

Aleksei Balabanov's Thriller Reveals Soviet Corruption

BY GREGORY FREIDIN

On the surface, Aleksei Balabanov's *Cargo 200* is a noir thriller about a psychopathic police captain in a provincial Russian city, one of those industrial hellholes that pockmarked the face of the U.S.S.R. The month is August, the year the Orwellian 1984, when the angel of history despaired of the Soviet Union and was making way for Mikhail Gorbachev. Balabanov packs his historically accurate *Cargo 200* with such a



DETAILS: *Cargo 200* * L/Fri 9:30 PM - P/Sun 11:45 PM
U.S. Premiere * Introduced by Kirill Razlogov * Russia, 2007, 90m

russia's gray underbelly

strong allegorical charge that the result is a double exposure of Russia then and now. The film has polarized and set the whole of Russia talking—another sign of the rebirth of Russian film.

In 1984, Balabanov was 25, college behind him, and serving as a paratrooper in Afghanistan five years after the Soviet invasion. The U.S.S.R. itself was 67 and stagnating. Keep this in mind as *Cargo* takes you to Captain Zhurov's fly-infested apartment; think also about the corpse of Vladimir Lenin, embalmed and still on display outside the Kremlin, a ghoulish reminder of the country's historical freight.

Balabanov heaves it out of storage and presents us with close-ups of recycled pickle jars and bottles, armored apartment doors, dilapidated buildings, classic Russian and Soviet kitsch, and vintage autos. All are lit with bare bulbs, flashlights, hurricane lamps, primitive disco strobes and, for the most part, the kind of diffuse gray northern daylight that one imagines illuminates

Gregory Freidin, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures and Director of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities at Stanford University, is author of a critical biography of Osip Mandelstam, A Coat of Many Colors (UC Press, 1987) and forthcoming critical biography of a Russian Jewish writer Isaac Babel, A Jew On Horseback (Stanford University Press). He has been a commentator on Russian affairs for the Voice of America, BBC, PBS, and CBS.

the better parts of hell. As always, Balabanov provides a lovingly selected period soundtrack with lyrics that create another layer of meaning. The illusion of authenticity he achieves is powerful, and those who lived under the old U.S.S.R. may break into a cold sweat realizing how little has changed. *Cargo* was shot on location, not far from St. Petersburg (Leninsk is the actual steel town Cherepovets). All Balabanov's crew needed for their time travel was a set of wheels and a tank of gas. Pity Sasha Baron Cohen, who had to travel to Romania to get to his "Kazakhstan."

Not having to go far, Balabanov digs deep, raising questions both about recent history and Russia's much older romance with alcohol, corruption, xenophobia, and a rigid authoritarian state that has no compunction about using extreme violence against its own people. Lest we forget, Balabanov places a big bust of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of Cheka (now FSB), in Captain Zhurov's office.

As in fairy tales, the film's three female figures stand for the three faces of Russia. The 18-year-old Angelika embodies Russia's present, a spawn of the stagnant Soviet Union. Zhurov's old mother is a caricature of Soviet citizenry, their minds shot by alcohol and propaganda. She is permanently glued to her TV and a glass jar full of hooch. And Antonina, wife of the underground distiller Aleksei, is a traditional good Russian woman, who is helpless to change anything (she fails to prevent the rape of Angelika), but is loyal and effective in her revenge.

For the main male characters, Balabanov

uses his favorite "brothers" device, arranging them in three sets. The "fathers" are the 50-something colonel from Leninsk and his Leningrad sibling Artem, a professor of Scientific Atheism. Both worry about the future and are corrupt. Their "sons" are more despicable. Slava—that's Russian for "glory"—is a good-for-nothing hedonist. The shady operator Valery ("healthy" and "strong") wears a red T-shirt with huge letters U.S.S.R. on it and is romancing the colonel's daughter to avoid the draft. As in the old Soviet joke about the newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, which contrary to their titles contained neither truth nor news, the "sons" have no claim to either glory or strength, or health. Valery turns out to be a hopeless drunk and coward: he abandons Angelika to her abductor and flees from the area reluctant to get entangled with the police. As the film ends, he and Slava strike up a friendship of convenience, and we see them in a fading shot poised to spin out deals and become tycoons in today's Russia. The film's only other young man of their generation is Sergeant Major Gorbunov, Angelika's long-awaited boyfriend. He arrives in a sealed coffin.

At the core of the tale are Aleksei (the director's namesake) and Zhurov ("glum") who belong to neither generation and are, in a way, outside of time. They formed a bond, based on some secret, while Aleksei was serving a ten-year term for manslaughter. The bond remains so strong that when asked, Aleksei accepts a death sentence for a murder committed by Zhurov. Balabanov does not reveal their secret, but

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the film as a whole implies that, different as they are, Aleksei and Zhurov are tied together like Siamese twins.

They are eternal Russian types, locked in the eternal Russian sadomasochistic drama. When having a Dostoevskian "conversation across eternity" with the professor of Scientific Atheism, Aleksei may wax eloquent in extolling God and utopian socialism. But he thinks nothing of forcing himself on Angelika and would have, had he not conked out in a drunken stupor. Antonina hides Angelika in the peasant bathhouse where Aleksei keeps his still, but Zhurov finds her there, forces her onto all fours and sodomizes her ... with an empty vodka bottle. Soviet times—as Balabanov implicitly quotes from Dostoevsky—are the "eternity that is nothing but a peasant bath house with cockroaches in every corner."

The rape scene is hard to take. But if you don't look away, you notice a shadow of pleasure flit across Angelika's face—a form of consent between the victim and the victimizer. Balabanov wants to link Angelika's violation to Russia's romance with alcohol. And now the police officer who, instead of protecting, gruesomely violates an innocent, becomes an embodiment of the brutal Soviet-Russian state for which



vodka was the biggest source of revenue and civil quiescence.

In the morning, Zhurov handcuffs Angelika to his motorcycle. Their ride through the industrial outskirts of Leninsk is perhaps the most haunting long shot of the entire film, an inversion of the motorcycle glamour. Zhurov is taking his victim into the heart of—no, not darkness, but worse—Soviet industrial gray. Shooting in color, cinematographer Aleksandr Simonov proves himself the supreme connoisseur of every possible gray tint. Elevated tracks, intertwining pipes, smokestacks, girders,

cables and cooling towers fly by forming a cruel backdrop to Zhurov's handsome stiff-backed posture and Angelika's face with smeared eyeliner and flowing mane.

Balabanov inverts the opening of *Easy Rider*, with a soundtrack to match Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild:" "On my little raft, through storms and rain, taking with me only my visions and reveries, my childhood dreams, I shall float away... and shall find perhaps a new and colorful world..."

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