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The Breath of Filmmaking

Sergei Dvortsevov recently made his first fiction feature – yet he is still a documentary-maker at heart. DOX met him at Planete Doc Review.

By Emma Davie

Sergei Dvortsevov is a poet of documentary filmmaking, an artist who distils form into its essence. Each of his four internationally acclaimed documentaries, from *Paradise* to *In the Dark*, are intimate and epic at the same time, the result of a rigorous and humane examination of every aspect of the moving image. Every frame explores vital questions about the human condition and re-ignites the act of looking with depth and moral force.

In the past, Dvortsevov has talked of the ‘moral difficulty’ in making documentaries and has recently worked in fiction. *Tulpan*, his first feature about nomadic life in Southern Kazakhstan captivated audiences and critics at Cannes where it won ‘Un Certain Regard’.

I met with him at the Planete Doc Review in Poland to discuss what fresh perspective his directing of fiction has given him on his documentary making.

SD: For me, film is film, whether fiction or documentary. It is a different way of exploring how to create the world on screen. With documentary, we steal life, we are thieves, in a way. Of course in a good way, but we steal. For fiction, you create every second of reality but with documentary you use reality. The most important thing for me is, I deal with image. Of course now I work with actors and it’s completely different compared with doc film but still it’s creating a world. And my current film, of course, has developed from documentary. Maybe some people will question if it’s reality or acting because it’s very organic, very natural.

Actors and Animals

ED: How do you achieve this lack of self-consciousness?

SD: Maybe because I make a film about village people and there are many animals there and when you shoot animals they immediately convey some level of truth. That means actors should not be weaker than animals. Their acting should be so natural, so true. For an actor to be as perfect as an animal is a huge demand!

For my fiction, I ask my actors to live there first. If they play shepherds, I ask them to live there before we start shooting, to work as shepherds. As with documentaries, research is very important. I have a precise script but because we shot something very strong, then I

was forced to change the script according to the language with which I shot: long very powerful takes, impossible to cut. That’s why I was forced to redo the script.

ED: It’s interesting that you mention long takes. One of the things I love about your work is your respect for time. Like the Tarkovsky title “sculpting in time”, you use time as your material.

SD: I think that film is a very young art and we still don’t understand what we are dealing with. Tarkovsky connected it with time and he tried to understand, to discover something and I appreciate this attempt very much. I also have tried to understand what the nature of the image is. Tarkovsky said time. I deal more with energy. I think we are now just making the first steps to understand this art of cinema. Just a few directors try to understand the nature of this art, not just make entertainment.

Inherent Ethical Dilemmas

ED: I see it almost like a scientist’s work: you have been at the forefront of trying to do something simple but radical with our art form but now you’ve said you find it morally difficult to make documentaries. Does that make this exploration a dead end?

SD: When I am talking about this aspect, I am talking more about this contradiction of doc films. We want to make films out of the lives of real people and this is a contradiction because when you make something, you interfere with their lives and then you make art out of this. You create your own imagination, your own feeling about their life and this is not true. This is just a slight, tiny piece of truth and this is often not good for people. Very often it is painful for you also.

To have the motivation to make film, you have to understand why you want to do it: why you want to disturb these people, why you want to use, steal their lives. What do you want to show? That’s why for me there is a question, because I know now I have enough skill as a documentary maker to make ten, twenty different films about the same subject. Everyone who understands how to make films knows that it depends on the angle of camera, on the lens, on light. You have to ask yourself first of all, why do you do it? Do you have a strong reason? Not just to entertain. It’s absurd to make entertainment from real life just to show something funny. This is life; real life. It is serious for

who you shoot. It is not just about making a film to show at festivals and get prizes. This is about people.

That’s why for me this is a very strong contradiction of documentary, but at the same time, the most interesting documentaries are when they are very close to this borderline. The closer they are, the more interesting they are, because they go deep and the deeper you go, the more interesting it is, because you see more conflict, more drama – the drama of life. You touch more serious things. The deeper you go, the more moral and ethical problems you have.

When you start making films, you don’t question yourself because for you it’s just interesting, but the more skills you have, it changes. Like people who discovered nuclear power, Sakharov and so on – they were young. It was very good for them as scientists but after this work most of them turned against it. They asked themselves, what they had built? A bomb or an electricity station? Documentary films are like a very dangerous weapon and you have to understand why you do this.

Catching the Breathing

ED: You don’t structure your film around a traditional narrative. I’m interested to hear that when you edit, how do you know if the structure works and when you film, how do you know when you “have it”?

SD: It’s a very difficult question because the simpler a film looks, the more difficult the structure. For example *Bread Day* is a simple

film – seventeen long takes in one film – but to structure this film was very difficult. I try to build a story in such a way that I do not destroy the vision of reality, the subject which I shoot. I don’t destroy the breathing.

For me it’s very important to tell the story, but at the same time to put breathing inside the story, breathing which relates to the subject. Every person has their own rhythm of breathing and for me it’s very important to pass it on. Very often if you build a story, you are forced to destroy the breathing of life because you must build, which means you must cut, you must kill to make a structure and you feel this contradiction. On the one hand you need this breathing and, on the other, you need a good story and somehow you have to decide.

I don’t make films during the editing process, I make films when I shoot. Many people in documentary shoot something, then make films in the editing room. I don’t make films like this. While shooting I already understand how to edit.

ED: And yet the paradox seems to be that if you really understood what the film was, you wouldn’t have to make it, so there must be something new you understand in the editing room.



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SD: This is true. It's not that I know during shooting and that's it, but I have to catch breathing. I can't create breathing in the editing room. You have to understand before shooting how your picture will breathe. When I catch this, it is very good: deep breathing. But of course I don't know what film I make until the last day.

Preparation and Motivation

ED: I'm interested in the physical words you use like breathing and energy. Does it feel so physical for you when you are making your films? Often people forget their bodies when they are making films.

SD: Yes, but I like images very much. I like to understand how it works, what this breathing is. In some silent moment, you feel such strong energy. For example, one of my favourite moments in *Paradise* is when the cow puts its head in the barrel and then silence. There is maybe one minute of complete silence, no movement, nothing changes but you feel very strong energy. That's interesting. Why is it so powerful?

I think that probably now as documentary filmmaking goes more and more to TV, TV unfortunately cannot allow or doesn't like silence very much. For TV it's important constantly to entertain people.

These new technologies provide a lot of possibilities. It's good on the one hand because everyone now can make films, but when everyone can make films it starts to be bad for people – especially for the young generation, because they have to understand you have to be very prepared for shooting. You have to understand why you turn on the camera, not just because it's cheap.

ED: Do you think we forget to see then?

SD: Nowadays very often, yes. Now you see something and make a lot of films, but there's no energy. To put this energy on screen inside the image you have to have it yourself first of all and then put it in your cameraman, and you have to find energy in life because there is energy everywhere. But you need to feel this energy also. To feel this you have to be prepared, to be prepared to understand, not just to roll. You have to think first what to make work about. But if it's easy people don't think very much. All these tools don't give you enough motivation to think what you are doing.

Once I spoke with Ricky Leacock and he told me when he shot some films with Flaherty, they carried huge, heavy equipment to some mountains in Scotland. To carry this you have to think a hundred times before you start and it gives you motivation to be concentrated on what you want.

Documentary Is Closest to Life

ED: How do you know when you have found the right subject?

SD: It's a matter of intuition, I suppose. Suddenly I understand there is some energy here. You know, Tagore once said, when he was old, "I travelled my whole life. I saw many places, many countries, trying to understand the world and when I was very old, I returned to my village and once in the morning I saw the grass and I saw one drop of dew and I realised that the whole of life is reflected in this dewdrop."



Bread Day (1998).

For me it is very important to find this, some dew. I feel that through this I can show something more, not only this. I said I would not start a new film until I feel a strong motivation. I need a real reason to make film. But I love documentaries. In my soul I am a documentary maker. Maybe the next will also be fiction, maybe not. I don't know. For me, film is film. It depends on my feeling but of course I like life. I like life, and documentary is the closest to life in general. That's why I like it. ☒

Emma Davie

is a filmmaker, a tutor at Edinburgh College of Art and a consultant for the Scottish Documentary Institute.

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