



Introduction

I arrived in the Kamchatka Peninsula on September 4th, 2010 with a plan to make a feature length documentary about the native relationship to volcanoes based on my earlier short, SONGS FROM THE TUNDRA. As a crew of one - camera, sound, and editing - in one of the most remote places in the world, I became intimately invested in the lives of my subjects, and my project evolved into a much more personal film. While my initial inquiry with the Mortimer Hays Brandeis Fellowship was anthropological, after surviving a Siberian winter, lecturing about media nationalism at Kamchatka State University, and making so many friends and relationships, my artistic focus shifted to a more universal question: Why do people leave home? I am extremely grateful to the Mortimer Hays Brandeis family for this incredible opportunity and journey.



Project



Opportunity compels us to leave home, but what do we leave behind? Young people seeking jobs and industry want *progress* as opposed to the *stasis* of home. But *stasis* is family, tradition, and, often, a pristine environment untouched by development. What factors play into the decision to leave stasis behind? The young people of the Kamchatka Peninsula offer a uniquely extreme perspective on this question. On one hand, the industrial development of the peninsula is terrible; 33% of residents live in decrepit housing, the population has dropped by

a third in the last decade, and the unemployment rate is one of the highest in Russia. On the other hand, Kamchatka is one of the world's most *livable* places; it has the highest concentration of free-spawning salmon and brown bears, houses the world's largest biosphere, and contains two UNESCO world heritage sites in its volcanoes and hot springs. People vote with their feet — the population of Kamchatka has dropped more than any other Russian region since the fall of the Soviet Union.

My documentary project explored the irony of leaving the world's most beautiful place. Is Kamchatka's incredible environment a factor in the decision to leave? To find out, I pursued the question on three avenues: interviews, traditional documentary footage, and participatory photography. Over the course of the year I shot interviews with young Kamchadals on the precipice of the most important decision in their lives, focusing on the "why" are they leaving or staying. I combined these interviews with documentary



footage of their lives on the Peninsula, and in a few cases, I got footage of their new lives elsewhere in Siberia or Moscow to capture the “what” they are leaving. Finally, I gave some of my subjects cameras to photograph Kamchatka and stylistically treat the photos to get some sense of the “how” they view home. With all of the source material collected, I am currently in the process of collaging the material together into a single-channel film as well as a web installation.

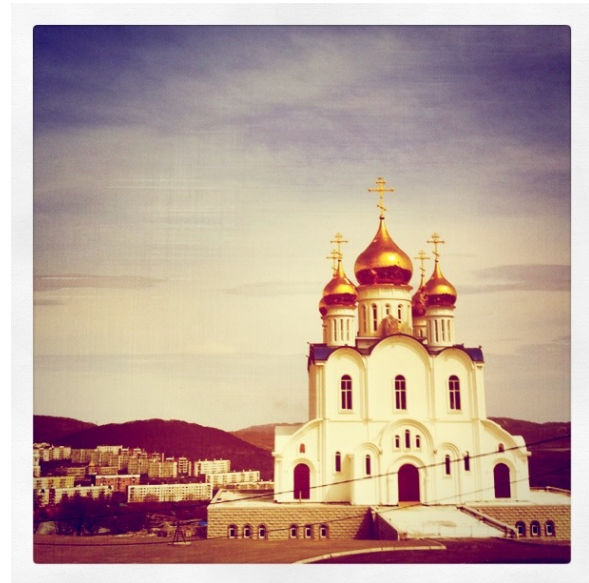
Because my family left Russia, I felt a deep personal connection with my subjects’ struggle to leave home. Although I began my investigations thinking economic and political factors would predominate this decision like it did for my parents, I was surprised to discover the environment plays a large role. Furthermore, I suspected that ethnic Russians - most of whom ended up on the Peninsula because of army orders - would feel less attachment than native Kamchadals. After documenting the experiences of both, I realized the human story of the peninsula is much more universal than I expected. Inspired by avant-garde films like Jean Rouch’s CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER, my goal is for the edited film to provoke and frustrate our expectations of what we expect from home.



Execution

The interviews formed the backbone of all of my artistic inquiry, and I shot them all year round. The first questions were always the same: *Do you plan to live in Kamchatka forever? Why do you want to stay or leave? What will you miss most because of the decision you make?* From there, I would usually focus on some kind of anecdote the subject has of Kamchatka that crystallizes the issue. For example, one girl wanted to leave Kamchatka and pursue a more glamorous lifestyle - she loves fashion - in the United States, Europe, or Japan. A good student, she spoke Japanese and English in addition to Russian. She told me a story

of how an American modeling agent contacted her on Facebook for photographs. Excited by the opportunity, she did not hesitate, and the ‘agent’ quickly asked for nude photos as well. She believed him, and he used the nude photos to extort her for more. While this sort of scam seems commonplace to us, the internet is a fairly new phenomenon in Kamchatka. The story of hope and intimidation is just one of many tribulations I recorded about leaving the peninsula.



I shot traditional documentary material to flesh out some of the most compelling interviews. Stylistically, this material echoes the fly-on-the-wall observation of verite cinema with long shots and a moving camera. Russia is a very difficult country to shoot in, but my reliance on a small consumer camera meant I could always claim to be an innocent tourist. One exciting shoot followed a Russian beatmaker from the Russian Far East who moved to Moscow to pursue a career in music. After facing skepticism from a Moscow public used to dismissing people from the regions, he linked up with other Siberian artists and now has a fairly successful career. The visual contrast between where he grew up and the night club atmosphere of Moscow is compelling. His music riffs on 8-bit culture and the beginning of digital sound, but his roots lay deep in Siberian nature. It is left to the viewer to make sense of this artistic paradox.

The photographic component of my project was the most challenging and also the most rewarding. Kamchatka is one of the most photographed places in the Russian Far East, but I

wanted to go beyond the National Geographic culture of nature photography and find a human dimension of an image of home. I sought to examine what my subjects would photograph and how they would photograph a natural beauty they see every day. The challenge was finding an image-making paradigm simple enough for novices to use but sophisticated enough to allow some rudimentary post-production (effects, color filters, etc...) so that the photographer could imprint her aesthetic subjectivity. My solution was an iPhone app called Instagram that takes photographs, applies filters, and publishes to the internet all on one device. One of my documentary subjects who opts to stay in Kamchatka because of the nature, embraced this sort of photography so enthusiastically that she would bring it on her volcano hikes. Surprisingly, she also photographed much of the rusting capital and injected beauty into it through post filters, suggesting a deeper initiative to make home more livable.



Outcome

The immediate outcome of my work is almost 100 hours of footage as well photographic and audio material on the subject of immigration and Kamchatka. Right now, I am organizing the footage around the individual stories of my subjects like mini portrait films with an eye to weave them together as my work progresses. I also hope that my work with students through Kamchatka State University has made them more comfortable with using media to express themselves, both on a technical and creative level. When I began the project, young Russians overwhelmingly saw the political and journalistic ramifications of collaborating with me. By the end of our collaboration, I believe they also experienced the emotional potential of media as well.

Ultimately, the outcome of my project depends on its distribution. In addition to working on a single-channel piece, I am experimenting with hypermedia “installations” published online as a collection of video and photographic material alongside a transcript of an interview with the subject. Currently, I have almost finished the first in this series about the Russian beatmaker and his journey from the Russian Far East to the Moscow beatmaking scene. With so much material, it is a daunting task to edit and distribute it which is why I hope to publish separate pieces on Kamchatka online. This creative experimentation has been an immensely rewarding process because I have never worked with such a rich collage of material before.

Personal Remarks

In September, I began my MFA as a directing fellow at the American Film Institute which I expect to complete in 2013. Recently rated by the Hollywood Reporter as the best film school in the world, the AFI includes graduates like Terrence Malick, David Lynch, and Darren Arronofsky - some of my favorite filmmakers - and I consider myself extremely privileged to continue my artistic education there. I am on a scholarship provided by the Paul and Daisy Soros Foundation as a New American Fellow. My applications to the AFI as well as the Soros drew heavily on my experience in Kamchatka and without the Mortimer Hays Brandeis Fellowship, I would not have the amazing opportunities to make films that I have today. A once in a lifetime experience, my time in Kamchatka is the lens from which I see my future work.