

Documentary from No-man's Land

'Prisoner of the Caucasus' and *Document 1*

Doug Aubrey

It was the last place in the world you'd expect to get a chance to see a film like 'Prisoner of the Caucasus'. A profound and viscerally unnerving documentary about a country that many war correspondents have called the most dangerous place on the planet: Chechnya, a burnt out clump of blood and soil, where even the most seasoned of war hacks and thrill seeking bang-bang chasers still fear to tread.

And while the west engage in their on-going 'hi-tech' war on terror and our view of such events becomes increasingly sanitized (i.e. war with big bangs and no body count), here was a remarkable film about the fog of war that the trans-global media for the most part have largely forgotten about.

The venue for the screening? Sunday night at a cinema supermarket—the UGC—in the very heart of Glasgow.

The partisan and sycophantic followers of a Scots' movie star turned humanitarian saviour-cum film maker have recently departed, to indulge in post premier back-patting, leaving the venue close to empty.

So just how come the few of us that were left ended up sitting here of all places, waiting to watch an obscure film about an obscure place on the planet that many of the multiplex's users probably didn't even know existed?

Enter *Document 1*, Scotland's first ever (as far as I know) *Human Rights Documentary Film Festival*—an intense weekend dedicated to global human rights documentary.

A documentary festival has been talked about for a generation or more here in Scotland. Long overdue, such an initiative has variously over the years been scammed, shammed and even scunnered by people who should know better, many of whom are now part of the great and the good from the media/arts establishment.

Although flawed and over-programmed to the detriment of many great films, *Document 1* was a significant step in the right direction—if not necessarily the great leap forward needed for the reclaiming of the art form from mainstream fakery.

Document 1's organizers, Mona Rai and Paula Larkin, deserve much credit

for pulling off such a significant event, despite being funded as much by giro as by the generosity of the nation's cultural institutions (with the notable exception of a few sympathetic sponsors, including commercial ones such as the UGC).

The films programmed ranged from the life-changing and life-reaffirming to the total crap (video art in search of an audience outside a gallery is still video art even if shown in a proper cinema). From



Karin Berger *Ceija Stojka—Portrait of Romni*

the predictable (privileged kids from the 'observer class' making films about wire burners and busking junkies) to the truly awesome. Criticisms aside, *Document 1* still represented a positive attempt to create a programme that was inclusive rather than exclusive in its intent. Evidenced by everything from the highly imaginative animations of a generation of kids in Glasgow who are learning to live with and get along with their asylum seeking neighbours ('Going Global'), to the moving story of the lost victims of the Nazi holocaust ('Ceija Stojka', Karin Berger). A people who have largely been written out of the story by the Holocaust Industry: the trans-national Roma.

Other key themes explored included: human trafficking and the sex trade; mental health; globalization; the current wannabe chic for 'guerrilla production' (why is it that just about every US kid with a camcorder is now a guerrilla film maker!?!); and other assorted world-wise films from a global village, that is increasingly running out of space, not least of all to show such stuff.

Over-programming also meant that many discussions were either cut short or in some cases didn't take place at all. Although those that were given room were highly charged and articulate.

Witnessing the persecution of the Kurdish people in a programme of films dedicated to the memory of the murdered Firsat Dag (a member of the new community in Glasgow's Sighthill estate) and hearing the eye witness accounts of among others Peri Ibrahim, a former—and potentially again in the future—Peshmarga fighter who had quite literally just stepped off the plane from Northern Iraq, also reinforced the need for the documentary form to 'take you there' by any and all means necessary.

'Prisoner of the Caucasus' (Yury Khashchavatski) the festival's closing film (as much by accident as intent) did just that—to a conflict still being fought in 1st World War conditions at the start of the 21st Century. Watch it and you end up feeling

raw, exposed, sickened and angered that such atrocities were and still are happening in not just a forgotten corner of the old Soviet Union, but in countless other places around the planet. Conflicts which the mainstream media for the most part either ignore for reason of political expediency (supporting a policy of 'you fight your wars and we'll fight ours' on the part of the one great super power and what's left of the rest) or for the enfeebled reason that such events are not considered to be news worthy enough for their audience demograph.

Is 'Prisoner of the Caucasus' one of the best documentaries ever made? Probably.

Because in its depiction of the brutality of war, it also used black humour to convey the horror (something that wouldn't go amiss in the po-faced world of the 'right-on' Euro-doc)

Did it go too far in its graphic depiction of the atrocities committed and human jam that war leaves behind? Definitely; it needed to.

Come to think of it, is it even really a documentary at all, or something far more important—real art maybe?

The layered narrative format of 'Prisoner of the Caucasus', centred on readings from Tolstoy (himself a young soldier when Imperial Russia first started to fight the Tartars in the region) and the film maker Yuri Khashchevatsky's correspondence with a number of his friends—a generation of camera wielding media mercenaries who covered and in some cases still are covering the war in Chechnya, armed not with Kalashnikovs but with Sony Camcorders.

His use of their footage—material we all seldom see of the horrors and sheer boredom of war—at times cut or underscored with music and not without irony (the burnt remains of a Russian tank crew are shown in black and white because, as the narrator says, they are too gruesome in colour!) is an abject lesson in the realities of war and raises fundamental questions about how we either as film makers or viewers perceive war, whether it be in a Hollywood movie, the Hollywood influenced coverage from the current war in Iraq, or just about anything that calls itself serious that comes out of the USA.

The fact that the film itself managed to escape the censorship of the film maker's own country also bares witness to this.

Also underpinning both the gore and horror of the Chechen War is a journey being made by the film maker in the company of a Navy lieutenant returning what is simply referred to by the authorities and film maker as 'Cargo 200' to its homeland.

"There are 3 types of soldier—The resigned, the professional and the reckless."

Tolstoy



Metyn Yegyn
'F', 2001



Beth
Armstrong
*Welcome to
Dover*



Contrary to war being about winners and losers, 'Prisoner of the Caucasus' deals in the universal futility not just of war but also of war coverage, which for the most part (if you ever get a chance to watch uncut footage) is not about heroes and honour but about tears and 'Cargo 200'.

"What's the point of you being here...?"

Tolstoy referring to an old Caucasian saying.

Increasingly the role of war correspondent is seen as a glamorous one. The camera person (the observer) as some kind of dare-doing war hero, rather than, as should be the case, as just a grunt in the service of a propaganda machine, which increasingly has become a weapon of war. While the glamorous image of the freelance war junkie, leap-frogging the planet in search of his (and increasingly her) next fix of human misery is an increasingly common phenomena. And yet with digitization and the www making it easier for us to see more and ever more young and idealistic wannabes chasing the bang bang, we witness less of what they see of such events.

Perhaps one of the biggest questions that 'Prisoner of the Caucasus', and several other films in *Document 1*, answers is that if we don't get to see the reality of war as seen by these news

stringers etc. then just who does?

The references to Tolstoy in 'Prisoner of the Caucasus' also perhaps points at the much maligned significance of that old and not so trendy any more (lefty) notion of a historical context still being as important—if not more so—than ever before. Because, as the narrator of 'Prisoner of the Caucasus' tells us: "In a movie just like a book you can always see how it ends..."

