



Interview with Paul Devlin, Director of 'Power Trip'

(provided courtesy of Filmmaker Magazine)

Filmmaker: First of all, let's say what the film is about.

Paul Devlin: "Power Trip is about corruption, assassination and street rioting over electricity in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. It follows the story of an American corporation trying to solve the electricity crisis there, which is crushed by post-Soviet chaos." I've got that pretty well memorized.

Filmmaker: It's almost like a Catholic catechism.

Devlin: Can't stumble on the pitch, especially with a story that's so tricky to describe. Otherwise, you lose people right away. I really believe in the nonfiction film genre, but I think we have a bad rap because of the word "documentary," and I try not to use it. LA Weekly called Power Trip "a real-life thriller." Someone else called it a dark comedy. So as we go out in the market theatrically, we're trying to find alternatives to the word "documentary" and emphasize that this movie is entertaining. You'll learn a lot about a world you never knew before, but it will be fun to watch; there are funny parts and there's also tragedy. And those are the elements that make up the best fiction films as well.

Filmmaker: When I was watching the film, at first AES Telasi come across as the bad guys. These poor Georgian people, they've had free electricity their whole lives, they don't have much money — how are they expected to pay for it? But as the film went on, I found myself actually rooting for AES. You realize, what they're doing is trying to raise the level of responsibility in a country devoid of accountability.

Devlin: That was part of my own journey as well. I know Piers Lewis, the main character in the film who is also manager of AES, the massive American "global power company." I saw Piers and AES doing these nasty things, such as disconnecting entire neighborhoods in Tbilisi because they weren't paying their electric bills. And I'd come back with the footage and show early rough cuts, and everyone hated the Americans for what they were doing.

But as I learned more about the situation and the story developed, I started to realize that the company was genuinely trying to help the Georgians solve their electricity problem. They had very unusual values — "Integrity, Social Responsibility, Fairness and Fun" — and they really seemed to believe in them. So that gave me an opportunity to develop a sort of character arc of Piers and AES, where your perception of them changes over the course of the film. And also maybe deliver a more hopeful message about corporate America than we normally see.

Filmmaker: How did you hook up with Piers Lewis?

Devlin: I knew him from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. When we decided to do the movie, he gave me access. And he turned out to be a great, contradictory character. He's a progressive, Berkeley-educated, world-traveler, NGO type, but he winds up working for this huge multinational, disconnecting the Georgians from their electricity. And the crazy thing is the Georgians love him because he's been there seven or eight years, speaks the language and really understands them.

It was actually Piers's idea to make the movie. He invited me to visit him in Tbilisi and said, "This place is crazy! There are amazing stories here. You've got to do a movie about this place." And I said, "You're nuts! How am I going to try to tell the story of the epic post-Soviet transition to capitalism? It's too big." And he kept encouraging it, and I sent a camera over there, and Valery Odikadze, a Georgian cameraman who eventually became a co-producer, shot some great scenes of workers pulling down illegal power lines. I went over there just expecting to make a fund-raising demo, but there was so much amazing footage that I said, "Okay, I'm hooked. I'll do it." That's when I was able to shoot the disconnections and the street rioting and that kind of stuff.

The challenge was these esoteric topics and this complicated, global, post-Soviet stuff that is sort of difficult to describe just in words, but when you get those kinds of visuals and you see that kind of conflict and the drama that happens when people get disconnected from their electricity, suddenly these local events give you a hook to hang the larger issues. It became clear, for example, how American optimism can be profoundly naive, because a system that works at home will not necessarily work in a foreign culture without first laying a groundwork of education and rule of law. And then we can understand the profound disappointment that independence has been to many post-Soviet states, to the point that some even want to go back to Communism.

Filmmaker: Is AES still there?

Devlin: I'm going to let people buy a ticket to the movie to find that out. I'll just say that we had to change the end of the film this summer [2003].

Filmmaker: When you were filming riots and stuff, as an identifiable American, did you ever get worried?

Devlin: Sometimes I got worried. A couple times I was asked to stop shooting when I was near the presidential offices. But generally, I didn't have much trouble. I worked alone with a small Mini DV camera, so I think I was under the radar. But there were a couple of moments. I was shooting at night once, and a car stopped and four big beefy guys got out. I thought, uh-oh, I'm in trouble. But they turned out to be policemen, and they were telling me to get off the street because there had been some tourists who had gotten beaten up in the area recently!

Filmmaker: How did you go about getting funding for this film?

Devlin: Well, funding for independent documentaries in the U.S. is pretty difficult. I sought funding from the Soros Documentary Fund [now the Sundance International Documentary Fund], the MacArthur Foundation, all the usual suspects, and was rejected out of hand everywhere.

This was a very difficult film to pitch. “So you’re going to do a movie about the Georgian electricity sector. Why would anyone be interested in that?” Once you see Power Trip, you understand why it’s so interesting, but to try to do that on paper is a tough pitch. I made a strong effort with a really good proposal; I actually hired a grant writer, but got nothing. And to try to get private sources for this is also difficult in a market for independent documentaries where it’s very unlikely you’re going to profit.

So if you get no outside funding, at some point you have to make a choice: quit or keep going on your own. I wound up self-financing. And I did that with my last film, SlamNation, as well. I’m hoping that we can break even on Power Trip.

Filmmaker: And what are you doing with it now?

Devlin: Our sales agent and international distributor is Jan Rofekamp with Films Transit International, and he’s doing very well with sales overseas. We’ve sold to the BBC, and I’m told there are over 20 other international sales. In fact, he’s characterized Power Trip as a worldwide best-seller at this point. Europeans get it!

The U.S. market is a little trickier. We were talking to domestic distributors, but not all those deals were great. So we’ve been booking the film ourselves in theaters. We played the Film Forum run in New York in December, and we’re going to be playing in Santa Monica, Pasadena, San Francisco, a few others. With television, if you don’t hit the jackpot with HBO, where there is serious money, the options diminish precipitously after that. The next step is the Sundance Channel, PBS and those kinds of markets, and then you’re talking anywhere from \$15,000 to \$30,000 if you’re lucky. If you do very, very well, maybe you’re talking \$40,000 to \$60,000. And this is for a low-budget nonfiction film that is going to cost you anywhere from \$100,000 to \$200,000 — and that’s with a lot of favors and a lot of in-kind services. If you were to really budget it, it would be more like \$350,000 to \$400,000. I think with the international TV sales, though, we’re going to do well. And a lot of corporations and financial institutions are contacting us about in-house screenings, which is a nice perk. And if we can find our way into the educational and institutional video market, we’ll be in good shape. Maybe I’ll even break even. But if you’re counting on making money, you’re in the wrong business, because the market for independent documentaries is pretty much unsustainable. Sort of like the electricity market in Georgia.