East European Film Bulletin

REVIEW

The Wall of Wolf Street

Arjun Talwar's *Letters from Wolf Street* (*Listy z Wilczej*, 2025)

VOL. 155 (MAY 2025) BY ZOE AIANO

What does it really mean to integrate in a foreign culture? Is integration a process that is ever truly completed? Who gets to decide – the incomer or the locals? After 12 years living in Warsaw but still not feeling fully at home, Indian documentary filmmaker Arjun Talwar takes to the street – specifically Wolf Street, the street he lives on – to get an answer to the question of whether he'll ever be accepted by his neighbors.

In a reversal of Agnès Varda's *Daguerréotypes*, in which the 'local' uses film as a medium for getting to know the immigrant community, Talwar's camera provides an opportunity for him to start conversations with a cross-section of the Polish working class: the woman selling meat behind the butcher's counter, the woman selling vegetables in the kiosk, and an anarchist cobbler. Most of these encounters fail to transform into a lasting relationship, at least as shown within the context of the film, but the primary exception to this is Piotr the postman. Seemingly equally fascinated by the street and its history, he becomes a guide and companion, his own good standing in the neighborhood also granting Talwar access to a wider group of interlocutors.

Piotr offers a sense of hope as someone capable of forming a bond of friendship and respect with the director, but inevitably there are undertones of racist hostility elsewhere, and Talwar even mentions having been beaten up by skinheads in the past. Vox pop reactions from passers-by parrot the usual rhetoric of couched skepticism towards foreigners – so long as they work and learn the language, they're acceptable. Even a fellow filmmaker offers up the damning assessment that immigrants will always live in a parallel world, implying they can never aspire to anything more.

The most gut-wrenching and overt exhibition of far-right ideology comes with the annual independence day parade, attended by a plethora of ultra-nationalist and ultra-religious groups. Despite being warned against it by Piotr

and having always taken pains to avoid it in the past, Talwar and his sound recordist Mo, originally from China, delve into the crowds and the smoke from the flares. While they are never subjected to any targeted aggression, watching them stand steadfast against the waves of black balaclavas and threatening banners is truly wince-inducing. In one particularly powerful moment, Talwar asks to hold a demonstrator's Polish flag. As he states in his voice-over, he has never been comfortable waving any flag, making this both an act of defiance in the face of a group unlikely to accept a person of color as a compatriot, but also a concession to the idea that assimilation means compromising your values at times.

In addition to the Polish characters, Talwar also takes stock of the experiences of several fellow immigrants. After he runs into the charismatic Mo, who was his former classmate at film school, while filming, she joins him as his sound recordist. She also shares his experience of finding the doors to the local film industry closed after graduation and faces a similar existential dilemma about whether to keep trying to pursue her dream or admit defeat. Indeed, the precarity of creative labor proves too much for her and she ends up dropping out before the film is finished to join the staff of a Chinese medical center. By all accounts, she seems happy with her new life, which offers stability and a way of bridging her natal and adopted cultures while also hopefully helping people to feel better.

The most classically assimilated protagonist is Feras, who came to Poland as a refugee from Syria and now has a Polish wife and child, and even celebrates getting his citizenship during the filming of *Wolf Street*. He has successfully built a life in his new home, yet a part of him still feels torn. He spends his evenings obsessively trying to recreate Damascus in digital form, in a clear demonstration that acquiring another culture does not at all mean overwriting the previous one.

Most poignant of the figures Talwar meets along the way is Oskar, a member of the Polish Roma community. As the narration notes, Oskar is the first Polish person the director encounters to ever react to meeting an Indian with great enthusiasm, and he even considers them as countrymen because of the Romas' Indian origins. They have an instant rapport and Talwar goes to visit Oskar's family in a town just outside the city, only to discover that they are subjected to constant racist abuse by their neighbors – the damning lesson is that even being Polish isn't enough to be accepted if you don't fit the dominant ethnic profile.

Even more depressingly, all of this wondering and wandering is done in the shadow of the ghost of Talwar's best friend who moved to Poland from India with him, and who struggled with depression and ended up committing suicide. This painful experience of grief increases the stakes of Talwar's mission to find his place and be accepted – he has to justify his decision to stay not only in

terms of his sunk costs of time and effort, but also the emotional weight that comes with a sense of responsibility to a lost loved one.

The film manages to walk a fine line between the playfulness of its format and the heaviness of the topic. It also successfully avoids the trap of an overly neat conclusion in which everything is resolved (or the opposite, in which the director abandons all hope), even if the carefully composed narration that structures the film seems a little too composed at times. In the end, the questions underpinning the film are perhaps unanswerable, but by making this film Talwar will hopefully trigger viewers in Poland (and elsewhere) to reflect on their relationship to those they live alongside.