is more effective for the absence of a narratorial voice. He could never film such an event directly, Mr Loznitsa avers: not only would that "make you an accomplice", the presence of a camera would "draw in the audience to participate". Often he conveys a sense that he is telling one story among many. Elsewhere in "Donbass", for example, a businessman whom the militia are extorting is transferred to a holding room—where he finds a legion of other detainees pleading for help on their phones. The sequence, like many in Mr Loznitsa's films, seems at once hyperreal and mythic.

The interplay between audience and spectacle, and the use of news footage to validate lies, are at the heart of "The Trial", which he made just after "Donbass". One is a feature, the other is shaped entirely from archive material, but in their preoccupations, the films are twins. "The Trial" reconstructs a tribunal that took place in Moscow in 1930. A group of Soviet engineers and economists were accused of forming the "Industrial Party", which in collusion with France had supposedly plotted against the Bolshevik government.

In reality, like the Ukrainian "fascists", the Industrial Party never existed; the entire case was fabricated. The trial was held—or performed—not in a court but in the House of the Unions, a grand hall used for state ceremonies, illuminated for the cameras and complete with a 1,000-strong audience. "The Trial" intercuts passages from the resulting propaganda film with shots of crowds demanding the death of the culprits. In this instance, says Mr Loznitsa, "Stalin was the real director of the show. I merely helped make it into a film."

Strikingly, none of the accused—the main actors in the drama—protested or tried to clear their names; instead they helpfully implicated themselves in fantastical crimes. Some were rewarded for their convincing performances. Leonid Ramzin, a professor of engineering, was cast as a leader of the imaginary conspiracy, but his death sentence was commuted to ten years in prison. He was amnestied in 1936 and later showered with awards. Meanwhile, the prosecutor, Nikolai Krylenko, was himself arrested in 1937 during the Great Terror. He falsely confessed, too—and was executed soon afterwards. By then, the era of co-productions with Stalin's prisoners was over.

Russia and separatist Ukraine are not the Soviet Union, but justice is still suborned to theatre, and facts to interests. Mr Iampolski argues that in this nihilistic climate, "inscription"—the act of committing things to paper or the screen—becomes the main form of legitimacy. In this way propaganda, including Russia's demonisation of Ukraine, makes falsehoods credible. Yet even (or especially) now, scrupulous film-makers can expose lies instead of spreading them, as Mr Loznitsa shows.

At the end of "Donbass" the grumbling extras prepare for another stunt. A soldier enters the trailer and ruthlessly shoots them all dead. A TV crew soon arrives to report on this latest confected-but-real atrocity. Mr Loznitsa's camera dispassionately surveys the scene from above.

From: https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2019/07/25/a-bold-ukrainian-film-maker-charts-the-line-between-fiction-and-truth