

FILM REVIEW

Victory Day. Directed by Alina Rudnitskaya. New York: Grasshopper Film, 2015. 30 Minutes. Color. Russian with English. doi: 10.1017/slr.2018.135

Alina Rudnitskaya's film *Victory Day* (2015) is compellingly understated. The film is structured around interviews with six Russian gay and lesbian couples in their apartments in St. Petersburg against the backdrop of Victory Day celebrations on the city's major streets and squares. The film opens with a panoramic view of Petersburg; the camera then fixes on a street filled with tanks waiting for the parade to start. Only then do the interviews begin. Indeed, the stark contrast between the official solemnity and grandeur of the public festivities and the cozy domesticity of the respondents—who sit, casually dressed, some barefoot in shorts and t-shirts, on couches in their living rooms—is the organizing principle of the film. One woman is filmed with her lover on her right and her young adult daughter on her left; others are filmed with their pet dogs and cats. The respondents are also shown intermittently performing various everyday tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry.

In filming the interviews, Rudnitskaya makes a brilliant decision to remove the interviewers entirely so that viewers are led to re-construct the questions from the respondents' answers. This generates from the very beginning of the film a certain empathy as viewers quickly surmise that the first question was asking how long they'd been together. The answers range from six months to six years. The next question asks where they met. These opening questions elicit happy responses, with the interviewees playfully interrupting one another to add or correct details, highlighting the universality of human affection. In between the respondents' answers Rudnitskaya inserts text—such as a short note explaining the 2013 ban on gay propaganda—as well as clips from TV interviews with politicians, such as Vitaly Milonov, who defends the ban, and from Russian talk show guests, with one guest arguing that fines are not enough and that gays and lesbians should be forbidden from donating their blood and organs. Another clip shows LGBT protesters being beaten by counter-protesters on a square in central Petersburg. As the film progresses, the respondents' answers become darker. When asked how the gay propaganda law has affected their lives, one respondent describes the efforts he made at a new teaching position to hide his sexuality, describing it as “like walking on a mine field.” Another respondent who had previously been rather open at work recounts how she was let go from her position after the ban was passed, her boss explaining that she did not fit the “moral image” of the company. Since then she has had 53 interviews with no job offers.

While there are certain shared political beliefs that emerge from the interviews—for example, all lament the totalitarian drift of Putin's Russia, which many say increasingly resembles the Soviet Union, lending a somber irony to the film's title—there is also a good deal of variety in the responses, revealing myriad strategies for survival and myriad political positions. One respondent argues that the ban has had the opposite of its intended effect, inciting Russian gays and lesbians to speak out, while a lesbian couple performs a song they'd written with the refrain “Molchu” (I am silent). A male respondent conjectures that democracy is perhaps impossible in a country as large as Russia. Later, he notes that some “middle-class” gay friends are pro-Putin and support the annexation of Crimea while dismissing gay rights and protections as unimportant; he also points out that most of these “nationalists” work for foreign companies. Another remarks that while one should not critique the country's leaders, one wishes they had “more brains;” he then admits to envying the “calm and equality” he witnessed on a trip to Germany. The final minutes of the film show the

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start of the parade outside, filming the respondents silently watching it on TV as the music and noise from the street grows louder.

Several features make this film especially effective as a documentary. In addition to the juxtaposition of public and private worlds, the absence of the interviewers, and the sequencing of the questions, as mentioned above, I would point out the naturalness and frankness of the respondents. Of course, the fact that this is a very limited pool of interviewees and that they are for the most part educated professionals living in St. Petersburg cautions against any simplistic universalizing of their experiences and opinions. The situation in the Russian provinces is, no doubt, quite different. And what of other gay and lesbian-identified Russians not living with a partner? That being said, having access to the words of ordinary Russians, which the Russian media will not and cannot convey, makes this documentary gem historically important. Moreover, the accessibility of the language—the respondents speak clearly and largely avoid slang—makes this perfect for use in advanced undergraduate classes on Russian language and culture.

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