In the press conference for *My Joy* at the Cannes Film Festival, director Sergei Loznitsa said of the film: “in the beginning, I chose to make a road movie but you can’t really define the genre of the film. In fact I don’t even really understand the style!” Loznitsa’s debut feature film has left many critics and viewers feeling confused. The opening sequence, a body being thrown into a pit and covered in cement, is the first sign that spectators might need to rethink their expectations of the film based on its title.

The first half of *My Joy* closely resembles a road movie, with its episodic structure, following the truck driver Georgi (Viktor Nemets) as he attempts to deliver flour and meets interesting characters along the way. Early in his journey, Georgi is briefly stopped by the police. He then picks up a nameless old man, who tells him his story, in the form of a flashback, about why he now has no name. After the old man disappears at a gas station, Georgi meets a young prostitute, who helps him take a side road to avoid a traffic jam. Once she has left him, he journeys alone along isolated roads, eventually encountering a group of thieves.

After this meeting, the film seems to shift suddenly. There is another flashback and, when the story resumes, it is unclear how much time has elapsed or if the narrative is still following the same character. The nameless, mute man is also played by Nemets, although he has grown a beard for the second half of the film. The loosely linked episodes continue and the film winds its way towards where it began. Two soldiers, who fear the rural area through which they are driving, attempt to deliver a dead soldier’s body to his mother. They ask directions from a mad man walking along the road, who raves about how he killed people for the sake of the fatherland, so that children would smile in the future.

Eventually, Georgi sets out on the road again, this time as a hitchhiking passenger in someone else’s truck, and the film returns to the police station.

Although this is Loznitsa’s first feature film, many of the stylistic elements and themes of *My Joy* are familiar to those who are acquainted with his work in documentary. Like most of his documentaries, *My Joy* is set in the periphery, exploring the daily lives of everyday people, without telling the viewer anything about their personal histories and Loznitsa uses long takes with few cuts to present the story. Loznitsa, trained as a feature film director, rejects the notion that documentary cinema portrays reality and has an interest in directing
feature films because he feels there are certain ethical lines that cannot be crossed in documentary, citing suicide as an example of something that cannot happen on screen in a documentary film.

Appropriately for the theme of this year’s Symposium, Loznitsa pushes beyond the limits of documentary cinema in his portrayal of the horrors of the periphery. Typically, Loznitsa’s films depict the periphery as a place that is somewhat mysterious and decrepit, but hauntingly and timelessly beautiful, echoed in his choice of film titles such as Portrait and Landscape. In My Joy, however, the “other Russia” is no longer inhabited by fishermen (Artel), construction workers (Today We are Going to Build a House), and ordinary people waiting for a train (The Train Station) or bus (Landscape). Instead, it has become a dangerous place, populated by thieves, murderers, a child prostitute, corrupt police officers, a wandering lunatic, and a host of dead bodies appearing at various points throughout the film.

This film about the Russian periphery is actually the product of several countries. Loznitsa, who was born in Belarus and raised in Ukraine, now lives in Germany. The film was shot in Ukraine by Romanian cameraman Oleg Mutu, using funding from Germany, Ukraine, and the Netherlands after the Russian Ministry of Culture refused to finance the project. When My Joy premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010 it was not only the sole debut film in competition, but it was also Ukraine’s first-ever entry in competition at Cannes. It was then screened at Kinotavr, a festival exclusively for Russian films, the following month. The film’s controversial portrayal of a bleak Russian countryside, without the possibility for redemption, resulted in scathing attacks at Kinotavr. Loznitsa, however, still walked away with the prize for best director, as well as the prize from the film critics’ guild, and My Joy was the only debut feature to win a major prize at the festival. My Joy has been screened at numerous other festivals, including Karlovy Vary, New York, Toronto, London, Stockholm, Rotterdam, and the Molodist International Film Festival in Kiev, where it was awarded the Grand Prix.

Erin Alpert

Sergei Loznitsa

Loznitsa was born 5 September 1964 in Baranovichi, Belarus and moved to Kiev, Ukraine as a teenager. He graduated from the Kiev Polytechnic Institute with a degree in engineering and mathematics. He was employed as a scientist at the Institute of Cybernetics, where he was involved in the development of artificial intelligence, and worked as a translator from Japanese to Russian on the side. In a drastic change of careers, he entered the State Institute for Filmmaking (VGIK) in 1991 and studied in Nana Djordjadze’s studio. His debut documentary, Today We Are Going to Build a House, won several awards, including the prize for the best debut at the Russian Documentary Film Festival in Ekaterinburg. He has since made seven more shorts and three feature-length documentary films, which have been screened at festivals throughout the world. Loznitsa immigrated to Germany in 2001, but has continued to work with the Saint Petersburg Documentary Film Studio.

Filmography

2010  My Joy
2008  Northern Light (documentary, short)
2008  Revue (documentary)
2006  Artel (documentary, short)
2005  Blockade (documentary, short)
2004  Factory (documentary, short)
2003  Landscape (documentary)
2002  Portrait (documentary, short)
2001  Settlement (documentary)
2001  The Train Station (documentary, short)
1998  Life, Autumn (documentary, short)
1996  Today We Are Going to Build a House
      (documentary, short)