

13. **Pictures of Russia** [Series, Video from Russia. We have 5 of the titles.]

Samuel Rachlin, Danmarks Radio, 1986, 75 min.

Samuel Rachlin's visual exploration of The Russian Soul; the mystique of its people, culture and land.

It was a rare privilege to receive Mr. Rachlin's feedback for this review; as he explained, "This documentary attempts to see the Soviet society and its people through rituals new and old, and this, I believe is the key to understand what this documentary tries to do." It certainly does provide an insightful view of the richness and depth of Russian rituals and commemoration.

The 1984 footage is very attractive, with an appealing selection of scenes and details of groups of people sharing space or tasks in everyday life, particularly on special occasions. The choice of detail is colorful and scenic, and also gentle enough for school showings even for small children. The script is in English commentary with English subtitles or voiceovers provided for Russian speech. Each segment opens with the camera panning through a scene, with commentary punctuated by impromptu street interviews with passersby, and clips of added input from sources like Bulat Okudzhava. One nice touch is the capsule opinions that slip in, about the challenges and triumphs of the Russian experience. The opinions range in tone from satire to lyrical wistfulness. Their succinct candor would strike the television viewer as modern, until at the end when the speaker is identified: Tiutchev, Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, Gogol.

Topics have enough variety to help keep the attention of a school audience. But the subject changes were not abrupt, the cuts were not distractingly fast paced. The producer wasn't afraid to allow moments when the viewer can simply take in the scene and ponder this quote or that visual effect. It's also refreshing that the script bothered to bridge theme transitions in a smooth and logical way.

The focus does definitely reinforce those features which would most readily come to mind among foreign viewers: bath house, troika, vodka toasts, slim selections at the grocery, soldiers at Lenin's tomb, ice cream, church pageantry at Paskha. From that standpoint, people who like the comfort of their favorite stereotypes would find extra upholstery for bolstering cliched thinking. The film did pose as paradoxical a couple of situations which are not necessarily so; if a "voluntary" work crew gives up their Saturday to clean streets without pay on Lenin's birthday, and a foreign television crew shows up to film their comments, it stands to reason that everyone would find it prudent to rave about their enjoyment of the day. Some generalizations are a little bit... general: Russia seems so near to Europe, yet so distant; Russia has always had its own cultural and political traditions and old customs; the key to the enigmatic mysterious Russian character is its enormous susceptibility to emotion and mood.

For school use, one would definitely need to bring students up to date on contemporary culture, the contrast between private vs. public life, and the many Russian citizens who have always swum against the tide in creative ways.

This very attractive earnest film doesn't argue for an individual bias, or introduce any controversial new view. The themes are its contemplative visual study of the outer appearance of Soviet public festivals and commemoration in 1984, and its choice of quotes which try to express for outsiders what Russian-ness feels like from the inside.

List of scenes:

Passersby musing on the Russian character: love of truth, kindness...

Red Square

Subbotnik

Church, its influence

May Day parade in Red Square

Political self-aggrandizement, public pageantry

Patriotism, and its emotional component

May 9 day, end of WW2: children honor veterans, soldiers reunite.

Volgograd memorial

Rural influence, song "I see the wonderful plains..." river footage

Love of land, early history in walled cities

Love of chess (+ very fast tournament in park)

Civic "christening" of a baby as a new Communist

School assembly, goodbye to the 10th graders by the smallest kids. (song, "Uchat v shkole...")

Lack of consumer goods

Comedy routine by Gennadii Khazanov that foreigners are treated better

Public dance with song "The whole village is in a merry dance; the whole world knows the strength of the Russian people."

Easter, cemetery visit, sprinkling cakes on graves

Poets: their graves, commentary by Okudzhava, persecuted fame

Dinner: importance of food and music, and Russian penchant for “excited arguments and lengthy stories”

Are Russians Europeans?

Snow sports

Bath house

Russian choir master interview about popularizing church music

Russian troika race, Gogol quote

Okudzhava, importance of remembering history

Quote, Lermontov, Farewell unwashed Russia