

Ordinary People

BY HOWARD FEINSTEIN | 16 MAY 2009

Dir/scr. Vladimir Perisic. France/Serbia/Switzerland. 80mins.

This powerful Serbian film has an English title which succinctly sums up its subject: soldiers who violate international law during wartime without self-judgment, viewing their acts as banalities on the same level as smoking a cigarette or brushing their teeth. Perisic does not depict these young men as monsters, but as uninteresting products of a system of rigid discipline that, over time, eradicates one's sense of self as well as one's conscience.

He makes his point by putting us inside the head of a simple conscript, Dzoni (Popovic), during the 1990s when the Serbs were fighting Muslims and Croats over their secession from Yugoslavia. At the beginning Dzoni is an innocent, a blank; his face has no definable characteristics. The newest member of a seven-man unit, he is harassed by the others and treated as an outsider. The group is sent by bus on an undisclosed assignment. They see nothing at all happening at the remote, deserted set of buildings - either a factory or a farm - they are taken to. Some have a premonition of the task they will be told to perform: executing civilian males with a rifle shot to the back.

Perisic takes his time showing us the young man's evolution into a murder machine. The camera lingers on him as he sits in the grass with nothing to do. After the first batch of men arrives, Dzoni tells his macho commanding officer, Kouki (Isakovic), that he cannot carry out the order. He tries anyway, but turns his head and misses his target; another man finishes the victim off. Out of ennui, and the desire to be accepted by his comrades, and possibly the wish to please the man in charge—the psychology of military training put them in the role of father figures—Dzoni becomes thicker-skinned. He does not hesitate to fire, then becomes even more brutal. By this time his features have altered, making him look somewhat harder.

This plot may not seem sufficient to carry a feature, but the director's artful skill carries it along. Perisic opts for a precise, minimalist style with mostly static shots in carefully framed long takes, often with windows and doorways to double the effect. The sparseness affords him an opportunity to play with light and shadow: it might seem a dichotomy, but he treats this heavy, horrid subject poetically.

We never lose sight of the fact that the single day in which the action takes place is an extremely hot one. White walls give off a punishing glare, Dzoni squints and sweats. There is an existential component to this story; it's possible that similarities to Albert Camus's *The Stranger* are conscious. For Dzoni, new calluses on his right hand are the only reminder of what he did. Foreseeing a potential problem, Kouki tells him, "Nobody forced you."

Production companies

TS Productions

Trilema

Prince Film

International sales

Wild Bunch

(33) 1 53 01 50 20

Producers

Anthony Doncque

Milena Poylo

Gilles Sacuto

Cinematography

Simon Beaufls

Editor

Martial Salomon

Production design

Diana Radosavljevic

Sound

Frederic Heinrich

Main cast

Relja Popovic

Boris Isakovic

Miroslav Stevanovic

Miroslav Isakovic