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**Vitalii Manskii: *Close Relations* (Rodnye, 2016)**

**reviewed by Raisa Sidenova © 2017**

Vitalii Manskii's *Close Relations* is a moving portrait of his family against the backdrop of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict and a poignant example of "first-person" documentary. Neither in its content, nor in its formal features is it an explicitly political film; however, it is an honest examination of how politics disrupts the lives of ordinary people. *Close Relations* is a nuanced work about a situation whose media representations both in Russia and abroad often lack sophistication.

The filmmaker achieves a high level of intricacy by filming his own family: his mother, his aunts and uncles, his cousins, and his nieces and nephews. Familial affection and respect allow the director to listen and to observe without imposing his own views, and to let the film's protagonists—his relatives—be open and sincere in expressing their opinions in front of the camera. And these opinions are varied and contradictory. As Manskii mentions in an interview, he made a conscious effort not to argue with his pro-Russian family members. He thought that arguing would undermine the film's premise (Evdokimova 2016). This restraint has paid off in the final version of the film.

*Close Relations* opens in Lviv, Manskii's hometown in Western Ukraine, in May 2014. A multi-ethnic city with a complex history, Lviv seems to be an appropriate home for the Manskii family. Talking to his mother, the director attempts to trace the ethnic background of his ancestors, who came from various parts of the former Russian Empire, including Poland, Lithuania, and Russia. After establishing that most likely they do not have ethnic Ukrainian lineage, Manskii's Russian-speaking mother, however, refuses to give up her Ukrainian identity, proving that the messy business of national belonging is something that goes well beyond ethnic and linguistic divides.

Then the filmmaker goes to Odessa, in Southern Ukraine, where his sister's family lives. Her husband is optimistic about the end of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, betting that the fighting will be over before winter. In December, the film crew celebrates the New Year's Eve with Manskii's relatives in Sevastopol, the capital of the annexed Crimea. His aunt is unreservedly pro-Russian, while his cousin, who works for a local football club, is slightly more skeptical, pointing out that political isolation of Crimea can damage the sporting industry.

In 2015, Manskii is back in Lviv and then goes to Kiev, where his Odessa relatives now live after his brother-in-law got a new job. Together, they visit the residence of the ousted President Yanukovich. In the spring, the filmmaker travels to the Donbass region, where he meets one of the oldest members of his family, Uncle Misha, who moved to Ukraine from Russia after WWII as part of the Soviet effort to rebuild the region's heavy industry. The 86-year-old ailing man is an avid watcher of Russian television and wholeheartedly supports Russia's actions.

Back in Lviv, the family is sending off one of the director's nephews to the army. Manskii ends the film in Moscow, announcing that while making this film he had to leave Russia for Latvia, but he still follows Russian events closely and considers everything that is going on "his personal tragedy."

Unlike Sergei Loznitsa, another documentarian with biographical ties to both Ukraine and Russia, who in his film *Maidan* contemplated the fate of the Ukrainian revolution from a strictly observational point of view, Manskii creates a film that is up-close and personal. Accompanied by a first-person voice-over narration, the documentary reveals an unexpectedly private side to the filmmaker, who became famous for provocative, sensationalist and often moralistic works. His previous film about life in North Korea, *Under the Sun*, spurred conversations about the ethics of his filmmaking approach (Hicks 2016; Boynton 2016). But in *Close Relations*, Manskii is incredibly sincere, even intimate; he is soft-spoken and the tone of his voice is melancholic, even weary, rather than bitter or outraged. One can still hear his more sarcastic remarks in the candid moments of his conversations with his mother and brother-in-law. But the overall sentiment is sorrowful. When he says at the film's start: "I never thought I would make this film," the viewers can feel that what they are about to see is very personal to him. As one would not offer much exposition in a conversation with a friend, Manskii does not explain much to viewers about the historical and political context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict beyond providing a timeline, a few location pointers, and a rather simple recap of the events. *Close Relations* thus requires concentration and attentiveness from viewers with limited knowledge of the Russo-Ukrainian relations, but a repeated viewing can be rewarding.

The film's strongest point is its ability to capture the emotional complexity of the conflict. Although Manskii's personal politics is

clear—he is against the Russian aggression in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine—the filmmaker acknowledges that the roots of the conflict are deep and people's responses to it are emotional rather than rational. One example is a scene when director's Aunt Natasha from Crimea calls her sisters in Lviv via Skype and they cannot reconcile their political differences. Another example is Manskii's conversation with his Aunt Liuda who lives in Lviv and talks about how the war affected her relations with Russian culture: she recalls how before the previously unimaginable conflict, she would always yearn to visit Moscow and go to theaters and museums there. Now, she says, she does not want to go and cannot even watch her favorite Soviet films. Celebrity crushes are also ruined: Liuda, a fan of Nikita Mikhalkov, took his poster off the wall because of his support for the Putin regime. This episode is both humorous and serious: one can laugh off the loss of fan-girl affection for an actor, but one should admit the pain of losing one's cultural identity.

Liuda's comment about her lost affection for Soviet movies brings up a larger concern of the film: the shared cultural heritage between Russia and Ukraine and how it has formed a shared identity. One such legacy is heard on the film's soundtrack, a famous "Two in the Café" theme by Mikael Tariverdiev from the 1973 television series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (*17 mgnovenii vesny*). As it plays throughout the film, this lyrical melody sounds both ironic, even a touch mocking, and undeniably tender, reflecting the filmmaker's mixed feelings about the Soviet cultural legacy. On the one hand, it is an integral part of many people's identities, including Manskii's, who recalled that when he was a child in Lviv one of his neighbors used to practice piano playing the Tariverdiev tune (Serebriakova 2017). On the other hand, films like *Seventeen Moments* greatly contributed to the Soviet popular mythology of the Great Patriotic War and bear a mark of Soviet cultural imperialism, which is currently revived in Russian popular culture through heavy borrowing from late Soviet popular film, television, and music.

Television is, in fact, an underlying theme of the film. The film is peppered with references to TV. Manskii's mother and her sisters watch Ukrainian election coverage. During the New Year's Eve his Crimean relatives watch televised addresses from both Ukrainian and Russian presidents. In Donbass, Uncle Misha regularly watches Russian TV (in one of the scenes his TV broadcasts nothing other than *Seventeen Moments of Spring*). Television and, in particular, propaganda on Russian state-owned channels, has played an instrumental role in shaping Russian public opinion on the conflict, preemptively spreading misinformation. Manskii is acutely aware of what he is working against. While Loznitsa in *Maidan* used long takes to emphasize the manipulative editing of contemporary television, Manskii uses TV footage itself to show how his protagonists' opinion of political events is shaped by what is shown on TV.

Of course, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has an actual bloody side to it, with people dying in a real, not an informational war. Due to its focus on the director's family members who do not live in war zone, *Close Relations* cannot address this topic directly. But the film is not ignorant of the problem. Although most of Manskii's relatives are safe, living in Lviv, Crimea and Kiev, the reality of war is creeping into their everyday life. Two of Manskii's nephews are of conscription age and one of them, Zhenia, is actually drafted. Although he does not say a word in the film, his fate is perhaps most intriguing out of all the protagonists since his life comes under a real threat. During a post-screening Q&A in London, Manskii approvingly announced that after finishing his mandatory army service, Zhenia decided to be a professional serviceman and joined the Ukrainian Army.

Another sequence that deals with how the human toll of the war became a part of the everyday life in Lviv is when the filmmakers intercut a conversation between Manskii's niece Yulya and her friend in a café with footage of a military funeral. Several reviews (Bondarev 2017; Dolin 2016) see this episode as criticizing the young women for their lack of awareness about what is going on around them. But I would disagree with such a reading. Yulya's remarks about how during Maidan every death was remembered, but now during the fighting in the Donbass region casualties become a statistic, point out that the women are indeed very conscious of what is happening in the country, even as they sit in a Lviv café, discussing among other things their personal hope for Ukraine's European future.

*Close Relations* continues Manskii's collaboration with the cinematographer Aleksandra Ivanova, who proved to be an invaluable contributor to his latest films, including *Pipeline* (*Truba*) and *Under the Sun*. Ivanova is a careful and observant cinematographer, inventive and quick-thinking when filming both outdoors and in confined spaces of small apartments, local cafes, or public transport. Often, she films from behind the windows and against reflections, creating a sense of eeriness and lyricism, which contributes to the overall melancholic mood of the documentary.

*Close Relations* premiered at the 2016 Karlovy Vary Film Festival and has since been shown at numerous festivals, including Toronto, Odessa, London, Amsterdam, and Leipzig. The film was released in Ukraine to generally positive reviews. Its release in Russia is in doubt. As the Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskii accused Vitalii Manskii of saying "treasonable things" (*antigosudarstvennyye veshchi*), the film was refused Russian state funding and became a Ukrainian, Estonian, Latvian and German co-production. The film is not officially banned, but for a theatrical run it needs a release certificate from the Ministry of Culture. Given the personal animosity between the Minister and the documentarian, it is unlikely that producers can obtain the permission. *Close Relations* was shown in Russia only at a handful of festivals, including ArtDocFest in Moscow and Polnyi Art-House in Chelyabinsk. The Russian film critics, however, showed their recognition of Manskii with their White Elephant award, deeming the release of his two 2016 films, *Under the Sun* and *Close Relations* as "The Event of the Year."

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*Close Relations*, Russia, 2016

Running time: 112 minutes

Director: Vitalii Manskii

Producers: Natal'ia Manskaia, Guntis Trekeris, Simone Baumann, Marianna Kaat

Cinematographer: Aleksandra Ivanova

Editors: Peteris Kimelis, Gunta Ikere

Music: Harmo Kallaste, Mikael Tariverdiev

Sales: Deckert Distribution

Production Companies: Vertov, Ego Media, Saxonia Entertainment, Baltic Film Production, 435 Films

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