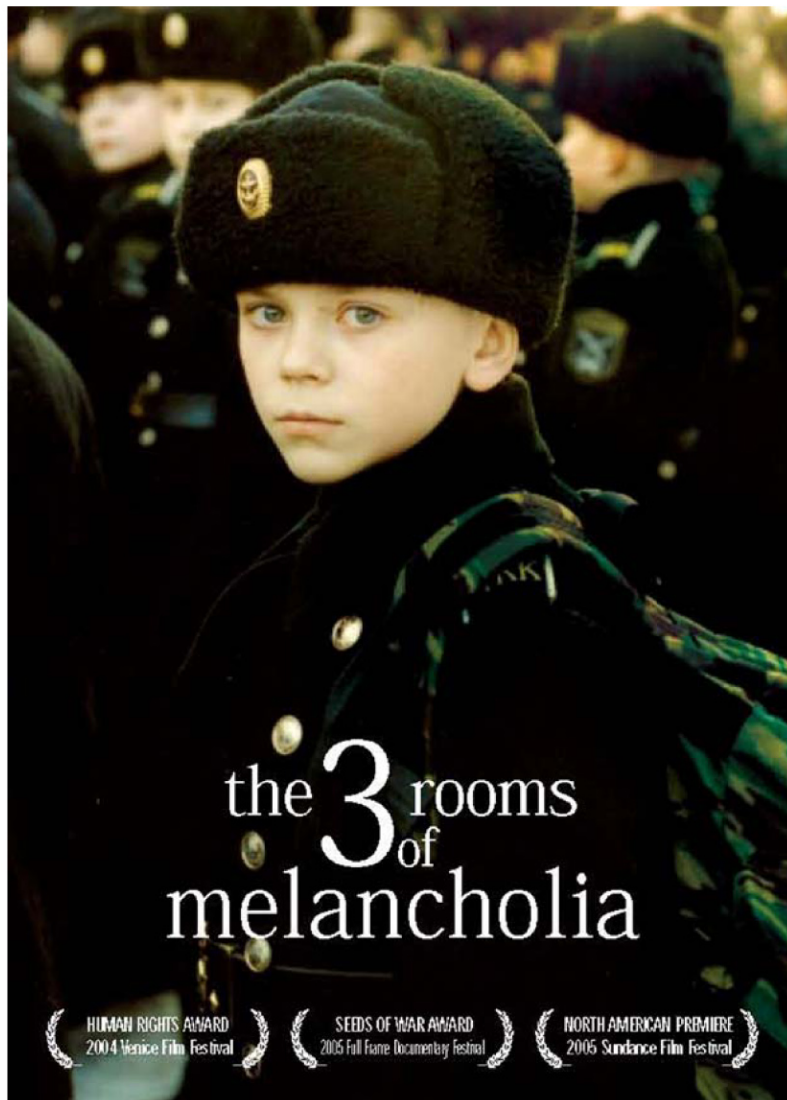


THE 3 ROOMS OF MELANCHOLIA

a film by PIRJO HONKASALO



106 minutes / color-b&w / 2004 / 35 mm / 1.85:1 / Dolby SR
IN RUSSIAN, CHECHEN, ARABIC & FINNISH WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

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Synopsis 1

This award-winning, stunningly beautiful documentary reveals how the Chechen War has psychologically affected children in Russia and in Chechnya. Divided into three episodes or 'rooms,' the film is characterized by an elegantly paced, observational style, which uses little dialog, minimal voice-over commentary and a spare but evocative musical score.

Room No. 1, "Longing," set in a military academy in Kronstadt, near St. Petersburg, portrays the highly regimented lives of the young cadets, most of them from broken or dysfunctional families, who are being trained for future roles in the Russian army. While showing their military drills, classroom sessions, church ceremonies, and recess period, the film briefly profiles several of the boys, whose stories reflect the political turmoil of contemporary Russia.

Room No. 2, "Breathing," filmed in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, the former Soviet republic fighting for its independence, shows the widespread destruction wrought by the Russian shelling and bombardment, a city where families struggle to survive in barely habitable buildings, packs of stray dogs roam the streets, Russian military vehicles clog the roads, soldiers monitor roadblocks, and a courageous woman attempts to rescue orphaned or semi-orphaned children from the violence.

Room No. 3, "Remembering," filmed in the neighboring Islamic republic of Ingushetia, focuses on children in refugee camps and in a makeshift orphanage, including a young boy found living in a cardboard box, a 19-year-old girl traumatized by her rape at the age of 12 by Russian soldiers, and a roomful of children transfixed by televised images of the deadly aftermath of the crisis in which a Moscow theater audience was held hostage by Chechen terrorists.

THE 3 ROOMS OF MELANCHOLIA, which poetically blends sustained close-ups of children's faces with gray, fog-shrouded landscapes, illuminates the emotional devastation wrought on youngsters who have little or no understanding of the historical and political reasons for the bitter conflict. In an even more troubling sense, the film also makes clear how the seeds of hatred are being instilled in young minds that will likely fuel the conflict into the next generation.

Synopsis 2

This highly unconventional, moving documentary on the children who are victims of the seemingly endless Chechen conflict has been deemed "a masterpiece...a profound meditation on the cost of war" (Pat Aufderheide, *In These Times*). With stunning photography and a minimum of dialogue, the filmmaker takes us inside a Russian military school, established by Putin for orphans as young as 9. Their days are filled with ice-cold regimentation, as they train to fight Russia's ethnic and religious wars. Cut to orphaned Chechen children who are being sheltered by a good Samaritan. THE 3 ROOMS OF MELANCHOLIA has the look of a Renaissance painting, infused with deep, dark colors that match the solemnity of its subject matter. The film's elegance and dignity suggest a compassion and intelligence that are timeless, if in short supply.

— Karen Cooper, Director, Film Forum

Review Excerpts

"Magnificent! Evidence that when a director-cinematographer with a poet's vision photographs the material world, ordinary human faces and landscapes can leave impressions that transcend any words that might describe them. A requiem for the living as well as for the dead."—Stephen Holden, The New York Times

"Achingly Beautiful!"—New York Post

"★★★★ 14 out of 4 Stars!"—Jan Stuart, Newsday

"Quietly Devastating! Mesmerizing! Undeniably Powerful!"—Time Out

"A MASTERPIECE! A profound meditation on the cost of war."
—Pat Aufderheide, In These Times

"A beautiful, moving, mysterious film, and genres can't hold it! A prodigious, almost spiritual experience, a luminous, challenging art movie out of the Tarkovsky school that happens to be about a real war and its effects on real children. It was also a daring cinematic enterprise; while the Western media had trouble getting any independent footage from Chechnya, this Finnish art-film director took a film crew there and captured the breathtaking devastation. Put this on your must-see list!"—Andrew O'Hehir, Salon.com

"All the force and the beauty of cinema is here... A magnificent and essential work!"
—Le Nouvel Observateur (France)

"The most revelatory and accomplished film in the Sundance festival! Creates such a quiet whirlwind of emotion it sucks the oxygen out of your heart."—John Anderson, Newsday

"Extraordinary! A visual poem, a moving painting and an orchestral requiem."
—International Documentary

"Viscerally poetic, the film is stunning in its invention, its beauty, and its muffled sadness... A unique work of art."—Premiere (France)

"Besides its obvious artistic merits in the way the film is structured, photographed and put together, there was no more relevant and timely film in the whole festival, more or less coinciding, with the terrorist slaughter of the children in the school in Beslan, Russia... [The film] gives a powerful symbolic and moral charge and a characteristic item of [Honkasala's] rather incomparable strength and reach with this documentary."—Jan Aghed, FIPRESCI

"Walloping... Harrowing... Rapturous... One of those rare films that deserves to be called 'poetic,' THE 3 ROOMS rhymes images—of hands, sleeping faces, news footage of the terrorist attack in Moscow's Dubrovka Theater—across its span, adding a spine of formal complexity that enriches the emotional impact. Given how difficult it is for even hard-news journalists to get access to Chechen locations, production team's accomplishment looks all the more impressive."
—Variety

Film Festival Selections and Awards

NORTH AMERICAN PREMIERE
2005 Sundance Film Festival

FIPRESCI AWARD
2005 Thessaloniki
Documentary Festival

SEEDS OF WAR AWARD
2005 Full Frame Documentary
Film Festival

SPECIAL MENTION, BEST INTL FILM
2005 DocAviv Intl
Documentary Festival

MOST INNOVATIVE FILMMAKER AWARD
2005 Chicago Intl Documentary Festival

FIRST PRIZE
2004 cph:dox Festival (Denmark)

OFFICIAL SELECTION
2005 Amnesty Intl Film Festival
2005 Hot Docs Film Festival

"LINA MANGIACAPRE" AWARD
2004 Venice Film Festival

GRAND PRIZE
2005 Zagreb Intl Documentary Festival

HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD
2004 Venice Film Festival

WORLD CATHOLIC ASSOC AWARD
2005 Mar del Plata Festival (Argentina)

AMNESTY INTL DOEN AWARD
2004 Amsterdam Intl
Documentary Festival

Production History

An American producer with an ambitious plan for a trans-Atlantic series on the Decalogue approached Iikka Vehkalahti of the Finnish public broadcasting company YLE to suggest a suitable director. Vehkalahti asked Pirjo Honkasalo to direct one part of the series. She chose the commandment "*Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour*", and *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia* was born.

It took a whole year to reach a draft agreement that was apparently acceptable to all parties. As the talks entered a critical phase, Honkasalo engaged Millennium Film producer Kristiina Pervilä as a partner. Even as all seemed to be ready, Honkasalo could not bring herself to accept a clause giving the American producer the right to a "final cut". A staunch believer in the European "auteur" tradition, she felt that a film director must not relinquish control over a work for which she is artistically and morally responsible. Nor would she allow any third party to pre-empt her right to make the final judgement calls on how to use footage of the lives of people living in a war zone.

At that point the American producer visited Helsinki to try and resolve the conflict. As Honkasalo remained intractable, he quipped: "I opened heaven's gate for you girls and you are too stupid to walk in". The two sides never met again.

Honkasalo had also refused to divulge anything about the theme of the film to the Americans before any agreement had been signed, so the subject remained free for her to work on. Even though it meant they had to start looking for funds all over again, Honkasalo and Pervilä were determined to continue with the project, particularly as a great deal of preliminary work had already been done with trips to possible locations and the drafting of a script.

In addition to winning financial support in Finland, Sweden and Denmark, the two women obtained financing from Nordisk Film & TV Fond, a Scandinavian foundation, and from the European Media Fund. Germany's ZDF and the Franco-German television channel Arte offered to co-produce the film through the Martin Pieper "Grade format" scheme. The Kronstadt Military Academy was willing to welcome the film crew, and the President of Ingushetia volunteered transport and armed security guards for field trips to the crisis area. Everything seemed to be going well.

And then the unpredictable happened: September 11, the collapse of the Twin Towers, and Russia joined America's war against terrorism. In exchange, the West chose to silence its criticism of the war in Chechnya, now redefined as part of Russia's contribution to the war against terrorism. Chechnya thus became an internal affair for the Kremlin and the wall of silence became virtually indestructible.

Earlier on, during the pre-shooting trips, Ingushetia had been awash with observers from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other human rights organizations who were able to keep track of events in neighboring Chechnya. They were now quietly being forced out of the country while, at around the same time, the post of President of Ingushetia "conveniently" went to a new incumbent, a former classmate of Vladimir Putin with a KGB background. The change of attitude also meant there was no more talk of cars and bodyguards for the crew. The film crew were let in, but without their equipment, and they were soon presented with an ultimatum to leave the country within 24 hours. A climate of distinct hostility towards the media began to spread across Russia. By now the Kremlin had significantly tightened its grip on the media and effectively controlled all television channels of any importance, and most of the press organs.

Increasing numbers of former KGB officers - now employed by its successor organisation, the FSB, or Federal Security Service - began to infiltrate all manner of public administration bodies across the Russian Federation in what effectively amounted to a quiet takeover of large portions of executive power by the secret services.

Shooting for the film was taking place at the Kronstadt Military Academy in October 2002 when Chechen rebels burst into the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow. The ensuing hostage drama resulted in a change of atmosphere in Kronstadt. The directors of the cadet school began to make it impossible to continue filming. They became increasingly nervous and suspicious, fearing bad repercussions. No-one seemed to think that shooting footage of Russian and Chechen children was a good idea any more, albeit on the grounds of propriety or out of concern for the safety of those involved.

Kristiina Pervilä, the Finnish producer, battled for the ever-increasing number of new, additional official filming permits, calling on influential contacts in the cultural sphere, in the military, in political circles - including the Duma (the lower chamber of the Russian Parliament) - and among civil servants responsible for the issuance of accreditation credentials to journalists in the Caucasus region. They did manage to continue shooting the film, but the details must remain confidential to avoid putting anyone at risk.

Filming finally had to stop in the autumn of 2003, when the hostilities began spilling over into Ingushetia and it became too risky for anyone to show their face to a camera.

More on the “3 Rooms”

Room No. 1: Kronstadt - A fortress island near the city of St. Petersburg, Russia



Kronstadt, founded in 1704, is a town of 45,000 inhabitants on an island in the Gulf of Finland. Nowadays this town is formally a district of St. Petersburg. Traditionally, it has served as the base of the Russian Baltic Fleet.

In February 1921 the inhabitants of Kronstadt were, like most other city-dwellers in Russia, hungry, cold and discontented with Communist rule. The sailors at Kronstadt were in sympathy with them; they recognized that winning the war against the Whites was one thing, but that it was also necessary to defend the spirit of the Revolution against the authoritarian and bureaucratic regime the Bolsheviks were building.

In March 1921 Kronstadt was the scene of the first and last popular armed uprising against the rule of the Communist Party. The revolt only lasted 18 days, but could conceivably have provided the spark for a third revolution that would have toppled the young Communist government and created a very different Russia.

The island was closed to ordinary citizens until 1996, because of the presence of a naval military base on the island. You could only go to Kronstadt on an excursion or at the invitation of a resident of the town.

Nine years ago a brand-new cadet school took up quarters in an old, 500 meter-long, pre-revolutionary barracks building surrounded by an iron fence. The number of enrollees quickly rose to six hundred from less than a hundred initially, with ages ranging from nine to seventeen. The school, which represents an attempt to revive Czarist military traditions, is under President Putin's special protection. At the academy, the days are filled with military drill and classroom activities, leaving the boys only one hour of free time each day. The school can also be seen as a social project, as orphans and children with difficult family backgrounds are given priority in student selection. The children of fallen heroes of the Chechen war are particularly welcome. Still, most of the boys do look back on a long family tradition of careers in the military, the police force or the KGB. The cadets come from all over the Russian Federation, also from Chechnya, some having grown up thousands of kilometers away.

Room No. 2: Grozny - The Capital of Chechnya



Chechnya is a small area situated in the north-eastern part of the central Caucasian mountain chain. The neighboring Ingushetians are close relatives of the Chechens, both linguistically and culturally. In the vernacular, both groups describe themselves as "Vainah" - literally "our people". The Chechens are the main ethnic group in the northern Caucasus.

Imperial Russia set out to conquer the Caucasus region as early as the eighteenth century with the help of a special military unit known as the Cossacks, who were to become the backbone of Moscow's expanding colonial rule. The Russian-Chechen wars have been a recurrent reality ever since.

The current capital of Chechnya, Grozny (a Russian word meaning cruel), was originally a fortress erected in 1818 as a deterrent against Chechen rebels. The same year marked the beginning of the Caucasian war, a period of frequent hostilities that spanned more than forty years. Today's Chechens say that they lost about 75 per cent of their people in the course of the fighting in the nineteenth century, with casualties on both sides totaling several hundreds of thousands. After the war, surviving Chechens were deported from the fertile regions of the Northern Caucasus.

Large-scale oil production in the Grozny area began in 1893, drawing foreign capital in its wake. The financial boom resulted in the establishment of several large factories.

The so-called "wild division" of Chechen and Ingush regiments during the First World War became famous for their unique mix of bravery, proclivity to sacrifice in action, contempt of death, and their phenomenal ability to withstand pain and scarcity.

In 1944 Stalin ordered the simultaneous deportation of more than 300,000 Chechens and 93,000 Ingushetians to Central Asia, with a resulting death toll in excess of 180,000. A ban was imposed on the Chechen language, which remained in place for 13 years. Only in 1957 were the survivors given permission to return to their homeland and re-establish an autonomous Chechen-Ingush Socialist Soviet Republic. An assembly of representatives of the Chechen nation declared Chechnya's independence in November 1990 amid claims that a country which produces more than four million tons of crude oil a year can fend for itself, even without Russia.

Dudayev was elected the first President of Chechnya in 1991. The same year saw a revolution that caused a shift of power away from a thin layer of Chechen intellectuals to a new set of rulers characterized by parochialism, foolhardiness, cruelty and unflagging determination. Key positions in the economy went to people with no relevant

expertise. Oil riches vanished into thin air. Such developments eventually led to the outbreak of the first Chechnya war.

By 1996 the total number of fatalities had exceeded 200,000 and a peace treaty was signed in Hasavjurt. The accord, which put an end to the first Chechnya war, also effectively set the stage for the second. The Russian military felt bullied and humiliated, and complained that the politicians had not allowed them to "finish the job"; to a large extent, this attitude accounts for the kind of revenge-driven brutality seen during the second Chechnya war, with its trail of medieval atrocities perpetrated against rebels and civilians alike.

Aslan Maskhadov became the second President of Chechnya in 1997. His imposition of Shariah (strict Islamic rule) and the carrying out of public executions did not save the country from chaos and anarchy. Chechnya became something of a safe haven for criminals from all over the Russian Federation.

When a Chechen hit squad led by Basayev and Khattab attacked a village in Dagestan in 1999, Russia had to respond in some way. Public support for Vladimir Putin, the newly appointed crisis Prime Minister and head of the KGB's successor organization the FSB, seems to have been enhanced ahead of the 2000 Presidential Election by his endorsement, after the bombing of a block of flats in Moscow, of renewed military action in Chechnya and his decision to mount a counter-terrorist operation in the northern Caucasus. After succeeding a much-enfeebled Yeltsin as President, Putin failed to stop the war, although he had several real opportunities to do so. The Caucasus expedition now threatened to become a chronic problem for the 21st century as well, if only because of a large number of vested interests in keeping it that way.

If history repeats itself, the region could be in for decades of continuing hostilities echoing the nineteenth-century Caucasian war.

Our film shows Hadizhat Gataeva as she combs the ruins of shot-up houses in central Grozny in search of orphaned or semi-orphaned children and offers to take care of them and be "a mother" to them. Gataeva, who grew up in an orphanage herself, has been harboring abandoned children since the first war in Chechnya.

Room No. 3: In the State of Ingushetia - 4 kilometers from the border between Russia and Chechnya



Ingushetia, or "Galgaachia" in the native tongue, is the smallest constituent republic of the Russian Federation, located in the northern Caucasus. The Ingush people are closely related to the Chechens and speak a similar language, belonging to the Caucasian family of languages. Ingushetia has been part of Russia since 1810. From 1921 to 1924 it was part of the Soviet Mountain Republic established in the Caucasus. The Ingush Autonomous Oblast was established in 1924. From 1934 to 1992 it was joined to neighboring Chechnya in the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, except for a brief period following World War II.

Many of the families who lost their homes when they were forced to leave Chechnya because of the armed conflict that began in 1999 are now living in appalling conditions in the neighboring Russian Republic of Ingushetia. Initially, many displaced Chechens lived in tented camps, but these have now all been closed down by the Ingush authorities in an attempt to make them go home. Some of the internally displaced families are still living in ruined factories and former farm buildings - which are not fit for human habitation - without adequate shelter or such vital services as water, gas and electricity.

The Ingush authorities say that it is safe to return to Chechnya, claiming that the situation has returned to normal. However, many who would like to return are afraid. They say that their greatest fear is that their children will be abducted during night raids and will "disappear" like so many others in Chechnya. The Ingush authorities sometimes promise to provide material for housing, but often the material is delivered and then taken away the next day. In some cases people were not allowed to move into houses built by aid agencies such as *Médecins Sans Frontières*. Before the closure of the tented camps, local and federal authorities cut off gas and electricity supplies in an attempt to force people to return to Chechnya. Many of the human rights violations that have characterized the conflict in Chechnya are now spilling over into Ingushetia. There are frequent reports of the "disappearance" and killing of Ingush and Chechens in Ingushetia. There are also reports of harassment of those who speak out against the spread of violence.

The current level of atrocities virtually borders on genocide or ethnic cleansing. People are abducted from their homes by kidnappers who demand ransoms to let them go. Failure to oblige may result in having to pay for the victim's maimed corpse, albeit at a lower price. The Duma has declared the war over several times, but the bombing raids have not ceased. The refugee camps in Ingushetia have been emptied but the displaced persons have nowhere to go in Chechnya. With shooting in her backyard, Hadizhat Gataeva, the woman in our film who takes care of nearly 63 orphans, must move her family out of harm's way again, to neighboring Dagestan since they cannot return to Chechnya. But it is not clear just where in Dagestan they will be able to set up a new home. Kapanamur, the German charity that has been supporting Ms. Gataeva's family for years, has announced that they will stop their support at the end of the year.

Filmmaker's Statement



The personal point of departure:

Having completed my "Trilogy of the Sacred and Satanic"(the full-length documentary films *Mysterion*, *Tanjuska and the 7 Devils*, and *Atman*), I felt I had purged myself of what I had sought from the documentary film: its purifying and implacable concreteness. I had given whatever I had to give; to that concretion, an intimation of human silence.

I felt an attraction and attachment to the logic of the dream, to which the fictional film provides the most natural path. The world of the dream is half in the past, half in the future. Its gods swing back and forth between life and death. There is no sense of longing in dreams. Time in dreams is not time in time. I directed the feature film "*Fire-Eater*".

I have always been stimulated not only by the Sacred and Satanic, but also by the Poetic and Political. It was this that drew me back to the documentary.

I don't care for truths, for I see all thought as roiling foam that adheres to nothing nor holds fast; but in the time when I am not asleep or dreaming, I wish to know how the human tribe leads its life, shapes its history and expresses its will, which always seeks to improve the human condition and yet wallows, bewildered, in its blood like some elk gone astray in the city and impaled on the spikes of a cemetery fence. It should not happen this way.

Europe is filled with people who need grace of some kind to cope with their righteous rage. The righteous rage turns, a reflection, against them. And life is no court of justice; justice does not prevail, life does. It rises out of chaos in an ascending spiral, briefly appears to have structure, and descends in the curve of a downward spiral toward fresh chaos.

Stripping away icons of the enemy calls for the acceptance of grace along with righteousness. Grace is illogical and irrational - in other words, a profoundly gratuitous liberation from the compulsion to hate.

Filmmaker Biography



PIRJO HONKASALO - DIRECTOR, CINEMATOGRAPHER and PROFESSOR OF THE ARTS

Pirjo Honkasalo has directed, written and worked as a cinematographer for documentaries and feature films for over 25 years. Ms. Honkasalo was born in Helsinki in 1947. She entered film school at the age of 17 and completed her cinematographic thesis at the age of 21. In the same year she shot her first full-length film. She continued to study and worked as an assistant at the Temple University in Philadelphia. Her first major directing role, the historical drama film *Tulipää (Flame Top)*, was chosen for the Cannes Official Selection series in 1980.

As a documentarian, she is best known for her trilogy *The Trilogy of the Sacred and Satanic*, the final part of which, *Atman*, won the Joris Ivens prize in Amsterdam in 1996.

Her latest drama film, *Tulennielijä (The Fire-Eater)*, won the AFI (American Film Institute) Grand Prix Festival in Los Angeles in 1998.

EDUCATION

1965-69 University of Art and Design, TAIK, Helsinki, Finland,
Degree in Cinematography

1971-72: Temple University (School of Communications)
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
Post-graduate work in Film Studies
Graduate Assistant

RETROSPECTIVES

Rouen, France 1996,
Kuopio, Finland 1998,
Visby, Sweden 2000
Docpoint, Helsinki, Finland 2004

AWARDS FOR LIFE'S WORK

BAT Prize at Sodankylä 1993
SUOMI-FINLAND Award 1998
LATERNA MAGICA 1999
AHO & SOLDAN 2004

SHORT FILMOGRAPHY

Under production 2004:

TERREMOTO, a documentary film
BETONIYÖ, a feature film (casting period)

Documentary feature

THE 3 ROOMS OF MELANCHOLIA

2004, 105 MIN., 35mm
Producer: Millennium Film & Baabeli Ky
Pirjo Honkasalo: Director, Cinematographer, Editor

Feature film

TULENNIELIJÄ (Fire-Eater)

1998, 100 min., 35 mm
Producer: Marko Röhr Productions, co-producers Aquavite film&media, SVT Drama (scripted by Pirkko Saisio)

Pirjo Honkasalo: Director

Awards and festivals: *Grand Prix of AFI (Los Angeles International Film Festival 1998)*; two Awards at the *Locarno International Film Festival*, Rouen, France; *Torino, Italy, Cinema Delle Donne Special Prize of the Jury*; *Viitasaari Finland*; *nine Jussi Awards (the Finnish Academy Awards)*; *State of Finland Film Award 1998*; *Fire-Eater has been screened in over thirty countries*

Documentary feature

MYSTERION (Mysterion)

Part I: THE TRILOGY OF THE SACRED AND SATANIC

1991, 94 min., 35mm

Producer: Epidem Oy & Baabeli Ky, co-producers SFI, YLE TV-1 (in co-operation with Eira Mollberg)

Pirjo Honkasalo: Director, Cinematographer, Editor

Awards & festivals: *Grand Prix of the Balticum Film Festival; Jussi Prix (the Finnish Academy Award) for the best Finnish Documentary of 1991; State of Finland Film Award 1991; Berlin Film Festival Panorama; Viitasaari Festival*

Documentary feature

TANJUSKA JA 7 PERKELETTÄ (Tanjuska and the 7 Devils)

Part II: THE TRILOGY OF THE SACRED AND SATANIC

1993, 83 min., 35mm

Producer: Baabeli Ky, co-producers SFI, YLE TV-1

Pirjo Honkasalo: Director, Cinematographer, Editor, Producer

Awards & festivals: *Amanda Award for the best documentary in Northern Europe 1993; Kettu Prize and Jussi (The Finnish Academy Award) Prize for Finland's best documentary 1993; International Jury Award (Bombay International Film Festival); Special Jury Prize (Amascara Festival in Portugal); State of Finland Film Award 1993; Berlin Film Festival Forum*

Documentary feature

ATMAN (Atman)

Part III: THE TRILOGY OF THE SACRED AND SATANIC

1996, 76 min., 35mm

Producer: Bayerischer Rundfunk&Telepool, Baabeli Ky (cinema version)

Pirjo Honkasalo: Director, Cinematographer

Awards & festivals: *Joris Ivens Award (Grand Prix) at the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival 1996; Kettu Prize (best documentary film in Finland 1996); State of Finland Film Award 1996*

TV drama

LEONARDON IKKUNAT (Leonardo's Windows)

1986, 82 min., video

Producer: YLE, TV-1 (written by Pirkko Saisio)

Pirjo Honkasalo: Director, Editor

Awards: *Prix de Special Jury (Festival International du Film d'Art, Paris); State of Finland Film 1986*

Feature film

DA CAPO (Da Capo)

Shot on location in Finland, Los Angeles and Las Vegas

1985, 110min., 35mm

Producer: P-Kino Oy, in co-operation with the Swedish Film Institute, YLE TV-1 (in co-operation with Pekka Lehto)

Pirjo Honkasalo: Director, Writer

Festivals: *(e.g.) Cannes Director's Fortnight*

Feature film

250 GRAMMAA (250 Grams, a Radioactive Testament)

1983, 62 min., 35mm

Producer: P-Kino Oy (in co-operation with Pekka Lehto)

Based on a book of poetry by Reidar Eknert

Pirjo Honkasalo: Director, Writer, Editor

Awards & festivals: *State of Finland Film Award 1983; International Festival of Venice 83; Moscow Film Festival*

Feature film

TULIPÄÄ (Flame Top)

Shot on location in Finland and the Soviet Union (Lenfilm-Studios)

1980, 145 min., 35mm

Producer: P-Kino Oy, co-producers BBC & the Swedish Film Institute, YLE TV-1 (in co-operation with Pekka Lehto)

Pirjo Honkasalo: Director, Writer

Awards & festivals: *Cannes, main feature competition (the second Finnish film of all time); most major film festivals (e.g. London, Los Angeles); four Jussi Prizes (the Finnish Academy Awards)*

Credits

director & cinematographer PIRJO HONKASALO	producer KRISTIINA PERVILÄ Millennium Film P.H. Baabeli
edited by NIELS PAGH ANDERSEN PIRJO HONKASALO	co-producers LISBET GABRIELSSON, LG Film LISE LENSE-MØLLER, Magic Hour Films HEINO DECKERT, MAJADE Films
director's assistant & camera assistant MARITA HÄLLFORS	sound mix OLLI PÄRNÄNEN
additional camera KATINA & MADINA	meguru film sound composer & conductor SANNA SALMENKALLIO
sound MART OTSA KRISTIINA PERVILÄ JAAK ELLING	music performed by RISTO JOOST countertenor OUTI ILJIN violin MAX SAVIKANGAS viola ULLA HAMMARBERG cello
location managers & interpreters VLADIMIR MIKLASHEVSKY MARIA LAKCHINA SANNA LIINAMAA TAIR ALIYEV	music produced and mixed by TIPI TUOVINEN
soundtrack studio TIPI TUOVINEN	music recorded by MIKKO OINONEN
negative cutting TUIJA KOTAMÄKI	produced in association with YLE TV2 documentaries IIKKA VEHKALAHTI ZDF in association with ARTE MARTIN PIEPER SVT-Documentaries BJÖRN ARVAS
colour grading MARKKU LIND Finnlab	supported by SES, The Finnish Film Foundation PETRI ROSSI AVEK TIMO HUMALOJA The Danish Film Institute JAKOB HØGEL The Swedish Film Institute GÖRAN OLSSON The Nordic Film- & TV Fund EVA FÆREVAAG The MEDIA Programme of the European Community
titles and opticals JAN-ERIC NYSTRÖM	
digital post production GREG FISHER TOMI NIEMINEN DFF	
voice-over PIRKKO SAISIO	
sound designer MARTTI TURUNEN	

an ICARUS FILMS release

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

July 27, 2005

Beauty and Terror Abide for People Caught in War

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

The acrid fog of war is palpable in Pirjo Honkasalo's magnificent documentary, "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia," one of the saddest films ever made. The movie, which opens today in New York, is evidence that when a director-cinematographer with a poet's vision photographs the material world, ordinary human faces and landscapes can leave impressions that transcend any words that might describe them.

As the film journeys from a boys' military school on an island outside St. Petersburg, Russia, to Grozny, the ruined capital city of Chechnya, to an orphanage just over the Chechen border in the republic of Ingushetia, a sullen mist hangs over everything. That haze becomes a profound metaphor for the unknown into which humanity anxiously peers, searching for beauty but often finding terror.

Beauty and terror are the inextricable polarities of Ms. Honkasalo's meditation on people caught up in war. Over the rolling pastoral landscape of Ingushetia, the rumble of combat just across the mountains groans in the distance like an unseen, gathering storm. At the thud of a distant explosion, a horse pricks up its ears and turns its head; inside an orphanage, a child recently rescued from Grozny hears the sounds, stares into the void and bottles up his fear. But the pictures of horses, shepherds and grazing livestock, and of children's immobile faces, also evoke the continuity of nature and the persistence of hope; life will go on.

A brooding score by the Finnish composer Sanna Salmenkallio infuses these images with an ineffable sorrow. The somber mood is echoed by the filmmaker's view of European history, expressed in the production notes. "Justice does not prevail, life does," writes Ms. Honkasalo, best known for her documentaries "The Trilogy of the Sacred and the Satanic" and "[Fire-Eater](#)." "It rises out of chaos in an ascending spiral, briefly appears to have a structure, and descends in the curve of a downward spiral toward fresh chaos."

"The 3 Rooms of Melancholia" is divided into chapters titled "Longing," "Breathing" and "[Remembering](#)." In the first, we visit a military academy in Kronstadt, an island near St. Petersburg in the Gulf of Finland, where several hundred young, mostly preadolescent cadets endure months of rigorous training. This is tomorrow's Russian army, which may or may not be dispatched to the killing fields of Chechnya where some of the fathers of these soldiers-in-training lost their lives.

A narrator introduces several boys and sketches their family backgrounds in the starkest terms. These tales suggest that a significant portion of Russia's future army will be made up of orphaned and discarded children, many the progeny of alcoholics, prostitutes and broken homes. Much of their training is devoted to endless drills in which they tramp through the snow in formation in modified goose step; the tiniest errors of dress and body language are coldly scrutinized and corrected. Even the boys' play is militarized; a snowball fight is organized as a war game.

Part 2, "Breathing," goes to Grozny, a city reduced to rubble. Some residents, however, have remained. A woman living near the top of a bombed-out high-rise hoists a bucket of water many stories through a window. Another lies gravely ill from water contaminated by oil, her three scared, weeping children clinging to her. Stray dogs scavenge the ruins.

A brave Chechen woman, Hadizhat Gataeva, knocks on the apartment door where the poisoned woman lives and gently pries her children away from their mother so they can be transported to safety across the border.

The last part of the film visits the orphanage where the children are sheltered and fed and where the adults gather to chant prayers. The narrator again sketches only the barest details of their histories. We meet Aslan, an 11-year-old boy who was found in a cardboard box, who lost much of his memory (he believes he's Chechen but may be Russian) after being sexually abused by Russian soldiers. Another boy, Adam, nearly died when his mother tried to throw him off a ninth-floor balcony after her husband was killed in the first Chechen war. Milana, 19, was raped by three Russian soldiers when she was only 12.

Although tears are shed in "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia," the film mostly lets its images speak for themselves. More affecting than any displays of emotion is the prevailing attitude of stoicism and endurance in the face of suffering. The film is a requiem for the living as well as for the dead.



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Beyond the Multiplex

... a devastating Chechen war documentary.

By Andrew O'Hehir

...I could complain that Gus Van Sant is a borderline celebrity in the film world, while Finnish director Pirjo Honkasalo, a superior artist in every respect, is barely known outside arty European circles. (She certainly wasn't known to me until very recently.) But that's pretty dumb: Fame doesn't guarantee talent, and vice versa! Wah wah wah! The real point is that if you get a chance to see Honkasalo's new film "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia" -- and you can get past that lugubrious title -- please don't pass it up. Yes, it's a documentary, and yes, it's about the Chechen war, but those facts are fundamentally inadequate. It's a beautiful, moving, mysterious film, and genres can't hold it...

"The 3 Rooms of Melancholia": Insert cliché about children and war here -- then abandon Pirjo Honkasalo's devastating war documentary "[The 3 Rooms of Melancholia](#)" is one of those films you have to allow yourself to surrender to, bit by bit, without worrying too much where it's taking you or why. Most of what goes under the name of documentary film these days, as I constantly complain, is just second-rate TV journalism. Finnish filmmaker Honkasalo is an entirely different animal, an artist with a piercing eye, tremendous patience and a rigorous formal technique.

This isn't what you'd call an undemanding film (check out that title!), and I don't think I absorbed it all in one viewing by any means. But "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia" is a prodigious, almost spiritual experience, a luminous, challenging art movie out of the Tarkovsky school that happens to be about a real war and its effects on real children. It was also a daring cinematic enterprise; while the Western media had trouble getting any independent footage from Chechnya, this Finnish art-film director took a film crew there and captured the breathtaking devastation. The audience for this kind of thing is necessarily pretty small, but if anything I've just said sounds intriguing, put this on your must-see list.

Honkasalo, who's best known for the feature "Fire-Eater" and the documentaries making up her "Trilogy of the Sacred and Satanic," is a festival fave who has never made the least impression on the marketplace. But at some future date when historians look back at the grim (and poorly understood) story of the Chechen rebellion and/or civil war, they'll find two telling works of art. One is Andrei Konchalovsky's ignored masterpiece "[House of Fools](#)," and this is the other.

Honkasalo starts a long way from Chechnya, on the fortress island of Kronstadt outside St. Petersburg. Site of an important anti-Bolshevik uprising in 1921, Kronstadt now hosts an elite military academy founded by Russian President Vladimir Putin. The boys here are mostly orphans or kids from profoundly damaged families, and as we absorb the details of their routinized lives, Honkasalo silently enforces the point that the long tentacles of the terrible Chechen conflict have touched almost every one of them. There's almost no narration and less judgment; as cheerless as it is, Kronstadt is better than the streets for most of these boys. What lies ahead for them, as Russia's officer corps of the future, is a troublesome question.

The remaining two "rooms" of the film take us to Grozny, the all but flattened capital of Chechnya, and then to nearby Ingushetia, where many Chechen refugees live. Honkasalo follows a Chechen woman named Hadizhat as she tries to rescue abandoned, abused and starving children in Grozny -- some don't even know where they came from, or who and where their parents are -- and takes them across the border to an unofficial Islamic orphanage.

Watching a group of three kids age 5 and under say goodbye, probably forever, to their desperately ill mother in a bombed-out building might not be your idea of a good time at the movies. In fact, it might be the most painful scene I've ever seen in a film. But Honkasalo isn't twisting our heartstrings to no purpose; she's challenging us to confront such an awful moment and face its consequences, and also to ask why it had to happen and whether -- whoever and wherever we are in the world -- we might have done anything to stop it. The answers to such questions are never comfortable, but the profundity and humanity of "3 Rooms of Melancholia" provide their own kind of hope.

"The 3 Rooms of Melancholia" opens July 27 at Film Forum in New York. Other engagements may follow.



An intimate look at the young faces of war

BY JAN STUART

July 27, 2005

☆☆☆☆! [4 out of 4 Stars!]

THE 3 ROOMS OF MELANCHOLIA (unrated). Pirjo Honkasalo's impressionistic documentary examines the Russian-Chechen war from unexpected vantage points, achieving a level of intimacy with her subjects that stops the heart. 1:48 (graphic descriptions and scenes of emotional intensity). In Russian, Chechen, Arabic and Finnish with English subtitles. At Film Forum, Manhattan.

The face of war was more fathomable in the pre-terrorism days, when men trudged off to war with guns and women stayed behind to hold the fort. Now, of course, women are charging into the fray, and some of them come armed with camera crews to record the holy mess their sisters and brothers are stirring up on foreign soil.

Last year, Jehane Noujaim's penetrating "Control Room" took movie audiences into the bureaus of al-Jazeera to reveal a side of the war in Iraq that Americans were not being shown on network news.

This year, Helsinki-born director Pirjo Honkasalo has mined the rubble and breeding grounds of the Chechen war. While only one of the three interrelated chapters that make up her stunning triptych, "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia," goes to the epicenter of this conflict, it evokes the psychic devastation of war with an immediacy that couldn't be any more unsettling if the filmmaker had shot all of her footage through the gun barrel of an army tank.

There seem to be dozens of unhappy rooms in the military boarding school profiled in the first chapter. Honkasalo tracks a day in the life of students at the Kronstadt Cadet Academy, an institution established by Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose fiercely ordered and monitored activities give fuel to the argument that czar-like rule is making a comeback in Russia.

The mostly 11- and 12-year-old boys we meet here bear the scars from alcoholic parents or families destroyed by the war. Honkasalo zooms in on them with a startling, voyeuristic intimacy, as teachers bark out instructions on how to salute, goose-step and properly button uniforms. The only smiles we glimpse from these warriors-in-the-making are in bedtime pillow fights, snowball war games and unison chorales in which the boys sing, with a gusto devoid of irony, "Let the horse run free, and let me run free as well."

The bombed-out ruins of the Chechen capital of Grozny provide the apocalyptic backdrop of the film's middle section, which depicts the heartrending spectacle of three young children being taken by a good Samaritan from their ailing mother, who is left to expire alone in her shell of an apartment.

Their destination is Ingushetia, a rural settlement of Chechen-related peoples. There, in the film's final section, we encounter a teenage girl who was raped by Russian soldiers at age 12; then the film abruptly switches gear, and we observe the local menfolk chant and dance in prayer.

There is a bellicose undercurrent to this atavistic ceremony, as if the men were psyching their boys for combat. With a minimalist grace, Honkasalo has turned our gaze around from her first chapter, pointing us toward the scrappy faces of boys who could one day obliterate Putin's academy-groomed grunts with a suicide bomb. (Copyright 2005 Newsday Inc.)

ON MOVIES SUNDANCE GOES INTERNATIONAL

JOHN ANDERSON

JANUARY 16, 2005

The Sundance Film Festival starts Thursday night, striking fear and apprehension into the hearts of journalists, publicists, producers' representatives, distributors, programmers, Mormon waitresses along Park City's Main Street and anyone without dinner reservations or photos of the maitre'd's daughter with Satan. Oh, yes, there will be some filmmakers there, too. But it's only their careers that are on the line.

The rest of us have to be worried about being cold, wet, hungry and tired for 10 days. But OK, it ain't coal mining. It's more like camp. Camp Crusty.

Sundance has been credited with (accused of) being many things, including a farm system for Hollywood. The truth is, such is the price of success. Had Hollywood ignored the festival, the festival would have been considered a failure, not the least by those who lament its alleged loss of innocence and reputed independence.

The more significant change that has occurred recently at the film festival Robert Redford made famous - and festival director Geoff Gilmore made Sundance - is its international flavor and repute. Founded as a celebration of American Indies, it has increasingly - some would say inevitably - become an international festival.

This week, for the first time, the always reliable World Cinema section will be juried, as will the 3-year-old international documentary section. Prizes will be awarded; a narrative will be created. And the media, which always prefer a narrative, will have an excuse to lavish more attention on world films that are worthy of attention.

Better than worthy - it may, in fact, be the most revelatory and accomplished film in the festival - is "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia" by Finnish director Pirjo ("peer-yuh") Honkasala. You don't have to take my word for it. Honored in Venice last fall, the documentary - which gives fresh meaning to the genre - was acclaimed in Toronto and likely would have won November's International Documentary Festival Amsterdam if it hadn't already been in Venice and Honkasala hadn't been on the jury.

Charming, tall and funny in that dry-ice Finnish manner, Honkasala is as singular as her film, which she said owes much to its producer, Kristina Pervilä. "I said, 'I want to make a film in three parts with no main character, no story and nothing happens. Please finance!'"

Honkasala laughs, but the viewer won't. And the suggestion that nothing happens in her "3 Rooms," while self-deprecatingly modest, is also false. If nothing else, the combination of Honkasala's visual poetry, uncompromising intent and eloquent portraiture of the war-scarred children of Chechnya and Russia creates such a quiet whirlwind of emotion it sucks the oxygen out of your heart.

It was a film made through subterfuge, foreigners being forbidden to visit, much less film, in the war-torn region of Chechnya. "I often thought," the director said, "that it would be easier to come to Russia with a tank than a camera."

"We were actually the only people left in the hotel," she said of her small crew, which stayed on the "safe" side of the Russian-Chechen border in Ingushetia. "And in a very classical way, a guy in a black leather jacket - because these old KGB guys were always in black leather jackets - came to us in a dark corridor and said in a low voice, 'You have 24 hours.'"

"After all those years," she said, "you don't have to say anything more. You say, 'You have 24 hours' and we understand the rest: '— off from this country.'"

Honkasala laughs again. "Fortunately we were all women, and we became completely 'blondes' - 'Oh it's so lovely that you protect us and we didn't understand it was so dangerous. ... We were just shooting children, we didn't know ...'"

Her three-person crew included a student, "a real blonde with big, blue eyes, who said, 'Oh, I didn't remember. It's my birthday!'" So the Russian men, being chauvinists, saw this blonde having a birthday and went out to get a cake!"

It seems characteristic of the director that she can laugh about a project that is steeped, as per its title, in melancholy and born of grief and guilt. "In past times, everybody knew that in the Soviet Union people didn't have human rights or freedom of speech, and there was a gulag," she said. "And we accepted the explanation that it was an internal affair - we wanted to accept it, because we were socialists and left-wing, and we accepted this lie."

"In Chechnya, I had the feeling we were doing the same thing again," she added. "It became so particularly clear after 9/11 and Russia joined the 'war on terror.' It gave a clear sign to the Kremlin to do whatever you want, it's your affair and we didn't want to see it. In a way, you don't forgive yourself. Violating human rights cannot be the affair of one country, ever."