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Heather MacDonald, dir. Kitchen Talk, USSR (Kukhonnye razgovory SSSR). (Filmakers Library, 1991, distributed by Filmakers Library, 124 East 40th St., New York, NY 10016, tel. (212) 808-4980). Color; Russian with English voice-over and English; 58 minutes. VHS videocassette; \$350 sale/\$75 rental.

Heather MacDonald, dir. Kiev Blue. (Filmakers Library, 1992, distributed by Filmakers Library, 124 East 40th St., New York, NY 10016, tel. (212) 808-4980). Color; Russian with English voice-over and English; 28 minutes. VHS videocassette; \$295 sale/\$55 rental.

Usually we think of a documentary filmmaker as an objective observer; she should be invisible in the final product, which purports to portray the material as it really is, not as it is performed for some third party. Of course the illusion is just that, and it is always manipulated by the cameraman, the editor, the sound technician to produce their version of the material, what they see and what they want the audience to see. Heather MacDonald's two short films are not classic documentaries in this sense: she makes no effort to erect a wall of objectivity between herself and her material. She herself is very much present in the films both as an audience for the Russians and as an actor in her own right. At first blush the absence of objective distance risks turning the films into well-produced home movies; but this same interaction between the filmmaker and the Russians also provides insights that might not otherwise be available:

how do Russians interact with Americans? how are our cultures different?

Kitchen Talk, USSR is a series of vignettes in the life of everyday Soviets shot in the last days of perestroika, sometime in 1990. As the title promises, we do see the kitchen conversations we all know so well. We see the concerns and routines of several of MacDonald's acquaintances: Emma, the journalist/screenplay writer in Kiev, with her family of four; Genya, who studies journalism in Moscow, and his wife Larisa; Shura, who has left Chernobyl to live in tent city in Moscow; and a few others. While they are not well-known figures, these people clearly belong to the intellectual elite. They know MacDonald, they have other American friends, they speak English, Emma's sister lives in the US.

Emma raises the issue of nationality. She tells the story of a taxi driver who asked her if she was Ukrainian or Russian. She refused to say, but when she said she was going to the train station to meet friends coming from Moscow, he said, "Your friends are Russian? I won't take you." Emma is Jewish, but her husband is Russian, so her children will be Russian, "a great victory for them," she says. Yet "If war starts, we are the first." We see Emma cooking in her bathrobe while her daughter, who was born at the time of Chernobyl, puts on makeup. Emma, like other Kievans, has a special water filter to remove radioactivity. Still, "radiation is everywhere," and a doctor says there is not one healthy child in the region.

Genya discusses politics and the propiska system: he will be evicted from his small dorm room when he finishes his studies in Moscow, then he will have to bribe some official to get a new stamp

in his passport. He exchanges packages with his parents in Novosibirsk through a friend who works on the train, since he doesn't trust the Soviet mail. Genya and his friends discuss lines and the absence of goods in the shops. They also take MacDonald to where the artist friends are building a cottage by hand; the area looks like a wasteland.

Most of this is standard stuff. Peripheral characters are more revealing: shortly after some shots of empty display cases, an older man and woman insist that "the harvest is good, we have bread and everything else... all will be good." Another pair comes up to MacDonald in the street and tells her to stop shooting. The man demands to see her passport. We see only a short clip of Emma's father: he called the next day, MacDonald says, to ask that she erase his interview. Emma, too, is afraid MacDonald's translator works for the KGB and shows her letters from Americans that have been opened in the mail.

The film ends with discussions of the Russian character, as opposed to the American. Russian hospitality is demonstrated: even Shura, the homeless woman, gave MacDonald several gifts; in every home the filmmaker was fed a meal. Americans are viewed with suspicion because they smile all the time, and that can't possibly correspond to their true feelings. While such musings are familiar to all of us who have spent time in Russia, they don't always make the cut into "objective" documentaries.

Kitchen Talk, USSR would be useful orientation material for students planning a trip to Russia or the Ukraine. Because of the wealth of everyday detail, the texture of Soviet life, the film could

also be useful in the language or culture classroom. Unfortunately, however, the text is either in Russian with an English voice-over or in English originally, which makes it only marginally useful for Russian teachers.

Kiev Blue is a much more focused film: its subject is lesbians and gay men in Kiev. It was the first documentary shot on homosexuality in the USSR. The film opens with a warning that brings home to the Western audience just how volatile the subject is for the participants: "in order to protect those people who participated in this documentary, this film cannot be taken outside North America." The audience feels it is part of a conspiracy. Then we see MacDonald and Emma (from Kitchen Talk) writing on bathroom walls and handing out cards on the street: "Gay American journalist wants to talk about gay/lesbian life in Kiev. Please call..."

The three lesbians and six gay men who respond to MacDonald's request agree to participate only because the film is being shot for American, not Soviet television. All are in their twenties. They are shown inside their apartments and on the streets, in couples and alone. Though they live in Kiev, they speak Russian and appear to be of Russian nationality with one exception--Laima, who must be from the Baltic. She also provides the hoarse musical accompaniment to the film with her guitar.

First the men present the legal situation. When the film was shot, in 1991, Article 121, which forbids homosexual acts, was still in effect, though it was rarely used. The men tell stories of major Kosenko at the MVD, who has called in most of them for questioning. They are presented with a list of other gay men and threatened with

the article if they do not provide more names and sign a document that they are gay. As a result, gay men can never trust each other, since they never know who might be working for the major. Older men use the article to blackmail younger men for sex. Criminals use it to blackmail all for money, and they can beat up gay men with impunity, the police turning a deaf ear to their complaints.

Since the law does not cover women, they are sent to psychiatric clinics. While men have a place to meet, women don't, and they all complain that invisibility is a problem: they don't know how to find other lesbians. Laima and Lena originally lived with Laima's father, but when he found out he beat Lena and they left. For the most part, none of them discuss their homosexuality with parents or straight friends.

Housing is a major problem for both men and women, as one might expect. Because of the propiska system, gay people can never live together legally. Both gay men and lesbians in the film considered solving the problem by marrying each other. Nikolai and Yura, who have been together for a number of years, rent a private apartment, then move on after a year when the neighbors get suspicious. They comment that there is a downside to the greater attention homosexuality has gotten in the past few years: before glasnost', when homosexuality was a taboo topic, they could walk down the street holding hands and embrace in public. No one knew what homosexuality was. Now that the public has more information, they can't be so free.

The legal situation is only part of the problem, say the gay men. Doctors, even those who are otherwise progressive, consider

homosexuality an illness. Gay men and lesbians are treated in psychiatric clinics with electroshock and insulin. MacDonald shows a clinic and interviews a psychiatrist, P. F. Vasilev, who treats gay men. According to him gay men don't come on their own, since the clinic is obliged to report them to the authorities. Those in his care, he says, come from prisons, where they are sent for homosexual violence.

Even AIDS is discussed, if briefly. One of the gay men goes into a hospital for a sinus infection. He is afraid of being infected there, since there are no disposable needles (all make their way to the black market, and he can't afford the price). In the gay community, "since you can't see AIDS, no one is afraid of it; none of our friends have AIDS or practice safe sex." The same man admits that in a few years we will have the same problems as in America.

MacDonald closes the film with a shot of her reading letters she has since received from the participants. They greet her from the newly independent Ukraine, where the parliament has canceled Article 121. One man's boyfriend broke up with him when his parents found out; he denied he was gay. Two of the participants have decided to start a newspaper in Kiev.

Earlier the participants explained that, while Moscow and Petersburg already had the beginnings of a gay movement--even a newspaper (though a bad one), there was nothing comparable yet in Kiev. Since they have remained in touch, the film itself may have provided the impetus to create a nucleus of such a community in Kiev. The men also asked MacDonald to "give our address to Americans who can help us."

While I am not sure who lobbied the Ukrainian parliament for the repeal of Article 121, it is clear that IGLHRC and ILGA were instrumental in pressing for its repeal in Russia. Most of us would agree that such involvement is ethical, and Amnesty International now includes gay and lesbian rights in its definition of human rights. Yet the fledgling gay and lesbian movement, especially in Russia, has been heavily influenced by foreigners: the gay press, particularly in the early years, was filled with translations of Western articles, some of which were of questionable relevance to Russians. Key gay rights and AIDS activists either are American or have close ties to Americans. And the influx of foreigners and foreign information permits the right to portray the gay movement as yet another foreign intervention. Rasputin, for example, claims that "that kind of contact between men is a foreign import." And the international gay festivals held in the FSU are decried as orgies where foreigners come only to have sex. These criticisms come from within the Russian gay community as well: Americans come to Russia to have unsafe sex, to return to a kind of pre-AIDS utopia of the bathhouse era. If that is true, the repercussions may be devastating.

Against such a background, Heather MacDonald's film seems a breath of fresh air and a model of objectivity. Kiev Blue provides a much-needed glimpse into the real lives of gay men and lesbians in the former Soviet Union. Since the situation for homosexuals is effectively the same throughout Russia, the Ukraine, and Byelorussia, and since the issue of nationality is not raised in the film, it can provide useful materials for discussion in Russian classes as well as classes on culture or gender in the Soviet Union.

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