SLOVO

Film review

Bad Roads

Natalka Vorozhbyt, 2020

Screenwriter(s): Natalka Vorozhbyt

Place: Ukraine

Studios: Kristi Film

Length: 105 minutes

Language: Ukrainian, Russian

Serhii Tereshchenko, Columbia University

Natalka Vorozhbyt's *Bad Roads* is a film about Donetsk, the largest city in Eastern Ukraine, approximately six years after its occupation. It can metaphorically be described as a post-apocalyptic zombie film, reminiscent of Mark Forster's *World War Z,*[1] but it would be too cynical to put it this way. This work provides an immersive experience of modern warfare, focusing on the period between 2015 and 2022 in Ukraine, and most likely, somewhere else too. Any territory can be subsumed by such warfare, and its main component, as the film suggests, is not the 'pyrotechnics', like the missiles flying into residential areas, but the misinformation that makes local populations support the invasion. The film does not show how this happened, but it shows a variety of responses to this hazardous and unlucky situation of being bombed and surrounded by brainwashed relatives, neighbours, and friends. In essence, this film appeals to anyone who enjoys escape movies, specifically escaping from the dirty mouths of bigotry and identity framing, like Jordan Peele's *Get Out*.[2]

The director Natalka Vorozhbyt comes from the theatre and is experienced in film, television series, and TV novella formats. Her work on the film was the continuation of her work on a biopic, which was an attempt to tell about Donetsk airport, the months of fighting for it, and its destruction by the Russians: 'I collected the interviews on which the film is based while working on *Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die*.' Her works in general appear to elicit realism as steps toward reality, but a critical viewer may eventually realise that realism keeps turning into its own

[1] *World War Z,* dir. by Mark Forster (Paramount Pictures, 2013).
[2] *Get Out*, dir. by Jordan Peele (Universal Pictures, 2017).

universe that has its own internal meanings. The feature that is central to the film is the social game of a sadist and a submissive person, and how they connect in these situations. The director studied this theme in her roles as a journalist, a screenwriter, a play director, and then a TV scriptwriter for one project that got reshaped so many times, and now took the form of a film. Initially, it was meant to be a play about standing up to injustice in the very nature of a power game between a victim and a perpetrator, but the film has put a twist on the project.

There are linguistic details that make this film difficult to subtitle. The language is a deception, and understanding it is a challenge of survival. There is an excessive amount of context and indiscreet factors that need to be taken for analysis, allowing subjectivity to be born. Everyone has their own language, which shows their take on the situation. *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*[3] by Peter Pomerantsev is a great supplemental book to explain how totalitarian regimes use misinformation globally to divide and conquer, and rig elections with the support of the crowd. The choice of language can be fatal at times, and proper choice of words can mean life or death. There is an authenticated video that shows Russian soldiers in Kherson being greeted with 'Slava Ukraini', to which they respond, perplexed, 'But we are Russians'. This misrecognition seems to be the constant reality of the war.

The film embraces four separate stories at different locations: a block post, a bus stop, a basement, and a front yard. They are four different situations that are united by the same horrifying condition of being trapped in a spiritual basement but without a roof overhead, like a displaced person. In Scene One of the movie, an old school principal cannot find the right words to locate himself in the unknown territory of a block post: he realizes he cannot pass it and he does not want to obey any orders. Suddenly, he slips into a rhetoric that is critical of the soldiers' efforts: 'Who are you fighting for?' to the local organised forces at the block post. Also, the principal mumbles that he just saw a girl from his school at the block post. 'Do you molest schoolgirls around here?', asks the principal of the soldiers of the Territorial Defense. A good beginning for the film, is it not? It is the scene that can devalue all the war effort but it also shows how lies are made up from thin air just because some people do not live by the law. Yet, of what is available, it is hard to say who to support: the principal or the soldiers.

[3] Peter Pomerantsev. Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

In Scene Two, the word 'our' is claimed by a pro-Russian old lady, a nasty *babushka*, who calls Ukrainian soldiers 'Nazis'. The old lady tries to protect her granddaughter from dating a Ukrainian soldier. The granddaughter responds 'I don't know you' in a teenage rebellion.

Scene Three is the most psychologically distressing and presents rape and its rationalisation by a 'rebel' soldier, whom the viewer should understand to be a pro-Russian separatist. War is shown as a gendered experience. In the film, men have no faces, they are lost in the darkness and the background. They are 'the war'. And their intentions are muddled by ambiguous information from various women. The war is about female sexuality; it is biopolitical and unappealing. The rape scene is also staged in such a way that the face of the woman is obscured, and the soldiers are harassing and abusing her body, which could be interpreted as an archetype of a coloniser who uses rape to win the battle. Once there is personification, a real human in front of you, there is no win for the coloniser, as the scene suggests. Suddenly, as the victim and the perpetrator start speaking of love, they tap into other parts of themselves. So, there is either pleasure or pressure, agreement or humiliating submission, which devalues human worth.

Scene Four is about everyday sadism that only waits for a victim. A lady runs over a hen on a countryside road, and she comes up to the owners of the bird to pay. Instead, they pressure her psychologically. As the director commented, in the last scene:

> The task was to portray people not in black and white, not to divide them into friends and foes, but to show the drama of people who, due to various circumstances, found themselves on different sides of the conflict. Each of them has their own truth, each of them has a motivation to fight against the other side, to do ugly things.[4]

It is difficult to say whether we are seeing the same soldiers or the same woman. Metaphorically, it is about people having different selves that can appear in the same situations, and how there must be resistance to being framed by a rapist, a coloniser, or an exploiter by their language. In this film, language is the game that one needs to win to survive.

[4] Natalka Vorozhbyt. *Кайдаші, суржик, Тарантіно і Погані дороги. Інтерв'ю з режисеркою Ворожбит*, online video recording, YouTube, 21 June 2021, <https://youtu.be/81YlAXxSYPM> [accessed 14 June 2023].

Personal borders are analogous to state borders. They are hazy, and the goal is to highlight the hazy lines between enemies and allies. However, this film teaches how fragmentary presentation leads to a diversity of interpretations, and so its form embodies its content of blurred and defended personal and national borders. The form of the film and its partiality represent the philosophical insight into the power of images for a military enterprise. Emotion is the only remaining reality, and hopefully, more people will see this film to see how one can try to overcome a sadistic frame in a power struggle.

Bibliography

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World War Z, dir. by Mark Forster (Paramount Pictures, 2013)