



GIRL MODEL

Executive Produced by Simon Kilmurry **POV** and Catherine Olsen **CBC**
In association with **BBC Storyville** and **DR2 Dokumania**



A Film by David Redmon & A. Sabin

Carnavalesque Films | 78' | USA | 2011 | HD HDCAM 16:9 | Stereo



“A brilliant exposé of a dangerous business...eerie, visceral horror haunts every scene...” –

indieWIRE

“...the intrepid "Girl Model" gets inside the virtual human trafficking of beautiful young Russians into the netherworld of the Japanese modelling market, tracking one young blonde Siberian's experience from breathless hopeful to damaged dreamer.” –

Variety

LOGLINE

Girl Model follows a complex supply chain between Siberia, Japan, and the U.S. within the modelling industry. The story is told through the eyes of a scout and a 13 year-old model.



SYNOPSIS

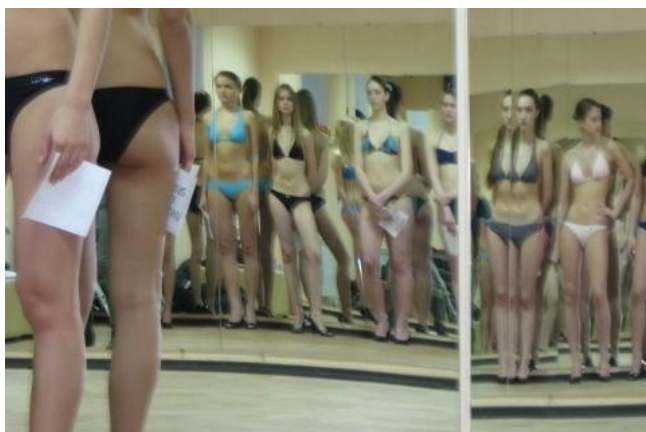
Despite a lack of obvious similarities between Siberia and Tokyo, a thriving model industry connects these distant regions. *Girl Model* follows two protagonists involved in this industry: Ashley, a deeply ambivalent model scout who scours the Siberian countryside looking for fresh faces to send to the Japanese market, and one of her discoveries, Nadya, a thirteen year-old plucked from the Siberian countryside and dropped into the center of Tokyo with promises of a profitable career. After Ashley's initial discovery of Nadya, the two rarely meet again, but their stories are inextricably bound. As Nadya's optimism about rescuing her family from their financial difficulties grows, her dreams contrast against Ashley's more jaded outlook about the industry's corrosive influence.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Girl Model is a lyrical exploration of a world defined by glass surfaces and camera lenses, reflecting back differing versions of reality to the young women caught in their scope. As we enter further into this world, it more and more resembles a hall of mirrors, where appearances can't be trusted, perception become distorted, and there is no clear way out. Will Nadya, and the other girls like her, be able to find anyone to help them navigate this maze, or will they follow a path like Ashley's, having learned the tricks of the labyrinth but unable to escape its lure?

DIRECTORS BIO

David Redmon and Ashley Sabin's interest is in nonfiction documentary storytelling. They have produced, directed, edited, and photographed five films: *Mardi Gras: Made in China* (2005), *Kamp Katrina* (2007), *Intimidad* (2008), and *Invisible Girlfriend* (2009) and most recently *Girl Model* (2011). *Mardi Gras: Made in China* was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. *Kamp Katrina* and *Intimidad* both premiered at Museum of Modern Art and the South by Southwest Film Festival, and all of Redmon and Sabin's films have screened on domestic and international television stations. *Girl Model* received funding through the Sundance Institute, Cinereach, Puffin Foundation, Harvard Radcliffe Institute, and The Fledgling Fund. It will air on POV and CBC in 2012. Redmon received his PhD in sociology from the University at Albany, State University of New York and is currently a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University. Sabin received her BA in Art History from Pratt Institute.



FILMOGRAPHY

Mardi Gras: Made in China, 2005, 72 minutes, Documentary, Awards: Florida Film Festival Best Documentary, Camden International Film Festival Best Documentary, Santa Barbara International Film Festival Social Justice Award, River Run Film Festival Human Rights Award

Kamp Katrina 2007, 74 minutes, Documentary, Awards: Nashville Film Festival Honorable Mention, Independent Film Festival of Boston Special Jury Prize

Intimidad 2008, 72 minutes, Documentary, Awards: Magnolia Film Festival Ron Tibbet Award for Excellence in Film, Connecticut Film Festival Best International Film, River Run Film Festival Human Rights Award, Sidewalk Film Festival Grand Jury

Invisible Girlfriend 2009, 72 minutes, Documentary, Awards: Indie Memphis Film Festival Best Directing, Magnolia Film Festival Ron Tibbett Award for Excellence, Cinema on the Bayou Best Humanities Themed Documentary

Girl Model 2011, 77 minutes, Documentary, Toronto Film Festival

Directors Q&A

Girl Model Filmmakers (Ashley Sabin and David Redmon)

How did the story come to you or how did you first find out about Siberian girls modeling in Japan?

ASHLEY SABIN: This is the first time we've made a film where the idea came to us from the main subject. I attended Pratt Institute with Ashley Arbaugh where we both studied Art History. I remembered her because she was frequently gone on casting trips and afterward would ask me for the notes to our "Chemistry of Art" class. Years later, Ashley saw a couple of our films when they screened at MoMA and got in touch to suggest that a film about her work scouting young girls to be sent overseas to model would make an interesting documentary. We were wary at first but after hours of long conversations we decided that there really was something to the story and so decided to try and make it work.

Was the main theme, subject that motivated you towards the story, conveyed by the end of the film or is the outcome a different one from what you intended to?

DAVID REDMON: The process of making Girl Model was like jumping down a rabbit hole. We knew that we would be brought to some very dark places, but we didn't know who would bring us there, or where they would be. This tension of not knowing is how we set up the framework of the story. The audience experiences this labyrinth the same way we did and the same way the young girls do in the film.

Did you predict the girls would not find success in their dream during the course of the film and at what point?

ASHLEY SABIN: We had doubts, but Ashley kept stressing that in Japan the girls make money. Our first point of concern occurred when we read the contract. It was in English and Japanese, yet we were told the local agency translated it to Nadya. Nadya's mother insisted that she would bring home \$8,000US. However, in the fine print of the contract it read, "...after costs were deducted ..." and "... this contract can be altered any time by Switch." These examples were two red flags. When we arrived at the airport in Japan, no one from the agency picked up Nadya (and the same thing happened to Madlen). We realized that the girl's dreams were about to be met with a harsh reality of the modeling business: a desire to earn profit from female youth.

Did you research previous character's stories (other models from previous years) before getting into production? If so what were your findings?

DAVID REDMON: Making Girl Model was like entering a house of mirrors and looking at the different distortions of reality. We had moments of clarity such as when we met Rachel who introduced us to other models. From an outsider perspective, it seems the older models know how to navigate the system. Most of the models are not shocked by the Japanese business practices; in fact, they say it is worse in NYC, Paris, and Milan. Most of what we hear from other models is their frustration in the lack of regulation and the exporting of 12 to 15 year olds. For instance, we have been speaking with two models (Dunja Knezevic and Victoria Keon-Cohen) who have formed a union in the UK called Equity Models Union. The union is exciting because hopefully it's an internal shift in protecting models rights.

You could have challenged Ashley's attitude towards the girls, her career were you ever tempted to?

ASHLEY SABIN: We set up the story to leave ourselves out as much as possible. At one point we had a version with how Ashley brought the project to us (which included the making of the film). This version of the film seemed irrelevant and uninteresting; it became a smaller film about deception. Yes, we challenged Ashley numerous times but we decided to let each character be who they are. An audience may experience frustration with this choice, but we believe it makes for a stronger responsive experience.

Do the unfolding events with the girls after an unsuccessful modeling prospect would have been any different whist in Japan if the camera hadn't been there?

DAVID REDMON: I would think that cameras would have had the opposite effect: it helped protect Nadya. I would imagine the cameras put pressure on the situation for everything to appear like it is a well-oiled machine. Some girls do make money, but the vast majority don't so I don't think the camera changed that situation. Every month hundreds of girls experience similar events as Nadya did in Japan.

Are you still in touch with Nadya and the other girls? What are they doing now? Are they still in debt?

ASHLEY SABIN: We recently receive a message from Nadya that she has decided to continue working as a model. Having gone through the emotional experience of her first trip to Japan, it's a bit incredible to us that she'd want to continue that line of work. But we also understand that, because of her background and the economic situation of her family, she views the prospect of being a model as an opportunity to escape and work overseas.

DAVID REDMON: The problem, however, is that when 12-15 year old girls are placed inside a marketplace of adults who sexualize and treat them as disposable goods, there's infinite potential for the situation to go awry. At this point, we can only hope for the best for her.

Your presence in Japan must have provided her with some security. How well do you think she would have coped if you weren't there?

DAVID REDMON: I think Nadya's age made the entire situation very difficult. We were the adults and she looked to us for support when people in the modeling industry wouldn't assist. From time to time, when the situation demanded it, we stepped in to provide guidance, although none of these experiences are in the film. Frankly, though, I don't know what she would have done or how she would have navigated her complications without at least a little bit of our help.

ASHLEY SABIN: Additionally, the language barrier made the situation more complicated for everyone. For instance, when Nadya first arrived at the airport in Tokyo, she was expected to find her way to the agency on her own, with just an address on a slip of paper. She didn't speak the language, didn't know how to get there, and didn't know her rights. She didn't know who to ask or where to turn and hadn't ever traveled abroad. Had we not intervened to help her find the way, she would have become exasperated, completely lost in Tokyo and probably would have lost all trust in us. It was one of the rare times we decided to intervene.

MAIN CHARACTERES

Nadya
Ashley Arbaugh

CREDITS

Directed by
David Redmon A. Sabin

Consulting Producer
Marcy Garriott
Robert Garriott

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David Redmon
A. Sabin

Second Editors
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Alan Canant

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A. Sabin

Original Score by
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Eric Taxier

Digital Intermediate services by
Alpha Cine Labs

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Marc Brown

DI Online Editor
Bevin Flynn

DI Producers
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Jannat Gargi

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Tom Hammond

Production Stills
Meghan Brosnan

Graphic Designer
Jesse Bussey

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Argot Pictures
Jim Browne

Attorney
Jeffrey Coploff

Additional Diary Footage
Ashley Arbaugh

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The Film Studies Center

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Radcliffe Institute
Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program
Chicken and Egg

Produced in Association with American Documentary/
POV, CBC News Network

Executive Producer for American Documentary
Simon Kilmurry

Executive Producer for CBC News Network
Catherine Olsen

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Girl Model: Toronto Review

9/9/2011 by David Rooney

Directors/producers/directors of photography/editor: *David Redmon, Ashley Sabin*

The Bottom Line

Compelling subject matter outweighs narrow focus in this bleak glimpse into one unglamorous reality behind the modeling industry.

Between Siberia and Tokyo, scouts and agencies scouring the Russian countryside to find fresh faces for new girl models for the hungry Japanese market in this revealing doc by David Redmon and Ashley Sabin.

Anxious parents looking to dissuade their daughters from pursuing a career as the next Kate Moss might find *Girl Model* a useful tool. **David Redmon** and **Ashley Sabin**'s engrossing documentary provides access to a pitiless niche of the fashion industry, but it's arguably more fascinating in its depiction of the recruiters than their discoveries.

The specific milieu here is the unlikely channel between Siberia and Tokyo, with scouts and agencies scouring the Russian countryside to find fresh faces for the hungry Japanese market. While trends vary from year to year, the prevailing appetite is for tall, young, cute, skinny and borderline pre-pubescent.

The intriguing opening sets the scene for this less-than-wholesome unregulated meat market. A sea of blank-faced girls in swimsuits parades before a dehumanizing panel that mandates dieting even for the most sylph-like candidates.

The documentary might have benefited from tracking a handful of wannabe models attempting to break into the fashion world and bring financial support to their struggling families. But the filmmakers instead confine their focus to just one of them, 13-year-old Nadya. Her unhappy experience in Tokyo no doubt echoes that of many unworldly girls packed off to Alienation Central, without language skills, social smarts or even the most rudimentary business savvy.

Housed in a shabby, cupboard-sized apartment with a similarly clueless Russian roommate, Nadya goes through a punishing grind of casting calls and rejections. Fine print in her contract allows the Japanese agency to renege on the immigration requirement of guaranteed work, and she is eventually sent home with debts of \$2,000 for photo shoots and other expenses.

While Redmon and Sabin show admirable restraint in their detachment from this story of innocence chewed up and spat out by a cruelly exploitative industry, the poignancy of Nadya's solitude resonates. But the film could use a sharper and more expansive point of view. It's biggest problem is that Nadya is always less interesting than the woman responsible for her thankless odyssey.

An American former model who now works as a scout for a Russian agency specializing in supplying girls to Japan, **Ashley Arbaugh** is a dizzying whirl of contradictions with a giant

chip on her shoulder. Intercut with excerpts from her own video diaries as a miserable teen model in Tokyo, she spouts an off-putting mix of self-justification and self-loathing. For every confessional moment in which she concedes that the promise of a golden future for these girls may be false, there are equal glimpses of willful denial concerning the damage being done to them.

The heads of the modeling agencies are no more flatteringly represented. Tigran, an ex-military man who controls the Russian supply chain, appears to have convinced himself that he is providing a valuable service to economically disadvantaged girls. But his educational methods – involving a cautionary trip to the morgue -- are questionable to say the least. And his Japanese counterpart, the ironically named Messiah, responds to ethical issues with obstinate evasion.

Mostly, however, the filmmakers decline to put anyone on the spot with pointed questions, sticking to an observational approach and allowing Arbaugh to hang herself with the glaring inconsistencies of her involvement in the industry.

The idea for the film actually came from Arbaugh, who had attended college with co-director Sabin. Given that she emerges here as a whiny mess, screaming for therapy, it's hard to imagine she doesn't now regret making that call to suggest that her work might be juicy documentary fodder.

Venue: Toronto International Film Festival

Production: Carnavalesque Films

Directors/producers/directors of photography/editors: David Redmon, Ashley Sabin

Consulting producers: Marcy Garriott, Robert Garriott

Music: Matthew Dougherty, Eric Taxier

Sales: Dogwoof Films

No rating; 77 minutes



Girl Model

By JOHN ANDERSON

10th September 2011

A Carnavalesque Films presentation in association with Dogwoof Films and POV.
(International sales: Dogwoof, London.) Produced by David Redmond, Ashley Sabin.
Directed, edited by David Redmond, Ashley Sabin;

With: Ashley Arbaugh, Nadya Vall.

As unaffected and fat-free as the would-be superstars it profiles, the intrepid "Girl Model" gets inside the virtual human trafficking of beautiful young Russians into the netherworld of the Japanese modeling market, tracking one young blonde Siberian's experience from breathless hopeful to damaged dreamer. Broadcast on PBS is assured, but the vaguely salacious nature of story, and the tenacity of its directors, could help further advance a doc that manages to balance guileless objectivity with a very determined point of view.

Using no narration and limited titles, helmers David Redmon and Ashley Sabin open their gritty verite drama with a fantastically bleak shot overlooking the Siberian city where the story begins, and then move inside where it's warm -- a modeling meat-market that draws hundreds of young Russian girls hoping to hit the big time, parading their skinny innocence around in bargain-basement bathing suits. They all dream of being chosen to go to Japan, where work is guaranteed and a bright future is promised, both of which, not unexpectedly, turn out to be figments. But while Sabin and Redmon never actually expose anything -- the slippery male characters they interview reveal little that's overtly illicit, not even their perpetual pipeline into impoverished Russian youth -- it doesn't take a sommelier to detect the piquant bouquet of arch criminality.

The girl at the center of "Girl Model" is 13-year-old Nadya Vall, a willowy candidate whose childlike looks make her a shoo-in for the youth-obsessed Japanese market and whose consequent travails are chronicled by Sabin and Redmon, from Siberia to Tokyo and a series of misadventures that seem built into the system. But where Nadya is the picture of innocence and aspiration, ex-model Ashley Arbaugh is something else. The film's most intriguing and enigmatic character, Arbaugh now wrangles young girls for the Russian agency run by a shady customer named Tigran, and his Japanese counterpart, known as "Messiah" (a Japanese mogul who "really likes models," as Arbaugh says, in the film's most loaded moment).

While "Girl Model" falls a bit short in the delivery of hard facts and incriminating evidence, it more than makes up for that in the knotty psychological profile of Arbaugh, whose own video-diary entries from the mid-'90s -- when she was modeling -- provide a haunted glimpse into exploited youth. A visit to Arbaugh's home in Connecticut, a spacious, rambling modernist dwelling with all the warmth of a bus station, is a creepfest: A pair of baby dolls sit upright on the couch in a living room devoid of almost all other decor. Arbaugh comments that she thought it was appropriate when she bought the house to buy the dolls, too. She

has an overt desire for children and an apparent inability to have them; her need is palpable and pitiful, and the doll sequence has the mind reeling.

Still, Arbaugh continues to help funnel young girls into a business that chews them up and spits them out. "Girl Model" isn't judgmental, except by implication, but it is a bit heartbreaking, not just about the girls and their plight, but about the desperation behind their families' willingness to send children into a game so rigged against them. Their contracts, we're told, routinely forbid them to gain weight, or inches -- and since adolescents who don't grow are either sick or dying, this is clearly a way to get rid of them for any reason whatsoever. Nadya ultimately doesn't suffer irreparable damage, even if her dreams do, but what she symbolizes about the global culture's idolization of youth and beauty -- and its lack of remorse in exploiting it -- speaks volumes.

Production values are understandably, and perhaps appropriately, horrid at times, given the seat-of-the-pants filmmaking and the nature of the characters and their story.

camera, Redmond, Sabin; music, Matthew Dougherty, Eric Taxier. Reviewed at the Cinereach screening room, Manhattan, Aug. 25, 2011. (In Toronto Film Festival -- Reel to Reel.) Running time: 77 MIN.



TIFF Review: Girl Model

Published September 10, 2011 | By Tw

Directed by: David Redmon, Ashley Sabin

Starring: Ashley Arbaugh, Rachel Blais

I've seen more than a few documentaries, chronicling some pretty terrible things. Girl Model doesn't really stack up to those in terms of raw emotional impact, but it is a fascinating film to watch just the same.

We see girls as young as 12 or 13 being taken advantage of, signing contracts in languages they can't read, being shipped around the world and being treated poorly most of the time.

They are homesick, they call their mothers and cry, and say they want to go home, that they wish they'd never gone... But so do the girls on American Idol. It's hard to feel sympathy for a girl who you later find out re-ups, multiple times, for additional trips.

Without a doubt these girls (most of them, anyway) are far too young to be doing this job, but in the grand scheme of injustices in the world, beautiful young girls who have to find out that the world of modeling isn't as glamorous (or lucrative) as they had hoped ranks pretty low.

Those less cynical than I will no doubt feel for the girls, consider the atrocities visited upon them monstrous and cruel, and I certainly wouldn't try to argue that this is not the case, simply that my personal (and limited) quantities of empathy don't stretch as far as the girl models in this film.

Just the same, Girl Model is an absolutely intriguing film to watch. The narrative predominately follows a 13 year old girl named Nadya from her home in Siberia to Japan with hopes of becoming a model. Her family has high hopes for her as well, and they are already planning how to spend the money they hope she will make. Nadya's story is a sad one, if perhaps not quite falling into the category of 'tragic' or even 'terrible', but it is the people around her that are truly interesting.

First among them is talent scout Ashley, a former model herself, who has no problem inflicting the hardships she encountered onto other girls. Ashley, in fact, comes across as a complete psychopath, fumbling to find the words to express just how much she doesn't care about the girls (or anything else). We get to see Ashley as a teen model more than 10 years ago through her own video diaries which she supplied to the filmmakers, but get no glimpse into any kind of real identity beyond the lonelygirl13-type mask she chooses to show us, alternately laughing and crying for the camera with no real conviction.

If the foreign modeling industry is responsible for creating this monster, then that may be the truest indictment against it that we see in this film.

Another fascinating creature is Tygran, the jovial businessman running the modeling

company that Ashley is scouting for. Tygran may or may not be completely full of shit, but I was not entirely unconvinced he didn't believe what he was saying, and that he truly believed he was helping these girls, giving them a better life than they had in Siberia, or wherever. And in some cases, maybe he did. Nadya had a nice home and a seemingly loving family, but others may have seen the admittedly poor conditions in Japan as a vast improvement over what they were leaving behind.

It can certainly be seen how the industry could drive these teen girls to prostitution, as sexualizing a 12-year old girl the way they do (especially for the Japanese market) can have untold effects on a budding young psyche. In a rare moment of lucidity, Ashley even muses on how to a girl that young, alone in a foreign place, selling your body to a rich businessman for a great deal of money might seem like the natural progression of selling your body to a camera for next to nothing. Of course she then adds that in many cultures, prostitution isn't considered a bad thing at all, and that perhaps it IS easier than modeling.

The fact that Ashley, herself, petitioned the filmmakers with the idea for the documentary shows just how much she, and all the others in the movie perfectly willing to be filmed, have no idea that there is anything wrong with what they are doing... but then, since we keep buying the magazines and watching America's Next Top Model, maybe we don't think so either.

FILMMAKER

“GIRL MODEL” DIRECTORS ASHLEY SABIN AND DAVID REDMON

By [Scott Macaulay](#) in [TIFF](#), [TIFF Features](#)

on Wednesday, September 14th, 2011

In both narrative and documentary film, the character of the fashion model has long been a symbol of not only glamor but also a kind of post-modern alienation. Depicting a Russian teen model casting and one young girl's travel to Japan for modeling work, *Girl Model*, David Redmon and Ashley Sabin's absolutely riveting new documentary, is set in a morally adrift culture in which the image of childhood is a globally traded commodity. Nadya is an innocent-looking, blonde 13-year-old for whom modeling work is both a dream and way out of the poverty she's grown up with in Siberia. But the modeling contract she signs is full of loopholes and onerous clauses (if she gains a centimeter around her waist, it's void, for example), and, with her parents remaining in Russia, she has no real protectors in Japan.

As a character, Nadya is both heartbreaking but also something of a heroine, refusing to be beaten down by the world she's found herself in. Fascinating for different reasons is the film's other main character, Ashley. A former model in the 1990s, Ashley is the scout who organizes the casting, selects Nadya, and brings her to Japan. Intelligent and beautiful but also conflicted and mysterious, Ashley comes off as both predator and victim, a woman smart enough to understand the moral dilemmas of her world while being unable to stop working within it. In *Girl Model* Redmon and Sabin illuminate both these characters while using their stories to create a hauntingly lonely film that in its poetic reach is about much more than one corner of the modeling world.

I spoke to Sabin via Skype while Redmon worked in the background and joined in to answer a couple of my questions.

Filmmaker: Let me start by asking you what came first with this movie — was it the idea of following girl models in general, or was it one of the subjects?

Sabin: What came first was the main scout, Ashley. She approached us after watching two of our films at MoMA. She was interested in us making a film about the process of [models] casting. That's how we got introduced to this whole world, which we had no knowledge of before.

Filmmaker: What films of yours did she watch?

Sabin: She watched *Intimidad* and *Kamp Katrina*.

Filmmaker: Is she a documentary film fan? How did she happen to be at MoMA?

Sabin: We actually went to school together at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. She was getting her masters in art history, and I was getting my undergrad. I didn't really know her that well, but we had a few classes together. So I guess you could say she was following our work. She was scouting us!

Filmmaker: I found her a completely fascinating character. There are moments in the film where she's suddenly very self revealing, particularly in the webcam footage. I wondered how you were able to build that intimacy with her so quickly.

Sabin: Our relationship with Ashley is pretty complex and contentious. We had to really work to figure out what was truth and what wasn't truth. There was a lot of push and pull with her. I really wish that we could have even gotten a little bit deeper, but she put up a lot of walls. But that kind of makes it interesting for the film because it creates this dynamic where the audience questions her. She becomes somewhat mysterious.

Filmmaker: "Mysterious" is a good word to describe her. To stay on her for a moment, why do you think she wanted to do the movie?

Sabin: I think there are a few reasons, and they are sort of conflicting. But the biggest reason is that she was involved in an industry that she wanted to sort of expose.

Filmmaker: And how did your complex relationship with her affect the shooting of the documentary as a whole?

Redmond: It was a difficult story to traverse, you know? I'll give you a simple example. When we went to the castings in Russia, it was pretty clear that we were there to make a documentary film. We had release forms, we had airline tickets, we had numerous conversations about where we were going. And when we got there and turned on the cameras to start filming, suddenly the scout, Ashley, introduces us as her assistants in Japan. Then she pulled us to the side and said, "Don't say anything. You're my assistants. You work for me in Japan." I mean, right there, within the first hours of starting this documentary, we were thinking, "What the hell is going on here!"

Sabin: Really early on, we knew she was going to be a central character [in the film], so it became this really tricky [question] of, how do you tell a story about a person who is also your access point? She was really controlling with what she wanted portrayed in the film. Sometimes you can see her looking at the camera through the corner of her eye. Because she was a model, she's really aware [of the camera], and she's super aware of how her image is going to be portrayed. So one of the things that she controlled was not having her family or any of her background in the film. We tried to respect that even though I think it would have added to the whole story. But even going into the [personal] spaces [like her house] that we did go into with her — there were not many pictures on the wall, there weren't many personal items. There'd be a bed, and a lot of times there were these really white walls. Cold spaces. So I think in a way she does that to herself. It's like she's interested in the past, but then she's not. She's interested in telling everything, and then she's not. So again, that push and pull with her was really difficult because as a documentary filmmaker you want to bring out different metaphors and themes coming from personal stories and connections to your characters. We really worried that without any of that background or understanding of her personal life people wouldn't connect with her.

Filmmaker: I absolutely did wonder about her personal life. I guess what you're saying is that there's stuff about Ashley you don't know yourselves.

Sabin: Right, exactly. I can make assumptions, but I don't actually know. At the beginning, we didn't want to push too much. Because if you start pushing really early on, demanding answers to your questions, you push the person away.

Filmmaker: Well, as I said before, I found Ashley fascinating.

Redmond: She plays the femme fatale extremely well. She's really knowledgeable about cameras, she's savvy, cunning, and a good businesswoman.

Filmmaker: That webcam footage, did she shoot that herself, away from the production?

Sabin: Yes, those miniDV tapes were some of the first stuff she gave us. That was actually sort of how we got to know Ashley, through her younger footage.

Filmmaker: David, tell me about the cinematography and color palette. It's partly due to the landscapes you shot in, but the film has a kind of blue-grey palette that winds up accentuating the film's lonely qualities. And the camera is often very close to peoples' faces. Were these choices an outgrowth of your previous work, or constructed in relation to the subject matter?

Redmond: The cinematography developed over the course of making the film. For example, in Russia, in Siberia especially, so much of the winter landscape is empty and open. At first we were doing a lot of wide shots without any close-ups at all. And then when we began to see the redundancy of the castings taking place with Ashley, the hundreds of girls moving in and out, we tried to get closer to that experience. It was important to get closer as we begin to follow the girls [Ashley] selected to become models. So that's how we developed the project — wide shot, and then closer and closer. And then of course there is the whole metaphor of interior world and exterior world. The interior world of the models who can't communicate with the Japanese because they speak incompatible languages — we had to really tease that out through visual images. I think that's where the close-ups came into play especially.

Filmmaker: Since this is a documentary about models, did you give thought to the film's relationship — or perhaps non-relationship — to glamour?

Sabin: I think that David and I always sort of start off at the surface level but then we want to go deeper. We don't seek out the darkness, but in this story, there was an underbelly to the glamour

and we realized pretty early on that we were going to show that side. You watch all of these model and fashion programs, and they are sort of flashy and glamorous. We recognized that it wasn't going to be this way. [The business] was sort of mundane, and parts of it were even boring and slow — and dark. That was the story that came out to us, not catwalks with mirrors reflecting back beautiful images. It's a bit rougher.

Filmmaker: Your subjects are so young — 13 and 14 years old — so their objectification by the fashion business is particularly disturbing. But I want to ask you about your relationship to Nadia, the main model. It's clear that her parents aren't going to Japan with her and that she's kind of there on her own. There are a lot of scenes where it's just her and her friend hanging out. You don't get a sense that Ashley is present every second either. So, you guys must have been a little bit of an emotional lifeline for Nadia. Did you ever feel that you were not just filmmakers but that you had drifted into kind of a parental role with her?

Sabin: The difficulty was her age. It is hard to watch someone go through such an emotional roller coaster, and there were times when she would ask for our help. But then we are also filmmakers. We would go between, "When do we help and when do we not help?" A good example is [when Nadia was stranded] at the airport. On the one hand, we don't want her to be stuck for hours and hours at the airport and film it. But on the other hand we're bringing her into a situation that we're facilitating, and we don't know what's at the other end. We're bringing her to the agency. Well, what's going to happen to her when she gets there? When we were on the bus with her, we helped to get her ticket. There were a lot of times where we felt it was not appropriate to film. There's a language barrier as well. We don't speak Russian, and we didn't have a translator. So we'd be flipping through the dictionary, trying to connect [to her]. We were also starting to understand what was going on [with the modeling agency], and that was really hard to convey. I mean, what do you do, tell someone who's being taken advantage of, "You're being taken advantage of," when they don't see it that way?

Filmmaker: Did you wind up saying that?

Sabin: Well, we expressed that concern fairly early on to the parents because the parents read the contract. In Russia, [Nadia] kept saying, "Eight thousand dollars! We're getting eight thousand dollars," and she would point to the contract, which was in English and Japanese, and they spoke neither. David looked at it and said, "No, that's when costs are taken out. And it's not indicated what the costs are going to be." That was one of the early red flags. We [said to the parents], "Have you asked these questions?" But you can only say so much because they were so excited. And, on the one hand, maybe yeah, it does provide them an opportunity. There's the chance that they will make money. But I think a lot of these young girls don't.

FAN QUARTERLY

[Toronto Film Festival: “Girl Model” Review](#)

BY [KENNETH](#) – SEPTEMBER 12, 2011

“I’m trying to save all these girls” is how Tigran, the owner of a Russian modeling agency, describes, in a fatherly way, the process of picking thirteen-year-old girls and, through a network of scouts, shipping them from Siberia to Japan for ostensibly modeling work and success.

The documentary *Girl Model*, by filmmakers David Redmon and Ashley Sabin, which I saw earlier today at the Toronto International Film Festival, is a stirring portrait of the journey undertaken by one such thirteen-year-old, Nadya Vall, and the woman who initially scouted her, a former model named Ashley Arbaugh from Connecticut.

We discover that Siberian girls, lacking knowledge in English or Japanese, may arrive in Tokyo without anyone to pick them up, any manager to guide them or translate for them, and essentially need to fend for themselves in tiny apartments. They sign contracts they can’t possibly understand, and often aren’t paid. They are made to lie about their age, and often do not get picked for work due to their youthful appearance. They become homesick quickly.

The startling inference from *Girl Model* is that, while these young girls are sent to be photographed in magazines, the reality – well known to the agencies – is that “they get placed at other places,” meaning they become prostitutes.

Ashley, in her scouting, seems conflicted with this reality. This film is, in a way, her confession without an apology, because like Nadya, she too is stuck in a cycle. As much as Ashley declares she is not passionate about the business of modeling – which is obsessed with youth – she doesn’t hide her fascination of Tigran, who we discern used to work in the military and killed many people. Tigran confides that his modeling business is actually a “religious experience” for him, a way to build a positive future for these girls, perhaps make amends for his past transgressions.

The film provoked many questions for me, and I think that was the intended effect. I wanted to know how Nadya was doing, given that the film was shot over a three-year period; apparently she is still modeling in China, though the filmmakers do not have contact with her at present. The Q-and-A session at the film’s conclusion provided some colourful commentary, including an assertion that Ashley Arbaugh is treading a fine line between booking work for models and actually being a pimp, because the promised success in Japan often did not materialize, and her declaration to the parents of prospective models that “Every model has success in Japan; they never end up in debt” is juxtaposed with Madlen, another thirteen-year-old who was sent home because her waist increased by two centimeters; moreover, she had accumulated an astonishing \$2,000 in debt to the modeling agency. An audience member declared the scout’s actions as “unconscionable.”

Does the fact that I publish a fan magazine make me guilty of perpetuating the cycle of celebrity obsession, which leads to the tragedies suggested by *Girl Model*? I know I encourage stories celebrating artists. What I often forget, and this film reminded me, is that for every star, there are a multitude of individuals who never make it, are forgotten, and end up, as the film intimates, exploiting their bodies because their physical beauty is the only attribute they know how to sell.

One of the film’s models, Rachel Blais, participated in the Q-and-A session, and said, “Hopefully this film will bring awareness.” She noted that in the United Kingdom, there is now a fledgling union organization attempting to bring greater rights to models. But will a modeling union really take off in certain parts of Asia known for poor records on human rights? I left the AMC theatre wondering what I could do to help. And yet, how do we help this kind of situation when in North America we glamorize reality TV shows which are the direct result of fame emanating from a sex tape? Heck, Fan Quarterly just published a celebrity profile on the Kardashians. I feel so torn after watching *Girl Model*, a truly epic documentary.

To all of our readers and fans who are caught in the dream of becoming actors and models, I hope you uncover this article and watch *Girl Model*, because the risks of this transcendent career need to be properly understood.

TORONTO REVIEW | “Girl Model” is A Brilliant Exposé of a Dangerous Business by
Eric Kohn (September 17, 2011)

It should come as no great surprise that a movie called “Girl Model” has a dark side. The particularly startling aspect of this sharp non-fiction exposé from documentarians David Redmon and Ashley Sabin is the eerie, visceral horror the haunts every scene. “Girl Model” portrays a business defined by inherent corruption.

Redmon and Sabin focus on two heroines with vastly different perspectives on this troubled world. A jaded model scout, identified only as Ashley, rides the Trans-Siberian railway in search of young recruits she can ship to her Asian clients. One of those selections, an impoverished 13-year-old Siberian recruit named Nadya Vall, heads to Tokyo expecting a payday for her entire family. Toasted by her relatives before heading out, her provincial grandmother says, “Who knows what fate will bring her?”

Ashley has a fairly good idea of the answer and it’s not glamorous. The filmmakers reveal the video diaries from the 15-year veteran scout’s teen years, when she was a model and dealt with the same isolation and confusion that Vall finds once she shows up in Tokyo. Redmon and Sabin travel alongside Vall but barely intrude, leaving no question that she’s lost and clueless. In short time, the girl has found a phone and made a tearful call to her mother in the hopes of going home, but the uncertain promise of a financial reward keep her rooted in purgatory, aimlessly searching for a gig that fails to turn up.

The movie implies that there’s a logic to the unrewarding system that traps Vall and the innumerable girls like her. Nadya’s representative, an affluent man named Tigran, expresses his intention with an absurd idealism. “For me,” he says, “this is a religious matter.” That pronouncement initially goes unchallenged, but Vall’s fate reveals the cracks in any convictions about her road to success. Everyone seems to profit from Vall—except for the girl and her family.

It turns out there’s nothing sacred about this hyper-competitive industry. Sabin and Redmon don’t aim for a complex empirical approach, but they do present an argument, with Vall as their chief rhetorical instrument. One particularly effective contrast cuts from the dolled-up Nadya’s ostentatious DVD clip reel to a decidedly less flattering shot of her in a state of duress. In place of facts and figures that would dominate a more journalistic approach, “Girl Model” is chiefly a visual affair, starting with the opening shot of an audition in which dozens of prospective young models glance at the camera and flash rehearsed smiles.

“Everyone has their own version of beauty,” Ashley sighs, at once recognizing her bleak job and resigning herself to it. A surgery she faces is another story tangent, bringing the aging scout a different perspective on physical standards than the one demanded by her professional life.

But “Girl Model” doesn’t aim for a redemptive finale. Ashley deems her practice “an addiction” and the cyclical nature of the movie confirms that diagnosis. It ends where it began, with the introduction of another new teen recruit. The conclusion implies that the commodification of the female body is a disease with no obvious cure. criticWIRE grade: **A**

HOW WILL IT PLAY? “Gilr Model” landed distribution in several foreign markets during its successful run at the Toronto International Film Festival. Critical acclaim and strong word-of-mouth should propel it to a healthy life on the festival circuit and strong returns from ancillary markets, if not in theatrical release.



Nadya, the model, with her mother



Ashley Arbaugh, the model scout



David Redmon & Ashley Sabin, the filmmakers

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