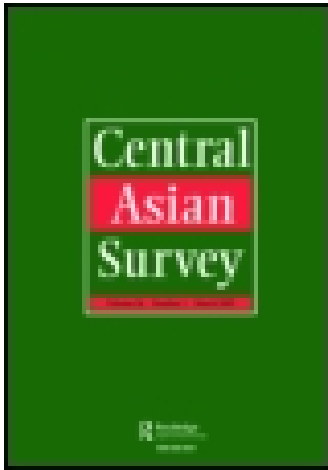


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### Multimedia review

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## Multimedia review

### Editorial introduction

In recent years it has increasingly been recognized that multimedia products, such as films, music and games, are important cultural artefacts and deserving of serious scholarly scrutiny. They can reflect or critique contemporary social, cultural, economic and political processes, and may be more or less influential in informing opinion. At the same time, they may have great pedagogic value alongside texts in university teaching on Central Asia. For both of these reasons, an occasional multimedia review section is being introduced to *Central Asian Survey*, beginning with Madeleine Reeves's review of Marat Alykulov's 2006 film *Chek ara*. The book review editor invites suggestions for future reviews in this section.

Nick Megoran

**The Borders [Chek ara/Granitsa]**, directed by Marat Alykulov, Kyrgyzfil'm/Oy Art Productions, in Kyrgyz and Kazakh, with English and Russian Subtitles, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2006; 20 minutes.

*The Borders* [Chek ara/Granitsa], directed by Marat Alykulov is a short, realist drama set at a remote checkpoint on a bridge across the river-boundary between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Released in 2006 in Bishkek, the drama is driven by contemporary themes: large-scale labour migration from Kyrgyzstan to its northern neighbour; bureaucratic obstructionism, the normalization of corruption and the increasing securitization of Central Asian borders. But whilst the themes are large, the story is told in miniature. This explains both the film's power and its pathos: Alykulov's commentary on the state of the state in Central Asia is sharp and critical, but it is delivered with a story-teller's lightness of touch.

The drama follows a group of four Kyrgyz labour migrants who are transporting the recently deceased father of one of their number home to Kyrgyzstan for burial. We join them as they approach the river marking the border between the two states, weary at their long journey and hopeful that the sight of 'their mountains' in the distance means that they will soon be home to give the corpse a proper burial. However, before they can leave Kazakhstan, a document check on the remote border-bridge awaits them, and this routine ritual of verification soon begins to unravel. The four young men and the Kazakh lorry driver who has promised to drive them to their destination hand over their passports to the Kazakh soldiers manning the border. They have a passport for the deceased man, and a doctor's letter confirming that he died of a heart attack. But the corpse, it turns out, is not in possession of a migration card – and without this neither they nor it are permitted to leave the country. Unwilling or unable to turn a blind eye to this omission, the soldiers go and fetch their 'boss' to solicit his opinion.

Whilst the soldiers are gone, the men are left waiting, and we wait with them. We hear birds screech round about; we are vaguely aware of cars passing in the distance. Nothing but this remote and rather shabby checkpoint indicates that this is stately space. The camera pans slowly across the faces of the four Kyrgyz migrants; some anxious, some resigned. We wait some more. For a short film, *The Borders* manages to avoid all hastiness. What we sense,

instead, is the slow distended time that characterizes the checkpoint encounter; the enforced waiting; the disjuncture between real and documented selves; the visceral awareness of being under the eye of the state.

However, above all, Alykulov's subtle direction communicates the tyranny of rules over reason, and the ends for which 'security' is invoked. This exposure of stately-authority-as-performance is revealed in the film's dramatic climax, when the chief of the border unit appears on the scene. He invokes a language of 'security' to recast an encounter that the migrants and their driver had hoped would be resolved amicably through recognition of their grief and of their status as Kyrgyz-speaking 'locals'. 'How do I know you aren't transporting drugs?' the border chief accuses, with exaggerated formality. Framing this encounter firmly as an official one, he instructs his subordinates to prod the corpse and check in its pockets. Grief, his actions remind, is no excuse for an undocumented body.

As the soldiers poke at the corpse with the muzzles of their Kalashnikovs, the young son of the deceased leaps up, unable to contain his anger. Just at the moment when his friends would seem successfully to have sealed their exit with a bribe, he bursts out with a response that undermines the stately 'legitimacy' of the border-check. 'There is nothing sacred for you' he shouts at the border chief. 'You just put up these borders to extract money from ordinary folk like us! If you give enough money, you'll let anything through – drugs and weapons, anything . . .' He disrupts their ritual of verification by making explicit that which must be concealed for the border-bribe to function effectively: the convenience of 'security' for the extraction of tribute; the inability of the checkpoint to stop the 'big ones' from taking money or drugs through; the uses and abuses to which 'stately authority' is put. It is the modern-day, nation-state equivalent of a child telling the Emperor to his face that he is wearing no clothes.

Herein lies the film's real critical edge. For this is a story about borders, certainly, but it is also, more broadly, about how 'law' is invoked for personal gain, and how 'security' is used to categorize and discriminate in ways that have little to do with protecting the state and its citizens. It is a message that Alykulov drives home powerfully in a final scene shot through with religious symbolism. For whilst the men are ultimately denied passage through the official checkpoint, they nonetheless *do* cross to Kyrgyzstan with their corpse. Moreover, they do so almost under the nose (although, crucially, outside the zone of responsibility) of the border guards who refused them exit. With the help of their Kazakh driver, the migrants carry the deceased man across the icy waters of the river separating the two states on a 'stretcher' made from the lorry's tailgate. Friendship trumps the pretence of 'law' in a final twist of the tail.

*The Borders* is a film short and is not obviously oriented at an 'international' audience. Shot in Kazakh and Kyrgyz, with subtitles in English and Russian, it speaks to Central Asian themes in Central Asian languages. It was made on a modest budget (just US\$5000) with an extremely small production team. The film has some technical rough-edges and perceptive viewers might spot some minor errors of continuity. Yet whilst these credentials may give the film an inauspicious start on the international film-festival circuit, they should perhaps also give scholars of Central Asia pause to reflect on the *types* of film through which we typically come to learn about the region. As subtle and poignant a film short as Alykulov's *The Borders* suggests that this rather marginalized genre might teach us rather a lot.

For one thing, the economics of film-making mean that film shorts represent a large proportion of all of the films made and shown in Central Asia. A 20-minute film short typically costs just a fraction of what it costs to produce a full-length drama, and, like *The Borders*, they can conceivably be met from single small grants (in Alykulov's case, from the Swiss Organization for Development and Cooperation). Moreover, this funding logic almost certainly has consequences for the scale of experimentation, the range of themes, and the sharpness of critique that the format can accommodate. A Bishkek newspaper commented with evident glee

after Alykulov's film was shown at the Moscow Cinema Forum last year that there was 'more talk' amongst festival critics about *The Borders* than there was about the 'much-hyped' Kazakh film, *Nomad* [Kochevnik], 'made with a budget of 30 million dollars' (Pozharskii 2006). Hyperbole notwithstanding, it certainly seems that film shorts are able to touch themes that their better-sponsored, internationally-oriented full-length cousins are not.

The concentrated creativity that characterizes the genre also makes the film short an excellent teaching tool. *The Borders* can be used with students of the region to unpack all sorts of themes – from corruption and border controls to Kyrgyz labour migration and its impact on expressions of 'everyday ethnicity'. In a climate of frenzied debate over how Central Asia is 'represented' in film, when Sasha Baron-Cohen's *Borat* has conference panels and journal issues dedicated to it, this suitability for use in the classroom is no small virtue. For it allows us to ask questions that, in the clamour around 'representation', have not often been posed: how are Central Asian cinematographers portraying their region? What picture of 'the state' do we get from such films? In Alykulov's case, that portrayal is as subtle as the film's critique is sharp. Those who watch the film looking for technical wizardry are likely to find that they are disappointed. But as a portrait of how border controls are transforming life for ordinary people throughout Central Asia, it is a masterpiece in miniature. With the potential to animate many a classroom discussion on borders, livelihoods and security in Central Asia, this film deserves a wide audience amongst students of the region.

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