

Distortion and dishonesty: Ukrainian films at the Cottbus Film Festival

By Stefan Steinberg
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The Festival of East European Cinema in Cottbus, Germany (120 kilometres southeast of Berlin and a few miles from the Polish border) has been an annual event since 1991.

While a handful of films at this year's festival, held November 4-9, provided insight, albeit limited, into the problems of the region, a number of works presented a distorted and, in some cases, thoroughly dishonest presentation of conditions in the east.

Across Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the former Soviet Union, tens of millions face social ruin following 25 years of the restored capitalist free market. Unemployment is rampant and the social welfare systems that existed under the former Stalinist regimes have been smashed up. This process was already well advanced six years ago, but has accelerated since the financial crash of 2008. The result has been the rapid spread of poverty among young and old. The political structures across the region are dominated by corrupt elites drawn from the former Stalinist bureaucracies, combined with a layer of nouveau riche who have plundered state property and enriched themselves fantastically.

The rapid increase of social inequality across the region, a corresponding turn towards authoritarian forms of government and officially orchestrated campaigns of nationalism have been triggered and exacerbated by the policies of the European Union (EU), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and global banks, which demand unceasing rounds of austerity in order to fill the treasuries of the banks and the pockets of the super-rich.

Increasing disillusionment with official politics in Eastern Europe is expressed in record low turn-outs in one election after another. Political parties and slogans are regarded as interchangeable. Plutocrats have now decided that often the best way to defend and expand their business and financial interests is to finance their own political parties and run the government. The most prominent example is Ukraine, currently ruled by billionaire Petro Poroshenko, the "Chocolate King", who has the full backing of the EU.

Against such a background of explosive tensions, the organisers of the 24th Cottbus film festival decided to dedicate one of the event's central sections to what its programme describes as "homosexual life worlds".

There can be no doubt that gays and lesbians face considerable discrimination in many eastern European countries where the church and nationalist, homophobic groups play a significant role in political life. But the prioritisation of gay rights in the current situation sends a definite signal. In particular, it creates a platform for parties such as the Greens and various pseudo-left organisations working together with selected NGOs to elevate identity politics above social issues.

In large part, the middle class forces leading campaigns for gay

rights are indifferent to, or indeed hostile to, the economic and social needs of broad layers of the working population. That is certainly the case with the German Green Party, which has been very active in the advancement of a "gay and lesbian agenda" in Eastern Europe while advocating the EU- and IMF-dictated austerity programs for the very same countries.

In addition to a plethora of films dealing with identity politics, the Cottbus festival also featured a handful of disingenuous and dishonest films centred on developments in Ukraine.

The feature film *Once Upon a Time in Ukraine*, directed by Igor Parfenov, opens with a ten-minute sequence featuring the rape of two young girls by pro-Russian policemen in Crimea. One girl, Nina, survives her rape and flees to Kiev to escape her persecutors, while the second victim, her friend, is killed by her assailant. The episode sets the tone for the film as a whole. Russia is portrayed as the aggressor in Ukraine prepared to use all means to achieve its predatory ends.

The director interweaves the fictional plot of his film with real events on Maidan (Independence Square) in Kiev. In Cottbus, Parfenov (described in a short biography as a sportsman and environmentalist) declared he had long considered making a film about revolution. When protests broke out in Kiev at the end of last November in Ukraine, he wrote his script in a week, rustled together a crew and set off for Maidan. A number of scenes in his film are shot against the background of violent confrontations between protesters and the police and special forces defending the regime of the former pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich.

The director also crops up as a leading character in his film—as a veteran of the Afghan war. His character befriends and offers shelter to Nina and hands out copies of Leo Tolstoy's famous *Letter to A Non-Commissioned Officer* to members of the police and special units defending government buildings in central Kiev. In his letter, Tolstoy calls upon Russian troops not to shoot on their fellow countrymen.

In fact, Parfenov's film has nothing in common with Tolstoy's humanitarian plea. Rather, it provides a platform for pro-Western propaganda against Russia while glorifying Ukrainian nationalism. Parfenov's film character repeatedly greets his companions, including another Afghan war veteran, with the battle cry of Ukrainian nationalists: "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!"

The most dishonest feature of the film, however, is its omission of any reference to the role played by ultra-right forces such as the Svoboda and Right Sector parties, which were in the forefront of the Maidan demonstrations, particularly in the weeks leading to the ouster of Yanukovich. Also absent from the film is any mention of the many interventions by leading politicians from Germany, Poland, the US

and other countries, who actively incited the crowds on Maidan against Yanukovich and Russia.

Many of the deficits and omissions of *Once Upon a Time in Ukraine* are replicated in a second film shown at Cottbus, *Almanac #Babylon '13—“Chronicle of Civil Protest”*, which documents, in a one-sided fashion, the events on Maidan beginning in late November 2013. Made by a consortium of 12 young film-makers, the film features documentary footage of the start of the protests by students one year ago, which rapidly developed into violent confrontations with the state forces defending Yanukovich.

We see some demonstrators in December trying to tear down the traditional Christmas tree set up in the middle of Independence Square, while others advise the protesters of the folly of their action. Another scene deals with the aftermath of the toppling of the giant Lenin statue that dominated the square in front of the parliament. The film fails to explain that the pulling down of the statue was carried out by militants from the ultra-right Svoboda party.

Instead, *Almanac #Babylon '13* features an art student who declares that while he opposes the destruction of the statue, in his opinion it should be included as an exhibit in a museum dedicated to the crimes of communism.

Another interviewee, a young woman, declares that she had grown up in the city and had no problem with the presence of the Lenin statue in the middle of the city. A further scene uncritically features Poroshenko addressing the masses in the square, posing as a genuine alternative to the Yanukovich regime.

The interviews in *Almanac #Babylon '13*, and the film as a whole, point to some of the problems confronting filmmakers and broad layers of the population in Ukraine. Strata of the Ukrainian middle class and artists openly embrace anti-communism and are either completely uncritical of or even supportive of the nationalist and fascist ideologies and activities of Svoboda and the Right Sector.

At the same time, broad layers of the population that oppose such organisations remain confused and disoriented about the historic gains for the Ukrainian working class resulting from the October revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky.

A third work featuring four short features by young Ukrainian filmmakers provides a glimpse into the backward and deteriorating social conditions in the country, especially in the countryside. The film reveals the enormous strains placed on social and family relationships by the current situation and avoids the nationalist apologetics which are so striking in *Once Upon a Time In Ukraine* and *Almanac*. At the festival one of the filmmakers noted that conditions for movie-making in Ukraine had worsened since the election of Poroshenko, who halted the state subsidy system for cinema that existed under the Yanukovich government.

One of the more interesting films at the Cottbus festival was *The Candidate*, directed by Jonáš Karásek, which takes a scathing look at the political system in Slovakia. The main character in the film is the head of an advertising agency given the job of making sure that an unknown candidate secures the post of national president in elections due in two months' time. Shadowy political “fixers” are behind the request and promise the agency unlimited funds for its campaign.

The ad agency is modelled on its Western counterparts. The wall in front of which agency chief Adam Lambert (Marek Majeský) gives his team-talks is plastered with national currencies from across the globe. His staff is recruited from major international companies and banks.

Lambert himself is under observation from a security team hired by

forces whose identity remains unknown until the end of the film. Having found the right pitch to promote the unknown candidate against his corrupt rival, Lambert decides that victory in a second-round vote is not enough. He wants his candidate to win an outright majority in the first round. To that end, Lambert organises an assassination attempt on his own candidate on the eve of the vote to secure the necessary public sympathy factor and tip the balance.

Lambert's candidate is elected, but is in fact assassinated on the day of the vote. Lambert's next task is to conceal the death of his candidate from the media and the public until the result of the vote is announced. We learn that the candidate's period in office was the shortest of any president in Slovakian history. One of the characters in the film, evidently speaking on behalf of the Slovak “Everyman”, laconically comments: “Better a dead president than a ‘lesser evil’”. *The Candidate* clearly draws on the recent political history of Slovakia. Wikipedia lists no less than eight major political scandals, involving vote-rigging, collusion of intelligence forces with politicians, corruption, criminal dealings by politicians, etc., which have taken place in Slovakia since 1993.

The current premier Robert Fico (a one-time member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) came to power in 2012 in the wake of the so-called Gorilla scandal, named after a Slovak Secret Service wiretap that revealed huge levels of corruption on the part of the country's business and political elite. It should be noted that the “Social Democrat” Fico formerly governed the country between 2006 and 2010 in an alliance with the far-right, xenophobic Slovak National Party. *The Candidate* fails to identify any progressive force that could oppose the corrupt and criminal relationships which dominate Slovak politics. The film tends to treat ordinary Slovaks as willing fodder for the messages of the advertising agencies. Nevertheless, the film, which notched up record audiences in Slovakia in 2013, has obviously touched a public nerve. And the issues it raises are omnipresent throughout Eastern Europe.

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