FILM REVIEWS

Austerlitz. Dir. Sergei Loznitsa. Germany, Imperativ Film, 2016. 94 min. Black and white. In German.
doi: 10.1017/slr.2018.302

Sergei Loznitsa's documentary film *Austerlitz* starts innocuously: people are passing beyond trees in the foreground. We cannot quite discern where they are, or what they are doing and saying, so we strain to see. Seeing little, we strain to hear. What we hear, beyond the faint murmur of conversation and sounds of footsteps on gravel, are trees rustling and birdsong. Our conventional viewing habits are blocked, and we are forced to pay more attention in the hope of gleaning sense from what we see. What we ultimately see are images recorded at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp observing visiting tourists. Dressed for a hot summer's day, often in t-shirts and shorts, they look bored, listen to the audio guide, or one of the tour guides giving their perspective on the various parts of the camp, or on the Nazi camps more widely. Most strikingly, nearly all the tourists photograph constantly: everything that they see is recorded by someone, and often in a selfie. In one episode, someone poses for a photograph, pretending to be hung up on post for executions. Such insensitivity is foregrounded aurally too, as the film subtly enhances the electronic bleeps and digital shutter clicks. As Loznitsa's film is an observational documentary, what people see, what motivates them to photograph, together with their thought processes are hinted at in fixed cameras that record long, durational segments. The spoken word is indistinct or a fragment, a babble (or Babel) of voices more or less ineptly verbalizing and grappling with the world of the camps. We spectators are forced to use our imaginations, something few in the film appear to have.

Here too, however, Loznitsa is keen not simply to repeat the same point throughout the film, establishing its own dull and repetitive pattern. So, what the guides say sometimes cuts through to us as profound, such as when one refers to the fact that historians are not sure whether one of the crematoria was ever used. There is also a shot sequence just after this where we are permitted to contemplate the crematorium for a brief moment in which there is no one in the frame. The absence of human presence is somehow a calming, inviting reflection. On occasion, the visitors too stop to read, think, and appear to be moved in somber reflection.

Depictions of the Nazi camps began with the 1944 Soviet film about Majdanek, which also filmed a visit of an Extraordinary Commission for the investigation of Nazi atrocities. The arrival or first-time visit to the concentration camp has been part of the wider film and literary genre of its depiction ever since. In documentary film, the purpose of such sequences is for someone to see for themselves, to verify the claims. It is thus also possible to see the visitors to Austerlitz as fulfilling this desire to corroborate with their own eyes and cameras what they have heard about the camp. It is the visitors' apparent lack of reflection, however, that strike us. It seems more likely that they are there from duty or herd instinct.

Loznitsa said the idea for the film came during his own visit to Buchenwald, during work on a yet-unfinished film about Babi Yar, the most significant site of the Holocaust in the USSR. What struck him was the mismatch between the camp's sinister function and both its well-designed architecture and the fact that it was part of everyday life, notably for the museum employees keen for visitors to leave, (http://seance.ru/blog/austerlitz-interview/). Yet, it can be considered in the wider context of Loznitsa's work, which includes a number of films that engage with the memory of World War II, such as *Siege*, his 2006 archival film about the Siege of Leningrad that eschews all verbalization in favor of a focus on the experiential, and his 2012

Slavic Review 77, no. 4 (Winter 2018)
© 2019 Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies
https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2018.302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fictional film *In the Fog*, where Soviet partisans are shown not to be heroic, but confused and self-interested. The common thread with *Austerlitz* is that Loznitsa's films about the war strive toward denarrativization. The overarching sense-making narrative, Soviet or (in this case western), has gone, and viewers are instead challenged to make sense of opaque, durational scenes in which the small details count, as well as, in this case, to ask themselves the bigger question of why people visit concentration camps.

The striving to challenge conventional understanding of the Holocaust motivates the film's title, which evokes the title of German author W.G. Sebald's 2001 novel, *Austerlitz*. As well as confusingly seeming like Auschwitz, *Austerlitz* is the name of Sebald's titular character, a Jew who came to Britain on the Kindertransport, but had forgotten his identity until a series of incidents force him to recall and recover it. His name is his identity crisis, and signals a sense of disorientation, the goal of Loznitsa's film.

Jeremy Hicks
Queen Mary University of London

Double Life: A Short History of Sex in the USSR. Dir. Ināra Kolmane. New York: Icarus Films, 2017. 52 min. Color and black and white. $390.00.
doi: 10.1017/slr.2018.303

When Lyudmila Ivanova made her infamous claim during a US-Soviet TV program in 1986 that "There is no sex in the USSR!," her comment—although roundly mocked at the time—revealed a certain truth about Soviet attitudes towards sex and the ways in which it was controlled by the regime, rendering it largely invisible. In her documentary *Double Life: A Short History of Sex in the USSR*, Latvian filmmaker Ināra Kolmane takes us through seventy years of Soviet history to highlight the interplay between sex, politics, society, and the changing meanings attached to sex and sexuality under different General Secretaries.

The film opens immediately after the Russian Revolution, when the free expression of sexuality was encouraged by the Bolsheviks to demonstrate that Soviet citizens were entering a new era and rejecting centuries of tsarist oppression. Romanov laws criminalizing homosexuality and abortion were abolished, divorce was made easy, public nudity was no longer shameful and a sexual free-for-all was encouraged under the motto "Down with Shame!" *Ménages-à-trois* were now socially acceptable, with Lenin himself dividing his time between his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaia, and his mistress, Inessa Armand, while the poet Vladimir Maiakovskii shared a flat with his lover, Lilia Brik, and her husband, Osip Brik. In terms of new sexual mores, Zhenotdel founder Alexandra Kollontai argued that satisfying your sexual desires should be as easy as quenching your thirst. It soon became clear, however, that some Soviet citizens were more entitled to quench their thirst than others. In one scene, a recently declassified Decree by the People's Commissars of Saratov was read out, in which it was stated that for a woman not to satisfy the sexual desires of all men in her Komsomol was "petit bourgeois." While the ideological construction of Soviet sexual mores was clear, the lingering effect of pre-revolutionary patriarchy was no less apparent.

Rather than creating a society based on sexual harmony, therefore, the result was a sharp rise in incidences of rape, the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases, and an increase in the number of abandoned children. In response, sexual mores and activity came under much stricter political regulation, with Lenin insisting that young people not waste their energy on sex but channel it toward building communism. In

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