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Long Distance Love

Madeleine Reeves^a

^a University of Manchester E-mail:

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Special issue themed multimedia review

Long Distance Love, directed by Magnus Gertten and Elin Jönsson. Auto Images, Sweden, 2009. Running time: 77 minutes. In Uzbek with English, German and Swedish subtitles. Order from www.autoimages.se

Long Distance Love is a feature-length documentary set in Osh, Kyrgyzstan and Moscow, directed by the Swedish documentary directors, Magnus Gertten and Elin Jönsson. The themes it touches upon of migration, courtship and love in Central Asia have figured in several documentaries in recent years, just as they have become the focus of increasing scholarly research. This film is distinctive within this field for the subtlety of its analysis of migration and its impact on individual subjectivities, the technical quality of the editing and for the gripping narrative, which touches on global themes through a finely-wrought love story. It is also one of only a handful of documentaries about Central Asia to have come to international attention; screened widely at film festivals, it gained the award for best documentary at the 2009 Hamptons International Film Festival. It deserves to be widely used by teachers and scholars of the region as a uniquely insightful resource for understanding the impacts of contemporary migration on individuals and family relationships.

Shot over two years, the documentary captures the pathos, precariousness, occasional pleasures and sporadic violence of migration for work in Russia, just as it interrogates how grinding poverty can undermine social relations. The film is underlined by a sharp social commentary, but this is lightly worn – for what is firmly foregrounded through the narrative organization is the beautiful and deeply endearing relationship between the film's two main protagonists, Alisher and Dildora, a young Osh Uzbek couple who have recently married after a brief courtship. The close, poignant rendering of their personalities, their hopes for their infant son, and the fragile friendships that Alisher strikes in Russia enable the film to move beyond the rather polarized narrative formulations which often characterize portrayals of migration to convey the complex dynamics of real-life long-distance love.

The couple's predicament is an archetype of the pressures that face young families in southern Kyrgyzstan. Alisher's parents are struggling financially: his father's work as a photographer 'barely covers the bus-fare'; his mother, overworked, in need of medical treatment and subject to domestic abuse, is forced to work in a cafe. After marrying, Alisher speaks of his 'shame' at not being able to provide for his parents or pay off their debts, and turns to an agency in the city that promises to find him work in Russia in return for a cut of his salary. Dildora, pregnant with the couple's first child, fears his departure but concedes to Alisher's decision. We follow Alisher as he travels to Russia and arrives in the city, as he learns the rules of the apartment that he comes to share with 18 other migrant workers, as he seeks out work to enable him to send money home, and as he is routinized into the demands of construction work in sub-zero temperatures.

We also see how migrant life in Moscow undoes people. 'Satan can lead you away if you aren't careful,' we see Alisher being told by a fellow Uzbek soon after arriving in the city. Aibek, a Kyrgyz friend and housemate, tells him how he was warned by relatives not to get interested in Russians, or in how other people live: [*orus eline kzykpa! Bashka bir eline kzykpa!*], and how, ignoring them, he sold his possessions and left for Russia, struggling now to pay off the debts he has incurred to pay his rent in Moscow. As his year progresses, we see Alisher being told off for having a 'lazy attitude' at work, getting drunk and being questioned by the police for having a fake registration document. Eventually he returns home, his more a story of survival than success, to find out what we the viewer already knew: that his family have been forced by

the money lender to whom they are indebted to leave their apartment for a single dormitory room; that his mother has been ‘humiliated’ by her relatives for becoming homeless; that his father has retreated into drink and silence.

The filming moves between Osh and Moscow, enabling us to get a sense of each partner’s predicament that the other can only glean from occasional phone conversations and text messages. Some of the most poignant scenes concern the birth of the couple’s son, Abdullah, when Alisher’s absence is felt most acutely. We see Alisher overwhelmed by emotion as he learns the news of his son’s birth from Dildora, and Dildora in turn lament the fact that she was the only woman on her ward at the maternity hospital not to be visited by her husband. We also see each partner gripped by emotion as they look at a photo of the other: Dildora, with Abdullah, smiling on her way from the maternity hospital; Alisher looking poised and confident against a Moscow skyline. There is an immediacy and intimacy to the filming which makes one barely aware of the camera. Only occasionally do scenes have the feeling of having been ‘staged’ (as when, towards the very end Dildora tells Alisher that she is pregnant with a second child) or of having worked out differently because of the camera’s presence (one suspects that the Moscow police officer who tells Alisher off for having a fake registration would have been decidedly less polite without the camera’s presence).

What the film manages to capture – almost as a by-product of the main narrative – is something of the intensity and complexity of migrant life that resists a narrative either of victimhood or of a heroic ‘victory against the odds’. In this, I think, it manages to capture something that few social studies of migration from Central Asia have been able to do: the everyday lived experience of being ‘on edge’ and the kinds of stresses that this generates, uncertain whether there will be work tomorrow; whether there will be a raid on the apartment where you live; whether you or someone you know will be the target of skinhead violence; whether you will be paid as agreed. We see a great deal of condescension on the part of Russians, and some hostility. We are aware of skinhead organizing as a constant low-level background threat. But we also see some real warmth and genuine curiosity about cultural difference, as when Alisher and Aibek are invited to join a meal with the Russian owner of the dacha where they are doing some renovations and share *samogon* toasts to Abdullah’s health.

We also get a glimpse into the sociality of Osh before 2010; an Osh of tensions, inequality and poverty, certainly – but tensions that are born of structural precariousness rather than of ethnic diversity. Alisher, after all, moves into a majority-Kyrgyz flat in Moscow and switches seamlessly between Uzbek and southern-dialect Kyrgyz; we see Uzbeks and Kyrgyz living, working and partying together in Moscow, just as we see Alisher’s mother fruitlessly try to appeal to a Kyrgyz-dominated bureaucracy in Osh not to be forcibly removed from their apartment. Watching it after 2010 I find myself wondering how much of this would be different if Alisher were to embark on his journey today, as Moscow migrant apartments increasingly organize along ethnic lines to avoid conflict.

Perhaps above all, however, the film explores how romantic love can emerge in the context of an arranged marriage and the struggles of sustaining long-distance love. As such, it is a welcome antidote to studies of intimacy and marriage in Kyrgyzstan that have focused overwhelmingly on its more coercive and abusive instances. This powerful and moving film deserves to be widely screened and will prove a valuable contribution to discussions of migration, love and transnational intimacy in Central Asia.

Madeleine Reeves

University of Manchester

Email: Madeleine.Reeves@Manchester.ac.uk

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