East European Film Bulletin

ESSAY

# Loznitsa's Countryside Revisted

## Sergei Loznistsa’s *Letter* (*Pismo*, 2013)

VOL. 29 (MAY 2013) BY MORITZ PFEIFER

In his new short film *Letter*, Ukrainian director Sergei Loznitsa once again leers at his preferred subject: the Russian countryside. This time the setting is supposedly in front of a psychiatric institution although nothing in this slow-paced nostalgia sham suggests instances of lunacy. At first site, the little people that wander around so quietly over fields and woods look like ghosts or angels. This is not a metaphor. Loznitsa used some pre-Second World War lens to get the blurry halo around everything that is dressed in white, and captured the whole thing on a Soviet-era reel.

Ghosts or angels, either way, it is clear that these spirits belong to past times. As I have noted in a piece about his other two peasant documentaries, Russia’s rural society is drastically declining and Loznitsa is there to record that moment. Not without regret it seems. *Letter* is tinged with a melancholic sigh. There’s a scene in which two men enjoy a lunch pause having someone playing the accordion for them. In another scene a woman walks out of a house and caresses a nearby cow. As the day ends, some men have a smoke overlooking a meadow. These scenes suspiciously resemble good old social realist shots of happy peasants (as for example in some of the films of Loznits’as Ukrainian predecessor Alexander Dovzhenko who, by the way, also made three movies about the disappearing country people in a time where much of society was undergoing industrialization). Did Loznitsa finally stylize himself as a chronicler for the vanishing people in Russia’s countryside?

But then again, there’s the uncomfortable detail that all this is taking place in front of a psychiatric institution. In his film *Portrait* (2002), Loznitsa already established the link between the country folk and the crazy. Things are not as idyllic as they seem. The weird fogginess of the movie’s images makes it hard to believe in the purity of the rural environment which they would otherwise suggest. As in *Landscape* (2003), Loznitsa’s second movie about the disappearance of traditional lifestyle, the director is playing with content and style.

To understand this, we may compare Loznitsa's film to some of the blurry, b+w Gerhard Richter paintings. Take a look, for instance, at one of these family paintings:

**Gerhard Richter – *Familie am Meer* (1964) and *Tante Marianne* (1965)**

Richter also maintains a melancholy relationship with the past. At first sight, the painting on the left looks like any other happy-family holiday souvenir; the painting on the right like a sentimental take on childhood bliss. But the man in the picture on the left is Heinrich Eufinger, Richter's father-in-law and Obersturmbannführer in the SS during the Second World War. He was also a physician and gynecologist who sterilized mentally ill women as part of the Nazi euthanasia program. The picture on the left depicts Richter's Aunt Marianne who was sterilized because of her mental illness, and later killed. Richter did not reveal this information until recently, making the public believe that he is merely painting scenes from everyday middle class life. This, of course, was not strictly a lie since many families in post-War Germany dealt with their Nazi past in such a self-censoring way.

Rural or bourgeois idyll – both can work as masks hiding human tragedy. The choice of what part of reality we prefer not to see defines the reality we live in. When Eufinger died in 1988, the newspaper praised the "fruits of his scientific work".[1] There was no mention of his Nazi past, and he was, of course, never held responsible for the crimes he committed. What memories will survive? Those of happy holidays or those of doctors contributing to mass murder?

In Russia, as in many other countries, psychiatric facilities are still politically used to silence dissidents, a condition that, as the Law scholar Michael L. Perin recently showed, goes par with the wretched conditions in which "nonpolitical" individuals are held.[2] In order to stigmatize political opponents by sending them to psychiatric hospitals, he observes, these institutions must first conform to certain dehumanizing standards. It is considerably harder to stigmatize someone in a psychiatric system based on social inclusion…

Better enjoy the look of a beautiful countryside. In today's hyper-capitalist

Russia, there’s a new wave of nostalgia for Stalinism, and many people surely want to believe that there is still something like an untouched countryside where mother Russia is willing to take care of her children. Richter and Loznitsa show us the downside of such dreams, namely that there is a connection between the existence of mental health institution and the cleanliness of landscapes. What must people hide from themselves to believe in the purity of their country? Watching Loznitsa’s film, we are invited to ask ourselves whether the nimbused people he portrays are just a bunch of peasants. All that glitters is not gold.

References

Frauenarzt, Heft 8, 1988.

Michael L. Perlin, International Human Rights and Mental Disability Law: When the Silenced are Heard, Oxford: 2012.