



## 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.*