



How I ended this summer

Director: Alexei Popogrebsky
Country: Russia
Date: 2010

A review by Phillip French for *The Observer*:

Last Sunday's film of the week, Kelly Reichardt's bleak American independent movie, *Meek's Cutoff*, centred on nine people losing their way while attempting to cross an arid, inhospitable part of remote Oregon in 1845. This week, in Alexei Popogrebsky's *How I Ended This Summer*, we have an equally harsh story with a cast of two, set on an Arctic island in Chukotka, at the extreme north-eastern tip of Russia. It is like a gulag designed for two, stuck on the edge of the world and, like *Meek's Cutoff*, it has a pared down quality that invites, indeed virtually compels, the viewer to see it as some kind of allegory.



The film's title suggests an essay a boy might write after an adventurous holiday in some colourful spot, and indeed one of the two characters appears to be a student performing unfamiliar tasks on an isolated meteorological station. He's the good-looking Pavel Danilov (Grigory Dobrygin), aged around 20, with a silver ring in his left ear and carrying a rifle. We first see him doing readings of various instruments that measure weather and radio activity (this is evidently a contaminated area) as the wind whips around him.

He then returns to the shabby hut he shares with a querulous older man, Sergei Gulybin (Sergei Puskepalis), an experienced meteorologist some 30 years his senior. There is tension between them, first expressed by Sergei revealing that the younger man has forgotten to take cartridges for his gun. In 1984, he tells him, a hydrographer was killed by a bear just a few yards from the hut because he carried no loaded weapon to defend himself.

Sergei is clearly a veteran of the job and the region and has long since adapted himself to a routine to protect him against the state authorities for whom he works and ward off the inner terrors of the solitary life.

To Sergei, this temporary assistant is a frivolous, unreliable figure who goes around wearing headphones that pump pop music into his head and plays violent video games that pit him against snipers. Pavel comes across as a playful figure, swinging on an abandoned radar dish and jumping along a row of oil drums in a dump of old cans and abandoned machinery. Sergei, on the other hand, is a stolid figure whose sole pastime is fishing for Arctic trout out at sea. They almost seem like the last survivors in a post-apocalyptic world and, in a sense, they are.

But every hour or so they communicate with some distant base on a crackling, scarcely audible radio link. Their equipment is antiquated and failing, their food terrible, the place ill-furnished, unpainted and falling apart. This is an official establishment that in the recent past was a hive of activity and common purpose. It has now become neglected in an almost contemptuous way by a state that has given up on self-respect. This emphasises the feeling of despair and pointlessness induced by the work, while the savage grandeur of the surrounding mountains, the snow-covered tundra and relentlessly pounding sea comment ironically upon it.

We learn nothing about the characters by way of direct exposition, only through what we observe. We're not sure how long they've been together, though we do learn that their tour of duty is approaching the end and that Sergei's family are travelling to meet him on the mainland. Trouble looms when Sergei goes off to catch trout as a present for his wife and son, leaving Pavel in charge of the routine reports. While minding the store, the young man gets an urgent radiogram for Sergei about serious family trouble. But when Sergei returns he doesn't – for reasons we're left to infer – pass on the message, and a serious row breaks out over Pavel's laziness and the faking of reports. From this point, everything begins to unravel. Sergei has recalled an earlier incident when a scientist took his gun to a comrade, with only a hole in the ceiling left to show for it. He may possibly be speaking of himself. As the weather suddenly deteriorates, cabin fever gives way to lethal enmity, a cat-and-mouse game ensues and the movie turns into a thriller.

Eight years ago, Popogrebsky made his directorial debut with *Roads to Koktebel*, a road movie in which a penniless, alcoholic former aero-engineer makes a journey with his 12-year-old son from Moscow to a rundown Crimean seaside town where he once worked in happier times. It was a most accomplished work, reminiscent of Tarkovsky and De Sica. His new film, while hardly mainstream, takes up themes from *Koktebel* but gradually shunts them into a more conventional direction.

In the earlier film one suspected a lurking allegory about contemporary Russia. Here it is unavoidable. "I would never intentionally put elements of parable into my story," Popogrebsky has said. "However, if the story grows beyond the concrete time and place in which it is set, and if it strikes some universal or personal chord in a viewer, for me this means that my mission has been accomplished." I find it impossible, in the film's complex moral resolution, not to see Sergei and Pavel as representing different sides of Putin's Russia, one shaped by older traditional ways, the other struggling to discover a new set of values.



At the 2010 Berlin festival, Sergei Puskepalis and Grigory Dobrygin rightly shared the prize for best actor, while Pavel Kostomarov's haunting, evocative and at times breathtaking photography received the Silver Bear for artistic achievement. The film itself went on to win the best film award at last year's London film festival.

From: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/apr/24/how-i-ended-this-summer-review>