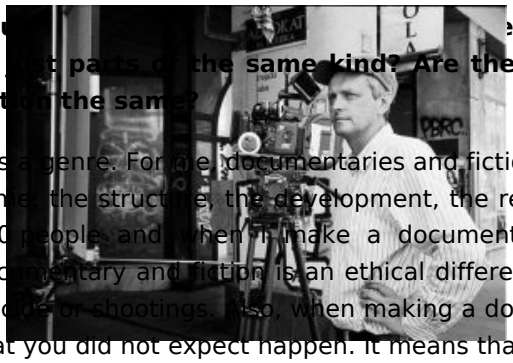
Interview of Sergeï Loznitsa: “One small moment and you understand everything”

Description

Sergeï Loznitsa is a Ukrainian director, born in 1964, famous for making both documentaries and fictions. He has received many awards, including one from the Cannes Film Festival for *Donbass* in 2018. *Regard sur l’Est* met Sergeï Loznitsa on January 10 while he was in Paris for the French premiere of *State Funeral*, a movie for which he used archive footages showing the USSR right after Stalin’s death in 1953. If you are in Paris, his movies will be broadcasted at the Bibliothèque publique d’information until March 8.



You ...es and fiction. Would you say that they are separate kinds of movies or just parts of the same kind? Are the tools used to make a documentary and the ones used to make a fiction the same?

It is a genre. For me, documentaries and fictions are the same. The footage is different but the way I make the film is the same: the structure, the development, the relationship between shots... But when I make fiction, I work with a team of 150 people and when I make a documentary I work with 5-10 people. However, I think the difference between documentary and fiction is an ethical difference because there are things you cannot shoot in a documentary, such as suicide or shootings. Also, when making a documentary, you are like a scientist doing an experiment: sometimes, things that you did not expect happen. It means that you cannot actually entirely create it. It surprises you and that is the most beautiful part of making a documentary. For the rest, how I use the footage, it is the same way.

Concerning one of your last documentaries, *Maidan* (2014), people often said that they had the impression that they were actually in Kiev, living through all those events, the revolution and the violence. Was that one of your goals while you were filming it?

It was one of my goals. I want to make films where spectators are not separated from the screen but participate in it and are positioned inside the film. Of course, it is an illusion but that is what I would like to create. Plus, recent cinema has developed in this direction. Also, if you look at museums, they now try to be interactive: they try to attack spectators, sometimes in a very agressive way. Modern art developed in that way and a boundary disappeared in art. Of course, the spectator is protected but also takes a risk in watching because some things in the film can be considered agressive depending on a person’s personality. In cinema, there is a documentary style that I try to use when I make fiction films. For my next film, I will try to use archive footage but also shoot my own footage and use them together, making a mix of the two.

With your last film, *State Funeral* (2019), is it also your goal to make the viewers feel like they are back in the USSR just after Stalin’s death?

Of course. It is not interesting to just have knowledge about that event. What could this knowledge bring to us? The thing is to make the trip. If you want to understand that period, the best way is to feel it with your own skin which is something that cinema can offer.

The title of *State Funeral* is political. *Maidan* and also your fiction film *Donbass* (2018) carry political messages. It seems like all your last movies are political.

Yes, of course. First of all, they are pieces of art. Secondly, they are political films because they are about very important topics and very important moments. Maidan is a real revolution that happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with an anticolonial background because the aim was to fight a Russian influence that was strong even in independent

Ukraine. I think this revolution is the first real revolution out of all those territories that were, a hundred years ago, “the Russian empire”. It was a serious revolution carried out by people, and not by people in power, not by some small group of revolutionaries and terrorists: it was a serious revolution made by people who wanted to clean the political stage. We will only know if it was a successful revolution or not in the future, but it happened.

Another film I made, *Donbass*, is about the media and the role and position of the media in this rather strange war which lasted almost as long as the Second World War. With this film, I attempt to describe what happened there and to describe how dangerous it is. Other films, like *State Funeral*, are super political films that show what Soviet power is and how the Soviet Union was organized. The film is about a ritual that is not only a Stalin’s funeral ritual but it is also a ritual that described the relationships among people, it described the whole society. One small moment and you understand everything. The speeches and texts from that time of commemoration sound ridiculous to us now. But, at that time, quite a lot of people accepted them. I spoke a few months ago to someone who was 16 years old during those events and told me he had cried all day when he heard the text, even though he was then a dissident and a very good poet. Can you imagine? He is a very educated person; his father even was a minister of Education in his Republic, Lithuania. Can you imagine this kind of person crying?

Would you say it is kind of absurd?

It is not absurd: it is a kind of mass hysteria. No one is protected from it. I believe that, if we discover and describe its mechanisms, we can somehow be protected. At least, we could not be fooled.

State Funeral (Copyright : Atoms & Void).

You worked using archives for *State Funeral*, and in other documentaries. Was it difficult to obtain authorizations?

No. Now, there is the Krasnogorsk Archive’s film collection (Moscow Oblast) which is the biggest center of post-Soviet Union documentary and fiction archives. It is open for everybody so anyone can take a look at the online catalog and then go there to watch anything. There, they absolutely opened everything for me and they helped us to find extra boxes that they did not even know existed.

Among all your movies, is there a movie that was more interesting or fun to make?

No. I make my films because I find the topics interesting. Plus, my best film is always my last film, for me. After that, my next film becomes my best film. I never want to change anything because, even if I find mistakes, they are always important mistakes for me to study in order to learn something. I also try to make as many movies as possible. Currently, I have 5 ongoing projects. For 2 of those films, I already have the footage so the next step is just editing and then releasing. Money is my only issue: as soon as I find money, I start making a movie. For *State Funeral*, we took a loan because, when I found out that this footage existed, I immediately thought that a movie had to be done. After Stalin’s funeral, all footage shot during that time was banned. It was only at the end of the 80s that the censorship was

lifted. Still, it was actually strange for me to discover that such footage existed. In 1953, 4 famous prominent Soviet directors made a 60-minutes film entitled *Great Farewell* which is a propaganda film in Soviet style. When Soviet power watched it, they banned the film and all the footage. Nobody knows, except the people who worked on the film, that this kind of film exists. Can you imagine how important it would be for Soviet people, or post-Soviet territories, to see those images? Stalin was forbidden as a picture. I remember some taxi and bus drivers in Georgia, in the 70s-80s, putting his photo on the glass but it was something really unusual. Everything that was connected to Stalin was somehow taboo. It was a cult and it was not good.

***Regard sur l'Est* is soon going to publish several articles about bridges in the post-Soviet territories and what they might represent politically. You also worked on bridges for the movie *Bridges of Sarajevo*. If that movie had instead been entitled *Bridges of Eastern Europe*, what would you have chosen to show in your movie?**

I would have shown that bridges are this idea, this symbol of a union of territories which are divided, whether it is by a river or by something else.

Is there a particular bridge that you would have worked on to show that?

No, I would have focused on the symbolic element only. I would have shown the border between different kinds of mentalities. That border is, I think, between Poland and Germany. In all the countries on one side of that border, people can understand each other without words and they share, more or less, the same concepts which are completely different from the Western concepts. But it is very difficult to build a bridge that can unite when such differences exist. The main problem in Europe now is this kind of line and the confrontation between West and East. We have to say honestly that this confrontation is based on the existence of different ways to describe the universe. First, there are symbols that exist in the West but do not exist in the East. Furthermore, the concept of property is different. The third element is linked to the idea of personality: you can see people as independent beings or you can see them as tools you can use. Those three elements define our lives and having different views of them is enough to have different universes. What is happening now in Ukraine is the act of fighting in order to have the possibility to create another type of life, different from what it was during the Tsar empire and the Soviet empire. Maybe I am wrong but I feel like European countries are looking at this long-lasting war like it is a disease far from them. But it is not far. It is very close. If Ukraine cannot protect itself anymore, the next country will be way closer to the border. I am sure that European politicians understand this, but maybe they do not have the possibility to speak honestly. I am not a diplomat so I can say this, and I can say that the task is to change mentalities. But how do you make it without violence? Education is very important here.

I have a last question. Very recently, Romanian director Corneliu Porumboiu said on *France Culture* that « *the absurd is a specific attribute of Romanian people* ». Without being culturalist, what would be a specific attribute of Ukrainian people, in your opinion?

Ukrainian people will stay on their position, no matter what happens around them. They are "*упрямые »* (stubborn) and there is nothing you can do about that.

* Juliana Barazer is currently studying International relations and Japanese at Inalco (Paris).

Interview in French

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