

Placebo: Alt.Russia (2016)

Documentary, 67 min.

Directed by CHARLIE TARGETT-ADAMS.

Cast: Brian Molko, Stefan Olsdal, Steve Forrest, William Lloyd, Fiona Brice, Nick Gavrilovic.

United Kingdom: Riverman Music Management.

Language: English.

Placebo: Alt.Russia is a 67-minute documentary directed by Charlie Targett-Adams that follows the eponymous British band as they tour across Russia, marking their 20th anniversary by striving to discover an alternative side to Russian society. They begin their journey in the distant city of Krasnoyarsk and make their way through Novosibirsk, Omsk, Yekaterinburg, and a slate of other remote Siberian cities before bringing their journey to an end in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. As Brian, Stefan, and their fellow bandmates tour each city, they strive to connect with the area's alternative crowd by meeting local creatives, in the process building their own small bridges between Russia and the West.

Documentaries about Westerners travelling to Russia often offer a potpourri of condescending rhetoric that is epitomised by the notion of the 'civilised' Westerner calling on the 'backward' Russia with a message of 'enlightenment.' However, *Placebo: Alt.Russia* offers its audience something different. While the film can hardly be considered pro-Russian propaganda, it is certainly not anti-Russian either, exhibiting the musicians' genuine attempts to discover an alternative Russia that is often unknown in the West. Indeed, the band itself has a very personal stake in this exploration, as they are genuinely touched by the surge of positive energy they receive from their Siberian fans who, at one point, surprise them with flash mobs of red balloons and white paper airplanes.

Stefan, the bassist, draws noteworthy parallels throughout the film, likening the Trans-Siberian Express to a riverboat in Paris and the interior of a bar in Novosibirsk to one he once frequented in Mayfair. He expresses a particular fascination with the neo-Soviet constructivist architectural designs of a local architect, Fyodor, comparing them to some of the buildings he had seen in Shoreditch, East London. Certainly, the band makes a sincere attempt to reconcile the UK and Russia culturally, celebrating the contrasting marriage between old traditions and new globalisation-driven trends in Russia.

Hailing the tolerance and freedom of expression in Russian society as they travel through the fairly apolitical Siberia, it is refreshing to witness the band's efforts to give often-ignored voices a chance to tell their stories, such as a local animator named Nina who makes short films and cartoons for children at her modest home studio in Omsk. When asked about her life in Russia, Nina expresses her contentment with the state's support of her as a single mother, while simultaneously accounting for her disposition by explaining that she does not possess any strong political views.

After meeting a few more alternative artists – Renat, a traditional Bashkir musician from Ufa; Muddlehood, a collective from Nizhny Novgorod who hang their paintings in derelict buildings; and the Recycle Group from Krasnodar, whose world-renowned art installations feature the likes of Bender from 'Futurama' in the place of Buddha – Placebo finally arrive in Moscow. Here the band meets with the head of 'TV Rain' – one of Russia's most popular internet channels known for its criticism of Putin – who recounts how ever-changing Russian legislation resulted in an accumulation of debt that forced TV Rain to relocate from television to the internet.

Placebo: Alt.Russia effectively demonstrates the emergence of alternative artistic movements across Russia and the accompanying political struggles waged as these artists attempt to introduce novel ways of social life into the Russian consciousness. Ultimately, the film offers an upbeat, politically hopeful tone in its celebration of the full artistic and social force of Russia's emerging, gutsy creatives, who strive with all their might to make their creative voices heard.

ERNEST A. REID

School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London

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