

OFFICIAL ENTRY – UKRAINE
BEST FOREIGN LANGUAGE FILM – ACADEMY AWARDS® 2019



OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD
BEST DIRECTOR

"COMPULSIVELY
MESMERIZING."

-SHADOWS ON THE WALL

"A SPRAWLING BLACK COMEDY
WITH A VAST ENSEMBLE CAST."

-SCREEN DAILY

"THERE'S NO OTHER ANTIWAR FILM
QUITE LIKE *DONBASS*."

-LOS ANGELES TIMES



A FILM BY SERGEI LOZNITSA

DONBASS

A MALAJA PICTURES PRODUCTION in association with KROKIDE BUREAU. AKA PRODUCTION. CAMERAMAN: MILO RE ANE. COSTUME DESIGNER: SERGEI LOZNITSA. DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: RIES WILDE. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: MILO RE ANE, SERGEI LOZNITSA. PRODUCED BY: SERGEI LOZNITSA. WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY: SERGEI LOZNITSA. CASTING DIRECTOR: ANITA CHIROVA. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: RENS VAN DEN BROEK, JACQUES BOUÏE AND BRIGITTE GONZALEZ. COSTUME DESIGNER: ANITA CHIROVA. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: RENS VAN DEN BROEK, JACQUES BOUÏE AND BRIGITTE GONZALEZ. MUSIC BY: BRIGITTE GONZALEZ. EDITOR: PETER WINKLER. PRODUCTION DESIGNER: BERND BUCKERT.

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In the Donbass, a region of Eastern Ukraine, a hybrid war takes place, involving an open armed conflict alongside killings and robberies on a mass scale perpetrated by separatist gangs.

In the Donbass, war is called peace, propaganda is uttered as truth and hatred is declared to be love.

A journey through the Donbass unfolds as a chain of curious adventures, where the grotesque and drama are as intertwined as life and death.

This is not a tale of one region, one country or one political system. It is about a world, lost in post-truth and fake identities. It is about each and every one of us.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

“ There is a banal saying: history repeats itself first as tragedy, second as farce. This is not true. There is yet a third reflection of the same events, of the same plot - a distorted reflection in a curved mirror of the underground world. The plot is impossible and at the same time realistic, it exists for real, it lives near us ”

writes Varlam Shalamov in his short story *PAIN*.

The words of Shalamov give a precise description of what has now become the state of affairs in a territory, which used to be called the Soviet Union. They also describe the subject of the film, which I made : a distorted reflection in a curved mirror of the underground world.

The action of the film takes place in the Donbass, a region of Eastern Ukraine, occupied by various criminal gangs. The fighting is going on between the Ukrainian regular army, supported by volunteers, and separatist gangs, supported by Russian troops. It is a hybrid war, happening alongside an open armed conflict, accompanied by killings and robberies on a mass scale, and a gradual degradation of the civilian population. There is fear, deception, hatred and violence everywhere. The society is collapsing, and death and deadly silence lie upon the place. The state of war reaches its climax.

The situations and circumstances, which seem to be absurd, grotesque, even comic, and almost impossible to imagine, do happen in real life. Sometimes, the participants of the events fail to believe that this is happening to them for real. And yet – these events do happen for real. They happen because the iron logic of the underworld, which affected all those generations born and bred in the catastrophe, that was the USSR, dictates its own rules. In my opinion, the war taking place

right now is similar to the one fought 70 years ago – at once a patriotic and a civil war.

One of the main reasons for this war, which has been going on since 2014, is the collapse of the USSR and the failure of the Soviet «project of the future». Such collapse could be followed either by a fundamental reform and complete re-organisation of the society, or by its continuous gradual decay and destruction. In this particular case, the first option after the collapse of the USSR is a gradual reform aimed at the creation of a European developmental model (with the emphasis on the rights of the individual, rule of law and protection of private property); the second option is the return to the totalitarian Soviet mode of existence. These two options are incompatible or rather mutually exclusive. Ukraine, at least the predominant part of its population, chooses the European way, whereas Russia is rapidly moving back to the USSR.

It is also important to bear in mind that the Donbass is an industrial region, which developed in the first half of the 20th century. The region was industrialised largely by employing the free labour of GULAG prisoners. Their descendants have settled in the region, having created a very peculiar community based around the factories and labour camp barracks. In recent years, especially during the rule of the former Ukrainian president Yanukovich, who was a native of the Donbass, the territory became extremely criminalised.

This is why, with military and financial help from the eastern neighbour, it became possible to divide this territory between paramilitary gangs and to usurp power in the aftermath of the Maidan revolution. The war goes on because Russia provides financial and military support to the separatist movement. Its goal is very simple – to prevent Ukraine from becoming an independent state. However, this is a different story...

My main concern and my main subject is the particular type of human being, which is produced by a society, where aggression, decay and disintegration rule. It is the people, their mentality, and their relationships with each other that prepare the ground for catastrophic historical events. Human nature reveals itself wholly and truly when societies come tumbling down, when conventional laws do not apply any more, when the ground is giving way beneath one's feet, and one can no longer rely on the crutches of civil institutions, but only on one's own spiritual strength, which is either given or not given to an individual, in order to resist chaos. It is in these very moments that the notion of humanity is defined here and now and for years to come. They usually occur at the instants of utter instability, which are brought about by wars.

The film consists of 13 episodes, each of them narrating a story, which took place on the occupied territories during 2014 - 2015. It is possible to say that though the film is a work of fiction, it is based on real events, no matter how unbelievable these events might seem. I collected this material and selected the most vivid stories and anecdotes, which help us understand the subject. The episodes are linked to each other via several protagonists, who lead us through the narrative and «hand over» our attention, as a baton, from one situation to the next. The narrative escalates from an absurdist comedy to an absurdist tragedy.

The protagonists of the film are ordinary citizens living on the occupied territories.

When I was a little boy, my parents sent me to a kindergarten. We used to sing and dance during the lessons. There was a piano in the middle of the classroom, and the teacher used to play some children's songs or some patriotic songs. Occasionally, the teacher made us play the game of musical chairs, which for some reason I hated with all my heart.

Everybody knows the game of musical chairs... The winner is one of the last two children who manages to sit down on the last remaining chair. In a certain sense, the game reproduces a basic behavioural pattern and makes us think about natural competition and survival of the fittest. But the thing that annoys me most about this game is the fact that you are dependent on somebody's will, on the whim of the person who plays the music and decides when to stop playing. When thinking about this film, I started remembering the game of musical chairs and the way I hated this game, and suddenly I came to understand something...

Imagine a kindergarten in the city of Donetsk. Children are playing an innocent game of musical chairs. Then the shelling begins. Very quickly, in a slight panic, the children and their teachers run down to the cellar. The classroom is empty. Little cabinets with indoor plants on them, chairs all over the room, sounds of explosions... Somewhere a cat gives out a few frightened meows. Suddenly one of the cabinets opens. A 5-year-old boy comes out of the cabinet. He picks up one of the chairs, which was accidentally knocked over by running children, places it in the middle of the room and sits down on it.

We hear the distant sounds of explosions...



SERGEI LOZNISTA

Sergei Loznitsa was born in 1964 and grew up in Kiev, Ukraine. In 1987, he graduated in applied mathematics at the Ecole polytechnique in Kiev. He then worked as a researcher at the Kiev's Institute of Cybernetics, specialized in artificial intelligence. In 1997, Sergei received his diploma at the Russian National Institute of Cinema, in Moscow, where he studied filmmaking.

Since then, he has directed 18 documentaries, winning prizes all over the world, and 3 feature films, all selected in competition at the Cannes Film Festival: MY JOY in 2010, IN THE FOG in 2012, A GENTLE CREATURE in 2017.

DONBASS is his fourth feature, and will open Un Certain Regard at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival.

CAST

Tamara YATSENKO
Liudmila SMORODINA
Olesya ZHURAKOVSKAYA
Boris KAMORZIN
Sergei RUSSKIN
Petro PANCHUK
Irina PLESNYAEVA Zhanna
LUBGANE
Vadim DOBUVSKY
Alexander ZAMURAYEV
Gerogy DELIEV
Valeriu ANDRIUTA
Konstantin ITUNIN
Valery ANTONIUK
Nina ANTONOVA Natalia
BUZKO
Sergei KOLESOV Svetlana
KOLESOVA Sergei
SMEYAN

CREW

Director

SERGEI LOZNITSA

Script

SERGEI LOZNITSA

Cinematography

OLEG MUTU

Production designer

KIRILL SHUVALOV

Editing

DANIELIUS KOKANAUSKIS

Costume designer

DOROTA ROQUEPLO

Sound designer

VLADIMIR GOLOVNITSKI

Production

MA.JA.DE. FICTION (Germany, Allemagne),
ARTHOUSE TRAFFIC (Ukraine), JBA PRODUCTION (France),
GRANIET FILM (Netherlands, Pays-Bas), WILD AT ART (Netherlands, Pays-Bas),
DIGITAL CUBE (Romania, Roumanie)

Co-production

ATOMS & VOID (Netherlands, Pays-Bas)

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