

REVIEW

Giving Up the Ghost

Chad Gracia's *The Russian Woodpecker* (2015)

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In 1976 a radio signal with a beat of ten times per second was emitted from a seven billion rouble antenna in close proximity to the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Ten years later an incident at the plant caused the reactor to explode. What was the link between the Duga antenna and the malfunction at the power plant? Herein lies the question Fedor Alexandrovich needs an answer for. Artist turned pacifist turned activist, Fedor is a larger than life painter and poet who is well established in the art world. He believes that the disaster in Chernobyl was an unnatural, man-made one and seeks to expose those responsible for the intentional human error. It is no surprise that the information Fedor gathers builds a damning case against the Russian government. The “woodpecker” signal was meant to cover a radius that enclosed nine US missile bases, jamming airwaves across the Eastern hemisphere. Eye witnesses confess that after a technician was brought in to tweak the transmitter, which was causing interference with SOS correspondence, it was revealed that the US remained protected as the signal would never be strong enough to permeate the Northern Lights. On September 1st, an inspection of the Duga antenna was scheduled to be carried out. Fedor’s theory is that before this deadline the satellite would have benefitted from a nuclear breakdown. The failure of the “woodpecker” could be blamed on the instability and collapse of the power plant’s reactor, rather than its own fallible design and doomed application. The culprit? USSR’s minister of communications Vasily Shamshin, a commonly conceived advocator of war on America during the late seventies and commissioner of the extremely costly but ill-fated Duga antenna. However, as Fedor reluctantly confesses, the proof of evidence that he needs to convince the world of his theory has died with the Muscovite bureaucrat Shamshin himself. Without it, Fedor’s argument never ceases to be anything more than a thoroughly convincing conspiracy. If the spectator is to take anything other away from this documentary ideologically, it is that they should not settle for pieces of the truth, for in the cracks between them lies misinformation. Ironically, the conclusion of *Russian Woodpecker* shares the same fate as the Duga radar; failure to launch and self-destruction. From the outset, Fedor is presented as a provocateur with a personal, vested interest in his case study. He was sent to an orphanage in his childhood to escape radiation poisoning and many of his extended family have been the victims of Soviet ruling in the Ukraine, either brutally beaten by the KGB or sent to the gulag. Fedor’s fear and paranoia is instigated by the

Maidan uprising in Kiev, which he describes as the “revenge of the Soviet Union”. The cinematographer of *Russian Woodpecker*, Artem Ryzhykov, was present during a peaceful protest in Kiev that led to a violent altercation between protesters and riot police. This revolution acts as an emotionally charged backdrop for the film’s closure. The physical and psychological pain endured by both Artem and Fedor is representative of not just themselves but the entire Ukrainian nation. Amongst the shocking stock footage and newsreels of the catastrophe, Fedor reimagines and reenacts his own theatrical response to his findings, resulting in some powerful imagery. During a sobering trip through the ghost town of Chernobyl the camera captures every detail of the apocalyptic wasteland. Abandoned sports centers, desolate amusement parks and empty school chairs at empty tables. The primary school is one of the most visually striking and memorable set pieces. A sea of children’s gas masks litters the floor of the classroom looking like a vast graveyard of dusty skulls. But the severity of these macabre aesthetics is counterbalanced by Fedor’s bleak and very dark sense of humor, which only amplifies his likability as the film’s protagonist. For instance, on a visit to a radioactive seaside, Fedor mockingly pours an entire bottle of red wine into the ocean, reciting a eulogy and explaining that doctors once believed red wine could protect against radiation. The filmmaker and Fedor delve into a rigorous inspection of the 1986 tragedy with hidden cameras, eye witness accounts and military personnel interviews. At this particular historical standpoint, Gracia channels the film’s ideology and paranoia from the locality of the past into present day current affairs. The documentary concludes within the context of the tumultuous occupation of Kiev’s Independence Square in 2014. The people of Ukraine protest president Yanukovich’s rejection of a pending EU agreement and his decision to opt for a Russian loan bailout instead. As the Euromaidan uprising intensified and the country appeared to be on the brink of civil war, Viktor Yanukovich refused to compromise and soon fled to exile in Russia. By directly relating the events of April 26th 1986 and January 2014, viewers are forced to make a vast leap of faith. The filmmakers have suddenly and drastically shifted their focus and agenda to instill in the audience Fedor’s own fear of history repeating itself. Ukraine’s current political climate and geopolitical relationship with Russia is once again being haunted by an “undead, Soviet ghoul”. Rather fittingly, Fedor explains at the beginning of the documentary that the purpose of the project was to go in search of the “ghosts of Chernobyl”. Nevertheless, Fedor’s scrutinizing of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster serves as a dramatic catalyst for *Russian Woodpecker* to reopen a masterful debate with regard to the political and historical landscape of Ukraine.