

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2022/23 SEASON**



**COMPARTMENT NO. 6**  
(Language: Russian/Finnish)

Director: Juho Kuosmanen. Running time: 107 minutes  
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2023.

“Back in the early 1990s, while covering the filming of the bizarre Russian-backed, Ukraine-set horror movie *Dark Waters*, I spent 17 hours on a midnight train from Moscow to Odesa. To this day I can still vividly recall the noise, smell and claustrophobia of that journey, crammed into a damp, four-bunk berth with tiny corridors whose windows were sealed shut, leading to toilets that were best avoided. All those memories came rushing back as I watched *Compartment No 6*, a 1990s-set drama in which a young woman boards a Moscow train heading the other way – up towards the port city of Murmansk. The film’s trajectory may be north rather than south, and the timescale far longer than my trip, but the expression on Finnish actor Seidi Haarla’s face as she enters the titular compartment had that same mix of horror and resignation that I remember so well.

Haarla plays Laura, a Finnish student who has been living in Moscow with Irina (Dinara Drukarova), an academic with whom she has fallen in love. Together, they booked a trip to see the Kanozero petroglyphs, ancient rock drawings that date back to the third millennium BC. But Irina’s schedule changed and she encouraged Laura to go alone, leaving her to share a sleeper cabin not with her lover but a stranger, Russian miner Ljoha (Yuriy Borisov).

Laura and Ljoha are chalk and cheese, almost caricatured representatives of their respective nations. He is gruff, often drunk and aggressively impolite, asking if she is going to Murmansk to work as a prostitute. She is aloof, looking down disapprovingly from the top bunk as he fills the cabin with his booze and cigarette smoke. At first it seems that their confinement may lead to some form of violence – that one of them might not make it to their destination. But as the journey progresses, a form of social perestroika starts to occur. Gradually they find common ground beneath the alien surfaces as the cold war between them begins to thaw.

Finnish director Juho Kuosmanen, who made the melancholy boxing romance *The Happiest Day in the Life of Olli Mäki*, has described *Compartment No 6* (which is loosely adapted from a novel by Rosa Liksom) as “an Arctic road movie that takes place in a train”. Shot largely within the confines of a real Russian train, the film brilliantly captures the authentic air of its setting, placing the audience right there in that strange liminal space between stasis and motion, an environment that strikes a chord with both its central characters.

Despite her declaration that she longs to be back in Irina’s bohemian apartment in Moscow, flashbacks to Laura’s life there show her as a fish out of water. Increasingly, it becomes clear that she only embarked on this gruelling cross-country trip in an attempt to fit in with her lover’s life. As for Ljoha, beneath his brash exterior lurks a painful recognition that Laura can only be his companion – for better or worse – for the duration of this journey.

Alongside David Lean’s British classic *Brief Encounter* and Wolfgang Petersen’s German masterpiece *Das Boot*, Kuosmanen cites Karim Aïnouz’s 2019 sisterly love story *The Invisible Life of Eurídice Guimarães* and Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* as key influences. I also saw deadpan echoes of Jim Jarmusch’s US indie road movie *Stranger Than Paradise*, in which Richard Edson’s Eddie famously remarked: “It’s funny – you come to someplace new and everything looks just the same.” While *Compartment No 6* may take place on the other side of the world, its bittersweet conclusion is similar; wherever you go, it’s not the arrival but the journey that matters.

Beautifully believable performances from Haarla and Borisov add emotional weight, rivalling the nuanced naturalistic charm of Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy in Richard Linklater’s *Before* trilogy. As for any wider message, the film’s central theme of overcoming otherness and finding common ground across personal, cultural and geographical borders seems like a balm for the soul in these tumultuous times.”

Mark Kermode, *The Observer*, 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2022.

“Laura (Seidi Haarla) is a self-doubting graduate student from Finland, who has found herself dawdling unhappily in Moscow, with a girlfriend who we’re fairly sure wants rid of her. A train trip they’re meant to be on together, to see some petroglyphs in far-off Murmansk, turns into a journey she must psych herself up to take alone.

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She gets thrown, instead, into a sleeper carriage with her worst nightmare: a Russian skinhead called Ljoha (Yuriy Borisov), whose boorish, boozy, chain-smoking habits oppress her personal space from minute one. In minute two, he's making fun of her language, and mockingly asking if she's a sex worker.

Places to run from this stranger on a train are few – he comes and pesters her in the dining car, too. With his manner of chomping on chunks of sausage, black bread and crisps in alternate mouthfuls, he's the kind of person likely to make you beg for John Candy's company in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* – a character who, for all his oversharing, meant well.

Much like that odd-couple two-hander, Juho Kuosmanen's film follows this close-quarters relationship as it shades, bit by bit, into a grudging intimacy. He has set this tale in the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, and somewhat depoliticised the source novel by Rosa Liksom, also making the two characters much closer in age.

It's a gripping exercise, in this very pre-MeToo environment, to watch Laura trying to extend Ljoha the maximum possible benefit of the doubt, based on his fairly grim, friendless life in a Russian backwater. It becomes an essay on bending over backwards to attempt liberal understanding, punctuated by shocking moments when Ljoha snarls at her efforts, throwing all semblance of civility out of the window.

Kuosmanen's visual craft gives the film a beautifully worn texture, with sunlight poking through the grime. Meanwhile, the merciful sense of actually being on a train puts the \$55m budget of Branagh's *Murder on the Orient Express*, with its horribly chintzy production fakery, to shame.

But it's the rapport between the actors – or the anti-rapport, to start with – that makes this such a winning diversion. Haarla is a real natural at letting an audience in on everything she's feeling, almost as if swear words are popping up in thought bubbles, but it's Laura's warmth and vulnerability that keep us at her side.

Ljoha could have been irredeemable, but Borisov sketches such a vivid portrait of inarticulate male neurosis, hiding behind an armour of pathetic misogyny, that we even grow oddly protective of him, too. When a third companion (Tomi Alatalo) briefly joins them – a bearded, guitar-playing troubadour who instantly assumes alpha status – Ljoha's face falls in a priceless comic beat. Laura is not above such moments of mischief in trolling him or getting her own back.

These two are such a strange fit to be entangled in questionable maybe-romance – it’s a “will they, won’t they, should they?” prospect to the last. Wondering where this ad hoc friendship might lead, an awkward, off-train finale suggests that Kuosmanen has handled the ride more confidently than the destination. But perhaps we’re OK with his shrug of an ending – as fortune cookies love to impart, it’s the journey that’s all-important.”

Tim Robey, *The Telegraph*, 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2022.