

ROSSIYA 88 – A FEATURE FILM WITH DOCUMENTARY AMBITIONS

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film
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Pavel Bardin's film begins without credits: we see a young man around 20 years old called Edward switching on a video camera in order to start a video diary. He has received permission to film the skinhead group *Rossiya 88*, although its members mockingly call him 'Abraham' on account of his Jewish father. The 8 stands for the eighth letter of the alphabet: 88 therefore means 'Heil Hitler'. The young men meet under the guise of a martial arts group in a cellar, from which they launch their attacks. They also shoot short propaganda clips for the Internet. Edward documents the group. During the film, not only does the group become accosted to him, but they also pose and act *for* him. The film's protagonist is his friend Sasha, who has the nickname *Shtyk* (Blade). His sister Julia is one of the few 'normal people' in the film, and one of the few with their own, distinct character. She has become used to her brother's fascist prattle and finds refuge in non-communication; she does not take him seriously, leaving him to the parallel world in which he is helplessly caught. The attacks on anonymous immigrants from the former Soviet republics soon bore the young men. The fact that Edward sees Sasha's sister with a Caucasian¹ is therefore timely. She lives the life of the big city and has friends from different countries. Now Sasha directs his hate towards a specific enemy and the story takes on a 'Romeo and Juliet' direction until a triple murder signals its highly dramatic ending.

The connection between society and the fascist underground is only depicted peripherally, for example in the person of the policeman who encourages the group to attack the Caucasian market: '...it's fun for you and a help to me'. Or the official who tries to win the lads for big business. The following scene is also indicative: there is a

knock on the club's door, but before it is opened, the trainer turns the portrait of Hitler to the wall to reveal a portrait of Putin. Pavel Bardin comments that 'We did not give this scene a deeper meaning; that would have been too obvious, direct and stupid. The only meaning which I am prepared to grant it is that under all these "national leaders", this is exactly the kind of thing that happens. And I would like him to see it all, at least through the eyes of his portrait'.²

In films whose content and meaning demand discussion of a taboo topic, these aspects overshadow artistic questions. *Rossiya 88* provoked a debate, could not find a distributor and lost a film prize which it had won. This is exactly what the director Pavel Bardin wanted: to draw attention to the fascist groups and their violence in contemporary Russia. He conducted considerable research for the film and collected a lot of documentary material, but turned it into a feature film. Why?

There are specific situations in which a feature film can help a documentary filmmaker: for example, when the research cannot reveal the logical chain of events, a feature film can fill in these gaps with fiction, whereas a documentary cannot. Moreover, the feature film has additional means of touching the audience emotionally.

Pavel Bardin always stresses that his research was thorough and that he used lines and events which, in a sense echoing a documentary style, were taken from Internet sites and video clips. He did not have to search long in order to find the required props for the film: the fascist scene in Russia is not publicity-shy and is particularly well represented in the Internet. However, the film crew did not have any direct contact to neo-Nazis, which would have been essential for a documentary. This

¹ i.e. someone originally from the Caucasus region.

² Interview with the Institute for the Development of the Siberian Press, <http://www.sibirp.ru/columnist/rappoport/?id=1612>.

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gave birth to a film script based on real events with some authentic lines and several documentary scenes that show the main character of Sasha conducting interviews with real people on the streets of Moscow. The range of opinions on the statement 'Russia for the Russians' is shocking. It shows the unconsidered proximity of the state-sponsored patriotism to fascist ideology. These insights have a greater impact than the occasionally one-dimensional fictional sequences.

The audience leaves the film stunned yet unmoved by the aggression depicted. The film is a purely intellectual exercise: its documentary basis does not help because the film does not touch the emotions. It misses its target because it does not overcome the gulf between the audience and

the problems on the screen. The director's social impact was less a product of the film itself than the discussion which it provoked.

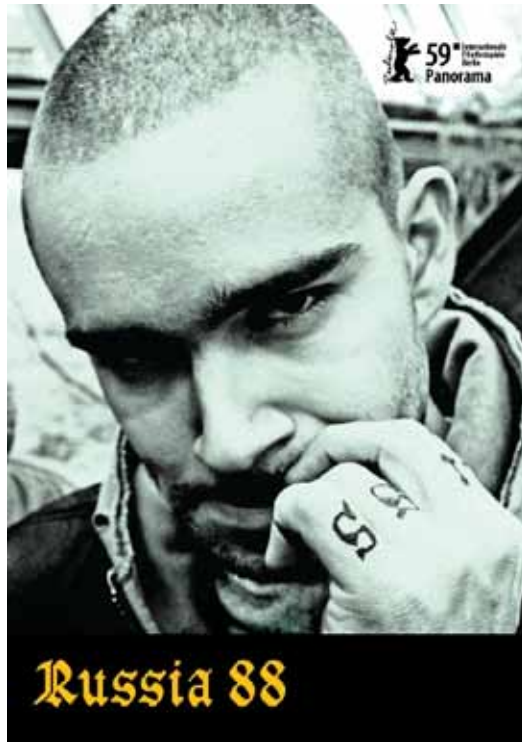
The short film 'Pride without Prejudice' by Kseniya Udodova, which received an award from the Goethe Institute and as a result made its way to the West, confirms that this discussion is necessary. The young journalist dares to take a documentary approach and talks with fascist and anti-fascist skinheads in the provinces. Here, too, normal passersby have their say: they cannot be fascists, says one woman, this demonstration has received official permission. Such citizens find it incomprehensible that 65 years after the victory

over fascism in Russia, Russian fascist groups can exist at all. Educational work is essential here.

At the end of the film *Rossiya 88*, Pavel Bardin relies once more on the power of the documentary alone, and with good reason: instead of

the usual credits, he runs a list bearing the names of the victims of fascist violence in 2008 in Moscow. In silence. For three minutes, the victims are named alongside the date of their death: three minutes of documentation which achieves almost the same impact of the whole of the preceding film. *Rossiya 88* is therefore still an important film because of its political resonance.

*From the German by
Christopher Gilley*



http://www.focus89.eu/docs/press_downloads/Photos%20FOCUS%2089/POSTER%20RUSSIA%2088.JPG

FILM REVIEW:

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/email/russian-anti-nazi-film-v-kremlin-bulldogs> (author: Mumin Shakirov)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Saskia Wegelein studied East European Cultural History and Sociology at the University of Bremen, concentrating on *Alltagsgeschichte*, film and migration between states. Since 2002, she has worked as a project consultant for the Bremen Film Institute (*Kulturelle Filmförderung Bremen*), as a curator of film programmes and as a film producer for *episode-film*. <http://www.episode-film.de>

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ROSSIYA 88

RF 2009 / 104 min

Writer and Director: Pavel Bardin

Camera: Sergei Danduryan

Editor: Philipp Pastukhov

Music: Piotr Fiodorov

Producers: Pavel Bardin, Piotr Fiodorov, Vassili Solovyov

Actors: Nikolai Matshulski (Sasha), Mikhail Polyakov (Edward), Vera Strokova (Julia)

Pavel Bardin (born 1975 in Moscow) studied journalism (1992–98) and directing and script writing (1998–99) at the State University for Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow. He has worked as a TV correspondent and editor, as well as a radio DJ. *Rossiya 88* is his second feature film.

The film *Rossiya 88* has provoked scandal ever since its appearance. At the ‘Spirit of Fire Festival’ in Siberian Khanty-Mansiisk in March 2009 it was in line to receive the main prize, but lost it seemingly through ‘pressure from above’. Instead, it received the ‘Jury Special Prize’ and the ‘Prize of the Association of Film Historians and Critics’. The film still has not received the state distribution licence. When it was shown in Moscow anyway, the screening was ended by the OMON special police unit. The film was shown abroad at festivals in Berlin, Montreal and Helsinki.

PRIDE WITHOUT PREJUDICE

Perm State University 2009, documentary, Mini-DV, 16:9, colour, 15:00 min.

Director: Kseniya Udodova

Camera: Aleksey Gyshtchin

Editor: Sergey Proskuriakov

Kseniya Udodova (born in 1988 in Perm) began studying journalism at the State University of Perm in 2005 while also taking a distance course in law at the same university. Since then she has become interested in the questions surrounding Russian nationalism and youth subcultures. The film ‘Pride without Prejudice’ is her directorial debut.

<http://www.goethe.de/kue/flm/prj/gre/pre/rus/enindex.htm>

POSTSCRIPT: PROSECUTED FOR ‘EXTREMISM’

The state prosecutor has filed a claim with the Samara district court to have the film *Rossiya 88* declared ‘extremist’ and withdrawn completely from public circulation. This assessment is based on testimonies of witnesses as well as on a linguistic experts’ opinion from the university. According to the law on immortalising the victory in the Second World War (1995/2004) and on combating extremist activities (2002/6) the use of Nazi symbols and attributes is prohibited. The first court session on 23 December 2009 had to be postponed due to the judge unexpectedly falling ill.

Source: www.openspace.ru/cinema/projects/70/details/15357/