# Reports and Commentaries

PERSONAL QUEST AND COMING OF AGE IN OLEH SENTSOV'S *GAMER* (2011):
A STORY UKRAINIAN AND UNIVERSAL
Vitaly Chernetsky

The feature film debut of the Ukrainian director Oleh Sentsov (b. 1976), shot with a digital camera and made on a shoestring budget of $20,000, *Gamer* (also spelled *Gaamer* at international screenings to distinguish it from the 2009 Hollywood film *Gamer*) is a gritty, documentary-style drama focussing on a competitive video gamer in his late teens living in a provincial Ukrainian city.[1] The film has enjoyed considerable success at festivals across Europe and the post-Soviet nations, from Rotterdam to Khanty-Mansiisk, winning several FIPRESCI prizes, most recently at the Odessa International Film Festival in July 2012. As such, the generally positive and often enthusiastic response the film has received represents a major accomplishment for the Ukrainian film industry whose recent major international festival successes heretofore have been restricted to short films.[2] *Gamer* also became one of the few Ukrainian films to gain theatrical release in Russia, a market highly resistant to cultural products from Ukraine that are not co-produced with Russia, mostly for political reasons.[3] This is certainly a major victory for its makers, even if the release was limited to short runs in May 2012 at a

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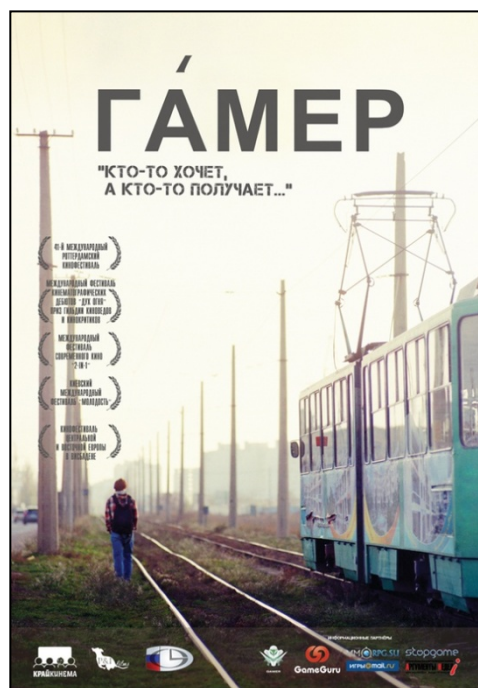
[1] Poster for the Russian theatrical release of *Gamer*. Source: P&I Films.

[2] The most notable examples are the two Palme d'Or awards won by Ukrainian directors at Cannes in the short film category: *Podorozhni / Wayfarers* by Ihor Strembitsky (2005) and *Kros / Cross Country* by Maryna Vroda (2011).

[3] The first film made in post-Soviet Ukraine and not co-produced with Russia to be released in Russian theatres was Mykhailo Illienko's *Firecrosser*, which opened in January 2012. See "Ukrainskii fil'm vpervye vykhodit v rossiiskom prokate," *Izvestiia v Ukraine*, 19 January 2012 http://www.izvestia.com.ua/ru/article/22696 (accessed 9 September 2012).

few art house theatres (three in Moscow, one each in St. Petersburg, Perm, Voronezh and a handful of other cities). The press the film has received has been near uniform in its positive acclaim. The enthusiasm of its writer-director and of the team of co-workers, many of them personal friends, helped critics and audiences alike to warm to this film.

    Gamer appeals to a variety of audiences as it presents a multi-layered story. On the one hand, it is an archetypal coming-of-age story focusing on the film's protagonist, Oleksii Kosov (Vladyslav Zhuk), a.k.a. Koss (his computer gamer nickname), echoing such classics as François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows / Les quatre cents coups* (1959), an intimate portrayal of a troubled teenager misunderstood by both family and peers.

    Like Truffaut's film, *Gamer* ends with a freeze frame at a moment indicating a major psychological transition in the protagonist's life. In a clear homage to Andrei Tarkovsky, whom Sentsov cites at press conferences as a strong influence,[4] *Gamer* includes several brightly-lit soft-focus dream sequences focused on the protagonist; these are strongly reminiscent of similar episodes in Tarkovsky's feature-length breakthrough, *Ivan's Childhood*, a.k.a. *My Name Is Ivan / Ivanovo detstvo* (1962), where the happiness saturating Ivan's prewar days in the dream sequences contrasts sharply with his present-day gritty wartime experience.

Figure 1. Koss in a dream sequence.

Source: Film still from Oleh Sentsov's *Gamer* (2011).

At the same time, the film is also a dramatic quest for personal success in a particular field—such as sports—and thus falls in a subgenre well represented both in Hollywood—for a clas-

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[4] See the press conference of *Gamer*'s crew at the 2012 Odessa International Film Festival, 20 July 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahvHVw4f_GE (accessed 9 September 2012).

sic example, see *Personal Best* (1982, dir. Robert Towne)—and in world cinema; for recent examples from the post-Soviet region, see such Russian films as *Garpastum* (2005, dir. Aleksei German, Jr.) and *Minnesota* (2009, dir. Andrei Proshkin). The relationship between the closed-off world of a competitive sport and the everyday experiences of the characters beyond this specialized realm is often at the centre of such films. In *Gamer*, the contrast between the two realms inhabited by the protagonist acquires the extra dimension of contrast between cyberspace and 'realspace', linking it to the central focus of cyberpunk literature and cinema.

   Gamer can also be viewed as an example of *arte povera*, manifested in its documentary look, and the film has been compared to the acclaimed signature style of new Romanian cinema, and occasionally even guerrilla filmmaking. Captured with a hand-held camera, the film's scenes shot at the 2010 World Cyber Games in Los Angeles have none of the sleekness that would have been expected from a high-budget commercial picture. The film's cast is mostly made of nonprofessional actors, including many real-life competitive video gamers.

Figure 2. At the 2010 World Cyber games.

Source: Film still from Oleh Sentsov's *Gamer* (2011).

Gamer is also a pioneering project from the city of Simferopol, the home base of Sentsov and most of his crew, and a city not previously prominent in film history (most of the film was shot in Simferopol; a few episodes were filmed in Evpatoria and Kyiv).

   Yet most importantly, the film provides an intimate window into the world of the video gaming culture, especially its competitive side, known in Ukrainian and Russian as 'kibersport' [cyber sport]. Viewing competitive gaming as a sport might seem unusual for some Westerners, but in post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, this designation has gained

acceptance. Ukrainian gamers have been participating in World Cyber Games since their inception, and have won several bronze medals beginning in 2002; at the 2010 games, Ukraine won its first gold.[5] While he insists that the film is not autobiographical, Sentsov himself hails from the competitive video gamer background, as does most of the cast. The film's production team stressed that casting was largely based on the physical type, following the Eisensteinian tradition of *tipazh*. The realism is also enhanced by the use of several actual computer clubs as locations, by including real game footage into the film, and by the dialogue that skilfully employs generous amounts of youth and gamer slang.

Despite *Gamer*'s reliance on many traditional narrative archetypes, its plot does not feel trite; the film is refreshingly non-judgmental and not in the least melodramatic. Koss, the protagonist, comes across as noncommunicative and aloof with both adults and his peers outside the gaming world; even the fellow gamers call him 'otmorozhennyi' [frostbitten, a slang term implying being socially inept and even dim-witted]. His mother (Zhanna Biriuk) seeks to understand him and worries about his prospects for the future, concerned that her son is beginning to manifest the character traits of his father who has abandoned the family.

Figure 3. Koss and his mother at home.

Source: Film still from Oleh Sentsov's *Gamer* (2011).

An overworked and underpaid university instructor who takes a second job at a convenience store to make ends meet, she is an echo of the stressed and overworked female characters in the late-Soviet films, such as *Adam's Rib / Rebro Adama* (1990, dir. Viacheslav Kryshtofovych). While he is getting remarkably good at gaming, Koss stops attending the technical

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[5] See http://www.wcg.com/renew/history/wcg2010/wcg2010_rank.asp, accessed 9 September 2012.

junior college where he was studying and is expelled from school. The daily routine of a provincial Ukrainian city where he lives is shown as dull, uneventful and generally devoid of hope and optimism, although the film stops short of suggesting the root causes of this anomie.

The world of gaming at computer clubs is portrayed as almost exclusively male (we only see female faces at the clubs once or twice), and Koss's social awkwardness with women of his own age when he encounters them in the street or at school is emphasized. In this the film differs from its Russian predecessor *Hooked* / *Na igre* (2009), which features one female gamer among its central characters. Yet in the game of *Quake* Koss is king, admired by other gamers both of his own age group and younger.

Figure 4. Koss in his element.

Source: Film still from Oleh Sentsov's *Gamer* (2011).

A multiplayer first-person shooter video game first introduced in 1996, in its earlier versions *Quake* was played at competitive tournaments in one-on-one and two-on-two formats; it is often considered the game that initiated 'cybersports'. The 2010 version, *Quake Live*, which is featured in this film, can be played both in a one-on-one 'duel' format and in several group modes; at the 2010 World Cyber Games it was played in the six-on-six format, yet representing it as such would have contradicted Koss's 'lone wolf' status in the film.[6]

While he is a rising star in the world of gamers, none of whom in the film are shown to be older than in their twenties, Koss's contact with the older generations is severely stunted;

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[6] For more on *Quake Live*, which bills itself as 'the hottest multiplayer first-person shooter on the web' and 'the decade's definitive first-person shooter', see its official website, http://www.quakelive.com (accessed 9 September 2012).

the film presents in a tactful, not heavy-handed way the separation between the 'pre-gaming' and 'gaming' generations in their social outlook. Koss excels in local tournaments, then gets drafted into a competitive team. A reigning champion tries to bribe Koss to fake a loss to him in the final of a larger contest, but Koss firmly rebuffs the offer. His ascent continues, and he goes on to compete in the World Cyber Games in the USA. Koss is determined to succeed and cares about little else, even when other gamers prod him to do so by suggesting the need to think of the life beyond gaming.

An extensive conversation with an older fellow gamer who tries to have such a 'big brother—little brother' moment with Koss foreshadows the film's denouement. The escape from the drabness of the everyday leads to the noisy, glitzy, overwhelming realm of the championship in a fancy convention centre, complete with a large exhibit hall filled with a geek's heaven of computer gadgets; nothing could be further from Koss's humble background. However, the key moment, the final match at the World Cyber Games, happens off-screen. We only learn later, obliquely, that Koss won the second place. He returns home a celebrity in the local gaming world, with younger gamers asking him to autograph their mouse pads. His success even helps in Koss's real life, as the local university—a much more prestigious institution than the technical junior college where he studied previously—offers him admission. Still, the end of his quest to be the world's best Quake player, which he imagined as a ticket out of the unsatisfying life he had been leading in 'realspace', leaves Koss feeling empty and distraught. His celebrity status does not mean much to those who do not belong to the circle of his fellow gamers, and the skills he had acquired as a gamer appear to be of little use in his real-life environment. In a moment of crisis, Koss throws his treasured mouse, on which he had carved notches for each tournament victory, into the river. The final portion of the film portrays a radical switch, as the protagonist is now in search of himself, of understanding his place in 'realspace' and in interaction with others.

Finding this new sense of belonging, reconciling the two sides of his self, and reaching internal balance, however, proves a far from easy task for Koss, even if the film offers a provisionally optimistic ending, as Koss appears ready at last to start the next chapter of his life in earnest. In a delicious twist, in the final moments, right after Koss flashes his first genuine smile in the entire film, *Gamer* appears to break the 'fourth wall': Koss winks at the camera, and thus the film's own artificial reality is thrown into relief in an implicit comparison with the world of video gaming.

The lingering sensation after this film is uplifting despite the far from glamorous, and even defiantly mundane picture of the everyday provincial Ukrainian life it presents, with colourless Soviet-era apartment blocks, kitschy bars and depressing computer clubs in stuffy basements. Shot mostly in Crimea, a region abundant with natural beauty, the film eschews this beauty except in the dream sequences. Most of the episodes appear to have been filmed in the drab, grey, cloudy light of the late autumn and early winter in landscapes, both urban and natural, that are deliberately anonymous. Recognizable landmarks, with very few exceptions, such as the bridge over the Salgir on which Koss stands after the night of crisis, are extremely few. These generic post-Soviet landscapes contrast all the more with several on-screen gaming sequences, edited into beautiful clips to rock and metal tunes by bands like *Linkin Park* and *System of a Down*. By contrast, the hero's existential crisis in the final sec-

tion of the film is accompanied by an emotional tune from a prominent Russian rock band, *Agata Kristi*, whose lyrics focus on a precarious quest by an 'issledovatel' zhizni' [explorer of life], and the final credits roll to a humorous song from a 1970s Soviet cartoon.[7] In the absence of an original score, the musical choices of the filmmakers are highly effective in augmenting the film's emotional landscape.

The confident vision by an author-director with insider knowledge of the competitive video gaming world he depicts, a keen eye to the universal anxieties of coming-of-age transitions, and a realistic, unadorned portrayal of provincial Ukrainian life helped *Gamer* create a cinematic statement that struck a chord with audiences both at home and internationally. One hopes that more great things lie ahead for its director and other members of the creative team.

Gamer, Ukraine, 2011
Colour, 92 min.
Director: Oleh Sentsov
Screenplay: Oleh Sentsov
Cinematography: Ievheniia Vradii, Iehor Petryk, Hennadii Veselkov
Art Director: Ievheniia Vradii
Editing: Dmytro Kundriutskyi
Sound: Volodymyr Kozlov
Cast: Vladyslav Zhuk, Zhanna Biriuk, Oleksandr Fedotov, Oleksandr Bashkirtsev, Denys Chepyk, Anastasiia Chorna, Serhii Durkyn, Oksana Fursa, Iuryi Savienok, Oleksandr Solomonov, Ihor Sydorenko, Pavlo Zahnybida
Producers: Oleh Sentsov, Olha Zhurzhenko

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[7] The songs are, respectively, 'Legion' from *Agata Kristi*'s 1996 album *Uragan* and 'Chempion' / 'Champion' by the Belarusian Soviet band *Pesniary* from the cartoon *Kvaka-Zadavaka* (1975) whose protagonist, an over-confident frog, is a bumbling would-be champion at a sports competition.