The DAU Project: History of One of Russia's Biggest and Most Controversial Film Production

Sergei Glotov, Tampere University, Finland

The European Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2022 Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The DAU project was a unique and colossal film experiment that lasted for several years and employed hundreds of people. Back in 2005, it was conceived as a conventional biopic of Soviet scientist Lev Landau, however, quite soon the idea transformed dramatically. After the production settled in Kharkiv, Ukraine, the director Ilya Khrzhanovsky constructed a gigantic set - The Institute, a dynamic historical reconstruction of a Soviet-era science centre. The Institute was populated by hundreds of untrained extras, who would improvise the majority of their lines and actions. A single camera operated by renowned German cinematographer Jürgen Jürges followed them around. The Institute had functioned for three years, during which 700 hours of footage were filmed. During those years, information began to circulate in Russian media about horrific conditions on the set, continuous abuse from the director, and the disastrous impact the production had on the city. This research explores available information on the production of DAU and constructs a historical narrative that begins in 2005 and ends in current times. The research data is a collection of online materials published in different languages. The research describes controversies that followed the production and release of DAU, as well as brings up responses from the director and his cast and crew.

Keywords: Film History, DAU, Ukraine, Production, Russian Film

iafor

The International Academic Forum www.iafor.org

Introduction

The work on the DAU project began in 2005. The original goal was to create a conventional biopic of Soviet physicist and the Nobel Prize winner Lev Landau with filming completed in Russia (Dau was the real nickname of the scientist). However, in 2009 the production moved to Kharkiv, north-east Ukraine, which in spring of 2022 had been heavily bombed by Russian military forces, following their invasion into the Ukrainian territory (Walker & Tondo, 2022).

Once in Kharkiv, the production with the director Ilya Khrzhanovsky in charge began constructing a gigantic set, the size of two football fields, at the old swimming pool. The set resembled a Soviet research facility, inspired by the one where Landau himself worked. With the financial backing from Russian businessman Serguei Adoniev the set, dubbed the Institute, transformed into an immersive space that followed the rules and customs of Soviet times (Macnab, 2019a).

The people, who populated the set, wore period clothes and used period items (Idov, 2011). They were supposed to embrace the lifestyle of the Institute and live their roles instead of acting them, thus allowing the director to achieve some level of authenticity. Some people, for example, Greek-Russian conductor Teodor Currentzis, who played the role of Landau, lived on the set for months (Rose, 2019), while others could come in in the morning and leave at the end of the day (Belikov, 2020a).

Overall, the filming lasted for three years, during which thousands of people participated in the production, be they part of the crew, cast and administration. 700 hours of footage were filmed by German cinematographer Jürgen Jürges, who worked with Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Michael Haneke. After years of editing, the production presented an immersive exhibition in Paris in early 2019, which was followed by a conventional premiere in 2020 at the Berlin Film Festival. Two films were presented, with one of them, *DAU: Natasha*, selected for the main competition.

DAU: Natasha does not feature Lev Landau, instead it tells the story of a cafeteria worker at the Institute, who gets arrested and interrogated by the security forces after meeting, drinking, and having sex with a foreign scientist. At the film's finale, the cafeteria worker is questioned by the actual retired KGB investigator, who was invited to the set. The man forces the main character to drink before questioning her and threatening to put a bottle in her vagina.

Considering that there was no script, and the experiences of the performers were real, the screening of *DAU: Natasha* generated a controversy, raising ethical questions about the physical, sexual, and mental safety of the cast. Following the premiere, five accredited Russian journalists and film critics (Tatiana Shorokhova, Marina Latysheva, Ksenia Reutova, Tamara Khodova, and Dmitry Barchenkov) composed an open letter to Berlin Film Festival creative director Carlo Chatrian and executive director Mariette Rissenbeek.

The letter asked three questions with the main point in inquiring if the Berlin Film Festival sees anything wrong in the mistreatment of talent in the name of art, as well as in screening a film that contains scenes of real violence against non-professional actors and non-simulated sex between people under the influence of alcohol? (kkbbd, 2020). Carlo Chatrian responded that all questions should be directed towards the production company, which ensured that there was no mistreatment on set (Ravindran & Davis, 2020). The director also denied any

mistreatment and allegations of sexual abuse, stating that the production was responsible, and the tough scenes were always discussed beforehand (Belikov, 2020b).

The current paper aims to look at how the DAU project was completed by diving into the history of its production using the available resources. The goal of this research is to find and report people's experiences on the set and with the director. Therefore, the main research question is *How the DAU project was produced*? The paper contributes to the field of film history by describing one of the biggest film productions ever, as well as by bringing the voices of actual participants into the spotlight.

Building the Institute

The director Ilya Khrzhanovsky, the son of acclaimed Soviet filmmaker Andrey Khrzhanovsky, had directed a single film before embarking on the DAU project. That film was 4, a festival favourite, that blurs the lines between fantasy and reality. Interested in the life of Lev Landau, who was an important scientist, but also a peculiar personality, who believed in the concept of free love, Khrzhanovsky founded a production company Phenomen Films, and set on seeking funding for the project, which at the time was a quite straightforward biopic (Macnab, 2019b).

Following the complicated process of writing the script based on the memoirs of Landau's wife together with Vladimir Sorokin, who also contributed to 4, Khrzhanovsky decided to abandon his original plan and instead focus on the period that the scientist lived and worked through (Zayats, 2017a). With plans made and funding soon secured, the production moved to Kharkiv, which is the second-largest Ukrainian city located in the northeast of the country. This was done for three reasons (Zayats, 2017a). Firstly, Lev Landau worked in Kharkiv from 1932 till 1937. Secondly, the city still had many examples of Soviet constructivist architecture. Finally, the production costs were significantly cheaper there.

Originally, the shooting was supposed to last for just 63 days (Strelnik, 2008). In the space of the old swimming pool Dynamo, the production company constructed the Institute, a large immersive set in the style of Soviet science centres. The city centre got billboards from the 1930s, old cars flooded the city, and a 1:1 replica of a Soviet plane, which Landau used to arrive in the city, was built in the airport. The director refused to hire professional actors, instead prompting for untrained extras, who would be able to immerse themselves into the film set. Therefore, the call was made for willing participants, as well as for any period artefacts to serve much-desired authenticity.

The keyword for the Institute was immersion. The use of anything modern was prohibited, and the atmosphere of the Soviet times was recreated to detail from clothing to food and packaging. Women were forbidden to wear modern tampons, instead, Soviet-model cloth versions were made available (Meek, 2015). The Institute had its newspaper, but also its own guards, who would look for anyone using modern words and then exclude them from the set. The culture of snitching was also flourishing as the result of such policy, with people reporting each other's failures to comply with the Institute's rules either to the director or people close to him (Idov, 2011).

There was no traditional script, instead the people were supposed to act and live at the same time, even when there was no camera around. A single camera unit was operated by Jürgen Jürges, who would later receive the Berlin Film Festival award for his work. When the

camera would find people, they were bound to allow filming any aspects of their lives, no matter how intimate they were. The production reports that 14 children were conceived during the shooting (Stanley-Becker, 2019).

It is clear that the Institute was not a regular film set. Sometimes there was no actual practical shooting for weeks, even though the set was functioning and living its life (Idov, 2011), sometimes, the shooting lasted for 24 hours a day (Witkin, 2013). There were strict rules in place, which not followed would result in firing from the project.

To create and maintain such a film set required a lot of labour from the supporting crew, be it carpenters, cooks, cleaners, or other professionals. At the same time, the production required a lot of translators for all the foreigners on the set, which included the camera crew, but also notable people who visited the set. Reportedly, people were contacted via phone calls, requesting to come to the film set and to discuss everything there, with the production covering the ticket expenses (Zayats, 2017b). However, once there, witnessing the abnormal film set, a person had to decide between either leaving or staying and trying to work.

There was a strict hierarchy on the set between those who were close to the director and the rest. The first group was treated comfortably and generously rewarded, while the second was continuously harassed (Tonet & Salino, 2019). And it was easy to get on the bad side of the director: ask uncomfortable questions, demand some rights, or refuse to drink with him (Idov, 2011). Therefore, the production was looking for people, who would not oppose the director and his vision, who would be eager to partake in the experiment, and who "had nothing to lose" (Zayats, 2017b).

Testimonies

The production of DAU was done in quite secrecy. While more than 392,000 auditions were completed with 10,000 extras participating in the shooting (Macnab, 2019b), not much information was available about the daily experience of the production. This can be explained by the possible existence of strict non-disclosure agreements (NDA), which would prevent people from speaking out to the media. Geoffrey Macnab (2019b) mentions a draconian NDA that he was suggested to sign when visiting the London office of the production once the filming was wrapped. So perhaps similar strict NDAs were implemented during the production.

Nevertheless, some testimonies, be it anonymous or from a few journalists that were allowed to visit the production appeared in the media. In 2010 Russian online media journal OpenSpace.ru published a collection of anonymous testimonies of people who worked on DAU (Prilepskaya, 2010). A freelance translator mentioned that the production resembled slavery with people from various places working for a small salary, with Ukrainians especially being treated as third-class people.

Another person, the coordinator, says that working on the project meant no sleep, no food, and no money since the production was trying to save on everything, delaying salaries and encouraging free labour (Prilepskaya, 2010). Other reports described how locals, who worked as drivers, cooks, or those who just landed the flats for the crew, were used by the production and never paid for their services (Koretsky, 2019).

Michael Idov (2011), who visited the filmset for a GQ story, describes the experience of Yulia, who was hired to be an assistant director and then was questioned by the director about her sexual life, if her friends are whores, and if she can sleep with another woman. After Yulia acted disgusted, she was fired.

Ukrainian journalist Artyom Zayats (2017b) collected various testimonies, including those published on Kharkiv city forums and popular online communities. He provides the quote from the production administrator, who discusses that everything the director asked for was supposed to be done by any means, and it was a norm; and those who were unsatisfied with this and dared to voice their opinions, were immediately fired. Zayats (2017b) also reports that many people never got back their landed period artefacts, since the production either lost or destroyed them.

Following the premiere of *DAU: Natasha* at the Berlin Film Festival, the first assistant in the second camera team Matthias Ganghofer testified that he experienced the feeling of manipulation and humiliation when his name was marked on a blackboard after using a cellphone inside the Institute (Grenier, 2020).

Rose (2019) shares the experience of Teodor Currentzis, who had the freedom to do what he liked, but still felt uncomfortable many times, although for him it was a necessary sacrifice for filming something real. Rose (2019) continues with the testimony of DAU associate Eddie Dick, who found the director to be a megalomaniac, treating his staff like servants. A former casting assistant reported that the director crossed the line from fictional to real abuse (Kovalyova, 2019).

Not everyone among the visiting intellectuals and noteworthy people had a pleasant time as well, for example, Le Monde (Tonet & Salino, 2019) reports that American artist Andrew Ondrejcak was assaulted by real Neo-Nazi extras invited by Khrzhanovsky on the set for further realism. Speaking of the real criminals, James Meek (2015) describes that some participants were arrested by the on-set police in the middle of the night, interrogated, and put into a prison cell with actual criminals hired from a Kharkiv prison.

However, some enjoyed being a part of the project. Witkin (2013) reports on the locals, who were pleased with how nice and kind everyone on the set was and who have not encountered any mistreatment from the production. Zayats (2017b) mentions people who appreciated the unique conditions and truly believed in the director's vision and goals. And it is important to remember, that Khrzhanovsky himself denies any allegations of abuse, manipulation, and sexual exploitation (Rose, 2019).

The End of Filming and the Premieres

After three years the filming was over. Khrzhanovsky decided to throw an epic farewell by partly demolishing the set and organising a rave-party on its ruins with guest appearances from the Canadian musician Peaches and the American DJ Spooky (Meek, 2015). Zayats (2017b) writes that Khrzhanovsky was filming the party by sending cameramen into the crowds composed of anyone willing to come.

Soon afterwards the production moved to London to assemble the 700 hours of footage filmed. The production stayed at 100 Piccadilly, an old neoclassical building close to Buckingham Palace. James Meek (2015), who was invited there to see some footage and

meet the director (both goals were not achieved), described how the building was transformed from the inside to resemble a branch of the Institute: life-size dummies in trenchcoats, the guards requesting to take photos upon the entrance, lunch served with traditional Russian food. When Meek (2015) asked how this building was able to be rented for the production's purpose, he was quickly cut off by the project's lawyer.

Years went by, and, finally, the project was ready to be premiered in October 2018 in Berlin as a huge art installation. The goal was to construct a large section of the Berlin Wall, make the audience get visas for the entrance, have Brian Eno and Robert del Naja of Massive Attack perform, and eventually symbolically tear down the wall on the anniversary of the actual fall of the Berlin Wall (Brown, 2018). But that did not happen. While some criticised such an installation for normalising totalitarianism, the official reason for the rejection was that the production failed to correctly file the necessary paperwork (Thaddeus-Johns, 2019).

The production switched to another European capital - Paris, where in January 2019 it eventually succeeded in screening 13 feature-length films within two public theatres open 24 hours a day (Donadio, 2019). Apart from watching the films, people could experience musical performances, seminars, eat Russian food, discuss their experience with shamans or psychologists, hang out with some of the cast of the project, or visit Centre Pompidou to see two people posing as DAU scientists living in an enclosed furnished Soviet apartment (Donadio, 2019). To enter, a person was required to purchase a visa, which could be valid either for 6 hours, 24 hours, or for an unlimited time, and only then they could enjoy watching various footage playing in different booths (Dolin, 2019).

The following year two films premiered at the Berlin Film Festival. *DAU: Natasha* was selected for the main competition, while the six-hours long *DAU: Degeneration* was screened as a part of the Berlinale Special selection. The first to premiere was *DAU: Natasha*, and it was the one that created the most buzz. That film or at least something resembling it was already screened during the Paris premiere. Excessive drinking and real penetrative sex already were questioned by film journalists, who could not see an artistic purpose behind those (Donadio, 2019).

However, the main controversy started following the open letter addressed to the Berlin Film Festival creative and executive directors that raised ethical questions about the film's production. The letter immediately provoked a strong reaction online with its authors receiving a torrent of criticism and threats, accusing them of being prudish and denouncing the film (Roth, 2020). The director defended the film, stating that the knowledge that everything is real gives a completely different reaction (Macnab, 2020).

In her interview with a Russian film journalist Natalia Berezhnaya (Belikov, 2020a), who played the leading role in the film, stated that anyone could stop filming at any moment, however, she never did so; the scenes were discussed before shooting, although some improvisation, especially with dialogues, was involved; and that she was asked permission to include the sex scene into the final film.

Following the Berlin Film Festival, the production tried to obtain the screening rights in Russia for some of the films, including *DAU: Natasha*, however, these were denied due to explicit pornographic materials. Phenomen Films tried to argue for the rights in court, however, the court dismissed the claim (TASS, 2020). A streaming website was launched instead, where a user can purchase a film for 3 dollars. As of the 3rd of August 2022, seven

films are available on the website with 5 more promised in the upcoming release. *DAU: Natasha* is not on any of these lists.

Conclusion

The DAU project was an ambitious production that lasted for many years that has been slowly fading into the past. There is no public information on the project's box office, as well as audience numbers. On IMDB.com the latest review of *DAU: Natasha* dates back to November 2020. Ilya Khrzhanovsky has moved to the role of art director of Babi Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre in Ukraine, which he wanted to transform into an immersive experience during which the visitors are supposed to make important ethical choices (Gredina et al., 2020). Following Khrzhanovsky's appointment, the members of the staff who had been working on the project during the previous years either left it or were dismissed (Davidzon, 2020).

The aim of this research was to collect the available information on the DAU project's production. It included testimonies of people who felt abused and mistreated by the production, as well as those who did not experience any of that. Such a huge production, the largest in the history of European cinema, had a lot of people involved, and their work, sacrifices, and experiences are worth being acknowledged.

References

- Belikov, E. (2020a, May 15). *Natasha Berezhnaya, Geroinya "Dau" Tam Ya Byla Chelovekom, Kotorym Ne Mogla Byt' V Etoy Zhizni*. [Natasha Berezhnaya, The Heroine Of "Dau" There I Was The Person I Could Not Be In This Life]. Iskusstvo Kino. https://kinoart.ru/interviews/natasha-berezhnaya-geroinya-dau-my-obgovarivali-kazhdyy-moment-i-s-butylkoy
- Belikov, E. (2020b, March 3). "Ya chelovek pravil": Ilya Khrzhanovskiy otvechayet na glavnyye voprosy o «Dau», ab'yuze i Tesake. ["I am a man of rules": Ilya Khrzhanovsky answers the main questions about Dau, abuse and Tesak]. AfishaDaily. https://daily.afisha.ru/cinema/14717-ya-chelovek-pravil-ilya-hrzhanovskiy-otvechaetna-glavnye-voprosy-o-dau-abyuze-i-tesake/
- Brown, M. (2018, August 31). *Stalinist Truman Show: artist paid 400 people to live as Soviet citizens*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/31/stalinist-truman-show-artist-paid-400-people-to-live-as-soviet-citizens
- Davidzon, V. (2020, May 26). *Turning Babi Yar Into Holocaust Disneyland*. Tablet. https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/dau-babyn-yar-khrzhanovsky
- Dolin, A. (2019, January 24). "Dau" eto fil'm ili serial? Kak yego smotret'? Pravda, chto na s"yemkakh bylo nasiliye? [Is Dau a movie or a TV show? How to watch it? Is it true that there was violence on set?]. Meduza. https://meduza.io/feature/2019/01/24/dau-eto-film-ili-serial-kak-ego-smotret-pravdachto-na-s-emkah-bylo-nasilie
- Donadio, R. (2019, February 15). "DAU": A Weird Soviet Exhibition 14 Years in the Making. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/02/dau-weird-soviet-exhibition-14-years-making/582874/
- Gredina, N., Safonova, K. & Kartsev, D. (2020, May 18). V Bab'yem Yare natsisty ubili 33 tysyachi yevreyev za dva dnya. Pochemu muzey, kotoryy khochet sdelat' tam Ilya Khrzhanovskiy, nazyvayut «Kholokost-Disneylendom»? [In Babi Yar, the Nazis killed 33,000 Jews in two days. Why is the museum that Ilya Khrzhanovsky wants to make there called "Holocaust Disneyland"?]. Meduza. https://meduza.io/feature/2020/05/18/v-babiem-yare-natsisty-ubili-33-tysyachi-evreev-za-dva-dnya-pochemu-muzey-kotoryy-hochet-sdelat-tam-ilya-hrzhanovskiy-nazyvayut-holokost-disneylendom
- Grenier, E. (2020, February 27). *What's behind the "most ambitious film project of all time."* DW. https://www.dw.com/en/dau-whats-behind-the-most-ambitious-film-project-of-all-time/a-52555534
- Idov, M. (2011, October 27). *The Movie Set That Ate Itself*. GQ. https://www.gq.com/story/movie-set-that-ate-itself-dau-ilya-khrzhanovsky

- Kkbbd. (2020, February 29). An open letter to Carlo Chatrian and Mariette Rissenbeek from accredited Russian members of the Berlinale press. KKBBD. https://kkbbd.com/2020/02/29/an-open-letter-to-carlo-chatrian-and-mariette-rissenbeek-from-accredited-russian-members-of-the-berlinale-press/
- Koretsky, V. (2019, January 30). *11 voprosov o "Dau": Chto nuzhno znat' o proyekte, vyzvavshem stol'ko skandalov*. [11 questions about Dau: What you need to know about the project that caused so many scandals]. Kinopoisk. https://www.kinopoisk.ru/media/article/3320314/
- Kovalyova, A. (2019, January 24). *Lights, cameras, madness: my troubling journey inside Dau, the most disturbing movie shoot in history.* The Telegraph. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2019/01/24/lights-cameras-madness-troublingjourney-inside-dau-disturbing/
- Macnab, G. (2019a, January 10). Controversial Russian film and art project "Dau" to finally launch in Paris (exclusive). Screen. https://www.screendaily.com/news/controversial-russian-film-and-art-project-dau-to-finally-launch-in-paris-exclusive-/5135622.article
- Macnab, G. (2019b, January 24). *Dau: a never-ending experiment in a Soviet laboratory*. British Film Institute. https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-soundmagazine/features/dau-ilya-khrzhanovsky-report-and-first-look
- Macnab, G. (2020, February 26). 'DAU. Natasha' director defends abuse scene, talks four more DAU features (exclusive). Screen. https://www.screendaily.com/news/dau-natasha-director-defends-abuse-scene-talks-four-more-dau-features-exclusive/5147659.article
- Meek, J. (2015, October 8). *Real Murderers!* London Review of Books. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n19/james-meek/diary
- Prilepskaya, K. (2010, March 26). *Chto na samom dele proiskhodit s Dau?* [What's really going on with Dau?]. OpenSpace. http://os.colta.ru/cinema/projects/70/details/16912/
- Ravindran M., Davis R. (2020, February 29). Russian Press Take Aim at 'Dau' Competition Selection at Berlinale in Searing Open Letter. Variety. https://variety.com/2020/film/actors/russian-press-open-letter-dau-natasha-berlinaleilya-khrzhanovsky-1203519822
- Rose, S. (2019, January 26). *Inside Dau, the "Stalinist Truman Show": "I had absolute freedom until the KGB grabbed me.*" The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jan/26/inside-the-stalinist-truman-show-dau-i-had-absolute-freedom-until-the-kgb-grabbed-me

Roth, A. (2020, March 3). "*I felt cruelly manipulated*": violent Russian film DAU. Natasha shocks critics. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/03/russian-film-dau-natasha-violence-soviet

- Stanley-Becker, I. (2019, January 25). Ordinary people lived in a replica of Soviet times. Were they abused for art in a daring new film? Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/01/25/hundreds-ordinary-people-spenttwo-years-role-playing-soviet-totalitarianism-were-they-abused-art/
- Strelnik, I. (2008, August 15). Kino Cnimayetsya V Kharkove: Istoriya I Sovremennost. [Movie Is Made In Kharkiv: History And Modernity]. Vecherniy Kharkov https://vecherniy.kharkov.ua/news/23909/
- TASS. (2020, September 15). *Sud podderzhal otkaz Minkul'tury vydat' prokatnyye udostovereniya fil'mam "Dau"*. [The court upheld the refusal of the Ministry of Culture to issue distribution certificates for the films "Dau"]. TASS. https://tass.ru/kultura/9457273
- Thaddeus-Johns, J. (2019, January 25). '*DAU' Premiere in Paris Is Postponed*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/25/arts/dau-premiere-paris-canceled.html
- Tonet, A., Salino, B. (2019, January 19). *A Paris, "Dau" sème le trouble et les roubles*. (Z. Pronchenko, Trans.) Le Monde. https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2019/01/19/dau-le-projet-artistique-fou-qui-seme-le-trouble-et-les-roubles-a-paris)_5411699_3246.html
- Walker, S., & Tondo, L. (2022, May 27). Kharkiv hit by fresh strikes amid fears city is still on Russian agenda. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/kharkiv-hit-by-fresh-strikes-amidfears-city-is-still-on-russian-agenda
- Witkin, D. (2013, October 16). Khrzhanovsky's "Dau" Stuck in Production After Eccentric Shoot. The Moscow Times. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/10/16/khrzhanovskys-dau-stuck-inproduction-after-eccentric-shoot-a28668
- Zayats, A. (2017a, February 26). *Vse, chto vy khoteli znat' o Dau. Chast 1*. [Everything you wanted to know about Dau. Part 1]. Film.ru. https://www.film.ru/articles/vse-chto-vy-hoteli-znat-o-dau-chast-1
- Zayats, A. (2017b, March 5). *Vse, chto vy khoteli znat' o Dau. Chast 2.* [Everything you wanted to know about Dau. Part 2]. Film.ru. https://www.film.ru/articles/vse-chto-vy-hoteli-znat-o-dau-chast-2