



Review: Power Trip

By Frank Scheck

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NEW YORK -- The travails of an American multinational corporation attempting to provide electric power to the former Soviet Republic of Georgia would seem to be more suitable fodder for a "60 Minutes" investigative piece than a feature-length documentary, but Paul Devlin's "Power Trip" provides evidence to the contrary. A gripping film dealing with a variety of complicated themes, the film even at times manages to play like a suspense thriller. Recently nominated for an Independent Spirit Award, it is receiving its U.S. theatrical premiere at New York's Film Forum.

Taking place some 10 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the film depicts the efforts of the AES Corp., a Virginia-based company that is the largest independent owner of power in the world, to fully wire the financially depressed city of Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. Attempting to infuse the area with a dose of Western-style free-market economics, the company faced disastrous results. The population, used to receiving their power for free under the old Soviet regime, now faced electric bills that represented a major chunk of their monthly income.

Attempting to play hardball, the company shut power off for those customers who refused to pay, which at one point included the Army and the airport. The outraged citizenry took matters into their own hands, demonstrating against the company's practices and willfully stealing electricity by tapping into existing power lines. Adding further difficulties to the process was the rampant government corruption, which has recently led to the resignation of president Eduard Shevardnadze. Eventually, the company found itself faced with a loss of more than \$200 million.

Filmmaker Devlin details this complicated series of events with clarity, a sense of drama and more than a few touches of dark humor, managing to make this specific story an effective microcosmic portrait of the vast political, social and economic changes endured by the region.



'Power Trip'

By DAVID STRATTON

A first-rate documentary which impresses on a number of levels, "Power Trip" provides unique insights into the role played by a major American company in an impoverished, corrupt, almost Third World country, Georgia. Made with deft evenhandedness, Paul Devlin's accomplished film plays almost like a fictional drama, containing suspense, comedy and some colorful characters. In some territories, theatrical release could prove successful, while television slotting is a must as well as further fest exposure.

In 1999, AES Corp., headquartered in Arlington, Va., and which is the largest owner of power in the world, spent \$35 million to acquire Telasi, Georgia's electricity distribution company, which was formerly nationalized. The Americans couldn't have predicted what they were in for; Georgia, the former Soviet republic, located in the unstable Caucasus region, is almost a basket case. In the years since the fall of the Soviet Union, the country, led by President Edward Shevardnadze, has staggered from one crisis to another, including civil war.

Devlin tells his story from the POV of British-born Piers Lewis, who has lived in Georgia for six years, speaks the language, and, at the start of the film, is strategic project director for AES-Telasi. The first problem the new company faces is that supplies of electricity in the country are a mess, with up to 40% of customers illegally bypassing their meters via homemade wiring. In the Communist era, power was free; now, the user has to pay, and AES-Telasi is determined to improve power supplies and keep shareholders back in America happy. A fortune is spent improving the power lines and metering every customer, but when the company starts sending out bills -- averaging \$24 per month, in a city where the average wage is as little as \$15 per month -- something's got to give. In effect, the customers simply refuse to pay. And when the company begins to cut off power supplies from bad debtors, public unrest grows.

While the wily consumers set about finding ways of obtaining illegal power again, AES-Telasi faces more pressing problems from the government itself. Despite the assurances of the president and his Fuel and Energy Minister, government facilities also refuse to pay for their power. In one revealing scene, AES-Telasi decides to cut off power to Tbilisi's airport in order to force payment of a staggering debt.

The company is now losing \$120,000 per day, and everyone's getting edgy. Devlin depicts the increasing tensions between the visiting Americans and the government and people, and, by implication, the tensions between the AES CEO, Dennis Baake, and his

shareholders. Baake, who has signed photographs of Mother Teresa and Bill Clinton on his office wall, seems genuinely dedicated to dragging Georgia into the modern world, but the difficulties he and his staff face seem almost insuperable.

Almost as an aside, Devlin depicts the crusading work of a trio of Georgian TV journalists who threaten to expose government corruption; when one of the journalists is gunned down in his home, his funeral brings Tbilisi to a halt, though Shevardnadze refuses to accept that the assassination was political. As the end credits unfold, the viewer is informed that, after filming was completed, an AES-Telasi exec (not seen in the film) was also murdered.

Devlin includes interviews with ordinary Georgians, TV commercials for AES-Telasi, Georgian cartoons which mock the Americans' efforts, and newsreel footage which fleshes out the recent history of the troubled country.

What makes "Power Trip" unusually interesting is the fact that Devlin refuses to take sides. He clearly sympathizes both with the people of Georgia and the horrendous problems they face when their power supply is shut down, and also with the generally good-natured, hard-working and amiable AES-Telasi employees. There isn't a hint of "ugly American" bashing in the film.

Shot on video, "Power Trip" plays out as a dynamic and incident-packed 85 minutes, offering insight into seldom discussed problems concerning the former satellites of the Soviet Union.



Light comedy at its darkest: An energy crisis illuminated

by Ward Harkavy
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Maybe most video journalism is so logy because of all the gear TV crews lug around just to capture brainless soundbites. Manhattanite Paul Devlin, by contrast, took his mini-DV camera to the Caucasus Mountains and came back with an inspired tale of how an entire country became unplugged and unglued. By trade an editor of network sports footage, Devlin was previously known for the urban-poetry documentary *SlamNation* (1998). A nation is slammed in Devlin's new *Power Trip*—the end of the Soviet empire literally meant lights out for the Republic of Georgia.

Homeland of Stalin and hemmed in by hot spots like Chechnya and Turkey, Georgia was ripped apart by civil war and corruption after the Soviet Union started disintegrating in the late '80s. A few years ago, giant multinational corporation AES, based in Virginia but scooping up power plants and electricity customers across the globe, purchased most of Georgia's sickly power system from the government and started sending out bills and shutting off electricity to customers who didn't pay them. In the Soviet era, Georgians hadn't had to pay for power, so you can imagine their outrage when their monthly electric bills suddenly went from zero to more than their monthly income. With a comic eye for the absurd, Devlin tells the story, set mostly in 2001, of powerless Georgia, in large part through the travails of his college pal Piers Lewis, a globetrotter who landed there and went to work for AES.

This is power reporting, but the story's the thing, and with the help of native music both traditional and modern, Devlin generates a whole lot more funk than, say, a Frontline documentary. His restless camera caresses Georgia's gorgeous mountains and striking architecture and he gives the same loving treatment to grape-stomping, cheese-making, street rioting, and yarn-spinning. There's no foreshadowing, so we feel overtaken by events the way the Georgians were. Like the best documentaries, this one raises questions instead of providing pat answers.

If only Devlin had taken his intrepid reporting a few steps further. AES's CEO and co-founder, Dennis Bakke, talks for the camera about being a "steward" for electricity, not profits. Don't believe it. *Power Trip* doesn't tell you that Bakke was the 312th richest person in the world when this film was shot, or that his real goal in life is to be a Christian crusader. AES churned up a cash flow of billions of dollars from hapless targets

of privatization like Georgia, and in 2001 alone, transferred \$4 million into a Bakke foundation that vigorously proselytized non-Christians worldwide. But you can forgive Devlin this slight case of credulity. He's a good storyteller. He should stay home next year to shoot the Republican National Convention.