

RUSSIAN DOCUMENTARY FILM: DIY* OR DIE TRYING

Essay by Evgeniia Marchenko

By talking about different realities of life, documentary films can not only hold up a mirror but serve cultural self-discovery - especially in a country with Russia's geographical expansion and ethnic diversity. To achieve this, documentaries first need one thing: the audience. Festival curator and filmmaker Evgeniia Marchenko on Russian spectators, the do-it-yourself movement in current Russian documentary film making and a visionary film school.

You will most likely not see documentary films on Russian television. Except for a tiny chance that Kultura TV channel might show something late at night, as if by mistake. But overall, that hardly ever happens. Film distribution in cinemas is even less likely than television broadcasting. The only platform that can bring a documentary film to the Russian audience is a film festival. This means, however, that most Russians do not know what documentary film is. Never seen it. And there is practically no demand for it. Not even an industry that could invest and make money exists. It should be noted that we are talking about auteur documentary cinema here, not about science, fashion, politics and history television programmes or commercial reality shows of various kinds.

The Russian Ministry of Culture has a funding agenda for documentary films, of course. But they only approve 'patriotic' projects on historical and propaganda-based military themes with real enthusiasm. However, sometimes creative projects are also lucky enough to get approved. The budget is very small, but the directors often agree to give up their rights in exchange for the possibility of producing.

Although I am deliberately generalising, it is a fact that the general trend in documentary production, which hasn't changed in Russia in recent years, is to borrow any small home video camera or mobile phone from a friend, and go shoot. According to the motto: Take it or leave it. Nobody thinks about framing, the picture, sound, editing, copyright on music or everything else - they just make DIY films on their own.

Ten years ago, a private school for documentary films and theatre opened in Moscow: The Marina Razbezhkina and Mikhail Ugarov School of Documentary Film and Theatre. Founded by these two, the new institution took the difficulties of the time as its starting point and soon managed to implement interesting projects. The director of the film division, Marina Razbezhkina, formulated her method of filming as a "documentary film based on the direct cinema of the

60s". But even today her approach has remained relevant. Since the beginning, Marina has educated dozens of talented filmmakers, who have continued shooting after graduation. This has made the Razbezhkina and Ugarov School the most sought-after and popular film school in the country. It cannot be compared with any specialised educational institution or state film university, as it leaves all its competitors far behind.

While studying at Razbezhkina school, the directing students also act as cameramen. There are clear rules: Hidden cameras, tripods, zooms, music and voice-overs are banned. The basic idea is to keep the distance between camera and object as short as possible in order to bring the author closer to the protagonist. As close as the protagonist will allow, of course. In any case the director should be a psychologist, too. This mainly results in film portraits of people



Russian direct cinema: WHITE MAMA by Zosya Rodkevich and Evgeniia Ostanina

and families in dire straits or strange situations, the same old social cinema that has always existed. But here it is not about “who to film”, but “how to film”. Starting from the specially cultivated realism, we have almost come to voyeurism in the literal sense of the word. Thus, a new film language was created, almost without filters, everything very up-close. In some cases, it becomes almost unbearable to watch and witness. But all in all, this film-truth (or Kinopravda to use Dziga Vertov’s term) has breathed such youth and freedom into Russian cinema, that it has now become the main trend in documentary film production.

The gap between the television programmes and the new wave of young documentary filmmaking has widened incredibly. From time to time I hear about the demand for “good uplifting films”. People say they have enough bad news in their lives and want to see the promise of stability, beautiful fairy tales and expensive blockbusters on the screen instead. It seems that the majority in Russia has no empathy and desire for freedom as long as they’re safe and have enough to eat. This is the audience brought up by Soviet-Russian television. And in fact, I still do not see how the festival and the television viewers could be brought together. They practically behave like non-intersecting parallels.

But despite all difficulties, the young filmmakers, who are ready to shoot films for free and do what it takes to be able to document the lives of their characters as closely as possible, have managed to influence the older and accomplished documentary directors. Ambitious film festivals began to give preference to young and unprofessional but more lively films in their programmes, a development that affected many players.

As there is no independent television in Russia, documentary filmmaking cannot be separated from current events in the country at the moment. The fact that filmmakers have begun to get more acutely involved in politics is not at all surprising, but rather a natural and healthy process. In this way, a hybrid

between journalism and documentary film developed. To my mind, Alexander Rastorguev, probably one of the most talented and many-sided directors in current Russia, was the most active influence. He is one of the very few equally capable of making subtle classical films, experimenting on the verge of gaming and reality and creating high-quality journalism. Well, he was, because he is no more. Less than a year ago, Alexander Rastorguev, along with the journalist Orhan Jemal and the cameraman Kirill Radchenko, was shot dead in the Central African Republic while making a film about a Russian private military company.

Since Alexander’s death a counter-development is also taking place: A large number of films focus on protagonists who look deeply into themselves and talk about their inner problems instead of showing what is happening in the here and now. Several more schools have appeared, some of them with a completely different focus of attention and aesthetics. This cinema turns out to be deliberately slow, beautiful, poetic and atmospheric, revealing its essence between the edits. It is a cinema without particular time. The pace and logic of the story is radically different, not easily accessible for everyone. One must be able to let go of the stream of thought and remain slightly in zero

gravity in order to properly perceive such a film. A kind of way to escape from traumatic events for both the director and the viewer.

The emphasis is quietly shifting to a hybrid film, where reality is again mixed with fiction, and fiction does not appear as such. It is no longer clear what is true and what is false: everything is a bit playful. On the whole, the pendulum swinging from realism to surrealism and back is not a trend, but a never-ending process.

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Born in 1989 in Leningrad, Evgeniia Marchenko studied at St.Petersburg University of Culture and Arts. She works as a director and camera operator of documentary films. Her films have been invited to Russian and foreign film festivals and have received several awards. Since 2013 she works as a programme curator at IFF Message to Man (Saint-Petersburg). Since 2017 she is also a programme director at IFF Rudnik (Kazan).

*DIY: Short for ‘do it yourself’



The world through the eyes of a child: HOW BIG IS THE GALAXY by Ksenia Elyan - like Zosya Rodkevich graduate from the Marina Razbezhkina and Mikhail Ugarov School of Documentary Film and Theatre