

Black Triangle. 1991, Directed by Nick Davidson. 52 min. Color. Available through Filmmaker's Library, 124 East 40th Street, New York, NY 10016. Sale: \$ 445, Rent: \$75.

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As *Black Triangle* opens the camera pans a large dense, dark hill, a virtual black triangle against a setting sun. Moving from what we later learn is an open-air uranium slag heap, the camera passes slowly through stands of dead and dying forest as funereal music plays in the background. Through narration we are told that Black Triangle also refers to the border area between northwestern Czechoslovakia and what was once southeastern East Germany, so named because of the intensity of environmental pollution within that zone. And while the metaphoric equation of region and slag heap seems at first a bit heavy-handed, the more we learn of the detailed circumstances of life in this region the more apt the metaphor appears.

Black Triangle deals at once with two critical and interrelated failings of East European socialism; intractable environmental pollution resulting mainly from development-at-any-cost government policies, and the disregard for the lives and health of workers, in this case those responsible for the mining of uranium and, before it, the soft brown coal found extensively in the region. More than a standard proclamation of "Green" concerns, the film thus clearly shows how production relations and the control of the production process sat at the base of environmental transformation in the Czechoslovak-DDR borderland, and in fact of much of the former socialist states of East Europe.

Uranium mining in the Black Triangle was under the control of WISMUTH, a joint venture of the Soviet and East German governments which is likened in the film to a state-within-a-state. Given over to total secrecy and subject to limited oversight and few regulations, WISMUTH was organized as a vertically-integrated corporation charged with the mining and processing of nuclear fuels. Its non-responsive nature was assured by its domination of the local economy of the border towns and villages and the near-total dependence of local workers on the corporation for their livelihoods. Clearly, its control of the regional economy is sufficient explanation for some of the appalling environmental practices depicted in the film; children playing on and at the base of the slag heap, road crews using the radioactive material as paving gravel, and raw radioactive sludge from two WISMUTH processing

plants being piped into local lakes which serve as the region's main water supply.

Given their complete domination by the mines, the miners and their families were reticent to challenge these and other practices, developing instead a culture of fatalism and dependency. High regional rates of cancer (there are 160 new cases of lung cancer reported among miners every year), leukemia, respiratory failure, and an average life expectancy of 48 years was explained away as accident by the local population. Though some did attempt to challenge these practices, they were threatened and intimidated by local officials from the start and were limited in their challenge by their lack of knowledge and the technology necessary to document and challenge the state. For example, the only Geiger Counter available to the population was donated by the West German Green Party and the sole dissident portrayed in the movie was shown as he hacked away at an ancient manual typewriter. Underlying all this, of course, was the imperiousness of the state and its developmental practices. Thus, the plan to destroy a number of villages to make room for a new Czech uranium processing plant was nonchalantly dismissed by one official as he suggested, "what do you care about a few grannies when 10,000 people will be working here."

With the revolution of 1989 one would think the region's problems would be on their way towards some resolution. However, this is not the case since the successor states in East Europe today are faced with the same questions as their socialist forbearers; namely how do you finance development and what do you use for energy in the process. The film especially succeeds in portraying the difficulties facing East European governments and people today as they try to come to grips with such questions which, in the Black Triangle, boils down to the choice between continued reliance on nuclear energy or the return to soft brown coal and its various health and environmental hazards. (Most interesting, the local Czech Green party especially supports nuclear power.) Though the energy question is essentially irresolvable, the transformation of governments has had some effect on this decision making process. The film ends with talk of a local referendum to decide on which alternative to adopt, and there is an open informational campaign to provide

voters with necessary information to make a decision about their future. The film ends on a positive note as Czech and German miners and environmental activists are shown celebrating Earth Day, 1990 together and tearing down the border posts to symbolize their unity and the international nature of environmental questions.

Though *Black Triangle* is a bit slow-moving it nonetheless succeeds due to the questions it raises and dilemmas it poses as well as for its obvious concern for the lives and health of East Europeans workers and families.