

Film Review: Kitchen Talk by Heather MacDonald 1991. 58 min.

Corinna Skema Snyder
Columbia University

The explicit goal of this video documentary was to expand popular American understandings of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Filmed over three weeks in 1990, simultaneous with the announcement of Gorbachev's winning the Nobel Peace Prize, the filmmaker hoped to put into question Americans' optimism about changes in the USSR. She did this in a documentary in which Soviet citizens, sitting in their own homes, discussed their experiences and understandings of living through these times of confusion, anger, frustration, scarcity and fear. In the process, they also compared their experience of living in the USSR with what they knew of life in the US, painting their own picture of Americans and their daily lives, and thus shed light on cross-cultural conceptions of those who were previous ideological, political and military enemies.

The documentary lasts close to an hour, and raises a myriad of issues; nationalism, anti-Semitism, Chernobyl and ecological destruction, homelessness, health care, bribery and corruption, shortages, and the KGB, to name just a few. While in content the documentary takes on a sweeping breadth of topics and offers broad generalizations about Soviets and Americans, the form offers a dramatic contrast. The subjects go by their first names, and are often introduced as friends of the filmmaker. The interviews take place in homes, usually, as the title indicates, around the kitchen table. Intimate and mundane family interactions are included, and even young children take part in the story-telling. Overall MacDonald tries to establish a sense of intimacy between her subjects/friends and herself, and by extension the viewer. This closeness is further accentuated by the minimal level of technical complexity, as the documentary was shot on video, with a two person crew.

Unfortunately, the film simultaneously takes on too much and not enough, and will leave an anthropological viewer frustrated with its gaps. It would not be fair to ask a documentary to fulfill the expectations of an ethnographic film. However, the filmmaker entered the Soviet Union as a cultural and political innocent, and unfortunately seems to have left without gaining much meaningful insight into some of the more complex and intriguing questions of identity formation that the video only touches on. In doing so, the video reminds us of the serious dearth of effective contemporary ethnographic work in the USSR, be it

written or filmed. Let me point out some examples of this problem, and then discuss the possible uses of this video for anthropologists, particularly for teaching.

The two main subjects, a journalist and script-writer from Kiev, and a student living and working in Moscow, both speak English, and often use in the interviews we see. The reason for this becomes clear about one-third of the way through the video, when the journalist expresses her fear that the translator MacDonald is using the conduct the interviews is some kind of informer. MacDonald does not speak enough Russian to conduct the interview on her own, but it is only through the subject's concerns for her own safety that we learn that an unaccredited interpreter had been an invisible medium through which all conversations have previously been filtered.

Nor does MacDonald seem to have much knowledge about the USSR, unless she only appears naive in order to elicit information from her subjects. She is, for example, seemingly unaware of "the line" on all Soviet passports that states the bearer's nationality, as well as the repercussions of this labeling for stigmatized minorities, and so asks her friend why her nationality is Jewish if she was born in the Ukraine. As the journalist tells her husband, while seemingly unaware that she is being both filmed and understood, "if they ask this, they don't understand anything about us." MacDonald also reacts with surprise when told that non-native Muscovites need to pay bribes to gain the necessary permits to establish Moscow residency and the subsequent access to jobs, apartments and social services.

Yes, life in the Soviet Union is difficult, and discrimination and corruption are powerful forces with which citizens do battle every day. Yet these aspects of the trials of day-to-day Soviet life have already served as the base for countless journalistic descriptions of the USSR. The transfer of medium from newspaper to video doesn't necessarily give new analytic insight into already established social practices. MacDonald raises a host of issues, but is unable to discuss them in any depth.

MacDonald chooses to show us intimate reactions between herself and her friends/subjects. She shows and tells us how she was showered with food and gifts (familiar experiences for anyone who has spent time in

the USSR). She includes in the video a request by one subject to smuggle silverware out of the country to give to an American relative, and it is unclear whether MacDonald understands that this is an illegal act. During an interview with the Moscow student in which he is discussing his understanding of American optimism and surface politesse, she asks him what he thinks her smile really means, asking him to bring his abstract generalizations about Americans to bear on their personal relationship and her own behavior.

Yet her attempts at intimacy are undercut for us as viewers both by her serious lack of knowledge about the USSR, as well as by the incomplete introduction we are given to her and her subjects. I was intrigued as to how she met her subjects. Introduced as friends, we never learn how these friendships were established. While this kind of information is not generally a part of traditional ethnography, nor of documentary, its lack here points out a confusion in the structure of this video. MacDonald's only relationship to this work is personal, as opposed to academic or journalistic, as it would be for a news writer. Yet basic information about her personal relationships and situation is omitted, leading to a sense of confusion about the structure of her story.

But not all of MacDonald's subjects are friends. Those who are left unnamed and unsituated are inevitably those who blame outside forces (for example saboteurs) for such structural problems in the USSR as the inadequate food distribution system, and who reiterate the optimism of official government prognoses for the future. This way of coping with and living in the Soviet Union is not explored in the video. Yet it is as powerful and meaningful a way of structuring identity and knowledge as the critical perspectives offered by the majority of MacDonald's subjects.

The work is strongest when it illuminates individual Soviets' beliefs and understandings about Americans, that is when individual Soviets offer their own ideas about the differences between the two cultures. For it is here that we hear and see the greatest variety of opinions, without any obvious attempt on the filmmaker's part to summarize or conclude. Here too the subjects reach their highest complexity as characters, voicing simultaneously contradictory statements, arguing with each other, changing their minds, confused and unsure.

This video could be used in an Soviet area class to point out some of the major themes that dominate daily Soviet life -- bribery, shortages, housing -- as well as show how

some Soviets theorize and practice their own daily lives. It could not take the place of ethnographic work, whatever the medium. A well-meaning piece of work, it unfortunately does not address the needs of an anthropological audience.