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### At Home Among Strangers

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At Home Among Strangers

by

Aleksandra Gorbacheva

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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## **Abstract**

*At Home Among Strangers* is a character-driven documentary that explores the price of freedom for a gay person in a society that lacks freedom and civil rights. It follows an asylum seeker from Russia, Sasha Smirnov, during a crucial moment of his life: starting over in New York City at 40 as a journalist without English language skills. The film reflects on the choices one makes and the consequences of staying true to oneself.

## **Project Description**

*At Home Among Strangers* is an observational portrait film that tells the story of Sasha Smirnov, an LGBTQ asylum seeker who came to New York City from Moscow, Russia as a result of rising homophobic sentiments in the early 2010s. The film focuses on the first year of Sasha's new life, revealing some of the traumatic experiences of his past, and revisits him 6 years later when the immigration interview that will determine his legal status in the USA is finally scheduled.

In 25 minutes this film covers almost a decade of one person's private life, against a backdrop of the political situation in Russia during these same years. Ultimately, the film is a reflection on the choices people make, and the repercussions of staying true to oneself. It's an invitation to witness how a resilient person builds himself up during a critical and difficult part of his life.

In 2013 Sasha Smirnov worked as a press secretary in Moscow's City Hall. It was a public official's post in the offices of a governmental body. His colleagues were not aware of his sexual orientation. Being openly gay with his friends and family and a vocal advocate for civil and LGBTQ rights in his private life, however, he prepared himself for the next step of his personal LGBTQ activism. In March 2013 Sasha publicly came out in an interview with *Afisha* magazine. He understood that this would mean his personal, private story would become very public. The new anti-gay law, commonly referred as the "gay propaganda" law, was being passed that year and it became a deciding factor in Sasha's decision to "go on record." It banned "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relationships among minors" and "forming of the distorted view of social equality of traditional and non-traditional sexual relationships," de-facto prohibiting any positive information about LGBTQ people in public spaces and media which could be heard/read by people under the age of 18. Sasha knew what the consequences of the law would be and he couldn't be silent anymore.

*Afisha* magazine is a long-standing liberal-leaning print and online publication that features writing about culture in Moscow. Since the adoption of the homophobic law prompted a large public discussion, *Afisha* dedicated the March 2013 issue to the LGBTQ community and interviewed about 30 LGBTQ people from different walks of life. Some interviewees shared their names and photographs and others didn't. Sasha did.

The interview started with his statement:

“I work as a clerk in one of Moscow’s City Hall offices and I’m aware that after this interview is published I might be fired... I hide that I’m gay from my colleagues. When someone makes an 'f-word' joke I just foolishly smile at them.”<sup>1</sup>

The interview and its consequences, including the one Sasha predicted — that he would be fired — are the starting point of the story I decided to focus on. Sasha coming out publicly, being fired, getting more and more depressed, and becoming a target of online and offline threats became the many reasons Sasha asked for asylum after coming to New York in late 2014. It was the last option for him to get himself out of constant danger.

In the film Sasha navigates through his new life in New York, experiencing a range of different feelings, be it excitement from walking the streets of Manhattan to being confused about how to use a washing machine in his local laundromat. While prepping lunch in his new tiny rental studio, where his dining table is placed right next to his bed, he talks about his journey towards personal liberation and brings up sad memories from the past. He still feels connected to the country of his birth and writes passionately on Facebook for his large Russian-speaking following. It’s easy to understand why he chose this manner of expression — his career as a journalist is nearly impossible to continue in an English-speaking country.

Even in New York Sasha is haunted by homophobia from people of Russian heritage. During an interview on a Brooklyn radio station, he is cursed out by an irate caller. He remains unfazed as he understands the emptiness of these threats in the U.S., in contrast to hearing something like this in Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> LTD Afisha, “«Я могу встать и сказать: так больше не будет» 27 историй из жизни российских геев. [“I can stand up and say: this will not happen again” 27 stories from the lives of Russian gay people.]”

Sasha socializes with the Russian-speaking LGBTQ community in New York and looks forward to his first Pride parade, where we see him walking in the first row of a Russian-speaking LGBTQ group. Even at this moment of newfound freedom, though, he is torn between the ghosts of the past and the uncertainty of the future.

Despite these fears, Sasha regrets nothing and ventures on the path to building a new life in New York. He takes English classes, gives a speech to an English-speaking audience (even if it's with a heavy accent), and he starts a new job in the fish department of an Eastern European grocery store in Coney Island. Sasha feels safe, but is he happy? As he walks on the beach at Coney Island, he says he is lonely and wishes he had a partner.

Six years later, Sasha is finally scheduled for his immigration interview. Time heals wounds, it turns out, and life provides beautiful surprises. We see him watching an image of himself at the end of this film. But this time he is in a spacious house, sitting with Douglas, his loving partner of three years. Douglas is extremely touched by seeing this part of Sasha's life, and wipes away tears.

*At Home Among Strangers* is about the emotional journey and psychological weight of leaving everything behind and starting a new life at the age of 40 in search of safety and a better life. My goals with this project were to find the right balance between the personal and the political, to tell an engaging human story, and to create an artistic document of a particular time in history using the medium of film.

## **Background and Context**

This story exists because of the Putin regime's policies in Russia. The homophobic "gay propaganda" law passed by the Russian parliament in 2013 was the first anti-gay law since the decriminalization of homosexuality that occurred after the USSR fell. LGBTQ people are a perfect scapegoat representing western values, and "the collective West" is Putin's ideological enemy. He has chosen to stoke culture wars to keep his power.

Human Rights Watch found that "the law's adoption also coincided with the spread of violence and harassment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and LGBT rights activists and a rise in homophobic hate speech by some Russian officials and public figures."<sup>2</sup>

Government support of homophobia, and propaganda about "traditional family values," led to increased homophobia among the public more broadly. "Despite the laws, LGBT people have become more visible in Russian society, and there is more information about their lives and problems in public spaces in the last 8 years. At the same time, homophobia is still on the rise and it's supported by the government," wrote the Russian oppositional media outlet "Meduza."<sup>3</sup>

Anti-gay laws and ideological sentiments, violence toward LGBTQ people, and being treated as second-class citizens has resulted in growing numbers of LGBTQ people trying to escape the dangerous regime in search of safety and freedom. During the 2010s New York, which has historically been welcoming to immigrants and LGBTQ people, became one of the

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<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Russia: Anti-LGBT Law a Tool for Discrimination."

<sup>3</sup> Meduza, "Июнь в Европе — это «Месяц гордости». Но не в России: тут ЛГБТ-людей продолжают унижать, преследовать и калечить.[June in Europe is a Pride Month. Not in Russia: LGBT people are still being humiliated, chased and beaten up]."

more popular destinations for Russian-speaking LGBTQ people seeking asylum. Sasha became one of those people.

Escaping an oppressive state, however, is only a part of this experience. The majority of asylum seekers come here with little to no savings. Most don't speak English, and don't have connections. It is unlikely that they will be able to continue working in their chosen profession. During the first 6 months of being here, they are not allowed to work legally, which puts them in an extremely vulnerable position. After 6 months they can apply for a work permit, but most of them will only qualify for low-wage jobs.

The legal aspect of seeking asylum is quite complicated as well. At immigration offices there are long lines of asylum seekers from different countries, each of whom left their country for a different reason. Not everyone will qualify for permanent residency, and some will be sent back. To be able to ask for asylum they must have a strong legal case and be able to prove that staying in their native country is a real threat to their safety.

Well-known non-profit organizations like Immigration Equality provide pro-bono legal assistance to LGBTQ asylum seekers, but their staff cannot cover every single case. For this reason, LGBTQ communities formed here by those who've already gone through this process provide a lot of help to newcomers. That was the case with Sasha—he was able to find an immigration lawyer through new friends at the Russian-speaking LGBTQ community RUSA LGBTQ+. But even with his strong, well-documented case, it took Sasha 7 years to get the immigration interview scheduled. The feeling of being unsettled for such a long time has a serious negative impact on an asylum seeker's mental health. The fear of being sent back passes only when the immigration status is granted.

Some people in Russia have a preconceived notion: “If you don’t like it here just go to Europe or America!” They don’t understand how hard immigration is, physically and mentally, especially when you don’t have another option to find for a better and safer life.

### **Production Process**

I come from Moscow, Russia. I lived there for 25 years of my life. My Russian identity and my connection to events in Russia continue to influence my outlook on life and my work. I started to work with the Russian-speaking LGBTQ community in New York around 2013, during my second year in the IMA program, in an attempt to document the outcomes of the rising homophobia in Russia. It seemed like my personal way to give a platform to those who are being silenced. The shared background and language became an obvious plus. As a recent immigrant, I was able to relate to some (but of course not all) life experiences of those who left their country in the last few years.

Originally I was hoping to make a film about one couple of LGBTQ asylum seekers from a Russian-speaking country because I was interested in capturing and representing love in film, love which is being silenced in my home county. I talked to a lot of people but was met with a lot of resistance, be it a lack of trust or fear that someone back in Russia would eventually see it because not every Russian-speaking LGBTQ asylum seeker is out to their family or friends.

After months of unsuccessful research, I decided to start making compromises about my potential subjects. Looking for a couple made my chances of finding someone very narrow, since not that many couples were arriving here to begin with. Compromise is a natural part of

filmmaking and often it's unavoidable. I broadened my search to include individuals, and one person who had declined to participate connected me with Sasha.

We hit it off during our first few meetings, and Sasha's enthusiastic response to participating in this project made me feel encouraged. By that point, I had been looking for the right subject for my thesis film for a very long time.

Sasha was open to anything and his backstory turned out to be extremely rich in terms of his biography (to the point that initially I considered filming in Russia). I appreciated Sasha's attitude right away. His charisma and charm are somewhat different from the extroverted charisma of those who are great entertainers, but his active processing, visible emotions and responses had a magnetic quality. His nervousness at our first meeting, combined with his determination to not hold back, made me feel good about the potential collaboration.

There was one aspect that gave me pause, however. Sasha used to work on TV as a reporter, and he is media trained. And as an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ rights he is generous with his life story and shares it with any journalists and filmmakers who ask. Because of this, I was concerned he would be performing and giving preplanned answers to questions he'd already been asked. Without spontaneity, emotion, and subtext, my interview with him might feel dry. I was also concerned that this story might be too well-known.

My first impression of him was that he was emotionally open, strong, and ready to be vulnerable, so I decided to proceed. I realized that an observational style, which I planned to lean heavily on while filming him, could help me to capture the moments of authenticity. I did make a note to my future self — the editor of this film — that I would need to look for “in the moment” reactions and avoid statements that felt like he had already made them in the past. My worry

about his story being overexposed dissipated when I realized that his past, which was covered by the media, was not as interesting to me as his present.

I started filming Sasha a few months after he came to New York. He was very new to the city, didn't have a job or an immigration lawyer yet, and felt a bit like a tourist as he was living off some savings he brought with him to get settled.

Working on this film, and having multiple conversations and interviews with Sasha, was a heartbreaking experience. But it did help me to find the right angle to tell his story and highlight the parts of his character that are the core of who he is. He is resilient, complex, and courageous, yet open and vulnerable; a person who truly lives through all his experiences, often with fear but without backing off.

Even though I wasn't focusing on Sasha's past, getting familiar with his personal history was important for my research and to better understand the subject of my film. For example, Sasha recounted several terrible episodes that occurred in Russia because he is gay. He talked about his struggles to accept himself as a Soviet teenager in a world where getting information about people like him was almost impossible. He talked about his attempts to be with women and how unnatural it was for him. He talked about being violently attacked by the homophobic brother of a man he met online, and not being able to go to the police to seek justice. The aftermath of this past can be glimpsed in his eyes during close-up shots, which I used a lot in the film to create a sense of intimacy.

In the film, I chose to briefly mention some aspects of Sasha's past to explain the reason he is in New York and what he gave up by leaving. It also helped establish the theme of the film:

the importance of personal freedom and self-acceptance and how those are impacted by one's environment.

During our first interviews, Sasha was honest and open, but I could sense that he'd given some of these answers in prior interviews. I arranged some simple shoots of him walking around with some old acquaintances from his hometown who had moved to New York City a few years ago, and of him walking around Washington Square Park. Through these first few filming sessions we got to know each other better, and I started to discover the film's subtext: the fight for freedom, its importance, and the price people from marginalized communities pay for it.

As Sasha mentions in the film, personal freedom for Russian-speaking LGBTQ people is not always an option. There is not much external support, you have to live a double life and you might not fully accept yourself. Sasha is older, so he lived through a lot of self-discoveries and got to the point of self-acceptance through a very intense internal process under pressure from external circumstances.

The subtext came from the themes which were rising to the surface during the interviews and observational filming. These are the themes relevant to Sasha's life I've noted: the importance of honest self-reflection and self-acceptance, making life choices based on that reflection and fighting for civil and LGBTQ rights. That's what I was in search of in every filming session I had with Sasha from that point forwards.

At the same time, the main story arc was yet to be discovered. This is both an exciting and frightening part of the documentary filmmaking process if you want to capture the story revealing itself in real-time. You need to make yourself available and be persistent: exciting episodes could await you around the corner. Simultaneously, a timeframe must be placed around

your principal filming. Originally I set 9 months to hit the one-year mark since Sasha arrived in New York.

Our conversations about his plans and interviews revealed several points: he'd take classes to learn English, he joined a Russian-speaking LGBTQ group called RUSA LGBTQ+, he would be participating in the 2015 Pride parade and he had enough savings to last him for his first year in New York. The last point was not very cinematic, as I wanted to show him working in a very different environment, potentially doing manual labor — an obvious descent from his previous career. This is a powerful and dramatic moment that is shared by many asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants. I knew that this scene had to be in the film, so I decided that I would wait for Sasha to start his job and this might be a potential ending. Eventually, it didn't end the film, but it became a part of the final sequence.

I was able to organize filming of the English class, one LGBTQ meeting, Sasha's interview at a Russian-speaking radio station in Brooklyn, and the Pride march as well as some intimate filming sessions in Sasha's neighborhood where he was doing simple things like laundry at the laundromat, getting a haircut and making lunch at home. I was lucky enough to catch unexpected moments that tell so much more about the character and his circumstances and work for the story better than any interview.

What I've noticed is that as a documentary filmmaker if you have a set objective you become an active observer. You notice some unexpected things being revealed to you during the process and you start thinking about how they could serve your objective. The more time I spent with my subject the more I learned about the type of reactions he would give. This helped to predict the optimal framing for particular moments.

By spending a lot of time with Sasha I almost became his friend. This is an interesting aspect of observational filmmaking: you witness a lot of sides of your subject's life and might feel engaged, empathetic, and conciliatory towards them. At the same time, it's necessary to develop a clear separation: there are aspects they may share with you that do not serve the story you want to tell, even if they are important to his life. For example, Sasha often mentioned he felt like a "tourist" in the first year of being in New York, mainly because he came here with some money and had some time to settle. But it wasn't a very exciting part of his life. I found a use for footage of him happily sightseeing in New York but I had to translate this aspect of his life and slightly change its meaning to create a dramatic beat: he feels good in New York City in comparison to being depressed in Russia.

The more I worked with my subject, the more events in his life I was able to witness and film. One unexpected shoot involved Sasha's preparation for, and participation in, an event called "Welcoming The Stranger " at the Congregation Beit Simchat Torah Synagogue that was organized for Russian-speaking LGBTQ asylum seekers. The fact that he was giving a speech for the first time in the English language made this scene a clear plot point in the film, and provided structure. We are witnessing Sasha's transition from being in a Russian mindset to being present in his new life.

One important thing I had to wait for was for him to get a job. He found one earlier than expected, but organizing the filming of this part became a new challenge. Not everyone was ready to let a camera in their private businesses, including Sasha's employers when he worked as a cleaner, and as a factory worker sorting nuts. I got lucky when Sasha found his third job, as a

cashier in the fish department of an Eastern European supermarket in Brooklyn. The owners let me film him working.

At this point I felt like I had sufficient material to edit an engaging film that would show an interesting character going through a dramatic transformation. I wanted to make sure that events highlighted in the film would convey Sasha's internal tension and conflicted feelings and create a dramatic development to show what steps he was ready to take to get what he needs. He gains a lot (freedom and safety, things he was looking for) but he loses a lot (everything he had achieved in life before now).

I knew that the Pride parade, considering its emotional charge and symbolic importance, could provide the apex of the narrative, and that Sasha's speech at the synagogue and working at the grocery store could be the film's resolution.

But life had other plans, and provided a more satisfying ending to the film. I finished principal filming in 2016, but the editing was done in 2022. At that point, I wanted to revisit my character and film where he is now in his life. I found out that Sasha is in love, living with his partner and, after nearly 7 years of waiting, is about to have his immigration interview. I decided to show how the passage of time changed his life and I filmed Sasha one more time, now with his partner in their new home, watching a cut of this film based on the existing footage. It sparked a very intimate and honest reaction, showing the tenderness and love of this couple. The ending is bittersweet: Sasha is not alone anymore, he is finally going to get asylum. But as a flag in their kitchen reveals, the backdrop of this is the war in Ukraine and the realization that he will likely never be able to go back and introduce his partner to his family and friends in Russia.

In documentary filmmaking, especially in the observational style, the story is created in the editing room. No matter how much you planned before you started filming, you need to have a fresh perspective on the footage you were able to get. As acclaimed editor Walter Murch said, “Wanting something just gives me the starting point. I expect the material itself to tell me what to do next.”<sup>4</sup>

It took me a very long time to find the essence of more than 30 hours of footage. I learned that when you look through the footage many possible story directions arise. Your job is to focus on the one that not only best serves your objectives but will also be the most impactful and interesting to the viewer. When you look through your material again and again, it reveals something new and very important, sometimes in places you haven’t even been looking at. And the opposite is also true—your favorite moments might not make the cut.

My goal was to create an engaging story people would want to see. An interesting film has more chance of having a social impact, challenging preconceived notions, making people question things, and even making them discover something new about themselves.

I decided to focus on personal experience and how Sasha’s history impacts what he does, what he says, and how he reacts to the world around him. The film’s politics stem from this naturally, without requiring extra exposition. As filmmaker Marc Isaaks says, “I like complexity, and I like characters who represent more than just themselves, and that’s usually defined by the theme that’s in my head, the bigger idea.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Murch, “In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing”, 109.

<sup>5</sup> James Quinn, “This Much is True: 14 Directors on Documentary Filmmaking,” 248.

In a perfect world, I would have loved to tell the whole story through observation, but when your production has a lot of constraints in terms of time and budget the compromises are unavoidable. Almost every documentary production uses a mix of observational footage, interviews, archives, and situations a director creates for their subjects to participate in. That's what I ended up pulling from for my film. To create a clearer structure for the film I utilized the interviews to point out key parts of Sasha's past and to have him reflecting on the events in his life.

A documentary film is a filmmaker's artistic expression, not a direct documentation of reality. A moment happens, and an idea of this moment is translated on the screen to fit a larger narrative. It's a very delicate balance between what actually happened and the world of this particular film. I believe at the end I was able to achieve my objective of allowing a viewer to accompany Sasha on his emotional search for freedom and safety.

### **Research analysis**

Making *At Home Among Strangers* put me in an interesting position as a filmmaker in terms of intersectionality. On the one hand, I'm a recent Russian immigrant and therefore an insider to Sasha's reality. On the other hand, I'm an outsider because I identify as a straight cis-gendered woman.

My understanding of Russian politics and the cultural aspects of Russian life made my research more streamlined. Being an immigrant created a point of connection for me as well. But being straight definitely made me ask myself questions, and raised questions from some people in the LGBTQ community. Even if I intended to create more visibility for the Russian-speaking

LGBTQ community, as a way of fighting rising homophobia in Russia, I expected initial distrust. They don't know what my angle could be, they don't know how familiar I am with LGBTQ issues and experiences. What if I wanted to use people to get a sensational story, and disregarded the consequences for them? What if I'm not sensitive enough to the community? I expected these fears and prioritized the issues of ethics and identity representation. It made me think about my place behind the camera and my approach.

Even a documentary classic like Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* raises big questions about the ethics of who is behind the camera, and why, and about their right to be in that role. Self-doubt did not fully go away, but maybe that isn't a bad thing. It made me think more deeply about how powerful storytelling is and how many ethical nuances need to be taken into consideration. I tried to avoid essentialism in my approach. Sasha's sexual orientation is only one part of him, and even if it tremendously impacted his life it doesn't fully define him. Showing a multidimensional human being and finding themes that go beyond LGBTQ issues were important goals for me to achieve. Understanding the history of the Russian LGBTQ struggle and its current situation in Putin's regime reassured me that Russian LGBTQ stories are an important tool that can be used to fight against the regime's oppression.

“Activists and artists clearly need to work with more-complex representational strategies that honestly deal with differences of ideology, class, race, culture, and sexuality within queer communities while at the same time confronting the homophobia.”<sup>6</sup>

I wanted to make a story full of empathy. But how would I make sure that my point of view wouldn't fall into stereotyping or a “flattening” of the issue? Throughout the history of

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Holmlund, Cynthia Fuchs, “Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary,” 27.

film, a lot of LGBTQ stereotypes have been created and persisted. The “queer villain,” “gay best friend,” “closeted macho homophobe,” and “flamboyant fashion gay” are just a few of them. And even if these character types are less common in documentary filmmaking, one of the tropes I had to take into consideration was that of LGBTQ suffering. On the screen we are used to seeing gay people looking for acceptance, feeling alienated, feeling depressed, and fighting for their lives (and often failing). Happy endings for LGBTQ protagonists are not as common as for straight ones. Obviously, this trope comes from real-life struggles, and real-life struggles are true to Sasha’s story. The danger of this trope potentially flattening the film still existed, though. What I needed to decide for myself was the appropriate style and tone to use in my film. That is the key to keeping personal ethics in check.

“The ethics of the making of a film are manifested in various ways in the film's aesthetics. Most viewers sense the filmmaker's attitude toward their subjects—be it contempt or respect, compassion or cynicism, arrogance or humility.”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to showing my character's pain, I made sure to give him agency, and to show him in different environments and in different moods, experiencing all the complexities of life. Instead of heavily leaning on all the horrible situations from his past, I showed Sasha as a resilient person. The happy ending, with Sasha settled, in love, and about to get asylum, definitely moves this story beyond the “suffering” trope. But even with all my considerations, my objective might be misinterpreted or at least perceived differently by American and Russian audiences. That’s a reality documentary filmmakers have to make peace with.

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<sup>7</sup> Ilisa Barbash, Lucien Taylor, “Cross-Cultural filmmaking,” 50.

Some ethical issues are specific to filmmaking. Regardless of the filmmaker's intentions, filmic representations are often perceived as the Truth: since you see it, it must be so. By the time you get to edit your own films, you'll see that nothing is further from the case. Cinematic representations are as constructed as any other. But, paradoxical as it may seem, the film seems to connote both immediacy and timelessness. Events captured on film seem to be locked in time, virtually repeating themselves at every screening.<sup>8</sup>

I intended to make this film for both American and Russian audiences with an acknowledgment that discussions of LGBTQ rights are at a very different place in each country. There is more acceptance of the LGBTQ community in the USA, but my film might serve as a reminder that freedom is a constant fight and not a given. The “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida and the “gay propaganda” law in Russia stem from the same bias. Despite the homophobia, thanks to social media and Youtube, queer voices are much louder in the last decade in Russia. But this doesn’t remove the fact that the LGBTQ community there is very vulnerable and it might get even worse because of the persecution of the opposition during the current war in Ukraine. That’s why humanistic stories about the oppressed can still be a tool of resistance to growing totalitarianism.

When I met Sasha I told him I would be honest and show him as I see him. And I believe I was able to keep this promise. He’s never distrusted me, I assume because of his background in media (including him working as a TV reporter), his understanding of what a documentary production process is, and his respect for storytelling in general. He knew well what consenting to participating in a project like this implies. Of course, his attitude put me at

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 49.

ease, because I knew that he was aware of what he was signing up for and I didn't have to convince him of anything.

The legacy of queer cinema and documentaries which talk about LGBTQ community is extremely rich. I researched different approaches: from intimate character-driven portraits (*Portrait of Jason*, Shirley Clarke) to activist films that call out anti-gay policies and demand the change (*Out At Work*, Kelly Anderson and Tami Gold) to animated gay refugee stories that use creative visual language to protect the identity of the character (*Flee*, Jonas Poher Rasmussen). I watched topical documentaries about Russian LGBTQ issues in the recent years, including a chilling film called *Welcome to Chechnya* by David France, which used hidden cameras to follow the escape of Chechen LGBTQ people who are especially in danger, a 2014 special report of Vice News *Young and Gay in Putin's Russia*, which showed the rise of violence and homophobia in Putin's Russia. These films showed me a lot of possibilities and directions for how this topic can be approached and tackled.

The style I wanted to focus on, and already had some experience with during my IMA program work, is an observational style. The main influence on my thesis was the 2013 observational documentary *Cutie and The Boxer* by Zachary Heinzerling. What I appreciated about this film was that it borrows cinematic language and grammar from fiction films, and has a strong objective that drives the story: preparation for Cutie's art show. With minimal interviews and just a bit of exposition, the film flows very well with successful use of close-ups that reveal more and more layers of the characters' emotional states and their relationships. This approach towards storytelling and editing is rather popular for observational films but, unfortunately, not always achievable. I acknowledged the limitations of time and resources I had, but I wanted to

construct a journey that has a clear path for a character with a very visible goal: to get integrated with a new society, both legally and mentally. By being there I was lucky to capture events in Sasha's life that became the building blocks of the narrative.

Considering the wide gap between shooting and the conclusion of the story, I decided to carry out an experiment from a 1961 cinema verite classic *Chronicle of a Summer* by Jean Rouch and a 1997 historical documentary *Chile, Obstinate Memory* by Patricio Guzman. Showing Sasha and his partner Douglas a version of the film based on 2015-2016 footage worked very well in terms of opening up my subjects, especially Sasha's partner, whom I'd never met before and did not have a chance to build a rapport with. As a documentary filmmaker, being able to spark a reaction is a very powerful tool. When used thoughtfully it can enrich the story without exploiting your characters. At the end of the day a film is not reality, but it can impact reality. Showing a version of this film to Sasha and Douglas impacted their reality, as Douglas got to know some new things about Sasha and this "set-up" pushed them towards deeper honesty with one another. This film has the potential to impact other viewers as well, whether they can relate to it or are challenged by it.

### **Audience and exhibition**

By telling a human story, *At Home Among Strangers* touches on three valuable topics: LGBTQ rights, immigration, and the outcomes of the Russian politics of the last decade. My intended audience is those who want to know more about these topics. Considering attitudes towards Russian people in the current political climate of Putin's war in Ukraine, I hope that my

film can debunk the notion that Russians are a monolith and that everyone supports Putin and his actions. Some Russians strongly oppose the regime, and suffer because of it.

I plan to submit *At Home Among Strangers* to various film festivals including LGBTQ festivals and festivals that have LGBTQ sections. I also plan to pitch it to media platforms that host short documentaries, including *The New York Times Op-Docs* or [dafilms.com](http://dafilms.com).

I would love this film to be seen by Russian audiences, and hope that it might challenge preconceived notions about gay people and their immigration by showing the actual complexity of forced immigration. This is a very relevant topic not only for LGBTQ Russians. I am sure this film will be of interest to the Russian-speaking LGBTQ community as well. They will be able to see the cost of asylum and understand the risks and the outcomes better. It will be hard to find a festival or a platform to show this film in Russia considering even more strict censorship there, but maybe I would be able to find a platform that targets Russian-speaking audiences and is located in a different country or use geoblocked distribution on Vimeo.

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