

On the Edge

Belarusian documentary filmmaking nowadays signifies a number of individual names and films rather than an integral set that can be characterized by certain common features. It does not exist as a unity or school and is very much individual-oriented.

As far as European references are concerned, one can say that part of Belarusian society is obsessed with this matter. The topic of “Europeanness” has been analysed in Belarus thoroughly for the last twenty years. New geographical borders created by the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 demanded a new consciousness. Since that time, academic publications, books and newspaper articles, both in the original and in translation, have continued to appear on the subject. In the majority of these texts, a messianic, utopian view of Europe dominates, and the concept of “Europe” is synonymous with “civilization”. Europe is positioned as a conceptual centre, an unattainable ideal, and a synonym for unity. From this perspective, Belarus is seen as being integral to Europe, which is associated with unquestionable progress, while the opposite view and other vector of national orientation signifies “backwardness”. The state film studio Belarusfilm makes documentaries illustrating the point of view according to which Belarus is the indisputable centre of Europe. This is one of the few examples of this “European component” in respect to documentary cinema, which apart from this case is hard to trace.

A documentary film, unlike a piece of journalism, deals with issues or problems indirectly. I am not aware of any other Belarusian productions touching upon this subject. However, some films unintentionally reveal the implications of the country’s “European relations”, manifesting important things about Belarusian identity. These documentaries need to be examined from a certain angle. At the same time, such motifs become apparent more through a film’s content than its artistic form or stylistic peculiarities.

I would like to consider here the short film *We Are Living on the Edge* by Victor Asliuk. It is a twenty-minute documentary shot in a Belarusian village. The action takes place almost on a single spot: the bank of the river. As usual in Asliuk’s films, no voice-over or interviews are used in the documentary. There are good reasons why I have chosen this film for analysis. In the first place, I know the background of its production very well. Moreover, *We Are Living on the Edge* received numerous awards at major international film festivals all over the world, which indicates that it was somewhat of a phenomenon.



The relevance of the film's topic manifests itself on different levels, starting on the literal level. The village shown in the film is located on the bank of Niemen, a major river. It is considered both to have influenced the history, culture and traditions of Belarus and to link Belarus to Europe.

The Niemen can also be seen as a character in the film and as the centre of the narration. The documentary shows an old local tradition in the Belarusian province. For more than one hundred years, the villagers in early spring have driven their cows to an island in the middle of the river, where the animals stay

outdoors grazing freely until late autumn. Their old masters travel there by boat twice a day to milk them. The Niemen thus appears in the film as an element embracing everything – both animals and people. When a viewer sees a team of old ladies in a boat sculling, there is no doubt that they have been raised here, on that river, and have been doing this all their lives. The need to milk the cows shapes the rhythms of their daily routine, of which the boat trips are an integral part.

Yet Niemen also has a destructive role. It gradually but inescapably undermines the houses on its banks, devouring them one by one, as if it was an evil creature, demanding a regular sacrifice. This is a constant concern among the characters. However, the natives do not resist the given order of things and accept the unavoidable. They calmly discuss whose houses have already come down into the river and whose are next in turn.

Finally, the Niemen acts as a mythological Lethe, which absorbs everything and carries it away forever. As if they could feel this, the cows refuse to be driven into the river for their eventual return from the island, which makes for the film's most dramatic scene. After their active resistance, they are at last forced into the waters of the Niemen, where they swim submissively towards oblivion. The year when the film was being shot appeared to be the last manifestation of this old tradition.

The territory where the village is located has never had a border with Poland apart from the decades after the Second World War. The Soviet regime arrived here in 1939, but it did not really consolidate its power here until after the War. It has therefore always been a European area historically. In the film, it represents the European past, the way Europe lived centuries ago.

A herd of horses that passes by, running through the village looks even older. The horses seem to be wild horses living in the wilderness, as in ancient times; people's lives, in turn, have remained unchanged and untouched, losing the category of temporality and acquiring that of eternity instead. There is no actual time. Or perhaps people live as our ancestors did, in timeless space. Only nature and an endless ag-

ricultural cycle define their day, and there is nothing important beyond that.

These old characters speak the way all elderly people are supposed to do: they complain and regret that the old times are in the past. This cry seems both typically Belarusian and universal at the same time. They are dissatisfied with potatoes nowadays, which are all rotten and much worse than in the past. These peasants are also upset that their fellow villagers drink so much. And not only them; they sum up the situation, “vodka has led half of the world to ruin”. They mention the novelty of this trouble, or, at least, the extent of it. One of the ladies remembers that “in the old days”, unlike now, just one single drunkard could live in the village. She names this person, but stresses the fact that this woman, in spite of being drunk, still “managed to milk her cows”. So milking the cows appears to be one of the most significant activities that keeps the world turning.

Another detail showing the practicality and the value system of these rural inhabitants is not easy to notice unless you understand this life well. This is a scene shot on the top of a slope, where the most of the film’s events take place. A middle-aged husband and his wife are pulling a heavily loaded handcart filled with a dark substance, which is actually manure. A small piece of the substance falls down on the road unnoticed. Following the cart, an old lady, apparently the mother-in-law, picks up the wasted fertilizer with her bare hand, a natural peasant action that would be absolutely incomprehensible for young urbanized Europeans.

This vanishing old generation has to admit sadly the decline of the values so dear to them. One woman was looking after a neighbour’s grave. She had grown old and it had become hard for her to tend not just her own family graves but also the neighbour’s. She therefore asked the daughter of the dead neighbour to look after her mother’s grave herself. The girl not only did not know where her mother had been buried, but did not care. The old woman was shocked to hear the girl’s answer: “You can go and shit on her grave, it’d be all the same to me!” These drastic changes around them make the characters realize that their epoch is passing. Yet they are inclined to perceive them also as warnings of the fatal fate awaiting all mankind.

Nevertheless, the tone of these remarks is calm. The characters accept their life as it is. Their old faces are, as one film critic puts it, “magnificently lined with history”. These people seem to be the embodiment of human wisdom, whereas their surroundings call up a strong feeling of nostalgia. The jury at one of the festivals where the documentary was awarded formulated impressions from the film that influenced their decision in the following way: “For its sublime evoca-





tion of a life which is vanishing in front of our eyes". "We are living on the edge", reminds the jury; this is why cinema matters. They refer to the foundations of cinema which has been "from the very beginning an art of grieving and loss, of recording the trace of what was once, but not now, no more, ever".

Still, this point of view on the film is not shared by all film professionals. The reason for this is likely to be found in the cultural and historical differences that characterize Eastern Europe and the West. For one western film critic, the severity of life portrayed in the film prevails over its beauty, which dramatises his perception. In his generally praising review, he called the film a "monstertpiece" (an allusion to "masterpiece") and a "shimmering portrait of the end of the world".

The other side of this attitude highlights the social component of the film's subject, ignoring others. From this point of view, which is also typical of some western critics and directors, nothing like harmony or authenticity is considered in connection with the film, just the outrageous living conditions, lack of running water, social degradation and isolation, poverty etc. This approach in its extreme form showed itself at the Leipzig Film festival, when during a debate after the screening, director Victor Asliuk was attacked by the professional audience and accused of profiteering from the misfortunes of these unhappy people. They claimed the director was enjoying his victorious way from one festival to another, whereas he did nothing in fact to help his characters. The aggressiveness subsided a bit when the director said he was from such village himself and his own mother still lived in the very same conditions.

The next point of this East-West divergence concerns religion. Once commonly defined, "Christian Europe" nowadays is becoming a doubtful feature of the European society. On the one hand, Islam, with its often critical view towards modern European values and beliefs, is spreading impetuously. On the other hand, a general, globalized secularization is successfully setting in. In contrast, the people shown in *We Are Living on the Edge* are bearers of another way of thinking. In spite of the fact that they were born and brought up in aggressively atheistic Soviet times and now exist in a post-communist ideological chaos (for example, the Belarusian president characterizes himself as an "orthodox atheist"), they have an instinctive Christian consciousness.

God is present in their conversations. He is appealed to when the characters complain that they have a pain in their arms and legs. They are also worried about the future, since the sinfulness of modern people might precipitate the approaching end of the world.

At the same time, this inherent Christianity has a strong pagan element. In the film, there is a brilliant example of this instinctive dual feeling. At dawn, an old woman is milking her cow. Afterwards, she takes the bucket in her hand and at first makes the sign of the cross over the cow's rear. Immediately afterwards, she wipes the very same back part with the cow's own tail, an action which looks like an ancient heathen ritual. This is a kind of sacral activity, though, in practice, it was quite hard to film such authentic moments. The characters were reluctant to be shot not only for themselves, but for their cows. Everyone who owns a cow has to beware of any potential "evil eye". It took the shooting crew a month of coming daily and just being present nearby to earn the characters' trust.



Finally, the most essential part of the characters' existence is marked in the title of the documentary. One of the ladies says that they all are, as well as their cows, living "on the edge".

This category of remoteness from the rest of the world is typical for the old generation in this village. The young ones prefer to leave the place where their ancestors have lived for ages. They do not stay, but either emigrate abroad or go to the cities – a process Europe experienced two hundred years ago. One Belarusian intellectual once noted that "a Belarusian who has set off to the world is not to be found anymore". And he is correct. According to the opinion of the same philosopher, "a person who does not understand who he or she is, is a Belarusian for sure". Thus, young people move and vanish irreversibly among other nations, losing pieces of their uncertain identity forever.

As far as the old people are concerned, the concept of their being "on the edge", their "locality" is deeply embedded in their consciousness, which is common for Belarusians in general, and can be explained by the tragic turns of Belarusian history. For the last ten centuries, Belarus has been a battlefield, caught between the two main directions for European culture: the West and the East. This sometimes shows itself in funny forms. There is a village in the west of Belarus called Zubelevichi. A river divides it into two parts. One of them, where the Catholics live, is unofficially called Warsaw, whereas the other one, with Orthodox inhabitants, is known as Moscow. This is symbolic of the situation of the entire nation. Belarusians have not managed to join themselves to one side, nor the other. They remain somewhere in between, hiding in their "locality".

Such a duality does not make it possible for the nation to become formed; at the same time, there is no fatal split, either. The process of national self-identification for Belarusians is not yet complete. There are few people in Belarus who see themselves as Europeans – the

young prefer to move to America or Western Europe. The real problem, however, is that few young people sense themselves to be Belarusians. Nationally orientated Belarusians are a minority in their own land. This is one of our basic problems.

Because of the vagaries of the Belarusian' consciousness, the question: "How do we fit into Europe", while important, is not as relevant as it is elsewhere. We are still at the stage where the question: "Who we are?" is more vital. This represents a paradox: our history and the foundations of life are in Europe, but to be of interest to other Europeans we must resist a global unification somehow and retain our "Belarusian-ness". The most important prizes the film *We Are Living on the Edge* received were for "Best European film".