

Guardian of the Frontier (Varuh meje)

Slovenia / Germany / France | 2002 | 98 minutes

Credits

Director	Maja Weiss
Screenplay	Zoran Hocevar/Brock Norman Brock/Maja Weiss
Photography	Bojan Kastelic
Music	Stewart Dunlop
Cast	
Simona	Iva Krajnc
Zana	Pia Zemlji
Alja	Tanja Potonik
Guardian of the Frontier	Jonas Znidarsi

Maja Weiss's intensely provocative film, "Guardian of the Frontier," is not the first movie to portray a leisurely boat trip down a river as a metaphorical journey from so-called civilization into an atavistic dream. "Apocalypse Now" and "Deliverance" immediately come to mind as forerunners.

But this fable of three young women who embark on a summer canoe trip down the Kolpa River, which divides Slovenia and Croatia, uncovers layer upon layer of social, political and even mythical resonance in an adventure that takes on the quality of a fairy tale. Other enriching echoes that ripple through the movie include "Beauty and the Beast" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

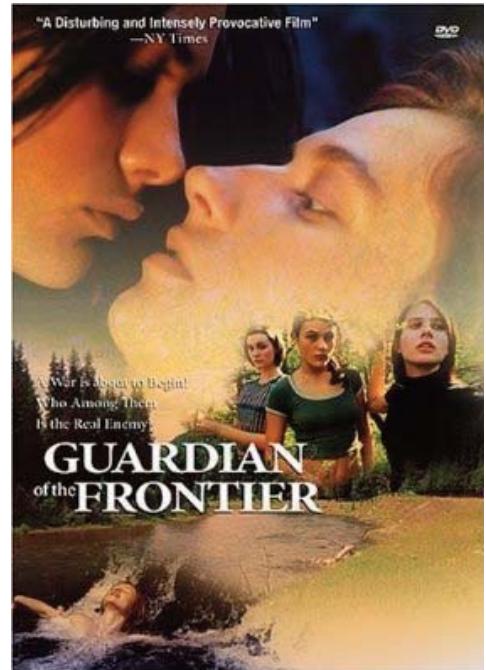
Feminism, globalization and the deep-seated tribal passions that ignited the Balkan wars are only three of the pertinent themes touched on by the film, which offers a remarkably evenhanded, and disturbing, reflection on the tug of war between modernism and older cultural forces percolating below the glossy facade of contemporary life.

"Guardian of the Frontier" may be set in Eastern Europe, but the comfy middle-class environment out of which the characters come, with its cellphones, television and rap music, feels utterly familiar.

Even before the friends, Alja (Tanja Poto), Zana (Pia Zemlji) and Simona (Iva Krajnc), are dropped off with their gear by Alja's boyfriend, Medo (Gorazd Zilavec), there are intimations of danger. The local news reports that a body was found in the river, and the possibility is raised that a serial killer might be lurking in the woods.

But "Guardian of the Frontier" is not really a thriller, and aside from some shadows looming over the tent, the movie avoids conventional shock effects. Its portentous mood is only one of many emotional flavors that Ms. Weiss expertly blends into a story that treads the line between a heightened realism and outright fantasy without tumbling headlong from one into the other.

What lends a stinging immediacy to the movie -- Ms. Weiss's debut feature, which the New Directors/New Films festival is showing today and tomorrow -- is its skill at giving characters who bear considerable symbolic weight a quirky flesh-and-blood reality. Zana, the brashest of the friends, is a pierced postpunk rebel of ambiguous sexuality who is contemptuous of men. As the trip proceeds, she aggressively flirts with Alja, who, bored with the smug Medo, cautiously flirts back. Zana is openly scornful of the blond Simona, the most strait-laced and sexually naïve of the three.



It is Simona who first encounters the film's title character (Jonas Znidarsi), a stoic, vaguely ominous figure who keeps reappearing in different locations. When first spotted, he is a silent fisherman in the middle of the river who regards her with a stone-faced indifference tinged with hostility. He is encountered again when the campers decide to violate an unwritten taboo and explore the Croatian side of the river.

In the most unsettling scene, they wander into a jolly folk festival at which the townspeople, dressed in traditional costume, dance and drink. At first the festivities appear to be a quaint, folksy celebration. But in the film's most pointed observation, that kind, colorful traditionalism is not just a frivolous exercise in theme-park dress-up, but a collective expression of tribal memory and longing. When the visitors find themselves menaced by leering drunken louts, they flee, but later in the evening the boys show up at their tent demanding sex.

At one point the celebration is suspended long enough for the fisherman to mount a podium (flanked by his wife and children) and deliver a political diatribe. An impassioned defense of old-fashioned patriarchal values and nationalist pride, his speech is a distillation of a brand of moralistic right-wing outrage with fascist overtones that knows no geographical boundaries. And Simona, as though under the spell of a silver-tongued pied piper, finds herself riveted by the messenger and his message.

For all its political reverberations, "Guardian of the Frontier" does not put forth a clear-cut agenda, and that is one of its many strengths. No matter where we may live, it suggests, these profoundly antagonistic forces are engaged in a pitched battle in what, with regional variations, amounts to a global conflict.

Stephen Holden - New York Times

edinBURGH
FILM
GUILD

Contemporary Eastern European Cinema