East European Film Bulletin

REVIEW

“You Can’t Want Someone’s Sobriety More Than They Do.”

Pepa Lubojacki’s *If Pigeons Turned to Gold* (*Kdyby se holubi proměnili ve zlato*, 2026)

VOL. 166 (SUMMER 2026) BY JACK PAGE

Producing an innovative blend of medias and formal styles, director Pepa Lubojacki’s autobiographical documentary recounts her family’s history of addiction and the cycle of trauma that imprints itself on each generation.

The film is told primarily through iPhone footage interspersed with highly stylized fictional sequences and archival photography. That said, the scrapbook photos from the family’s personal archive are jarringly reanimated, using visual effects to move the subject’s eyes and mouths while accompanied by a voiceover narration detailing the memories of each separate family member. This artistic license – at least for the documentary genre – does seem to control every character’s perspective, wherein essentially they all share the same voice as the filmmaker. Since the entire feature leans into an overly apparent director’s presence, its execution doesn’t seem so exploitative. Instead, Lubojacki displays a fearfully ruthless depiction of the illness of addiction and the impact it has had on her close relatives as well as her own mental health. Most importantly, the film encourages discourse on the subject, offering stimulating conversations on the science and philosophy behind it rather than just addressing a personal struggle. Unbeknownst to the vast majority of people, addiction is hiding in nearly every home and although we may not be able to fight it, the most important step is to understand it.

The main subject of the documentary is David, Pepa’s brother. Throughout the film the spectator will see David in many different lights: making a living, during relapse, in recovery, on the streets. We are first introduced to David in an abandoned building site, where he resides homeless in a dilapidated shed. Ever the gracious host, he offers his sister coffee and plays the radio. Despite his garrulous demeanor, there is something unsettling about David’s behavior.

He stumbles and shifts himself unsteadily in his chair. His trembling hands are clutched to his shoulders, his fingers digging deeply into his arms as he hugs his body. He hunches over himself, rocking gently back and forth as he watches the cigarette's ash sag from his crumpled, dirty fist. Forgetting the lyrics, he slurs some rap song in a giddy daze. It is early in the morning and David is already drunk. For Pepa, this is no surprise as she supplies him with groceries and panders to his ramblings on a daily basis. Importantly, Lubojacki raises the stakes of David's condition by refusing to shy away from the physical toll alcoholism has on his body and the serious danger that can arise from immediate withdrawal; symptoms such as epileptic seizures or a fatal cardiac arrest.

The documentary is at its strongest once it exposes the mythology surrounding addiction. Lubojacki's voiceover explains how she feels a sense of guilt that she is better off than her brother. Yet her sympathetic approach to David's condition only leads to relapse, disappointment, and loneliness. Pepa's belief is that David's failed attempt at sobriety is also a failure on her part. This reductive ideology causes Pepa's mental health to spiral out of control. With each intervention, she falls into a deeper state of depression until she herself attempts suicide by overdosing on pills. There is a recurring motif in the film that deftly symbolizes Pepa's isolation and grief. In a tightly framed close-up of her face, the camera zooms out trepidatiously to reveal Pepa fully clothed and floating on the river. Her eyes are wide open and calm waves lap at her mouth and nose as she stares out into the sky in a trance-like state of anguish. Motionless, her body sways rhythmically to the ripple of the current. It gives the impression that even though she is treading water, she is stuck. The camera continues its ascent until Pepa's body is minuscule. She is surrounded by a vast, dark void where the only signs of life are the whites of the lips of the meager waves. Trapped and directionless in this abyss, the scene is a visual realization of the filmmaker's psychological state: she is barely keeping her head above water.

The title of the film hints at a question raised in the film, namely if homelessness is a societal problem or if it's our perception that needs to change in order to make a difference. Likening pigeons to the homeless, Lubojacki quips that both prefer benches, consume garbage, are prone to injuries and disease, live in parks, meet in groups or prefer to be alone. In every city they are a ubiquitous yet invisible presence, but what if they could become useful or be treated in a different light? What if we saw something good in them rather than viewing them as a nuisance? As if to prove this bigger discussion is too abstruse, Lubojacki swiftly dismisses the idea and admits pigeons aren't made of gold so there's no point fretting about it anyway. Alternatively, the director shifts the focus on searching for the root of addiction. Does it stem from an inherent incompleteness developed by broken behaviors? Is it predestined by our genetics or passed down from our parents? Is addiction ever the original problem? The filmmaker's intention is not to answer these

impossible questions but to promote a fundamentally new dialogue on the subject and conceptually shift the way in which we approach the discourse of addiction.

Whether it is through unmet needs, a form of escapism, or to numb the pain, there is a universality of addiction that we are all guilty of possessing. Similarly, there is a heartening realization towards the end of the film that offers a kind of resolution between Pepa and David. Instead of trying to fix or fight the addiction alongside her brother, Pepa makes a conscious decision to accept him for who he is and love him regardless of his disease. When you recognize you cannot help someone who cannot help themselves, what else is there?