

The Long and the Tall of It

*Moscow Summer* review by Gerald Saul

Robin Schlaht's *Moscow Summer* (1996) is a hybrid of filmmaking practices that straddles the realms of social documentary and the formal avant garde. This is not new for the Saskatchewan filmmaker, but never before has Schlaht pulled it off with such force.

As with his previous films (*The People in Black* (1992), and *Sons and Daughters* (1994)), Schlaht's principle image-taking consists of well-composed slow-motion black-and-white images of people within their environment. He composed like a photographer, allowing the drama and the sentiment to unfold within the unwavering frame until the decisive moment is discovered. Simply on this formal level, the beauty of Schlaht's film is very moving.

In his previous films, Schlaht remained at a distance from his subjects, separating them as exotic and untouchable like fish in an aquarium. *Moscow Summer* is a departure from this formula. Laced with interviews, the film allows the subjects to graduate from form to content.

The film was shot and the interviews conducted on the streets of Moscow in the summer of 1995. During the cold war, western nations refused to depict Russian civilians as being similar to us. They were shown as either slaves of the communist nation or as diabolical collaborators with it. Since the end of the cold war, western attitudes towards Russia have reversed; the people are now shown as being just like us but without the "benefits" of the free market economy. At first, I thought Schlaht's film was going to simply propagate this latter viewpoint. *Moscow Summer* shows a people living and loving in ways which make them familiar to us. These people, we as western viewers might think, could be living next door. They appear to be the same as us.

However, I was soon struck by an amazing difference between "them" and us". In one scene, a pro-capitalist businessman is talking about the wonderful new age that Russia has entered. Set in a public space, passersby begin to listen to him. Suddenly, one onlooker interrupts and begins arguing with him. While the film camera must have been visible and apparent to all in front of it, the people simply ignore the western etiquette which compels us to stand clear of news cameras. These Russians do not worship the cameras and the people in front of them as we do. In this way, they are not us, they are of a different society where each individual may express an opinion. Freedom of speech is not taken for granted, but is a privilege that is not the sole property of the newscasters.

Another aspect of *Moscow Summer* which struck a chord with me was the pacing and editing decisions which were made. Schlaht was very brave in the editing of this film. Usually, our opinions are formed over time, the results of a series of observations of events and discussions with a variety of people. However, many documentaries will barrage the viewers with a steady stream of arguments and ideas in order to lead them all to the same conclusion. *Moscow Summer* gives breathing space between each interview during which one can formulate his or her own conclusions or opinions about what has been said. I found this to be a very refreshing approach for the film medium, an approach which more closely simulates the formation of ideas outside the confines of time-based media.

Robin told me that it was his conscious intention to avoid obvious signs of the influence of America upon the people of Moscow. However, the stains of capitalism show through the fabric of the scenes.

American ideology insidiously creeps across every frame-line and, in some cases, even leaps straight in as with the presence of a gigantic Marlboro Man postered across six stories on a high rise building. The subjects being interviewed are obviously aware and concerned about the economic shifts within their nation. No clear consensus has been reached. While some rejoice in the abuses capitalism allows the: "We'll drink and smoke and be independent", others seem to fear and regret their new world: "We should have been taught how to deal with this freedom, with democracy".

Robin Schlaht's portrait of these people gives us a glimpse at the complexities of Russian life at this crossroad in their history. Through this camera we come to know just enough to feel completely ignorant about Russian while simultaneously understanding a little bit more about our own attitudes towards media, advertising, and politics.

Gerald Saul, November/96