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Human Documents on Screen and Stage: A Contrapuntal Reading of Post-Soviet Documentary

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HUMAN DOCUMENTS ON SCREEN AND STAGE:

A CONTRAPUNTAL READING OF POST-SOVIET DOCUMENTARY

Natalia Plagmann

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Abstract

The goal of *Human Documents on Screen and Stage: A Contrapuntal Reading of Post-Soviet Documentary* is to consider how two documentary media – cinema and theater – engage with historical, social, and political reality in Russia over two decades, from the end of the 1990s to the end of the 2010s. This dissertation argues that, during this period, a transition takes place from *ethics* as the dominant of documentary discourse to the *aesthetics* of the document in works of contemporary Russian documentary film and theater. To track this shift, I analyze formal aspects of post-Soviet documentary cinema and documentary theater, such as sound, space, and materiality, following the logic of counterpoint. Counterpoint implies the multiplicity and simultaneous coexistence of independent, separate, and sometimes conflicting entities. Drawing on Sergei Eisenstein's theory of audiovisual counterpoint in montage and on Edward Said's concept of contrapuntal reading as a critical method, I suggest a new approach to the aesthetics and politics of the documentary. I maintain that the logic of counterpoint is instrumental in understanding how documentary cinema and theater work with new technologies, materials, platforms, ideas, and realities in Russia during this period. This dissertation brings contemporary works of post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater and present-day academic discourse on media and performance into conversation with early Soviet theoretical debates on cinema and theater. I show that, while post-Soviet artists of film and theater often rediscover and reevaluate artistic and theoretical works of Soviet documentarians, this multifaceted interaction nevertheless leads them to work out new aesthetic regimes of post-Soviet documentary.

Chapter One explores sound in post-Soviet documentary films and theatrical productions to suggest that voice leading, rather than "voice giving," occupies the primary position both in

terms of the sonic organization of these documentary works and of the audience's perception of the documentary as representation of the real. Chapter Two brings together post-Soviet documentary film and theater to analyze the notion of documentary space. It shows how documentary cinema uses the frame and documentary theater utilizes the stage box both as limiting and structural devices. Chapter Three is focused on documentary materiality and addresses the affective power of the material environment on screen and on stage.

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Writing a dissertation can be an isolating and solitary endeavor, and in many ways it is. However, no one gets to the finish line without the support of many people, too many to name them all in the acknowledgement page or two. To the many people who helped and supported me during my years as a doctoral student and whose names are not listed in the pages that follow – please know that my gratitude to you exceeds the appropriate wordcount but is sincere and heartfelt, nonetheless.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents.

Portions of this dissertation were presented at multiple ASEEES and AATSEEL conventions between 2014 and 2022, at the *New Directions in Russian, Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema Studies* International Symposium at the University of Cambridge (2014), at the Summer Institute in Performance Studies at Northwestern University (2016), at the Mellon School of Theater and Performance Research at Harvard University (2018), at the *Emerging Voices in REEES* Colloquium at Yale University (2021). An early shorter version of Part 2 Chapter One was published in Russian as "'Gde ia?' Vospominaniia detstva v kontekste kinopovestvovaniia v fil'me Liubovi Arkus 'Anton tut riadom' (2012)" ("'Where am I?' Childhood Memories in the Context of the Cinematic Narrative in Liubov' Arkus's Documentary Film 'Anton's Right Here' (2012)"), *АvtobiografiЯ* (2012).

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Notes on Transliteration and Translation

Russian names are transliterated according to the Library of Congress convention (without ligatures). Exceptions are made for proper names that are commonly represented differently in English, e.g., Dmitrii Glukhovsky for Dmitrii Glukhovskii, Vitalii Mansky for Vitalii Manskii, Vsevolod Meyerhold for Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, or toponyms, such as Grozny for Groznyi.

In the main body of the text, citations are translated and transliterated when transliteration is significant for understanding of the original wording in Russian; titles of films and theatrical productions are transliterated in parentheses. Cyrillic is kept in footnotes.

Translation into English are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

Upon the closing of the international documentary film festival ArtDocFest Riga in May 2023, three festival jury members – Ingeborga Dapkunaite (a Lithuanian actress), Dmitrii Glukhovsky (a Russian writer), and Uldis Tirons (a Latvian philosopher and journalist) – recorded their 90-minute conversation prompted by one question: What kind of cinema do we need today?[1] The urgency of this question was prompted by the ongoing war in Ukraine, which pushed filmmakers and their audiences to reevaluate the role of cinema, and culture in general, in the face of catastrophe. During their discussion, Tirons noted that "in their work, the documentary filmmaker must create an apparatus for understanding (*apparat dlia ponimaniia*)" and that and using this apparatus as an instrument for making sense of reality makes it possible to perceive incomprehensible realities, including the traumatic realities of war. Without pretending that depictions can capture the totality of the real or measure up to it, we can recognize that documentary cinema functions as an important vehicle of meaning by placing its conceptual and aesthetic frames onto the world, thus creating a sense of finitude, logic, and purpose. By emotionally engaging the spectator, documentary cinema connects disparate individual human narratives into larger historical, social, and political context, which, as Dapkunaite emphasizes referring to her experience as a theater actress, "has always been there, and art cannot exist detached from it (*v otryve ot nego*)." Answering the initial question, the speakers express the idea that documentary cinema occupies a privileged position compared to

[1]"Kakoe Kino Nam Nuzhno Segodnia? Otvet Glukhovskogo, Dapkunaite i Tironsa. Real'noe Kino," YouTube.com, Nastoiashchee Vremia. Dok, May 8, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSEtdb938Zw. Unless otherwise noted, all URLs cited in this dissertation were last accessed November 10, 2023.

non-documentary media, particularly in a time of war, due to its ability to stand in proximity and bear witness to real events.

This dissertation brings together two documentary media – cinema and theater – to explore how these documentary forms engage with historical, social, and political reality in Russia over two decades, from the end of the 1990s to the end of the 2010s. I argue that, during this period, a transition takes place from *ethics* as the dominant of documentary discourse to the *aesthetics* of the document in works of contemporary Russian documentary film and theater. In search of new documentary aesthetics, each medium faces and struggles to overcome its own limitations at the level of sonic and spatial organization and vis-à-vis its representation of, and engagement with, material reality. Although contemporary documentary theater and cinema respond to different sets of challenges, these two media adopt new technologies and redefine their own media specificity to stay relevant and appeal to their audiences. Documentary theater and cinema maintain their status of highly politically and socially engaged media in Russia in a significant way due to their ability to generate new aesthetic regimes that make their ethical, ideological, and political subject matter comprehensible.

This dissertation analyzes formal aspects of post-Soviet documentary cinema and documentary theater, such as sound, space, and materiality, following the logic of counterpoint. Counterpoint implies the multiplicity and simultaneous coexistence of independent, separate, and sometimes conflicting entities. It is characterized by horizontal structures and by dramatism whose tension finds resolution not in unity, but in a harmonious balance of differences. I maintain that the logic of counterpoint is instrumental in understanding how documentary cinema and theater work with new technologies, materials, platforms, ideas, and realities in Russia in this period. The logic of counterpoint is the logic of plurality; in the pages that follow, I

study the plurality of documentary image, sound, space, and matter in post-Soviet cinema and theater.

What Does "Post-Soviet Documentary" Mean?

In the past three decades, much has been written on the meaning of "post-Soviet" in the field of Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies.[2] Broadly, the term describes the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Socialist Bloc. However, as the authors of the edited volume *The Post-Soviet Russian Media* note, "When periods, or phenomena, are designated with a title including the prefix 'post-' (postmodern, post-communist, post-industrial) the intention is usually to signal that, although the period (or phenomenon) in question supersedes something now defunct, it has yet fully to transcend its predecessor, and persists in bearing its trace."[3] In other words, referring to the past three decades of Russian history as "post-Soviet" not only temporally marks this chronological frame, but also implies enduring ideological and political tensions, lingering issues of collective memory, and the lasting cultural heritage of the Soviet period. Although the documentary works of film and theater analyzed in this dissertation were created at least nine years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Soviet past is omnipresent in them as a theme, a reference point, a problem, and a context.

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[2] Most recently, on approaching post-Soviet as post-colonial via analysis of activist art, see: Tlostanova, Madina, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire*, On Decoloniality (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); on comparative analysis of post-socialist nostalgic practices, see: *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire's Legacies*, ed. by Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos, and Ksenia Robbe (Routledge, 2020).

[3] Beumers, Birgit, Hutchings, Stephen C., and Rulyova, Natalia, eds., *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals*, 1st ed, Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 1.

I also use the term "post-Soviet" to describe the geographical scope of the material and to avoid cumbersome descriptors of the complex identities of the film and theater directors I discuss based on their ethnicity, nationality, and/or citizenship. In a way, the fact that many of them indeed have such complex identities (Liubov' Arkus was born in L'viv, Ukraine, to a Russian-Jewish family and lives in Saint Petersburg, Russia; Talgat Batalov was born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to a Tatar family and lives in Moscow, Russia; Sergei Loznitsa was born in Baranovichi, Belarus, grew up in Kyiv, Ukraine, studied in Moscow, Russia, and lives in Berlin, Germany, to give but a few examples) bears the trace of this hybrid and multifaceted Soviet legacy. What unites these different contemporary filmmakers and theater makers is that they predominantly produced the works I selected for my analysis at Russian film studios and theaters between 1999 and 2017, primarily, but certainly not exclusively, for Russian-speaking audiences.

My choice of specific documentary films and theater productions for this project is determined by the material rather than a specific date-range within the post-Soviet period. Documentary films were certainly produced in Russia after 1991 and before 1999, but the first post-Perestroika years are marked by Russian cinema's efforts to define its new distinct documentary language. The Russian film critic Konstantin Shavlovskii states that post-Soviet cinema in Russia begins in the mid-1990s, not earlier, explaining, "Liberation from taboos, directly – to be able to film what was unimaginable to film before, as well as indirectly – to stop thinking according to a system of prohibitions and looking at everything within a film frame

from a Soviet censor's view point, – extended the 'Soviet' cinema's inertia (with a few exceptions) and froze reflection."[4]

I open my analysis with Vitalii Mansky's documentary film *Private Chronicles. Monologue* (*Chastnye khroniki. Monolog*), released in 1999. This documentary is a collective portrait of the last Soviet generation, to which Mansky himself belongs, reconstructed out of film chronicle fragments assembled from private collections. With its retrospective optics, the documentary is oriented thematically towards the recent Soviet past while simultaneously attempting to mark a departure from it visually and narratively. I use my analysis of this documentary as an entry point into a *caché* of post-Soviet documentary cinema preoccupied with some of the issues Mansky probes in his film: the tension between individual and collective, the complexity of human experience and its representation in film, the ambiguity of cinematic image, etc.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and before the early 2000s, there were no theater projects in Russia focused specifically on documentary play productions. Documentary theater as a distinct form of dramatic performance defines itself in opposition to theatrical practices based on fiction. "Documentary theater" as a term used in theater and performance studies remains difficult to contain within any one single definition. For the purposes of this dissertation, I define documentary theater as a form of postdramatic theater that is based on the document (factual material evidence of a real event) and frames its narrative around this document.[5] Russian theater

[4] "Освобождение от запретов, как прямое — снять то, что раньше было непредставимо, так и косвенное — перестать мыслить в системе запретов и смотреть с точки зрения советского цензора на все, что попадает в кадр, — длило инерцию «советского» в кино (за редкими исключениями), заморозив рефлексию." Shavlovskii, Konstantin, "Bratskaia Kolybel' – Dva Fil'ma Ob Odnom Pokolenii," *Seans* 75 (July 2021), 292.

[5] The term "postdramatic theater" is introduced by the scholar of theater and performance Hans-Thies Lehmann in his book *Postdramatic Theater*, in which he theorizes new forms of post-

has a long history of incorporating documentary elements into stage productions, from factographic and documentary experiments in Soviet theater of the 1920s by Sergei Tretiakov to the Blue Blouse agitational collective. Later, in Russian drama of the 1960s-1970s, "documentalism" transformed into politically engaged plays such as *Dramas of the Revolution* by Mikhail Shatrov. With the opening of Teatr.Doc in Moscow in 2002, documentary theater in Russia began a new chapter inaugurated by an independent theatrical company dedicated solely to the production of documentary plays. Many of Teatr.Doc's first experimental productions have been analyzed in recent scholarship on post-Soviet theater: Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky explore documentary drama through post-colonial, anthropological, and political analysis in *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama*, and Molly Flynn offers an in-depth study of documentary theater's relationship to justice, history, and memory in *Witness Onstage: Documentary Theater in Twenty-First Century Russia*.[6] The focus of my dissertation is a younger cohort of documentary theater directors, including Ekaterina Bondarenko, Anastasia Patlai, Mikhail Patlasov, and Andrei Stadnikov.

The new generation of theater-documentarians finds the artistic language and aesthetic codes of the New Drama movement, to which most of Teatr.Doc's docudrama belongs, not quite fitting for the new social, cultural, historical, and political realities of the 2010s. The radical playwrights and theater directors of the first post-Soviet wave who shaped the New Drama pushed against mainstream Russian performance culture at the time. New Drama strove to

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1960s postmodern performance with a specific focus on the political in theater. For more on postdramatic theater, see: Lehmann, Hans-Thies, *Postdramatic Theater* (Routledge: New York, London, 2006).

[6] Beumers, Birgit, Lipovetsky, Mark, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Bristol, UK; Chicago, USA: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2009); Flynn, Molly, *Witness Onstage: Documentary Theatre in Twenty-First Century Russia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

revitalize lethargic theatrical practices by introducing everyday language and by representing marginalized lived experience on stage. However, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, as the latest documentary productions reflect, reality outside of theater has become significantly intertwined with digital media technologies. Thus, a new generation of Russian theater-makers interested in documentary forms has built on the tradition of New Drama by going beyond straightforward representation of documents on stage. To quote the young Russian theater critic, blogger, and performer Viktor Vilisov, "Theater became contemporary without us noticing it."[7] My documentary theater case studies are from the 2010s, when I had an opportunity to see productions in person at theaters and conduct interviews with theater makers in Russia.

Retrospectively, it is possible to describe the chronological scope of my dissertation as the post-Soviet inter-war period – between the beginning of the Second Chechen War in 1999 and the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian War in 2022. This relatively peaceful time, punctured by terrorist attacks, military invasions of the Russian army into neighboring countries, mass protests, and a growing oppressive persecution of the political opposition in Russia, brought development of new forms of documentary theater- and film-making and increased independence of film studios and theatrical companies from state financing made possible by crowdfunding platforms and international cooperation. This period can also be viewed as the time when documentarians in theater and film gradually moved away from the Perestroika-era engendered and lingering pathos of document-based truth telling – a belief that newly discovered and publicized documents can grant access to the truth and that spectators will be moved by this

[7] Vilisov, Viktor, *Nas vsekh toshnit: Kak teatr stal sovremennym, a my etogo ne zametili* (Moskva: AST, 2019).

realization to reform reality in the present. Marina Goldovskaia's documentary cinema films, such as *Solovki Power* (*Vlast' Solovetskaia*, 1988), form a striking testament to this direction in Russian filmmaking, and its influence can be seen in documentary works by Liubov' Arkus, Sergei Dvortsevoi, and Aleksandr Rastorguev. In this period, a shift is also seen in documentary theater from the previous mode of investment into the potential of the document-based stage narrative to drive political and social change by the very fact of its presentation to the audience to a new, more nuanced and complex understanding of documentary aesthetics – a more serious and at the same time more playful relationship to the construction of reality on and off stage. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of two documentary theater champions, Elena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov, whose work at Teatr.Doc was groundbreaking for innovation of Russian theater in the post-Soviet period. However, since the early 2000s, a whole generation of their disciples and interlocutors have significantly expanded the field of documentary drama in their creative work on stage.

Undergoing a transition from ethics to aesthetics as the dominant in documentary production over the twenty-year period analyzed in the pages below, post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater remain highly politically and socially engaged media. Moreover, while keeping the "Soviet" (*sovetskoe*) as a point of reference and reflection, many post-Soviet documentary films and theatrical productions are preoccupied with a possibility of political and social change and envision a kind of futurity that potentially could be worthy of its own definition, not preceded by the prefix 'post-'. Based on these diverse documentary practices in theater and film, I use "post-Soviet documentary" as an umbrella term that, while specific enough, encompasses generational, regional, and temporal spans.

Reading Post-Soviet Documentary Contrapuntally

Considering two distinct documentary media, theater and cinema, as well as their subgenres (documentary opera, performance-lecture, found-footage documentary, etc.) together contrapuntally, this dissertation aims to engage with the interplay of different regimes of visual representation as well as different voices, identities, positions, and narratives in the broader historical and socio-political context of contemporary Russia. This method is loosely based on Edward Said's postcolonial literary criticism, known as "contrapuntal reading," that he most thoroughly developed in his work *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).[8] Said borrows the musicological term "counterpoint" to analyze canonical Western European literary texts, where important, yet marginalized voices, themes, and plot lines are crucial for understanding the literary work but remain at the periphery of narrative. Specifically, Said draws connections between present, yet hidden, colonial experiences in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park,* and the hegemonic imperialist perspective of the narrative. To read contrapuntally, he writes, "we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others."[9] By building on Said's contrapuntal analysis, I intend not to approach post-Soviet documentary from a postcolonial angle, but rather to instrumentalize Said's theoretical and critical apparatus for parsing out documentary film and theater in relation to the post-Soviet experiences they reflect, record, analyze, and question. Said's insistence on

[8] Said, Edward W., *Culture and Imperialism*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
[9] Ibid., 32.

counterpoint as a tool for understanding multiple, hybrid, coexisting, interacting, and conflicting experiences as they are mediated by culture is at the core of my project.

Equally important for my approach to post-Soviet documentary is Said's notion of intellectual and ethical reciprocity on behalf of the interpreter (a reader, a listener, a spectator) implied in "contrapuntal reading." Connected to the situatedness of a work of culture in the real world with its contradictions, political and ideological forces, and cultural prejudices, Said places the freedom and responsibility onto the interpreter to destabilize monolithic narratives and challenge misconceptions. He states, "In juxtaposing experiences with each other, in letting them play off each other, it is my interpretative political aim (in the broadest sense) to make concurrent those views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to each other and that attempt to distance or suppress other views and experiences."[10] Thus, reading post-Soviet documentary contrapuntally implies a degree of spectator empowerment – not directly through participatory practices in theater, for example, but indirectly through the impelling force of documentary that invites the audience to reflect on the heterogeneity of reality and the ambiguity of its representation in cinema and theater. Moreover, this interpretative work on behalf of the spectator is understood as political, precisely because it involves engaging with real sociohistorical and political conditions via an aesthetic experience and questioning of the *status quo*.

Scholars in the field of Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies have referred to Said's critical theory and literary criticism most prominently in the context of postcolonial studies. For instance, in their discussions of Russian 19th-century literary portrayal of the empire and its periphery, Monika Greenleaf in *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion: Fragment, Elegy,*

[10] Ibid., 33.

Orient, Irony and Katya Hokanson in *Writing at Russia's Borders* apply Said's critical framework developed in *Orientalism* (1978).[11] Most recently, Leah Feldman convincingly demonstrates how Said's concept of Orientalism can be effectively used in "exposing the imbrications of imperial and anti-imperial discourses that animate literary representations across the empire and their role in the formation of Russian and Soviet literary modernity" in her book *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus*.[12] Feldman further places Said's contrapuntal reading in dialogue with Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory – namely, his discussion of heteroglossia in Russian literary (novelistic) discourse – to highlight the relationship between the real world and literature in the works of these two thinkers.[13]

My dissertation contributes to the productive thread of comparative analysis described above by expanding Said's contrapuntal reading from the postcolonial literary context onto post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater analysis. If it is logical in the context of imperial and anti-imperial narrative analysis, as Feldman shows, to juxtapose Said's postcolonial critique with Bakhtin's writing on discourse and its authoritative function in language, then the introduction of "counterpoint" in the context of post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater begs a comparison with Bakhtin's concept of "polyphony." In music theory, the two terms are often used interchangeably to describe musical composition that consists of several distinct tones, voices, or melodic lines; however, in literary criticism, "polyphony" and "counterpoint" have quite distinct operational meanings and analytical applications. Both Said and Bakhtin appeal to the

[11] Greenleaf, Monika, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion: Fragment, Elegy, Orient, Irony* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996); Hokanson, Katya, *Writing at Russia's Border* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Said, Edward W., *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
[12] Feldman, Leah, *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 26.
[13] For more on Said's Orientalism and Bakhtin's literary discourse theory, see: Feldman, 27-33.

musicological terms to describe the complexity of literary texts and the intersection of ideas, subjectivities, identities, and sociohistorical positions. Bakhtin famously uses the term "polyphonic" to define Dostoevsky's novels in his essay *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929): "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels."[14] For Bakhtin, "polyphony" is a category imbued with ethical ambiguity: conflicting ideas expressed by different characters in Dostoevsky's works do not find a resolution in a singular authorial voice. Instead, the polyphonic narrative accommodates multiple contradicting positions, independent consciousnesses "with equal rights and each with its own world, [which] combine but are not merged in the unity of the event (*sobytie*)."[15] Bakhtin's "polyphony" describes the structure of Dostoevsky's literary texts; as such, when understood, first and foremost, as a category of narrative analysis, it seemingly does not gesture beyond literary discourse. In this narrow sense, Bakhtin's theory of polyphony is not concerned with the world within which literary texts are situated, with its historical, socioeconomic, ideological, and political realities. However, Bakhtin scholars Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson insist on reading Bakhtin's polyphony politically by inscribing his literary theory within the specific circumstances of Bakhtin's persecution and silencing at the hands of the Stalinist regime. They state that "greater explicitness would hardly been possible either in 1929 or in 1963" when Bakhtin's work on Dostoyevsky's polyphonic novel was published.[16]

[14] Bakhtin, Mikhail, transl. Caryl Emerson, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Theory and History of Literature, v. 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 268.

For Said, "counterpoint" is instrumentalized as a mode of reading, critical analysis, and political intervention. In Said's words, "By looking at the different experiences contrapuntally, as making up a set of what I call intertwined and overlapping histories, I shall try to formulate an alternative both to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility."[17] Said's "contrapuntal reading" as a method of literary criticism is profoundly political and ideological. For him, the goal of narrative analysis is not only to discover as-yet-un-analyzed formal textual elements of canonical literary works and bring them into dialogue with established ideas about these texts. The purpose of doing intellectual scholarly work based on the principle of counterpoint, according to Said, is to use this discovery to highlight connections between works of literature and complex multiple histories in which they are situated and not to see culture "antiseptically quarantined from its worldly affiliation."[18]

Said applies contrapuntal reading as a method of postcolonial critical analysis to a *caché* of literary texts and thus discovers entire networks of textual phenomena working against the dominant imperial discourse in Western European canonical narratives. Developed by Said for his postcolonial project, this method can also function as a hermeneutical tool for understanding a diverse range of materials and objects. Specifically, in my dissertation, I use contrapuntal reading to analyze post-Soviet documentary works of cinema and theater. In my analysis, I deploy several key features of contrapuntal reading that stem from Said's method: a focus on formal elements of the text (in this case, of the film or the play) that are overlooked in analysis and/or overshadowed by "more significant" elements; an analysis of contradiction, opposition, or parallel that the text embodies at the level of general composition and individual narrative

[17] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 18.
[18] Ibid., xiv

elements; a connection between narrative (here, cinematic and theatrical) forms and the sociohistorical and political realities in which these works are situated. Finally, as the scholar of comparative literature and intermediality Kathryn Lachman notes, "In Said's view, a contrapuntal approach does not seek an overarching resolution, teleology, or synthesis, but instead focuses on the dynamic interplay of contradictions."[19] Correspondingly, my dissertation approaches post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater with a critical strategy that, in my view, accounts for the plurality and conflict of narrative and visual forms, ideas and positions, and materials and technologies characteristic for this historical period and these documentary media. Rather than imposing a hierarchical structure onto the material which I explore in the pages that follow, I attempt to address complex horizontal systems of exchange, dialogue, and cross-contamination.

Documentary Cinema and Theater as Objects of Study

This dissertation relies on an interdisciplinary scholarly toolkit necessary to engage analytically with the chosen object of study – post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater. My research is indebted to recent international scholarship dedicated to documentary cinema, theater, performance, and media studies for broader critical approaches to the subject, informed by cross-cultural and transnational discussions. Contemporary Russian documentary cinema and theater are not isolated from wide international networks of cultural exchange; Russian filmmakers and theater makers participate in international festivals and co-productions and engage in themes that concern theater and film makers globally, such as human rights, political struggle, reconciliation with traumatic past, notions of identity, etc. Most scholarly reflections on these two documentary

[19] Lachman, Kathryn, *Borrowed Forms: The Music and Ethics of Transnational Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 62.

forms – theater and cinema – are media-specific, and it is my intention to further facilitate a more rigorous crossdisciplinary analysis of these historically closely related media.

Methodologically, this kind of crossdisciplinary research has been probed by two collections of essays that interrogated the notion of documentality across different media. The concept of "documentality" (*dokumentnost'*) within the context of Russian 20th century culture is tested by the edited volume *Status dokumenta: Okonchatel'naia bumazhka ili otchuzhdennoe svidetel'stvo* (2013).[20] Various fields of inquiry come together in this collection of essays to map out the cultural assumptions and communicative effects of the document and its role and status in social structures and artistic production. My research draws on this dialogue between disciplines by exploring how and why different cultural artifacts are marked and perceived as documentary based on existing protocols of interpretation and registration of reality and regimes of selection.

Another volume of critical essays, *Documentary Across Disciplines* (2016), which brought together analyses of film, photography, literature, anthropology, and cultural theory, rehearses in its composition and structure the notions of montage, counterpoint, reliance on narrative, overdependence on material evidence, and hybridization and mutual contamination of media examined by documentary practitioners and theorists from various fields.[21] This volume casts a very wide net in search for multiple entry points and moments of dialogue between different ways of thinking about documentary *per se*. My dissertation is both inspired by the flexibility of analytical approaches demonstrated in *Documentary Across Disciplines* and, by contrast, operates within a specific historical framework and focuses on cinema and theater. By

[20] *Status dokumenta: Okonchatel'naia bumazhka ili otchuzhdennoe svidetel'stvo?* ed. Irina Kaspe (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2013).
[21] *Documentary Across Disciplines*, ed. by Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016).

combining interdisciplinary approach with a focus on the specific sociohistorical period and documentary media, my dissertation contributes to a growing body of scholarship on documentary and inscribes post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater into this crosscultural and interdisciplinary academic field of inquiry.

Much of my analysis brings contemporary works of post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater into conversation with present-day academic discourse and early Soviet theoretical debates on cinema and theater. This triangulation of ideas allows me to achieve several goals. First, by engaging with Soviet film and theater criticism of the 1920s, I highlight the relationship between post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater and the lasting legacy of experimental documentary practice and its critical reception in the early Soviet period. This is not to say, however, that this relationship is linear and of uncomplicated heritage. My dissertation shows that post-Soviet filmmakers and theater makers often rediscover and reevaluate the artistic and theoretical works of Soviet documentarians, artists, and thinkers, working out new aesthetic regimes of post-Soviet documentary in part through this multifaceted interaction work out.

Second, I track the development of ideas formulated by Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Viktor Sklovsky, Dziga Vertov, and others in contemporary theoretical thought on cinema, theater, performance, and media authored by scholars from a range of fields and countries. For example, the French film critic André Bazin engages with Eisenstein's and Kuleshov's texts on cinema in his 1950s essay collection *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*.[22] The writing of the American film theorist and historian David Bordwell from the 1990s also instrumentalizes Bazin's critique of Eisenstein and Kuleshov in his writing on film

[22] Bazin, André, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA: U of California Press, 1967).

style.[23] While my analysis is focused on post-Soviet documentary cinema, I consider these multiple iterations of theory to show how the concepts evolved, stayed relevant for film studies, and adapted to ever-changing cinematic contexts, technologies, and realities.

Finally, cultural production in contemporary Russia takes place in the context of the proliferation of digital technologies that challenge notions of materiality, media specificity, and the singularity and authenticity of the document. Institutionalized methods of recording and curating documents co-exist with fragmented and individualized archives. Processes of production and reception of documentary works resonate with, and respond to, the fast-changing sociopolitical and cultural landscape informed by digital media. In order to analyze the network of relations between post-Soviet documentary cinema, theater, and digital technology, my research draws on media theories interrogating intermediality.[24] Aage Hansen-Löve's seminal volume, which offers a historical analysis of intermedial relations between fine arts and literature in Russian culture of the early 20th century, was the dominant work until recently in the field of Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies.[25] In 2020, the film scholar Ágnes Pethő made an important intervention into the discussion of cinema and intermediality in the context of Russia and Eastern Europe with the edited volume *Caught In-between: Intermediality in Contemporary Eastern European and Russian Cinema*, which highlights the medium's relations with the other

[23] Bazin, André, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA: U of California Press, 1967).
[24] Chapple, Freda, Kattenbelt, Chiel, and International Federation for Theatre Research, eds., *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, 3. ed, Themes in Theatre 2 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); Nibbelink, Liesbeth Groot, and Merx, Sigrid, "Presence and Perception: Analyzing Intermediality in Performance," in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, ed. Sarah Bay-Cheng [and others] (Amsterdam: Amsterdam U Press, 2010).
[25] Hansen-Löve, Aage, *Intermedial'nost' v russkoj kul'ture: ot simvolizma k avangardu* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo RGGU, 2016).

visual arts.[26] My dissertation contributes to this ongoing exploration of intermediality in our field by expanding the scope of analysis to include post-Soviet documentary media and by showing how theater and performance can be studied from the intermedial angle, alongside cinema and other arts.

Specifically, in the context of post-Soviet documentary theater, Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky's volume *Performing Violence* (2009) has spearheaded a steady growth of scholarly interest in Russian contemporary documentary drama.[27] Molly Flynn's monograph *Witness Onstage* (2020), also referenced above, situates Russian documentary theater of the 2010s in the broader context of international trends in documentary theater and is focused, as the title suggests, on "evidentiary status of documents, the sincerity of testimony, and the performance of justice, as well as the country's fraught relationship to its Soviet past."[28] Flynn's volume provides in-depth analysis of Russian documentary theater's role in post-Soviet public discussions of Soviet traumatic history and its aftermath and also offers insight into the theater's engagement with contemporary politics.

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[26] Ágnes Pethő, ed., *Caught In-between: Intermediality in Contemporary Eastern European and Russian Cinema*, Edinburgh Studies in Film and Intermediality (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

[27] On the subject of Russian documentary theater in the context of New Drama, besides *Performing Violence*, Beumers and Lipovetsky published the article "Reality Performance: Documentary Trends in Post-Soviet Russian Theater," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 18, no. 3 (August 1, 2008): 293–306, https://doi.org/10.1080/10486800802123583; and edited a special issue of *Russian Review*: *The Desire for the Real: Documentary Trends in Contemporary Russian Culture,* 69/4 (2010).

[28] Flynn, *Witness Onstage*, 2. Flynn also published two articles exploring Russian documentary drama: Flynn, Molly, "The Trial That Never Was: Russian Documentary Theatre and the Pursuit of Justice," *New Theatre Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (November 2014): 307–17, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X14000657; Flynn, Molly, "Show Us Your Papers: Performing Post-Soviet National Identity in Talgat Batalov's *Uzbek*," *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 16–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1065636.

In addition to book-length publications, two chapters on documentary drama included in an edited volume on post-Soviet theater are worth being mentioned: Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu's and Lucie Kempf's contributions to *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (2020).[29] These authors describe genealogies of post-Soviet documentary theater and explore its aesthetics and politics in the sociocultural context of the 2010s.[30] Envisioned in dialogue with these scholarly explorations, my dissertation chooses a different approach, focusing on formal aspects of post-Soviet documentary theater (sound, space, and materiality) contrapuntally with documentary cinema of the same period. This approach enables me to track the development of documentary aesthetics and through this analysis to make claims about the political, social, and cultural relevance of documentary theater in post-Soviet Russia. In other words, my research foregrounds deploying acoustically, visually, materially, and intermedially oriented research tools in lieu of a primary focus on the narrative (what is *said*) and the political and socio-ideological *thematic* of performance (human rights activism, political protest, social commentary, etc.).

[29] Kempf, Lucie, "Giving Testimony in the Face of an Authoritarian Regime The Evolution of Documentary Forms at Teatr.Doc, the KnAM Theatre and the Belarus Free Theatre," in *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, ed. Curtis, Julie (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 54–65; Autant-Mathieu, Marie-Christine, "The Story of Russian-Language Drama since 2000: PostDoc, the Postdramatic and Teatr Post," in *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 36–53.

[30] For Russian-language contributions to post-Soviet documentary theater analysis, see: Davydova, Marina, "Teatr.Doc: Novyi Teatral'nyi Zavet," in *Kul'tura Zero: Ocherki Russkoi Zhizni i Evropeiskoi Stseny* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018), 93–100; Iakubova, Nataliia, "V Pogone Za Real'nost'iu: Dokumental'nost' Na Segodniashnei Stsene," in *Teatr Epokhi Peremen v Pol'she, Vengrii i Rossii* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014), 132–62; Ruddnev, Pavel, "Etika Dokumental'nogo Teatra: 'Publitsistika – Tozhe Iskusstvo,'" in *Drama Pamiati: Oherki Istorii Rossiiskoi Dramaturgii 1950-2010-e* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018), 473–88.

Whereas contemporary Russian documentary theater has enjoyed consistently growing academic attention in recent years, post-Soviet documentary cinema is yet to receive the scholarly treatment it deserves. It is notable that post-Soviet documentary films are not mentioned in recently published English-language academic surveys of Russian cinema, even in publications specifically focusing on present-day Russian cinema, such as *The Contemporary Russian Cinema Reader: 2005-2016* (2019) and *Cinemasaurus: Russian Film in Contemporary Context* (2020).[31] Meanwhile, documentary films by post-Soviet directors have been consistently awarded prizes at prestigious international film festivals and received recognition of scholars, critics, and audiences worldwide. Two documentary directors whose films are analyzed in the pages that follow, Vitalii Mansky and Marina Razbezhkina, were invited to join the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences in 2020.[32] Celebrated abroad and culturally, socially, and politically significant in Russia, post-Soviet documentary cinema continues the legacy of Soviet documentary filmmakers like Esfir' Shub, Dziga Vertov, Hertz Frank, Artavazd Peleshian, Mikhail Romm, among others, and it is my intention to facilitate more in-depth discussion of it among scholars of cinema and Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies in the U.S.

An example of such scholarship can be found in the volume *Arctic Cinemas and the Documentary Ethos* (2019), namely, Oksana Sarkisova's essay "Moving Through the Century:

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[31] Salys, Rimgaila, ed., *The Contemporary Russian Cinema Reader, 2005-2016*, Film and Media Studies (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019); Condee, Nancy, Prokhorov, Alexander, and Prokhorova, Elena, eds., *Cinemasaurus: Russian Film in Contemporary Context*, Film and Media Studies (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020). Post-Soviet documentary cinema is not included in Beumers, Birgit, ed., *A Companion to Russian Cinema*, Wiley Blackwell Companions to National Cinemas (Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2016); Salys, Rimgaila, ed., *The Russian Cinema Reader*, Vol. II: The Thaw to the Present, Cultural Syllabus (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013).

[32] See the official announcement of the Academy: "Academy Invites 819 to Memebership | Oscars.Org | Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences," June 30, 2020, https://www.oscars.org/news/academy-invites-819-membership.

The Far North in Soviet and Contemporary Russian Nonfiction."[33] In her contribution to the volume, Sarkisova examines documentary films by Aleksei Vakhrushev, in which the director addresses the traumatic experiences of the indigenous people of Chukotka and portrays contemporary nomadic settlements in the Russian Far North. By situating Vakhrushev's work in the context of the Soviet tradition of Arctic documentary cinema, Sarkisova argues that contemporary Russian documentary depictions of the region are profoundly shaped by this visual and thematic continuity.[34]

The prolific film scholar and critic Zara Abdullaeva also published many articles and two volumes in Russian dedicated to post-Soviet documentary cinema, *Real'noe kino* (2003) and *Postdok: igrovoe/neigrovoe* (2011).[35] These book-length publications authored by Abdullaeva are collections of her critical essays and interviews with filmmakers and film scholars. Abdullaeva positions Russian post-Soviet documentary cinema within a broad framework of global cinema, both documentary and fiction. By looking through this kaleidoscopic critical lens, Abdullaeva parses out elements of documentary style, narrative strategies, and thematic foci characteristic of contemporary documentary filmmaking in Russia. Abdullaeva's essays, together with the collected works of film critics published in a special two-volume edition of journal

[33] Sarkisova, Oksana, "Moving Through the Century: The Far North in Soviet and Contemporary Russian Nonfiction," in *Arctic Cinemas and the Documentary Ethos* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, n.d.), 231-253.
[34] For more English-language scholarship on post-Soviet documentary cinema, see: Oushakine, Serguei Alex., "Totality Decomposed: Objectalizing Late Socialism in Post-Soviet Biochronicles," *The Russian Review* 69, no. 4 (September 16, 2010): 638–69, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9434.2010.00585.x; Shembel, Daria "When Women Call the Cuts: The Marina Razbezhkina School of Documentary Film," *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures of Central and Eastern Europe*, no. 7 (2018), https://doi.org/10.17892/app.2018.0007.115.
[35] Abdullaeva, Zara, *Real'noe Kino*, Artes et Media 1 (Moskva: Tri Kvadrata, 2003); Abdullaeva, Zara, *Postdok: Igrovoe/Neigrovoe*, Kinoteksty (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011).

Seans dedicated to documentary cinema, is the most comprehensive, albeit uneven in focus and scholarly approach, body of work on post-Soviet documentary cinema in Russian to date.[36]

This dissertation attempts to analyze the documentary works by contemporary post-Soviet filmmakers in a systematic way, by studying them together, contrapuntally, with documentary theatrical productions of the same period. Drawing on diverse film-theoretical perspectives from such scholars as Pooja Ranagan, who focuses on fraught documentary representations of disenfranchised subjects in global cinema, and Emma Widdis, who addresses the intersection of cinema, subjectivity, and the senses in Soviet film, my research elucidates formal elements of post-Soviet documentary aesthetics. Through this analysis, I show how post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater engage with historical, social, and political reality in Russia from the end of the 1990s to the end of the 2010s.

Chapter Breakdown

The logic of counterpoint also defines the organizational principle of this dissertation with a two-part structure of each chapter. Each chapter is focused on one formal element and a set of analytical questions associated with the function of this formal element both in documentary theater and in cinema.

In **Chapter One**, I analyze sound in post-Soviet documentary films and theatrical productions. This chapter is structured around the notion of sounding voice and multiple approaches to instrumentalizing voice on the documentary screen and on stage. In this chapter, I interrogate the impetus of post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater to "give the voice to the voiceless." By analyzing works of contemporary Russian documentary theater and cinema, I argue that voice leading – a melodic structure highlighting counterpoint in music and as a critical

[36] *Seans: Real'nosti nedostatochno*, 31 (2007); *Seans: Nedostatochno real'nosti*, 32 (2007).

concept – (as opposed to "voice giving") occupies an important position both in terms of sonic organization and composition of these documentary works and of the audience's perception of the documentary as representation of the real. **Part One** is an exploration of sound in documentary theater focused on two case studies: the autobiographical documentary prose-based production of the Okolo Doma Stanislavskogo Theater in Moscow, *Occupation Is a Nice Affair. Oh, Federico!* (*Okkupatsia – miloe delo. O, Federiko!*, dir. Yurii Pogrebnichko, 2011) and the documentary production of Teatr Truda theater workshop in Moscow, *Descendants of the Sun* (*Potomki solntsa*, dir. Andrei Stadnikov, 2017). In analyzing these productions, I use the notion of voice leading to show how documentary theater produces horizontal structures of sound and voice. In **Part Two**, I consider the use of sound in documentary cinema and examine Vitalii Mansky's documentary film, *Private Chronicles. Monologue* (*Chastnye khroniki. Monolog*, 1999), Sergei Loznitsa's documentaries *Maidan* (2014) and *The Event* (*Sobytie*, 2015), and conclude with a case study of Liubov' Arkus's film *Anton's Right Here* (*Anton tut riadom*, 2012). My work in this section builds on theories of cinematic sound by Sergei Eisenstein (audiovisual counterpoint), Michel Chion (acousmatic sound), and Pooja Rangan (audibility). Here, I demonstrate how these documentary films interweave different auditory sources – human voices, music, noises – to produce continuous horizontal documentary soundscapes, connected with the image of reality that these documentaries seek to create.

Chapter Two brings together post-Soviet documentary films and theatrical productions to explore the notion of documentary space. In this chapter, I focus on the two-dimensional cinematic space of the screen and the three-dimensional space of the theatrical stage. This chapter shows how documentary cinema uses the frame and documentary theater utilizes the stage box both as limiting and structural devices. In **Part One**, I analyze the documentary

performance-lecture of the Meyerhold Center in Moscow – *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (*Ostanovka zimnim vecherom u lesa*, dir. Ekaterina Bondarenko and Tatiana Gordeeva, 2017); the documentary production of the Aleksandrinskii Theater in Saint Petersburg – *The Noise* (*Shum*, dir. Mikhail Patlasov, 2014); and the documentary production of the Teatr.Doc Theater in Moscow – *Out of the Closet* (*Vyiti iz shkafa*, dir. Anastasiia Patlai, 2016). My analysis in this section draws on media theories of hypermediacy (Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin) and intermediality (Patrice Pavis, Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt) to consider the relationship between technology, screen surface, and theatrical space. This section argues that the scenography of the analyzed documentary productions is profoundly shaped by and connected with the multisensorial experience of the extra-theatrical reality in which post-Soviet documentary theater is situated. The depth of field in documentary cinema is examined in **Part Two**, where my case studies include *Long Live the Antipodes!* (*¡Vivan las Antipodas!*, dir. Viktor Kosakovskii, 2011), *The Pipeline* (*Truba*, dir. Vitalii Mansky, 2013), and *The Optical Axis* (*Opticheskaia os'*, dir. Marina Razbezhkina, 2013). Here, I apply film theories concerned with the use of deep and shallow focus in rendering spatial distance in cinema developed by Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, Vladimir Nilsen, and André Bazin to post-Soviet documentary films. This section concludes with reflection on how contemporary documentary filmmakers explore vast spatial and temporal spans and use cinematic tools, such as the depth of field, to map out different post-Soviet spaces visually and perceptually.

After discussing documentary sound and space, in **Chapter Three** I turn to documentary materiality, exploring the use of inanimate material objects in post-Soviet documentary theater and cinema. By focusing on the complex relationship of documentary theater and cinema to physical objects (things), I address the affective power of material environment on screen and on

stage. Approaching materiality and the documentary through the angle of affect theory allows me to think about physical objects beyond their symbolic and/or indexical function in documentary films and performances. **Part One** examines post-Soviet documentary films *Clean Thursday* (*Chistyi chetverg*, dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003) and *In the Dark* (*V temnote*, dir. Sergei Dvortsevoi, 2004) and centers on the notion of *faktura* conceptualized by David Burliuk, El Lissitzky, Vladimir Tatlin, and Viktor Shklovsky. In this section, I look at how post-Soviet documentary cinema incorporates images of material objects to produce a particular sensory-emotional effect on the audience. My analysis shows that inanimate physical objects acquire affective power and material visual expressivity on the documentary screen in the process of interaction with people depicted in film, and that *faktura* plays a key role in this process. I conclude this chapter with my discussion of material objects on documentary stage in **Part Two**. Here, I am interested in investigating how post-Soviet documentary theater instrumentalizes material objects as media. I also examine how documentary productions use physical things already marked as documents, such as museum objects and legal papers, as sources of authenticity. I analyze the documentary one-actor production at the Joseph Beuys Theater in Moscow – *Uzbek* (dir. Talgat Batalov, 2012); the documentary local history-based production of the Tomsk Youth Theater – *The Uprising* (*Vosstanie*, dir. Viacheslav Gulivitskii, 2016); and the experimental documentary production staged at the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow – *Mel'nikov: A Documentary Opera* (*Mel'nikov: Dokumental'naia opera,* dir. Anastasiia Patlai, 2017). This section is framed by media theories that posit that documents are physical objects communicating *for* people (David M. Levy), and that material things have a particularly high capacity to store and communicate information (Devin Fore, Vilém Flusser). Finally, I demonstrate that the documentary status of material objects informs the action on stage

and that inanimate physical things can validate, challenge, or problematize the audience's assumptions of the documentary performance credibility.

Chapter 1: Documentary Sound: From Voice Giving to Voice Leading

In this chapter, I approach post-Soviet documentary films and theatrical productions primarily through their sonic organization. This chapter privileges sound as a structural element of a documentary work, taking as a point of departure the emphasized importance of a sounding voice in both documentary theater and cinema. In film, such tropes as the (first-person) voice-over, oral testimony, observed communication, and interview are fundamentally connected to the very definition of the documentary as a cinematic genre. It is not insignificant that one of the most-cited critical essays by the scholar of documentary film Bill Nichols is entitled "The Voice of Documentary."[37] In documentary theater, which usually engages with themes of high political, social, and ideological resonance, it is the sounding voice of actors that occupies front stage. By means of either reenactment and embodiment, using techniques of estrangement, or even projecting recorded interviews and testimonies, documentary theater relies on the multiplicity of human voices in order to produce the reality effect that it seeks. In his study of post-dramatic theater, Hans-Thies Lehmann explicitly connects documentary theater with "oratorio-like forms," emphasizing its affinity for plays based on interrogation, reportage, and trial records.[38]

Voice Giving or Voice Leading?

Documentary across media aspires to "give a voice to the voiceless" and is often envisioned as a vehicle for criticism, education, and change. Post-Soviet documentary theater and film are preoccupied with painful and pressing social issues without sensationalizing them, instead exposing a lack of public discourse and action around these issues. A kind of urgent

[37] Nichols, Bill, "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983), 17-30.
[38] Lehmann, 56.

necessity to construct narratives about autism, the dehumanization of migrant workers, the oppression of LGBTQ people, homelessness, and disability, in such a way as to be legible and accessible to the mass audience, is tied to aesthetic choices made by contemporary Russian filmmakers and theater directors.[39] However, following the recent critical intervention by the media and film scholar Pooja Rangan in her book *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*, I would like to question whether the guiding principle of "voice giving" in documentary is in fact flawed. Rangan discusses specifically participatory documentary, in which "voice giving" presents itself not only metaphorically as visibility and empowerment of the underrepresented, but also quite literally, through the gesture of giving the camera over to the subjects of the documentary. Rangan shows in her analysis that "documentary, especially in its most benevolent, humanitarian guises, is thoroughly implicated in the work of regulating what does and does not count as human."[40] She thus problematizes the implicit logocentrism instrumental for the mission of documentary "voice giving." Participatory documentary film perhaps exemplifies this problem most effectively, but the same ethical and philosophical ambiguity is at work across a plethora of documentary genres and is not exclusive to cinema.

To create an opening for a more complex understanding of documentary and shift the emphasis away from "giving a voice to the voiceless" as the dominant modus operandi of the genre, I suggest an alternative concept – "voice leading." I borrow the term from a theoretical vocabulary developed in musicology to describe a practice of music composition that includes

[39] For example, see documentary films: Liubov' Arkus's *Anton Is Right Here* (*Anton tut riadom*, 2012), Denis Shabaiev's *Someone Else's Job* (*Chuzhaia rabota*, 2015); documentary productions: Anastasiia Patlai's *Out of the Closet* (*Vyiti iz shkafa*, 2016); Mikhail Patlasov's *The Untouchables* (*Neprikasaemye*, 2016).
[40] Rangan, Pooja, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 8.

combining of several concurrent melodies, so that they cohere perceptually. In the words of David Huron, a scholar of music and music cognition, "*Voice leading is a codified practice that helps musicians craft simultaneous musical lines so that each line retains its perceptual independence for an ... listener*."[41] I argue that voice leading operates at the level of sonic organization and composition of documentary works and affects the audience's perception of the documentary as representation of the real. In introducing this term to documentary theory, I do not assume that the process of translation of a musicological theory into the field of theater and film studies is a seamless one. However, voice leading offers a number of insights for the complicated sound organization of documentary films and theatrical productions.

For instance, music, as well as cinema and theater, is a dynamic medium that "takes time": it exists temporally regardless of its duration, whether that is a few seconds, a few hours, or longer. Voice leading is connected to the idea of sustaining the continuity effect in music – that is, what we perceive as a coherent sound stream has no actual physical reality to it but is solely a construct of our auditory perception. In other words, it is "the subjective image of a sound activity continuing over time."[42] Keeping in mind voice leading as a technique that provides "a road map" for our perception out of auditory confusion and towards a sense of connectedness, I argue that documentary theatrical productions and films actively employ voice leading as means to organize their sound and visual streams and produce the effect not only of sonic, but of overall continuity to overcome the plotlessness of their document-based material.

Documentary Representation and Counterpoint

[41] Huron, David, *Voice Leading: The Science behind a Musical Art* (London, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 3.
[42] Ibid., 25.

For the purposes of this research, I find it productive to discuss two documentary media – theater and film – in dialogue with one another. This bifocal perspective is justified not only by a specific professional organization of the post-Soviet cultural sphere, where documentary filmmakers and theater directors/producers are often graduates of the same institutions of higher learning and sometimes continue to produce work in both art forms freely applying artistic principles of one to the other. Marina Razbezhkina and Mikhail Ugarov exemplify this trend perhaps better than anybody else. Razbezhkina is a documentary filmmaker who has been involved in documentary theater through writing texts for the Moscow based documentary theater Teatr.Doc. Mikhail Ugarov, a documentary playwright, director, and co-founder of Teatr.Doc, has also been a scriptwriter for television and film, as well as a film director. In 2008, Razbeshkina and Ugarov founded the School of Documentary Film and Documentary Theater in Moscow, where they co-taught courses to cohorts of future professionals specializing in cinema and drama.

However, it is of even more importance that the documentary mode of artistic production – in film and theater alike – actively incorporates elements of different media, allowing for new meanings and effects to emerge as a result of the destabilization of media-specific contexts. Documentary film and theater generate theories and practices that inform each other; thus, my research not only brings them into conversation, but also illuminates the already existing network of relations between these media. Since this chapter is focused on sound in documentary theater and film, I draw attention to an apparent tension between mediatized (film) and live (theater) voice. I show how documentary theater draws on recorded sound and image, while documentary film pushes against conventions of documentary sound synchronicity. More importantly, I

highlight the role of voice leading in both documentary film and theater, which are preoccupied with representation of reality.

To begin a discussion of the role of sound in contemporary Russian documentary film and theater, it is important to situate it retrospectively within a context of earlier Soviet debates around creative representation of reality at large, especially since all influential post-Soviet documentary filmmakers define themselves against the legacy of the famous directors of the 1920s, both in theory and practice. At the beginning of this section, I will specifically address the question as it was raised by Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigorii Aleksandrov as early as in 1928 and by Béla Balász in 1930. I will then turn to questions of sound in theater by way of tracing the genealogy of contemporary docudramatic treatment of sounding voices to the early Soviet avant-garde experiments in theater.

"Speaking People, Sounding Objects:" Theoretical Debates of the 1920s-1930s.

No discussion among filmmakers of the late 1920s-early 1930s, however specific its subject matter could be, remained limited to a conversation among professionals. Such discussions almost always poured over into a public debate and necessarily polarized not only participants of the disputes, but their supporters and opponents, artistic, as well as political. It is in this atmosphere of heated arguments among comrades-in-arts of the 1920s that the status and role of the documentary became largely discussed and questioned. Dziga Vertov and Victor Shklovsky exchanged a series of polemical statements published by the Soviet press, seeking to determine what this new medium – cinema – would be like. According to Vertov, who was strictly against the "artistic surrogates" of the old cinematography, the new cinema – *kinopravda*

– should show "life caught unawares" or "life as it is."[43] The very possibility of such "objective" cinema, which captures reality as such and offers a "direct" access to the truth (*pravda*), seemed very suspicious to Shklovsky. For him, the author's standpoint determines everything, from the angle chosen by a cameraman to the final cut on the editor's desk; therefore, there's no reality that seamlessly enters the screen unchanged. According to Shklovsky, a film can influence viewers' perception only when "the cameraman has their own special approach."[44] Approximately at the same time, Sergei Eisenstein joined the discussion and criticized Vertov's cinematic methods by pointing out the significance of a filmmaker's conscious decisions in the process of creating a film, as opposed to an impassionate reflection of reality on the screen as claimed by Vertov. Eisenstein responds to Vertov: "*Film direction* is not just organization of *optically recorded material*, even if this material as such can produce a certain effect, but *the organization of the audience through organized material."*[45]

In 1928, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Aleksandrov released a collective "Statement (*Zaiavka*) on Sound" in which they voiced their concerns regarding the anticipated arrival of synchronized sound in film. Most of all, the directors expressed their objection to the technological possibility of creating "an 'illusion' of speaking people, sounding objects."[46] They emphasized the importance of the formal achievements of silent film, particularly of montage,

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[43] Vertov, Dziga, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*/Edited with an Introduction by Annette Michelson; Translated by Kevin O'Brien. ed. Annette Michelson, (Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1984), 49.

[44] "Только определенный подход оператора делает кадр ощутимым." Shklovsky, Viktor, *Za 60 let: Raboty o kino* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1985), 31.

[45] Eisenstein, Sergei, "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form." *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*. ed. Yuri Tsivian, (Gemona (Udine): Le Giornate Del Cinema Muto, 2004), 126.

[46] Eisenstein, Sergei, Pudovkin, Vsevolod, Aleksandrov, Grigoriy, "Zaiavka", *Close Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, Laura Marcus (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 83-84.

and called for counterpoint to be mobilized as possibly the most effective sonic device against the seductive and simplifying power of synchronized sound in film. They insisted on treating image and sound as separate elements and imagined a future of sound film that would benefit from asynchrony, with sound empowering the visual, rather than acting as a background or accompaniment. Two years later, Béla Balász, a Hungarian-German cultural critic living in exile in the Soviet Union since 1931, wrote in his work on film theory *The Spirit of Film*, "The demand is that the sound film should not merely contribute sound to the silent film and thus make it even more like nature, but that it should approach the reality of life from a totally different angle and open up a new treasure-house of human experience."[47] Although they are primarily addressed to non-documentary cinema at the time, these theoretical statements foreshadow trajectories of development of sound in documentary film. Moreover, these concerns about the role of sound in cinema can be mapped over the discussions referenced above regardig documentary film at large. Taken by Vertov with regard to his emphasis on direct access to reality by means of filming it, this theoretical stance aligns well with the idea of synchronous sound, modified as little during the recording process as possible, catching both the image and the sound "as is." In practice, however, it must be said that Vertov's own work on sound in *Enthusiasm* (1930), for example, demonstrates the filmmaker's highly experimental approach to sound composition. While relying on sound recorded on location, Vertov constructs his cinematic symphony in this film out of images, words, sounds, and music.[48] Meanwhile, the

[47] Balász, Béla, *The Spirit of Film*, as quoted in Béla Balász, *Theory of Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* (New York, NY: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1972), 197.
[48] For more on sound analysis of Vertov's *Enthusiasm*, see: Fore, Devin, "Dziga Vertov, The First Shoemaker of Russian Cinema." *Configurations* 18, no.3 (Fall 2010), 363-382, and MacKay, John, "Disorganized Noise: Enthusiasm and the Ear of the Colletive," n.d., pt.3, 4. http://kinokultura.com/articles/enthusiasm-eye.pdf

argument of Shklovsky and Eisenstein in favor of embracing subjectivity in documentary filmmaking highlights the aesthetic potential of creative treatments of sound, freely organized by the film director in such a way as to amplify the cinematic effect of the documentary.

Unlike cinema in the late 1920s-early 1930s, Russian theater at the time did not face a crisis generated by sound technology. However, theater was already dealing with a different kind of challenge, namely that of redefining its own position *vis-à-vis* cinema. In juxtaposition to the inherently mimetic quality of film, theater offered heightened expressivity and an escalation of attractions in dramatic genres inherited from cabaret and circus. The notion of cabaret carried within itself traces of pre-revolutionary urban subculture; as a borderline form of entertainment between circus and theater, it played an important role as a venue for cultural and artistic exchange.[49] Cabaret brought together audience and performers, blurring the lines separating the participants of the show from the spectators. It did not carry the weight of elite intellectual high culture, nor was it perceived as belonging to a marginalized vernacular artistic scene. This liminal position of cabaret allowed for fluidity and spontaneity both in form and in content of performance and opened the space for experimentation, improvisation, and provocation.

As early as 1906, Vsevolod Meyerhold incorporated elements of cabaret aesthetics into his production of Aleksandr Blok's *Balaganchik*. Bordering on cabaret on the one hand, and *balagan*, associated with grassroots theatrical form, on the other hand, a series of productions exploring this kind of experimental theatricality were produced before 1917.[50] The emphasis in such *balagan*-inspired performances was on the spectacular (*zrelishchnost'*), the dynamics of

[49] For more on the history of cabaret in Russia, see: Bowlt, John E., "Cabaret in Russia." *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 19, no.4 (Winter 1985), 443-463.
[50] Among the most famous ones, *The Emperor Maximilian* (1911) with sets designed by Vladimir Tatlin, and *Victory over the Sun* (1913) with sets designed by Kazimir Malevich.

movement, counterpoint, and visual and sound effects. Meyerhold sought to revitalize theater by inserting elements traditionally associated with street or popular culture, such as masks and cross-dressing, gesture and pantomime, farce, and improvisation. In his article "Balagan" (1912), he radically defended the right of theater to be precisely that – theater. Meyerhold defined theatricality through playfulness, the grotesque, masterful control of the actor's body, facial expressions, voice, expressivity, and stylization. He juxtaposed play as the essence of theater with literature, witnessing the proliferation of a certain kind of drama that was highly dependent on text. He noted that, judging by the silence of the audience during a show, one could mistake theater for a library.[51] Meyerhold demanded, "Will it be soon that the law is written on the scrolls of drama: *words in theater are mere ornaments on the canvas of movement*?"[52] According to Meyerhold, *balagan*-like performance had a potential to generate a new kind of experience both for actors and spectators, since it encouraged a more active engagement on behalf of the audience. As for performers, this new form of theater liberated them from the authority of the text and provided them with openings for improvisation and playful demonstration of their skills as actors.

From Soviet Theory to Post-Soviet Documentary Practice

Early in its existence, post-Soviet documentary theater found itself looking for new forms of theatricality and borrowed several key elements from this early moment of intense aesthetic search for a rejuvenated theatrical language. Turning away from highly literary dramatic texts, it relies instead on vernacular language and verbatim speech. Moreover, documentary theater

[51] "В зрительном зале воцаряется такая же мертвая тишина, как в салоне для чтения. Это дремлет публика." Meyerhold, Vsevolod, "Balagan." Gazeta "Rech", №14 (27 aprelia 1912) in *Formal'nyi metod: antologiia russkogo moderizma*. pod red. S. Ushakina (Ekaterinburg: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2015, T.3), 526.
[52] Ibid., 527.

encourages a more active participation of the audience in performances through methods of immersive theater and/or talkback discussions after the shows. More importantly, Meyerhold's acute attention to musicality and rhythm is rediscovered by contemporary documentary theater and applied to productions where counterpoint, sound, and voice occupy a significant place.

When encountering documentary works of post-Soviet film and theater, one is constantly reminded of the early Soviet cultural heritage, which presents both a challenge and a source of inspiration for contemporary artists. In the post-Soviet period, documentary cinema and theater increasingly exchange not only themes and subjects, but also aesthetic means of expression. Documentary theater incorporates recorded video fragments and mediatized voices, while documentary cinema continues experimenting with voice-over narration and asynchronous sound. In search of a new documentary aesthetics each medium faces and struggles to overcome its own limitations at the level of sonic organization. In theater, the ephemerality of the live sounding voice on stage clashes with the reproducible recorded documentary voice. The conflict of these sound regimes creates dynamism that allows for a particular form to emerge on stage in the productions analyzed below. The staged document itself and/or a linear document-based narrative – the dominant mode of Russian documentary theater at the beginning of the 2000s – make way for a new mode of documentary theater that is attuned to the hybridity of the sonic environment of the 2010s. This new sound aesthetics in documentary theater seeks to instrumentalize a dynamic and multifaceted sound structure to propel the action on stage, rather than relying on the document itself to generate new meanings and keep the audience interested.

In Russian documentary cinema of the same period, filmmakers rediscover and mobilize Eisenstein's concept of audiovisual counterpoint in montage, outlined in the "Statement on Sound" (1928) mentioned above and further developed in "The Dialectical Approach to Film

Form" (1929).[53] Relying on the conflict between visual and acoustic elements of montage in documentary film, contemporary Russian documentary filmmakers seek to redefine the new documentary cinematic aesthetics that would differentiate itself from the omnipresent in the online sphere *televised* and *mediatized* documentary footage, which largely deploys synchronized sound.

When it comes to sound composition, both post-Soviet documentary film and theater privilege counterpoint as a key element. Edward Said, who coined "contrapuntal reading" as a term and productively applied musicological methodology to literature and culture analysis at large, writes, "The essence of counterpoint is simultaneity of voices, preternatural control of resources, apparently endless inventiveness. In counterpoint a melody is always in the process of being repeated by one or another voice: the result is horizontal, rather than vertical, music."[54] In what follows, I suggest a "contrapuntal reading" of post-Soviet documentary sound where, by following independent voices, I examine complex structures of selected theatrical productions and films. This analysis highlights a kind of "horizontality" of these works in which, by means of voice leading, each of the individual lines or voices is developed in relation to each other, in contrast with the idea of "voice giving," which implies a certain hierarchy and a vertical structure.

The material that I focus on in this chapter comes from the period between 1999 and 2017, with the earliest case study being Vitalii Mansky's documentary film, *Private Chronicles. Monologue* (*Chastnye khroniki. Monolog*), and the latest, Andrei Stadnikov's documentary play

[53] Eisenstein, Sergei, "The Dialectical Approach to Film Form." In *S.M.Eisenstein: Selected Works, Volume 1 (1922-1934)*, translated by Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1988), 161-181.
[54] Said, Edward, *Music at the Limits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 5.

Descendants of the Sun (*Potomki solntsa*). Among many films and productions of the period, the works examined in this chapter exemplify most potently what I am describing as voice leading in documentary. They do so by also representing a wide range of subjects and aesthetic choices available to contemporary Russian documentary filmmakers and theater directors.

Part 1: Voice Leading on Documentary Stage

I begin my analysis by analyzing two recent Russian documentary theater productions from the point of view of voice leading as a technique that, first, allows for the integration of several simultaneous but perceptually independent lines and, second, acts as a method of creating a coherent reality effect. My first case study is *Occupation Is a Nice Affair. Oh, Federico!* (*Okkupatsia – miloe delo. O, Federiko!*, dir. Yurii Pogrebnichko, 2011), which is based on an autobiographical text by the author Tatiana Orlova. In the aftermath of the World War II, Orlova spent her childhood in East Germany under the occupation of the Soviet army, where her father, a Soviet officer, was stationed in the 1940s-1950s. This production of the Okolo Doma Stanislavskogo Theater in Moscow uses not only a piece of documentary prose, which was not intentionally written for the theater, but also documentary archival footage of the Soviet army in Germany at the time. Besides the monologue of the protagonist, who is identified simply as a "Woman" (Lilia Zagorskaia), *Occupation Is a Nice Affair* includes several songs, both recorded and performed live on stage. In this chapter, I show how live and mediatized singing voices frame and weave through the performance and take on not merely an ornamental, but a structural function. I then analyze *Descendants of the Sun* (*Potomki solntsa*, dir. Andrei Stadnikov, 2017), staged by the documentary theater workshop Teatr Truda in Moscow. The weight of this performance is carried by the voices of six actors on stage, whose presence is basically reduced

to their sounding bodies: there is no direct interaction between them, and their movement across the stage is minimal. *Descendants of the Sun* brings together professional actors who deliver documentary texts and verbatim monologues with non-professional actors who read fragments from literary works. In the absence of music and sound effects, spectators are drawn to focus their attention on the voices – not only on what is being said, but on how it is being said: timbre, accent, pitch, and tonality, that is, what Roland Barthes calls "the grain of the voice."[55]

Orchestration of Voices in *Occupation Is a Nice Affair*

Yurii Pogrebnichko's Moscow theater Okolo Doma Stanislavskogo, whose title can be translated into English as Near Stanislavsky's House, is famous for its nonconventional treatment of canonical Russian drama, seen in such productions as Aleksandr Ostrovskii's *Forest* (2007), Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (2009), and Mikhail Bulgakov's *On the Run* (2016). The acting style of Pogrebnichko's actors, as well as the director's take on classical dramatic texts is perhaps best described by the preposition "near." This is not quite the Moscow-Art-Theater-inspired kind of drama, but rather a playful, yet profound, reconfiguration of what Stanislavsky's vision of authenticity on stage might look like in twenty-first century Russian theater. Blending vernacular language with the canonical text of plays, contemporary everyday objects with historically specific props and costumes, and period-appropriate songs with contemporary music, Pogrebnichko carefully balances between the theater of the absurd, psychological drama, and cabaret. In 2013, the experimental documentary prose-based production of Okolo Doma Stanislavskogo Theater *Occupation Is a Nice Affair. Oh, Federico!* received multiple nominations in the most prestigious Russian national theater award, The Golden Mask. The

[55] Barthes, Roland, "The Grain of the Voice" in *Image. Music. Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179-190.

production was celebrated for its masterfully crafted theatrical narrative that wove together fragments of Orlova's autobiography, musical numbers, scenes from Federico Fellini's and Akira Kurosawa's films, and documentary and mockumentary footage.

Occupation Is a Nice Affair. Oh, Federico! opens with black-and-white documentary footage shown on an old-style plain canvas screen elevated upstage. It shows Soviet soldiers marching along a dirt road. They look tired; this is not a victory parade, but what looks like a middle of a long and exhausting relocation of troops. From the footage alone, it is impossible to tell whether it takes place in Germany or Russia and whether it is during or right after World War II. The stage is empty and dark. A song begins; after a short interlude dominated by violins playing in F minor and a soft sounding rhythm section, a tenor sings, "Once upon a time, I lived…"[56] This is a popular song written in the 1970s and performed by Aleksandr Gradskii, whose voice has a recognizable color to it and who is praised for a unique vocal range (three and a half octaves) and a dramatic singing manner. When the screen goes dark and the light hits the stage after the end of the song, the audience sees a woman standing front stage (Lilia Zagorskaia) (Illustration 1). Her monologue begins, "When my mommy, my daddy, and I arrived to occupy Germany and went out to town for a walk the next day, it seemed to me



Illustration 1. Lilia Zagorskaia in *Occupation Is a Nice Affair* at the Okolo Doma Stanislavskogo Theater in Moscow. (dir. Yurii Pogrebnichko, 2017). Photograph by Viktor Pushkin at https://www.okolo.ru/shows/okkupatsiya-miloe-delo-o-federiko/

[56] "Zhil byl ia": music by David Tukhmanov, lyrics by Semion Kirsanov, released in 1974 by the Melodia recording company, USSR.

that Germans kept staring with curiosity and wanted to point fingers at me."[57] The performance offers this dual opening with a male and a female voices: both voices sing/speak about their past, memories of which are inextricably woven into the present moment. Zagorskaia's voice sounds soft, fragile. She looks like a grown woman dressed in absurd adult-size post-war Soviet children's clothes and, accordingly, her voice sounds almost child-like, even when she recalls how her adult son sent her away to a mental asylum after he tired of dealing with a schizophrenic elderly mother. She never sings, but actors wearing Soviet military uniforms, like her dad used to wear, take the stage throughout the performance to sing songs (Illustration 2). Each of their appearances looks like a separate act, reminiscent of images from Soviet films about the war, where such scenes of officers and soldiers singing were omnipresent. The songs they sing do not all come from the 1940s, however. In one of the most memorable episodes of *Occupation Is a Nice Affair*, the Lieutenant (Aleksandr Kulakov) plays the guitar and sings a song from the Soviet fiction film *The Last Inch* (*Poslednii diuim*, 1958) with a refrain, "What do I care about all of you? And what do you care about me?"[58] This assemblage of documentary images, male voices (recorded and



Illustration 2. Aleksandr Kulakov, Aleksei Sidorov, Aleksandr Orav, Dmitrii Bogdan, and Nikita Loginov in *Occupation Is a Nice Affair* at the Okolo Doma Stanislavskogo Theater in Moscow (dir. Yurii Pogrebnichko, 2017).

[57] "Когда мы с мамкой и папкой приехали оккупировать Германию, на другой день пошли гулять в город, мне все казалось, что немцы с любопытством рассматривают и хотят показать на меня пальцем."

[58] "Какое мне дело до вас до всех? А вам – до меня?" *The Last Inch* (*Posledniy diuim*, dir. Teodor Vul'fovich, Nikita Kurikhin, 1958); "Pesnia Bena ('Tiazhiolym basom gremit fugas…')": music by Mieczyslaw Weinberg, lyrics by Mark Sobol').

live), and men in military uniforms singing and dancing on stage works together as "the theater of the mind" of the protagonist. There is no coherent chronology in her recollections, and therefore it somehow makes sense for a WWII lieutenant to sing a song from the late 1950s. In this production, Pogrebnichko translates the experience of occupation for the theatrical stage – the very experience that seems to have profoundly split the protagonist's consciousness, which struggles to separate the past from the present and the fictional from the real. A sense of sonic harmony created by this performance is rooted not in the contents of the songs, but in the musicality of Zagorskaia's speaking voice and male singing voices. This sonic harmony clashes with the contents of Orlova's schizoid text – spatially and temporally disoriented, full of specific minuscule details (such as a thorough description of German porcelain design or of the color and texture of rubber gloves worn by German women while planting flowers outside their now occupied homes), yet incapable of sustaining narrative cohesion.

Occupation Is a Nice Affair ends with the same footage from the beginning of the performance: a grainy documentary recording of Soviet soldiers marching along a dirt road somewhere, accompanied by Aleksandr Gradskii's powerful and moving singing: "Once upon a time, I lived… It came to my mind, that I lived…" However, this time the footage goes on to show the male actors, who were on the stage just a moment ago, still wearing the same uniforms, marching along the streets of Moscow. Temporality folds onto itself here, merging the past and the present, the fictional and the real, the theatrical and the cinematic, with the sounding voice acting as a connective tissue holding the performance matter together. Pogrebnichko carefully orchestrates the sonic assemblage to elicit the audience's emotional response to the haunting presence of recent traumatic history, embodied on stage and omnipresent in mediatized images of war films, televised military parades, and Victory Day celebrations.

Descendants of the Sun: The (Not So) Lonely Human Voice

Descendants of the Sun also relies on a combination of recorded footage on screen and actors on stage. Unlike *Occupation Is a Nice Affair*, this performance does not include any music, just the sound of actors' voices. This production is a montage of verbatim monologues of people who were born in the Soviet Union (the oldest person in 1931, the youngest in May 1991) and fragments from literary works that were included in the Soviet high school program, specifically Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy. It also includes a short story by Andrei Platonov published in the 1970s, which gives the production its title. Other textual sources include Nikolai Bukharin's trial minutes.[59] *Descendants of the Sun* is a theatrical study of what socialism meant and still means for different generations of people who have outlived their country. With almost no set design, the minimalist space of the Sakharov Center stage in Moscow serves as an ideal location for this production. An open space replaces the traditional black box; spectators share the floor with the performers, barely separated from them by a thin rope stretched behind a bench in front of the seats for the audience. Accompanying the five actors on stage is a camera which films the actors



Illustration 3. Left to right: Sergei Karaban', Elena Novozhilova, Olga Romanova, Irina Nosova, and Ksenia Orlova in the Teatr Truda's production of *Descendants of the Sun* at the Sakharov Center in Moscow (dir. Andrei Stadnikov, 2017).

[59] *Crime and Punishment* by Fiodor Dostoyevsky, *Resurrection* by Leo Tolstoy, and *Descendants of the Sun* by Andrei Platonov. Nikolai Bukharin was one of the leaders of the Soviet Bolshevik revolution, alongside Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. Later, together with Joseph Stalin, Bukharin participated in ousting of Trotsky. In 1937 he was arrested and executed after a show trial in 1938. See: Hellbeck, Jochen, "With Hegel to Salvation: Bukharin's Other Trial," *Representations* 107, no. 1, (2009), 56–90.

and projects the footage onto a white plain wall (Illustration 3). There is a kind of reduplication of everything the audience sees. The footage seemingly flickers between live and prerecorded: soon after the performance begins, an attentive spectator can start noticing slight differences between the silent footage on the wall and the position of actors on stage, the movements of their lips as they pronounce their lines, and the fact that the camera angles are impossible for a static camera on stage. It is not quite apparent whether this is simply a lag in video transmission or whether what the audience sees on the screen is a prerecorded video sequence that is designed to be almost identical to the live action. The visual element is thus rendered almost superfluous: there is so much of it, on stage and on screen, that the spectator is drawn to pay attention to precisely the gap between what they see and what they hear.

As the play progresses, professional actors reenact verbatim monologues without looking at each other or at the audience. They face the screen showing photographs of people, whose voices (manners of speaking, cadences, accents, etc.) they imitate. Everything is focused on the sound of their voices. In a particularly striking episode, two actresses (Irina Nosova and Ksenia Orlova) interchangeably voice a monologue of a woman, Regina Gorbacheva, who relates how her father, a Soviet army general, was arrested and executed in 1937, how her mother was sent to prison, and how she herself was sent to an orphanage (Illustration 4). We hear the actresses' voices saying, "They arrested Rokossovky too,



Illustration 4. Left to right: Irina Nosova and Ksenia Orlova in the Teatr Truda's production of *Descendants of the Sun* at the Sakharov Center in Moscow (dir. Andrei Stadnikov, 2017).

tortured him… For what? For what? I am not going to talk about politics; I don't know anything…"[60] During this monologue, we see a photograph of this old woman on the screen. When the actresses finish the monologue, the screen shows the actual footage of the interview, and we can hear Regina Gorbacheva's own voice saying the same exact lines. This episode is the only one of its kind in *Descendants of the Sun* – the only instance when the audience can hear and compare the voice of the person and the voice of the actor voicing their words.

The actors' voices on stage in this production are not simply vehicles for the texts the audience hears – rather, they organize, hold together, and move the performance forward. In the words of Mladan Ovadija, a scholar of sound in theater, "The immanence, fluidity, and sensuality of the human voice and the expressiveness of stage sound – traditionally considered secondary to the primacy of the text – are essential elements of the performativity and scenic dynamics that propel dramaturgy in contemporary theater."[61] Although the fragments are connected thematically, it is a particular rhythmical and melodic structure of the vocal sound that plays a more important compositional role. The audience registers slight changes in the actors' voices as they transition from one person to the next. With these transitions, the spectator also becomes aware of the peculiarities of this person's manner of speaking, tonality, and accent. Guided by the principle of musical voice leading, the performance "teaches" its audience to recognize these individual traces in a way that is almost comparable to individual melodies. These voices are not to be "given" – instead, they actively shape the audience's perception and

[60] "Они и Рокоссовского арестовали, пытали его… За что? За что? Про политику я не буду говорить, ничего не знаю." Konstantin Rokossovky was a Soviet army general, who rose to high ranks during the Civil War (1917-1922). In 1937 was arrested, jailed, sent to camps. Rokosskovsky was one of the key Soviet military commanders of WWII.
[61] Ovadija, Mladan, *Dramaturgy of Sound in the Avant-Garde and Post-Dramatic Theater* (London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 3.

sharpen the acuteness of the spectator's perception in relation to understanding the performance as an integrated whole and paying attention to "the grain of the voice."

Descendants of the Sun ends with an improvisational sound piece designed by the composer Dmitri Vlasik to be performed by the actors. In the finale, the screen shows a video of a country road, shot from a distance with roadside grass and shrubbery occupying the bottom third and the sky occupying the top third of the screen space. White letters appear at random against the blue sky spelling out words and fragments of phrases that we heard throughout the performance voiced by the actors (Illustration 5). As the video goes on, the actors place themselves around the audience in the dark and improvise a musical piece, consisting of claps, whistles, and humming sounds, as well as the sounds of friction of small metal spheres rotating in clay pots. The actors respond to each other's sounds and orchestrate the piece live by tuning into each other's voices. This anti-hierarchical sound composition mirrors the structure of the performance, where each fragment is related to the other one thematically, with the theme (trial, labor, socialism, etc.) repeated and developed in an individual manner by the next speaker. It produces exactly a kind of horizontal structure, referred to by Said in his definition of counterpoint in music.[62]



Illustration 5. The screen showing a landscape with a road, with white letters spelling out "all of this was in in the head." Teatr Truda's production of *Descendants of the Sun* at the Sakharov Center in Moscow (dir. Andrei Standnikov, 2017).

[62] "In counterpoint a melody is always in the process of being repeated by one or another voice: the result is horizontal, rather than vertical, music." Said, *Music at the Limits*, 5.

Conclusion

Voice leading rests upon the principles of harmony and counterpoint. In this chapter, I suggest a reading of documentary theatrical productions that incorporates individual speaking and singing and mediatized and live voices, allowing for an understanding of the ethical work that these productions do, in addition to providing an analysis of their aesthetics. Here, voice leading refers not only to a melodic structure foregrounding counterpoint, but also to the way in which the sound of voices leads the performance and signifies agency. Documentary theater, which so often presents itself as "giving a voice to the voiceless," here replaces a hierarchy of narrative with a horizontal structure of repetition, improvisation, and response.

At the level of sonic organization, contemporary Russian documentary theater probes new aesthetic tools in order to reflect on a specific relationship to the real, in this case Russian history and collective memory, that this kind of theater is interested in. Instead of presenting the audience with a linear document-based narrative charged with a task of driving political and social change by the very fact of its presentation to the audience, the productions analyzed above are invested in provoking a complex reaction. These documentary productions insist on careful and intentional listening on behalf of the spectator to the sound of voices and musical pieces included in the acoustic structure of the plays. Thus, documentary theater engages the audience in the process of multifaceted interpretation of and interaction with the document, rather than presenting the document as a self-sufficient vehicle of meaning.

Part 2: Soundscapes of Documentary

This section explores voice leading as a constitutive sonic element of documentary films, specifically addressing the relationship between the visual and the auditory in post-Soviet

documentaries. I begin with a premise that "sound design is central in both of the [documentary] films' formal realization and aesthetic strategies," as formulated by Robert Strachan and Marion Leonard in their essay *More Than a Background*.[63] Documentary films are analyzed overwhelmingly more often in relation to their image structure: after all, to paraphrase Michel Chion, a scholar of sound in cinema, a film stripped of sound still remains a film, whereas a film deprived of image ceases to be perceived as such, but turns into a kind of sound piece.[64] However, by looking closely at the sound composition of post-Soviet documentary films, I argue that they actively employ creative sound design while working against the predictable expectations of the spectator, who has been trained by documentary tradition in cinema and other media visually representing reality, such as television and video, to anticipate synchronous sound. By sometimes mimicking the effects of synchronicity, but more often by explicitly underlining the disjuncture between the image and the sound, post-Soviet filmmakers bring to the fore the "constructedness" of their cinematic narratives. This problematizes the reality effect conventionally sought after by documentary as a genre. Instead of carefully camouflaging the seams and stitches of the making of a documentary film, these film directors emphasize the connective tissue that holds the cinematic work together.

The following case studies allow me to examine different strategies of sound design mobilized in post-Soviet documentary. I begin with a case study of Vitalii Mansky's documentary film, *Private Chronicles. Monologue* (*Chastnye khroniki. Monolog*, 1999), to discuss the sound technique of voice-over narration as a device providing coherence to otherwise

[63] Strachan, Robert, Leonard, Marion, "More Than Background: Ambience and Sound-Design in Contemporary Art Documentary Film" in *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, ed. by Holly Rogers (New York, London: Routledge, 2015), 175.
[64] See: Chion, Michel, transl. by Claudia Gorbman, and Walter Murch, *Audio-vision: Sound On Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

disparate footage sequences. I then move on to an analysis of Sergei Loznitsa's documentaries *Maidan* (2014) and *The Event* (*Sobytie*, 2015), which focus on the role of acousmatic sound in the absence of voice-over. I conclude with a case study of sound in Liubov' Arkus's film *Anton's Right Here* (*Anton tut riadom*, 2012), to show how the director complicates her documentary narrative by including her own voice in the story of Anton, an autistic teenager.

How "Real" is "Documentary" Cinema?

The unresolved early Soviet questions of what documentary cinema should be like resurfaced again in the early 2000s in a discussion between two leading documentary filmmakers, Vitalii Mansky and Sergei Loznitsa. In an article with a telling title, *The End of "Documentary" Cinema*, Loznitsa claimed that it was meaningless to talk about such notions as "observer" and "observed" as separate concepts when dealing with non-played cinema. "Everything we see on the screen has nothing to do with objectivity," Loznitsa writes in 2005.[65] Documentary film, according to the director, is not a reflection of reality as such, but a composition of cinematic devices that work toward and against a particular set of audience expectations shaped by the idea of the documentary as a representation of reality. On the other hand, that same year Mansky published a manifesto with another self-revealing title, *Real Cinema*, where he essentially repeated Vertov's claims against plot-driven documentary film and against reenactments in favor of capturing reality as it unravels in front of the camera.[66]

Interestingly, the dispute of the early 2000s, which reminded so strongly of the heated arguments of the 1920s, took place in a political situation in Russia in which state control over

[65] "Все, что мы видим в снятом виде, не есть объективность ..." Loznitsa, Sergei, "Konets 'dokumental'nogo' kino," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 6 (2005), 51-52.
[66] For more on the polemic between Loznitsa and Mansky see Oushakine, "Totality Decomposed," 638-69.

cinema production was relaxed and the state ideology was no longer clear. If the filmmakers of the early 20th century had to define their positions in relationship to other forms of visual arts, such as painting, photography, and theater, then the directors of the early 21st century must face an almost century-long history of documentary cinema and rearticulate their stance in relation to it. The crisis of representation in documentary is experienced yet again, this time with regard to the long-lasting heritage of the grandmasters of the past like Eisenstein, Vertov, and Shub… The cinematic archive available to Mansky and Loznitsa in the early 2000s is incomparably larger and encompasses everything from newsreels and documentary films of the 1920s and 1930s, to the war chronicles of the 1940s, to television programs and home videos, to list but a few examples. However, the problems that these filmmakers address in their theoretical writing and in their creative work, touch upon questions raised a century of film history ago: what constitutes the aesthetic and semantic potential of documentary footage? How can documentary constitute and re-constitute a historical narrative when dealing with archival material? How can the continuity of the present be fractured and reassembled to produce meaning in documentary? The work of the early Soviet documentary filmmakers provides a certain paradigm that helps contemporary directors define their own new cinematic language in relationship to it, be it the poetization of montage or the narrativization of the document.

Private Voice – Collective Memory

Keeping in mind Mansky's theoretical stance prioritizing minimal involvement of the documentary filmmaker in representation of real events captured by the camera, I examine his documentary *Private Chronicles. Monologue*. My analysis is focused on the role of the voice-over together with other sound elements in relation to the visual stream of the found footage he uses in the documentary. In *Private Chronicles. Monologue*, Mansky privileges the voice, rather

than other components of the soundtrack of the documentary, and by means of an actor's vocal narration achieves an illusion of continuity of unrelated montaged video fragments. Besides acting as a cohesive tissue between disparate visual sequences by providing a biographical first-person narrative, what other functions does the voice-over have in this documentary? I argue that the tonality of the voice-over in *Private Chronicles. Monologue* adds emotional dimension to a purely semantic level of the story itself. Together with music, written for the documentary by the composer Aleksei Aigi, the voice tunes the spectator's perception in a particular way, rendering the soundtrack of this documentary dwells on being recognizable and forgettable at the same time.

Private Chronicles. Monologue is composed of private footage recorded in the Soviet Union in the 1960s-1980s by multiple amateur camera operators. Mansky collected video fragments and assembled them to fit into a plausible life story of a representative of the last Soviet generation.[67] The text, composed to deliver this private biography, was written by the author Igor Iarkevich specifically for the documentary. It begins in 1961, ends in 1986, and leads the audience through a series of memories that the narrator shares about each year of his life. The narrator's voice belongs to the actor Aleksandr Tsekalo, who was indeed born in 1961 and was a popular media personality on Russian television in the 1990s and 2000s. His voice is the only voice the spectator hears over otherwise silent footage and, of course, we never see the actor himself – instead, the audience is invited to identify the narrator's voice with an image on screen at the very beginning of the documentary. *Private Chronicles. Monologue* opens with a footage

[67] For more production history of *Private Chronicles. Monologue* see: Oushakine, "Totality Decomposed," 661.

of a couple leaving the hospital with their newborn baby wrapped in a white puffy blanket, the mother holding a bouquet of flowers and the father holding the child. “This is me” is the first line of the film (00:02:38) (Illustration 6). A few minutes later, several different infants with their mothers are shown, but following the narrator’s voice, the spectator is expected to ignore the apparent visual difference and perceive all these images of children as belonging to the narrator’s voice and constituting his sole, albeit composite, image.


Illustration 6. Parents leaving the hospital with their newborn. *Private Chronicles. Monologue* (dir. Vitalliy Mansly, 1999)

The voice of Aleksandr Tsekalo sounds very familiar to Russian audiences, an effect Mansky surely anticipated when asking a media celebrity to read the voice-over, yet it is not the well-tempered voice of a theater academy graduate (the actor never received a standard theatrical education and training). It sounds relaxed and slightly detached from the story it is narrating, even though the story is highly intimate. The voice keeps a measured cadence throughout the entire documentary, notwithstanding the degree of emotional tension associated with events shown and described by the narrator. Zara Abdullaeva, a film critic, describes the voice of Tsekalo in her article on *Private Chronicles. Monologue* as stylized to sound like somebody from a periphery, “neither a capital dweller, nor a person from a province.”[68] She compares Tsekalo’s voice to a live band accompanying a silent film screening that, strictly speaking, does not belong to the world of the film, yet facilitates the unfolding of the cinematic story and calibrates the emotional response of

[68] “На самом деле это замечательно стилизованный текст – не столичного жителя и не провинциального, а окраинного.” Abdullaeva, *Real’noe kino*, 270.

the audience. Following Abdullaeva's observation, I suggest that the audience of this documentary, guided by the tone of the narrator's voice, is not supposed to identify with the story emotionally. Neither nostalgic melancholy nor joyful or tearful recognition of familiar objects, rituals, and places are organic to Mansky's film. A sense of boredom, fatigue, and indifference reflected in the voice color the stream of the narrator's remembering consciousness.

Mansky's balancing act in *Private Chronicles. Monologue* depends on two poles: familiarity and "forgettability." At the visual level, the audience is tempted to recognize numerous familiar details from the Soviet 1960s-1980s: elements of décor, clothes, hairstyles, children's toys, streets, buildings, cars, etc. Yet, because these details are so countless and overwhelmingly fleeting, the spectator has no time to create a meaningful connection between the details and the context. The same strategy is at work in the soundtrack for the documentary. The narrator's voice is recognizable, after all – Tsekalo was a popular showman, singer, and TV host at the time – but without a visual anchor allowing for a stable association, the voice remains a disembodied, almost spectral entity. This effect of being recognizable yet utterly forgettable is highlighted by the music score, composed by Aleksei Aigi for *Private Chronicles. Monologue*.[69] Aigi's musical style is highly recognizable, but the absence of a melodic structure built on pattern repetition renders his compositions impossible to reconstruct from memory.

While the voice-over in *Private Chronicles. Monologue* does indeed provide a narrative arc for otherwise disconnected documentary fragments, it also creates a certain effect of self-erasure in failing to establish a lasting association between the image and the sound. The chronicles assembled by Mansky in his documentary are silent, but the film itself comes with a

[69] Aigi wrote soundtracks for two widely successful fiction films in two years before the release of Mansky's documentary in 1999: *Country of the Deaf* (*Strana glukhikh*, dir. Valery Todorovskii, 1997) and *Retro for the Three* (*Retro vtroiom*, dir. Piotr Todorovskii, 1998).

full-bodied soundtrack, including a voice-over, a musical score, and a few sound effects (splashing of waves, gunshots, etc.). Mansky offers his audience a carefully composed, complex structure that, on the one hand, invites recognition, while on the other hand insisting on its own fabricated character. This disjuncture creates an opening for ambiguity and interpretation on behalf of the spectator.

The Politics of Sound in Sergei Loznitsa's Documentary Films

Mansky's opponent in the dispute around the nature of documentary filmmaking, Sergei Loznitsa, also masterfully mobilizes voice leading in his original and found footage documentaries. Loznitsa was recognized internationally in 2005 for his found-footage compilation documentary *The Blockade (Blokada*), which he created in collaboration with the sound designer Vladimir Golovnitskii. Golovnitskii also produced an elaborate soundtrack for Loznitsa's *Maidan* and *The Event*. After the release of *The Event*, in an interview to *Deutsche Welle* Sergei Loznitsa, called his film "a semantic pair" (*smyslovaia para*) to his documentary *Maidan*, released a year earlier.[70] *Maidan* is a monumental cinematic document that chronicles the uprising and a violent conflict between protesters and a militarized police force in Kyiv from December 2013 until March 2014. *The Event* is a found-footage montage documentary dedicated to the events of August 1991 in Saint Petersburg, then Leningrad, during an attempted coup which resulted in the fall of the Soviet Union. In addition to the thematic similarities of these documentaries, explicitly centered on depiction of masses at the times of nation-wide political crises, there are also formal resemblances at the narrative and visual levels. In both documentaries, images of the crowds are interspersed with shots focused on individual people

[70] Loznitsa, Sergei, "Putch 1991 goda – eto predosterezhenie Maidanu." *DW*, http://p.dw.com/p/1Gx7a.html.

and close-ups. There is no voice-over narration and commentary in either *Maidan* or *The Event*; both documentaries imitate the temporality of two full days (morning, afternoon, and night), even though the actual events depicted in *Maidan* span over a few months. I bring *Maidan* and *The Event* together as a "semantic pair" in order to discuss the politics of sound in Loznitsa's documentaries. In particular, my analysis is focused on the role of acousmatic sound in relation to the visual. I argue that the consequences of using the voice, whose origin remains unseen to the spectator, in Loznitsa's films are twofold: it intensifies the effect of the visual and brings to the fore the tension between the footage and the sound.

The acousmatic voice is a distinctive element of the sonic structure in Loznitsa's *Maidan* and *The Event*, and the overwhelming presence of acousmatic sound partakes in the politics of these two documentaries. The concept of acousmatic sound was introduced by Pierre Schaeffer in the 1950s and later elaborated by Michel Chion in a series of works on sound in cinema.[71] In short, acousmatic sound is a kind of sound that is not accompanied by the image of its source or its origin on screen. It is important, however, to mark the difference between acousmatic sound and non-diegetic sound. The latter is sound that, strictly speaking, does not belong to the world of the film, whereas acousmatic sound does, although its source cannot be visualized. For example, in *The Event*, Loznitsa uses both acousmatic and non-diegetic sound. Montage sequences are separated by blackouts, during which the spectator hears Tchaikovsky's *Moderato* from Act II of *Swan Lake, Op.20*. And while this piece signifies on multiple levels and plays an important part in the soundtrack of the documentary, its locus is explicitly off-screen, without

[71] See: Schaeffer, Pierre, transl. by Christine North, and John Dack, *Treatise On Musical Objects: Essays Across Disciplines* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017); Chion, *Audio-vision*; Chion, Michel, transl. by Claudia Gorbman, *The Voice In Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

even a possibility of identification of the source of the sound on-screen – it is non-diegetic.[72] In contrast, in an episode of *The Event* (00:30:48-00:31:29), we see a crowd gathering on St. Isaac's Square in front of the Legislative Assembly and hear a male voice addressing the people, possibly through a megaphone, a loudspeaker, or a public announcement system (Illustration 7). While we can notice that the people's gazes are oriented toward a common direction, we never actually see anyone speaking or anything indicated as the source of the sound. This voice is acousmatic. In the words of Chion, "For the spectator, then, the filmic *acousmetre* is… outside the image, and at the same time *in* the image. It's as if the voice were wondering along the surface, at once inside and outside, seeking a place to settle."[73]



Illustration 7. People gathered on St. Isaac's Square listening to an unseen speaker addressing the crowd. *The Event* (dir. Sergei Loznitsa, 2015)

One could argue that the prevalence of the acousmatic voice in *The Event* is of material nature, rather than a formal choice of the director, since the black-and-white footage, made by eight cameramen of Leningrad Documentary Film Studio in 1991 and discovered by Loznitsa in the archive twenty years later, was silent.[74] The sound designer Golovnitskii and Loznitsa had to create a soundtrack for the documentary without any synchronized sound recorded on location.

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[72] During the attempted coup on August 18-21, 1991, Russian central television stopped its regular broadcasting and instead showed a video recording of the Bolshoy Theater's performance of the ballet *Swan Lak*e by Piotr Tchaikovsky on repeat. The ballet would be interrupted only by the news.
[73] Chion, *The Voice In Cinema*, 23.
[74] See: Loznitsa, Sergei, Interview by Dmitrti Volchek, "Robkiy russkiy bunt," *Radio Svoboda*, 19 August 2015, https://www.svoboda.org/a/27195206.html

However, this was not the case with *Maidan*, when Loznitsa himself and his cameraman Sergei Stetsenko were in Kiev on Independence Square for months in 2013-2014 and recorded over 150 hours of synchronic sound.[75] Yet, *Maidan* is no less saturated with acousmatic sound than *The Event*. For example, during a dramatic footage of an attack on the protesters and the press (00:59:53-01:01:09), the spectator hears a male voice addressing the crowd in a sermon-like manner over the sound of explosions, shots, and voices of the crowd (Illustration 8). The speaker is never identified either visually or textually, via subtitle, which Loznitsa sometimes uses to inform his audience of the identity of the speaker. The camera stays focused on an empty bus in the foreground and the soldiers wearing shields and helmets in the background.



Illustration 8. The attack filmed from behind an empty bus on Maidan Square where a man wearing a jacket saying "Press" is photographing the attack. *Maidan* (dir. Sergei Loznitsa, 2015)

Speaking about his work on the soundtrack for *Maidan*, Loznitsa remarks, "We create the sound for a documentary the same way as for a fiction film… We use our imagination."[76] Therefore, a proliferation of scenes with acousmatic voice in both documentaries is a conscious stylistic choice on behalf of the director, which is not necessarily contingent on the visual material per se. It hinges on the filmmaker's artistic decision to create an image accompanied by a particular kind of sound to intensify the effect of the visual, which can reflect his political

[75] Loznitsa, Sergei, Interview in Ghent, Belgium, at the KASK Cinema, 12 March 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PxovHtv654. Video.
[76] "Мы делаем для документальной картины звук, как для игровой… Мы включаем фантазию." Ibid.

agenda. It is particularly relevant in that these documentaries are conceptually inscribed into a political framework by the nature of events they represent on screen.

In *A Voice and Nothing More*, a study of ethics and politics of the voice, the cultural theorist and film critic Mladen Dolar notes, "The visible can establish the distance, the nature and the source of the voice, and thus neutralize it. The acousmatic voice is so powerful because it cannot be neutralized with the framework of the visible, and it makes the visible itself redoubled and enigmatic."[77] If we consider this observation in the context of *Maidan* and *The Event*, keeping in mind a political dimension of Loznitsa's work, we can perhaps establish a certain pattern. Loznitsa repeatedly uses counterpoint as a structural element of the audiovisual construction of his documentaries. By refusing to synchronize sound and image in a way that would create a totalizing unity, Loznitsa directs the audience's attention precisely to the moments of tension between what is seen and what is heard. In a sense, this works against the audience's expectations: after all, the events depicted in both *Maidan* and *The Event* have been mediated by video and television; images of the Maidan revolt in particular have been widely circulated in the press and social media. For spectators, there exists a particular narrative around these political events built on conjunction of the visual and the sonic. Loznitsa's insistence on disrupting the continuity of the image and the sound reinforces the instability of such narratives. These documentaries capture events of immense political importance, but instead of participating in the construction of a solidifying discourse around them, Loznitsa instead suspends the possibility of total understanding. As Dolar observes above, acousmatic voice is not only powerful in its resistance to being neutralized by the visible, but it is also ghostlike, for it cannot be embodied by an object on the screen. And in turn, the visible, which does not correlate to the

[77] Dolar, Mladen, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 79.

sound, loses its semantic rigidity and becomes "enigmatic." In other words, acousmatic sound in Loznitsa's documentaries invites the audience to question the seemingly natural connection between the sound and the image, which mutually contaminate and complicate each other. Thus, through the politics of sound in *Maidan* and *The Event*, Loznitsa opens not only his documentaries, but also the events themselves, up for interpretation. *Maidan* and *The Event* constitute a "semantic pair," to borrow Loznitsa's own words, not solely in regard to the political nature of events they capture, but also due to a kind of aesthetic kinship. The usage of acousmatic voice, whose origin or source remains unseen by the spectator, allows Loznitsa to complicate his political message in *Maidan* and *The Event*. By destabilizing the illusion of continuity and natural connection between the image and the sound, Loznitsa gestures towards an impossibility of totalizing narratives around such events as the attempted coup of 1991 in the Soviet Union and the revolt against a corrupt regime in Ukraine in 2013-2014.

"Where am I?": The Voice of the Author in Liubov' Arkus's *Anton's Right Here*

Following the analysis of Mansky's *Private Chronicles. Monologue*, which relies on voice-over narration, and Loznitsa, who does not include voice-over in the sound composition of his *Maidan* and *The Event*, I continue with a study of Liubov' Arkus's film *Anton's Right Here* (*Anton tut riadom*, 2012). The analysis of this documentary allows for a discussion of yet another kind of audiovisual structure of a documentary – the one that incorporates the actual voice of the filmmaker. Unlike Mansky and Loznitsa, Arkus participates in her documentary, and it is her voice that we hear throughout the film. The documentary begins with Anton's close-up, which is immediately followed by Arkus's monologue about herself. This dual opening allows the audience to understand the film not only as a narrative focused around one person, an autistic teenager. *Anton's Right Here* is rather a film about how one person's world unravels through

contact with the "other;" Arkus places her own story and her own experience in dialogue with Anton's story without keeping a documentarian's distance and observing the life of the "other" from afar. Instead, she dramatically combines these two lives by acting as the film director and as an object of her own documentary. I would argue that the voice-over plays a particularly important part in the sequences in which Arkus speaks about her own childhood memories.

Anton's Right Here opens with a close-up of Anton's face and the sounds of his hoarse voice; there are no words, only the sound: a short, repeated stifled cry. Anton is not standing still; the camera captures his movement and the scuffing noise of his boots. Anton is a perpetual source of sound – not always legible words, but gruff moaning and stifled cries. Even before the opening credit sequence with the names of the film crew members and the film title, and right after the close-up of Anton, the spectator sees Lyubov' Arkus, the film director, getting into her car and driving through a dark city covered in snow (00:00:58—0:01:52). Her own voice is heard over the footage, "I don't remember when it started. The question that would wake me up in the morning, even before I woke up: 'where am I?' This person, who is about to get up, hectically drink coffee, make phone calls, then get into a car and run errands. The person, who learned everything she was supposed to learn as an adult […] Here she is. But this is definitely not me."[78] The sequence ends with a car parking in front of an apartment building, Arkus calling the intercom and, apparently, answering somebody's question by saying, "Mama, it's me." This opening occupies a strong position within the documentary's structure and suggests several parallel ideas, which are further developed in the film.

[78] "Когда это началось, я не помню. Вопрос, который стал будить меня по утрам, еще до того, как я просыпалась: 'где я?' Этот человек, который сейчас встанет, начнет лихорадочно пить кофе, делать звонки, потом сядет в машину и поедет по делам. Человек, который всему научился, чему положено было научиться взрослому. […] Вот он. Но это точно не я."

In an interview about the documentary, Alisher Khamidkhodzhaev, the director of photography for *Anton's Right Here*, describes one of the key episodes, which I will analyze below, as follows: "Generally speaking, documentary cinema is a constant return to the main character. When I was watching the final cut, it struck me that the story about Liuba's father's letters was the turning point in the search of the main character's image. And when we found this key to the image, that was it – the film was complete."[79] The episode, to which Khamidkhodzhaev is referring here, is about Arkus's family history: the arrest of Arkus's grandmother in 1937, when Arkus's father was three years old, and his untimely death at 29 years old, when Arkus herself was only a child (01:23:55—01:25:43). The director tells us in the voice-over how shortly before the death of Rinata (Anton's mother, who lived at Arkus's apartment while undergoing her final chemotherapy sessions), she found a package addressed to Liuba Arkus. The package contained correspondence between Arkus's father and grandmother, as well as photographs, documents, and a notebook. The camera zooms in onto a pile of paper covered in handwriting, telegrams, letters, and pictures (Illustration 9). It is Arkus's own voice that we hear in the voice-over telling us the story of her father, who passed away as prematurely

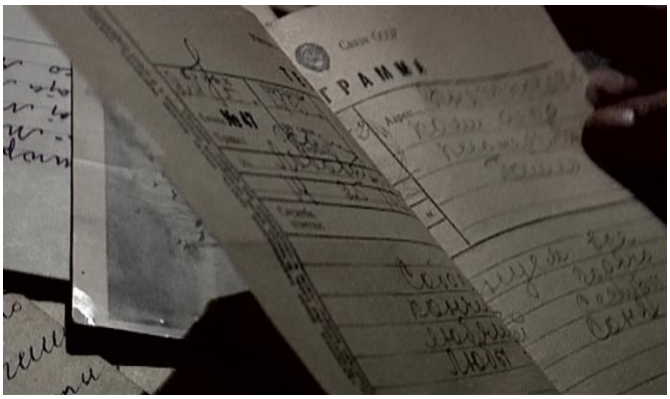

Illustration 9. Close-up of the correspondence. *Anton's Right Here* (dir. Liubov' Arkus, 2012).

[79] "Вообще, документальное кино – это постоянное возвращение к герою. Мне показалось, когда я смотрел финальную сборку, что история с письмами Любиного отца – это как раз поворотный пункт в поисках этого образа. И когда этот ключ к образу нашелся, то картина сложилась." Khamidkhodzhaev, Alisher, "Dostatochno vzgliada: (S Alisherom Khamidkhodzhaevym beseduyet Konstantin Shavlovsky)" *Seans* (29 avgusta 2012) http://seance.ru/blog/interviews/anton-alisher/

as did Anton's mother. She says, “I remember his smile, his arms, his shadow in a door frame, in Kosciuszko Park where we spent hours watching peacocks, and in the square in front of the Dominican church where we used to feed pigeons. Dad was three years old when he lost his parents. And he spent the rest of his life running away, moving from one town to another, changing jobs and lifestyles, but when I was born, he turned into a family man and would not let me off his arms.”[80]

In this short episode, Arkus's narrative includes both her own memories (images of her father, his smile, his shadow, which resemble the photographs captured by the camera in this sequence) and memories, which strictly speaking cannot belong to her. She can only know about her father's life before her birth from other people's stories. However, the image of the “other” – her father, in this case – is closely tied to her own remembering self. This indicates the porousness and flexibility of the borders between images, stored in her own memory of her childhood and her father, and those images that come from the outside, from other people’s stories.

In her article *Through The I of The Camera: Women and Autobiography in Contemporary European Film,* Wendy Everett, a scholar of contemporary European cinema, studies a particular identity structure associated with documentary cinema directed by women. Everett notices that the “I” in these documentary films is depicted as fragmented, not self-identical, incomplete. It often includes different and competing points of view and is often shown not a static worldview, but as an ever-changing landscape. Everett considers this quality of

[80] “Я помню его улыбку, его руки, его силуэт в проеме двери, в парке Костюшко, где мы часами смотрели на павлинов, и в скверике доминиканской церкви, где кормили голубей. Папе было три года, когда он остался без родителей. И всю жизнь потом он убегал, менял города, работу, образ жизни, а с моим рождением превратился в домоседа и не спускал меня с рук”.

cinematic documentary autobiographies as "one of the strengths of filmic autobiography, since it enables the director to recreate a remembered world exactly on her/his terms, as a complex inner/outer topography, contoured by experience."[81] I argue that it is this kind of identity structure of a remembering subject that the spectator finds in Arkus's documentary.

Arkus does not speak "on behalf" of Anton, and she does not ventriloquize his nonverbal communication; in fact, her voice in *Anton's Right Here* only describes her own experience, behavior, and memories. Her strategy in this documentary is not to "give a voice to the voiceless," specifically, to an autistic minimally verbal person. She does not offer a humanitarian intervention of "speaking up" on behalf of a socially marginalized group of people.[82] Instead, she shows, through recourse to her own experience and speaking in her own voice, that there are moments of nonverbal relationality that are familiar to neurotypical people. These moments serve for her as points of entry towards a beginning of understanding. By placing her own voice next to the voice of Anton, but without acting as a "translator" of his experiences into a neurotypical language, Arkus allows for the possibility of a different kind of communication to be recognized as equal to a "normalized" verbal exchange.

Conclusion

My analysis of these post-Soviet documentary films, which differ aesthetically and ideologically, centers on the role of the voice. The voice in documentary film always betrays a human presence, even if, as in the case of Mansky's *Private Chronicles. Monologue*, we never

[81] Everett, Wendy, "Through The I of The Camera: Women and Autobiography in Contemporary European Film," *Studies in European Cinema* IV, no.2, (2007), 128.
[82] For a critique of representation of autism in contemporary documentary and specifically of the documentary trope of "speaking out on behalf of the voiceless" see: Rangan, Pooja, "Having a Voice: Toward an Autistic Counterdiscourse of Documentary" in *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 104-149.

see the actually speaking person. Notwithstanding the absence of the body on the screen, which we could identify with the sounding voice (like in Loznitsa's documentaries *Maidan* and *The Event*), or multiple visually contradicting "presences" that we are invited to identify with the sound of one voice (for example, in Mansky's voice-over), the spectator follows the lead of the voice to construct a coherent durational sounding image. None of these films feature the conventional documentary trope of the "voice of God" narration, associated in Soviet and post-Soviet documentary voice-over tradition with the voices of Iurii Levitan, Mikhail Romm, Iefim Kopelian, and Sergei Tchonishvili.[83] In her analysis of this documentary sound convention, Rangan notes, "The hierarchical location of this acousmatic voice 'above' the diegetic sounds and images, its emanation from an unknowable off-screen space, and its economical and detached delivery worked in concert with its social and rhetorical coding to reinforce its metaphysical status and objectivity."[84] In contrast to this tradition, the documentary films discussed above highlight a non-hierarchical structure through various sound design strategies, all of which could be described as voice leading. Voice leading here creates an illusion of continuity that does not hinge on a linear narrative convincingly rendered by a detached "voice from above" or anchored in the diegesis of the film. To the contrary, be it a single voice (Mansky, Arkus) or multiple voices (Loznitsa), the coherence is achieved by weaving together several individual auditory streams (human voices, music, noise) in such a way as to create a continuous horizontal soundscape, associated with the image of reality that these documentaries aim to produce.

[83] For more on "the voice of God" documentary voice-over see: Wolfe, Charles, "Historicizing the 'Voice of God': The Place of Vocal Narration in Classical Documentary." *Film History* 9, no. 2 (1997), 149-67.
[84] Rangan, 110-111.

As David Huron shows in his research, voice leading in music functions as a "built-in" teaching mechanism that allows the listener to learn and quickly predict what sequence will follow. According to Huron, the listener's expectations develop along two pathways: short-term (expectations of a particular movement, progression, harmony, pitch, etc., within a certain musical piece) and long-term (expectations of a particular style of music, recognizable as such within a particular set of cultural conventions). As Huron asserts, "Our schematic [long-term] and veridical [short-term] expectations rely on our accumulated exposure to a given musical style or culture. Accordingly, voice leading is strongly wedded to culture."[85] The listener's knowing what might happen next musically is connected to a sense of purpose, movement, and continuity, which in its turn produces a sense of pleasure when the expectations are satisfied by the musical piece.

In reading the works of post-Soviet documentary film and theater contrapuntally, to borrow Said's formulation I attempted to show in this chapter how, by following the logic of voice leading, these works produce an effect of continuity and, "for an enculturated" spectator/listener, a sense of pleasure as well.[86] In these documentary films and theatrical productions, notwithstanding their differences in style and ideology, the sounding voice functions similarly as a device allowing the spectator/listener to predict the development of auditory and visual sequencing by following the sound. The spectator/listener develops "veridical" expectations based on the structure of each particular documentary, and the audience's familiarity with the culture of Soviet and post-Soviet documentary in general produces "schematic" expectations. Here, we overwhelmingly find structures of counterpoint,

[85] Huron, 146.
[86] Ibid., 5.

intertwined individual lines, simultaneity of voices, and repetition. Moreover, following Pooja Rangan's critique of the ethical aporia of "giving a voice to the voiceless" inherent in documentary, I hereby suggest voice leading as an ethically empowering mechanism offered by these documentary works.

Chapter 2: Documentary Space: Depth of Field on Screen and Flat Screens on Stage

Following the chapter that examines the role of sound in post-Soviet documentary films and theatrical productions by focusing primarily on voice leading as an organizational principle, this chapter turns to the question of space in documentary. After all, in documentary theater and cinema, sound is heard in a real space, where it resonates live or is recorded and layered over the visual. In the sonic organization, the main difference between documentary theater and film, is found in the live vs. mediatized nature of sound, even though documentary theater draws on recorded sound and image. In terms of the spatial organization, the tension arises from the two-dimensionality of the cinematic image and the three-dimensionality of the theatrical stage. The flat screen of a documentary film presents an illusion of three-dimensional reality by relying on visual devices such as linear perspective, wide angles, and depth of field. Three-dimensional theater, when staging documentary plays, often seeks to collapse its depth by using a dark flat background, placing actors frontstage, and amplifying frontstage visibility by lighting it against a dark upstage.

In this chapter, I focus my analysis of post-Soviet documentary space on films and performances in which the background plays a significant role and where directors actively draw spectators' attention to the depth of screen and stage. Background in such documentary works participates in calibrating spectators' optics in such a way as to encourage heightened attention to detail placed behind figures in the foreground, close-ups, and the brightly lit frontstage. In doing so, documentary cinema relies on the frame and documentary theater relies on the stage box both as limiting and structural devices, allowing for the interplay of flatness and depth, proximity and distance, legibility and ambiguity. In continuity with the method of contrapuntal reading used in the previous chapter, in this chapter I transpose the concept of counterpoint from musicology to

analyze the visual and spatial composition of documentary films and performances.[87] Visual elements in the background of these documentary works are brought in relationship with foregrounded elements, and thus they carry the weight of compositional bolstering of the visual order, grounding it in their depiction of reality and providing a sense of balance. Besides, I argue that both documentary films and performances use the depth of field and of stage to create an impression of an almost fully realized, detailed, and layered reality that they seek to represent and simultaneously to question the actual possibility of such representation.

The material that I focus on in this chapter comes from the period between 2011 and 2017 and includes three documentary performances and three documentary films. Among the many documentary pieces produced since the early 1990s both in theater and cinema, these recent works provide a range of compositional possibilities and diverse aesthetic decisions with regard to the role of background. I begin with a study of the documentary performance-lecture *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (*Ostanovka zimnim vecherom u lesa*, directed by Ekaterina Bondarenko and Tatiana Gordeeva, 2017), staged in Moscow at the Meyerhold Center; then I discuss *The Noise* (*Shum*, directed by Mikhail Patlasov, 2014), staged at the New Stage of the Aleksandrinskii Theater in Saint Petersburg. Finally, I turn to a documentary performance of the Teatr.Doc Theater in Moscow, *Out of the Closet* (*Vyiti iz shkafa*, directed by Anastasiia Patlai, 2016). I use my analysis of the role of screens that are located upstage and stream cinematic images in these performances as a pivotal moment and then turn to the documentary films *Long Live the Antipodes!* (*¡Vivan las Antipodas!*, directed by Viktor Kosakovskii, 2011), *The Pipeline* (*Truba*, directed by Vitalii Mansky, 2013), and *The Optical Axis* (*Opticheskaia os'*,

[87] For more on application of counterpoint in intermedial (music, painting, sculpture, architecture) analysis see Junod, Philippe, *Counterpoints: Dialogues Between Music and the Visual Arts* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017).

directed by Marina Razbezhkina, 2013). In my analysis of these documentaries, I show how cinematic, geographical, and figurative axes participate in shaping these documentary narratives: an imaginary axis between the West and the East (Mansky); the axis between two opposite points on the circumference of the Earth (Kosakovskii); and the historical axis between early 20th century photography and early 21st century documentary cinema (Razbezhkina). I argue that what comes into a kind of focus for the spectator as a result of various cinematic techniques used by these filmmakers is an image of extremely vast geographical spaces and historical spans rendered meaningful and emotionally expressive.

Part 1: Flat Screens and Theater Boxes

Maria Tregubova, a Russian theater set designer who has worked with some of the most famous and innovative theater directors, including Valerii Fokin, Dmitrii Krymov, and Andrei Moguchii, says in an interview that a set designer is a creator of "parallel realities" in "theater boxes." Today, Tregubova insists, set designers' work is "less about decoration and more about action": they are in constant dialogue with actual reality.[88] Following Tregubova's idea, in this section I reconstruct some of these dialogues between "designed" and "actual" realities by closely reading several documentary productions that were staged in Moscow and Saint Petersburg between 2014 and 2017. These dialogues are far from being conventional: the performances' plots are often barely graspable, while the performances themselves are usually minimalist. To analyze how contemporary theater overcomes the plotlessness of documentary material and designs its own coherent "staged reality", I focus on the relationship between

[88] "... сценограф, создающий в театральных коробочках параллельные реальности ... Сценография ... меньше украшает и больше действует. "Tregubova, Maria. Interview. "Vykhod iz teni: piat' rossiiskikh stsenografov rasskazyvaiut o svoiei professii," available at https://www.buro247.ru/culture/theatre/27-aug-2018-scenography.html.

theatrical space, document, and technology from the perspective of media theory. I argue that contemporary Russian theater-documentarians bring present-day life into art, turning a century old slogan — art into life! — on its head. They do so by instrumentalizing visual and textual documents in theatrical productions. Ultimately, I show how contemporary documentary theater's staging of reality relates to the current moment in Russia and to reality outside of the theater.

Documentary theater in Russia in the 2010s has appropriated the operational modality of digital media, which functions by assembling a version of reality by means of accumulating and organizing disparate visual and textual documents in real time. In the 2010s, a decade defined by the oversaturation and omnipresence of digital media, theater instrumentalized the screen as a heterogenous space that allows for play between still and moving images, flatness and depth, recorded and live action. The stage space functions as a frame for media representations that are made dependent upon the context produced by performance for their meaning. In this way, documentary theater distinguishes itself from other media marked by the documentary, such as photography, film, and (live) video while simultaneously incorporating them. Moreover, documentary theater not only *recalibrates* the audience's perception of the reality of performance, but also *destabilizes* the image of the real as a homogenous entity. Much like reality outside of the actual space of theater, the medial realities of these performances are multiple and conflicting, based on competing perspectives, fragmented, and malleable.

The case studies analyzed in this section demonstrate how, in a variety of architectural and scenographic settings, contemporary documentary theater translates its makers' and spectators' desire to understand, transform, and document their everyday reality into productions of two- and three-dimensional images of this reality as it is projected back to the audience both

on stage and on screen. In all three documentary productions selected for this section, interactive screens and digital projections are integral to the set design. The digital screen and video streaming play an important role in documentary productions, contributing to *action* on the stage more so than to its *decoration*. In other words, in the documentary productions I will discuss, scenography, or stage design, does not, for example, simply create an illusion of a particular place in time or provide an ornament to the stage box to achieve an effect of depth. Rather, it participates in the performance's unfolding: the digital content that the spectators see on the screen is an essential part of a theatrical piece, not an add-on. Screens amplify, record, and play back fragments of reality as it transforms live performance, defamiliarizing physical and material experience by turning it into a two-dimensional image. Thus, the audience engages with reality on two levels: its actual three-dimensional presence and its fragmented image mediated by screens.

Documentary theater is not the only type of theater that appropriates and interacts with new media, but it is particularly remarkable in the context of the relationship between old and new media and reality, because it defines itself specifically through its connection to the real. Theater, documentary theater in particular, has been incorporating screens and projections into scenography for nearly a century. The term "documentary drama" was first coined by Bertolt Brecht in reference to the work of Erwin Piscator in 1926. Piscator's methods influenced the development of European and international theater for decades; in many ways, he was the first theatrical director to actively implement the most advanced technologies of his time, such as photography, static projections, and cinematic images on stage.[89] In Russian theater, already in

[89] For more on early documentary theater, see: Willett, John, *The Theater of Erwin Piscator* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978).

1927 several theater directors, including Vsevolod Meyerhold, Aleksei Popov, and Andrei Lavrent'ev, in collaboration with the set designers, Viktor Shestakov and Nikolai Akimov, experimented with photographic and cinematic images projected onto screens in their productions.[90] In the 1920s, theater as an art form sought to redefine its own position in relation to dramatic presentation, when challenged by a newly arrived visual medium – cinema. One of the ways in which theater developed in the aftermath of the arrival of cinema was to appropriate a number of cinematic devices, namely montage and close-up.[91] These elements, incorporated into a new theatrical visual vocabulary, strove to approximate on the stage a more dynamic and realistic representation of the radically shifting reality of that historical moment. According to Viktor Beriozkin, a scholar of Soviet theater and visual arts, this appropriation of a new medium "further widened the limits of stage depiction of the new reality."[92] Thus, from the 1920s onwards, scenographic use of cinematic devices in theater has been connected to two tasks: redefinition of the media specificity of theater as a dramatic art form and realistic representation of actuality in theater. In what follows, I show how contemporary Russian documentary theater of the 2010s approaches these tasks and how new media organizes theatrical space and the audience's perception of performance. My thinking through the spatial organization of performance space is framed by the following questions: How do documentary productions

[90] For more on Meyerhold's production of *A Window into the Village* (*Okno v derevniu*) by Rodion Akul'shin and Lavrent'ev's production of *The Enemies* (*Vragi*) by Boris Lavreniov, see: Beriozkin, Viktor, *Sovetskaia stsenografiia. 1917-1941* (Moskva: Nauka, 1990), 104-113.
[91] For more on adaptation of cinematic elements by Russian theater of the 1920s, see: Fevral'skii, Aleksandr, "Kinofikatsiia teatra" in *Puti k sintezu: Meyerhold i kino* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1978), 108-146.
[92] "... шире раздвигались границы сценического изображения новой действительности." Beriozkin, 104.

document and generate realities? And how do these medial realities relate to the present-day moment and reality outside of the theater?

Ekaterina Bondarenko and Tatiana Gordeeva's Documentary Lecture-Performance

Lecture-performance (referred to in Russian as *performativnaia lektsiia* or *perfolektsiia*) is a specific documentary genre that recently emerged in post-Soviet Russian performance culture, following the wave of interest of practitioners and theorists of performance in this artistic practice abroad. In Russia, over the past decade many performers, such as Hanna Zubkova, Keti Chukhrov, Roman Osminkin, Viktor Vilisov, to name only a few, have provocatively and creatively engaged with lecture-performance in various live and mediatized formats. Lecture-performance as a distinct artistic genre can be traced back to the 1960s, when it emerged due to the intersection of conceptualism, with its conflation of artistic and critique production, and performance art, which centers on the performing body.[93] One of the first lecture-performances commonly recognized as such is Robert Morris's piece from 1964, titled *21.3*, based on Morris's reenactment of Erwin Panofsky's lecture reading on iconography and iconology. In her article on lecture-performances, a performance studies scholar and artist Mashinka Firunts shows how in this piece, *21.3*, Morris "addresses the conditions of academic institutionalization to which artistic practice has become subject."[94] From the 1960s onwards, the critique of institutions has been an essential feature of lecture-performances. By appropriating, inhabiting, and transforming the lecture form, performers expose everything that is problematic in the production and consumption of art and knowledge, from access issues and hierarchical

[93] For more on lecture-performance, see: Frank, Rike, "When Form Starts Talking: On Lecture-Performances," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 33 (Summer 2013), 4-15.
[94] Firunts, Mashinka, "Staging Professionalization: Lecture-performances and para-institutional pedagogies, from the postwar to the present," *Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts* 21:6 (2016), 19-25.

structures to obsolete forms of communication, etc. Lecture-performances seek to imagine and embody alternative forms through which knowledge can be communicated and disseminated.

In addition to institutional criticism, lecture-performance as a genre is characterized by heightened attention to the body and the voice as vehicles of information and knowledge. Unlike a conventional academic lecture, a lecture-performance cannot be reduced to a text. Lecture-performance creates meaning simultaneously on several levels: sonic, affective, visual, and embodied. And all these elements equally contribute to the structure of the lecture-performance: removing any one of these elements leads to a total transformation of the piece.

In the context of post-Soviet Russian culture, lecture-performance has gradually moved from the margins of performance art, if not to the center, then at least to a more visible position. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (*Ostanovka zimnim vecherom u lesa*, 2017, further referred to as *Stopping by Woods*) by Bondarenko and Gordeeva was one of the first experiments with lecture-performance as a genre in Russia and remains a singular example of a lecture performed and danced naked. By removing their clothes at the beginning of the lecture, Bondarenko and Gordeeva perform an act of rejection of external layers (of knowledge, prejudice, information, culture, etc.) that mark and confine bodies in a specific way. They intentionally seek to desexualize the act of undressing, as well as the eroticization of the naked female body. In doing so, they present their bodies as vulnerable open surfaces that, as the lecture-performance progresses, display not only the marks, but also the process of marking produced by interaction with the body of the other.

When asked about the structure of *Stopping by Woods*, Ekaterina Bondarenko states that the structure of the lecture-performance is supposed to imitate the process of a building construction, where one starts with a blueprint and exploration of the terrain, and then moves on

to the foundation, basic structure, walls, etc.[95] Their bodies, then, function in this performance simultaneously as a construction archive, carrying the traces of the construction process on the surface of their skin, and as the main construction instrument. Their lecture-performance is also structured poetically around the poem by Robert Frost that gave its title to the piece. There is no explicit connection between the poem and the lecture-performance; however, it is recited and written in full on Gordeeva's body as she moves rhythmically to the voice of Bondarenko reading the poem. One of the points that this lecture-performance makes is that knowledge can be illusive and not obvious; it can be communicated by bodily movement, visual association, or unconscious reaction.

Like any document-based art form, documentary theater invariably addresses reality post-factum, yet contemporary theater in Russia engages with different regimes of retrospective orientation. Documentary material is selected in accordance with the goals that each particular performance sets for itself. For example, I will later discuss Anastasiia Patlai's production *Out of the Closet* (*Vyiti iz shkafa*, 2016), which works with the immediacy of the present-day reality and is also invested in a kind of futurity approximated by enhanced understanding and facilitated conversation about problems, prejudices, and limitations in society. Meanwhile, Ekaterina Bondarenko and Tatiana Gordeeva's documentary lecture-performance *Stopping by Woods* poses similarly pressing yet distinct sets of questions.

Questioning the confines of any single performance genre, *Stopping by Woods* brings together dance and poetry, video and situationist art, lecture and participatory performance. Preoccupied with architecture and human body, Bondarenko and Gordeeva create a space of

[95] Bondarenko, Ekaterina. Interview by Natalia Plagmann, recorded on March 29, 2018, in Moscow, Russia.

public intimacy as they dance through theoretical discourse. Following Giuliana Bruno's critical thought on surface and screen, I propose a reading of the performers' bodies in this lecture-performance as "a space of crossovers," where movement and inscription, the spatial and the visual, are connected in "textural materiality and surface tension."[96]

Giuliana Bruno, a scholar of media and environmental studies, conceptualizes the notions of luminosity and surface in the context of visual arts, architecture, and modernity in her book *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*.[97] Bruno contends that the "shift to the digital" constitutes a "defining material cultural shift," and it is the surface that "is poised to be at the center of this process of rematerialization insofar as it is constituted, by its very nature, as an architectural partition. The surface is a form of dwelling that engages mediation between subjects and with objects ... it can become a site of screening and projection."[98] Bruno here articulates a threefold significance of materiality of the surface that functions first as "an architectural partition," which can organize space and serve as a limit and/or a structure, but also as a "space of crossovers, in which the visual and the spatial arts come to be connected."[99] Second, it functions as "a form of dwelling" enabling "mediation between subjects," in other words, a site of communication, if we emphasize *mediation*, and a form of shelter or safe terrain, if we emphasize *dwelling*.[100] Finally, it is "a site of screening and projection" that is intrinsically linked to the movement of light illuminating the surface, which becomes a space of "reflection and self-reflection."[101] Bruno notes, "As the surface has acquired its own theatricality and

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[96] Bruno, Giuliana, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago Press, 2014), 6-7.
[97] Ibid., 7.
[98] Ibid., 94.
[99] Ibid., 7.
[100] Ibid., 94.
[101] Ibid., 94, 82.

performativity, it is not surprising that it would return to the stage in more luminous forms to refashion theatrical space."[102] A projected image receives its visibility through the contact between a surface and a stream of light. The source of light is necessarily located at a distance to the screen surface to achieve a desired definition and quality of the image. This play of distance and intimacy, stillness and movement (of light and the performer's body), legibility and visibility, is activated in *Stopping by Woods* and suggestively embodied by the luminous bodies of Bondarenko and Gordeeva in this lecture-performance.

Stopping by Woods is a second project of the Bondarenko-Gordeeva duo; their collaboration in 2015 resulted in a documentary dance performance called *Leopard Spots* (*Piatna leoparda*).[103] Working on *Leopard Spots* was their first experience in combining documentary theater and dance performance. Bondarenko has background in documentary theater: for many years she has been a playwright and a documentary performance curator for Teatr.Doc. Gordeeva is a professional dancer, choreographer, and movement artist, trained at Vaganova Ballet Academy, with a long list of awards for her dancing, teaching, and choreography. In their own words, while working through the textual and embodied material for *Leopard Spots*, they started to develop their unique interdisciplinary method, which evolved further in *Stopping by Woods*.[104] Their method includes reenactment, improvisation, incorporation of verbatim, literary, and theoretical texts, dance, elements of situationist art, and video installations. In all their projects (they have co-authored three performances by now, adding *The Professional* (*Professional*) in

[102] Ibid.
[103] For more on the *Leopard Spots* performance, see Zaitseva, Natalia, "Kogda "kafka" stanovitsia byl'iu," *Syg.ma,* January 20, 2017: https://syg.ma/@natalia-zaitseva/koghda-kafka-stanovitsia-byliu.
[104] Bondarenko, Ekaterina. Interview by Natalia Plagmann, recorded on March 29, 2018, in Moscow, Russia.

2018), Bondarenko and Gordeeva both act as dramaturgs, choreographers, directors, and performers.[105]

The version of the performance of *Stopping by Woods,* which I attended at the Meyerhold Center in Moscow in March 2018 and which is analyzed in this section, is a distinct version of their lecture-performance. Usually, this lecture-performance is performed in Russian with insertions of Uzbek and Estonian; in this case, *Stopping by Woods* was performed for an international festival jury in English with fragments in Russian, Uzbek, and Estonian, which highlighted the complex and thoughtfully orchestrated verbal score at the center of their piece.

"The Architecture of Words" part of the lecture-performance is built around situationist art practices and includes texts in Uzbek, performed by Bondarenko, who grew up in Uzbekistan, and in Estonian, performed by Gordeeva, who lived in Estonia. The performers describe a specific walking route in Dzhambul and Khiva (Bondarenko) and in Tallinn (Gordeeva) and allow their bodies to react and reenact the movement in the performance space. This part of the performance examines the hybridity of Bondarenko's and Gordeeva's identities from the perspective of embodied memories. Here, performers connect the verbalization of their memories of specific spaces and movement in the vastly different space of the theater. For the audience, this linguistic switch signifies the inaccessibility, or a very limited intelligibility, of another individual's experience. Even though the audience witnesses the movement and hears the description of the places the use of Uzbek and Estonian allows Bondarenko and Gordeeva to

[105] For more on *The Professional* performance, see: Tarakanova, Olga, "Kak performans 'Professional' prevrashchaiet v tantsovshchikov programmistov i menedzherov po prodazham," *The Village,* July 25, 2018: https://www.the-village.ru/village/weekend/art/319773-performans-v-tsime.

connect their experiences to the specific places where these languages are spoken and simultaneously to complicate the spectators' access to these experiences.

In this performance, Bondarenko and Gordeeva explore architecture both in the sense of relationship between "a modern citizen and her artificially constructed habitat" – in other words, a contemporary urban environment – and the relationship between the body and architecture.[106] The theme of the lecture-performance – architecture – defines not only the content of *Stopping by Woods*, but also its form, reminding its spectators that performance, like architecture, is organized both spatially and rhythmically.

The naked bodies of the performers move through the small space of the rehearsal room at the Meyerhold Center; cube-shaped and with white walls, this performance space reminds one of a laboratory or a gallery hall – empty, clean, and unmarked. The walls here also function as screens onto which slides are projected throughout the lecture-performance. The stage space lays bare all technological devices and material support that is used in the performance by the actors to create and transmit sound and image. *Stopping by Woods* is a prime example of what could be called hypermediacy in theater, "which aims to remind the viewer of the medium by drawing attention to itself in a very deliberate way."[107]

Hypermediacy as a term was initially introduced for analyzing digital media and visual culture; this theoretical apparatus is also highly productive, however, for considering the relationship between different media brought together in the space of performance. According to

[106] The performance program refers to *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening* as "a paper on architecture" ("доклад про архитектуру"); regarding the relationship between the body and architecture: the program states that the performance explores "how the building of our body is structured" ("как устроено здание нашего тела"). *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening* performance program, Meyerhold Center, Moscow, March 2018.
[107] Chapple, Kattenbelt, *Intermediality in Theater and Performance*, 14.

Bolter and Grusin, "The logic of hypermediacy acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible."[108] In contrast to immediacy, which is characteristic of media producing an effect of transparency and "a unified visual space," hypermediacy highlights the mediated nature of an artwork and exposes multiple media involved in its construction.[109] In the words of Bolter and Grusin: "The logic of hypermediacy multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience."[110] It is possible, then, to think about a documentary theatrical performance, such as *Stopping by Woods*, which incorporates several distinct media and deliberately draws attention to the process of mediation, in terms of hypermediacy and, more specifically, in terms of the multiplicity of "the signs of mediation" and the reproduction of the "sensorium of human experience."[111]

In *Stopping by Woods,* multiple distinct media work simultaneously to construct a theatrical piece that at once aesthetically coherent and yet essentially plotless and fragmented. The narrative insufficiency and visual incompleteness of disparate fragments of texts, photographs, interviews, and video clips are compensated by the richness and complexity of the media forms brought together in the space of performance. All



Illustration 10. Tatiana Gordeeva's body as a screen for projected texts and images, and as a medium carrying inscription on its surface. Photo by Roman Kanashchuk. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,* Meyerhold Center in Moscow. (dir. Ekaterina Bondarenko, 2017)

[108] Bolter, Jay David, Grusin, Richard, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 33.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid., 34.
[111] Ibid.

these different elements of the production constitute a meaningful whole only when considered syntactically. The projected slides with text, images, and video fragments traverse the skin of the actors, who perform the lecture-performance naked (Illustration 10). Projected quotations from scholars of architecture and urban studies, such as Scott McQuire, Juhani Pallasmaa, and others, and from theoretical and literary texts by Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Iampolsky, and Ayn Rand touch and wrap the bodies of the lecturers-performers. Through their contact with the ray of light emanating from the projectors, the moving bodies of Bondarenko and Gordeeva acquire a particular luminous quality. Their skin-turned-screen both reflects the light and acts as an opaque surface on which words and images can acquire definition and legibility. These texts are presented as a series of dispositions and dislocations: images and texts are put together contrapuntally, and the spectator is challenged to find a thread of continuity in between non-self-identical visual, sonic, and textual elements. The complexity of the visual and sonic experience presented on stage corresponds to a kind of reality embodied by *Stopping by Woods*. Producing a linearly structured plot and clearly connected content is contrary to the very message of this documentary piece, which questions any possibility of providing a well-ordered version of the real.

Like any lecture, this lecture-performance is plotless and shaped by its subject-matter, architecture. While the montage principle remains the primary organizing device of *Stopping by Woods*, the contrapuntal logic of multiplicity makes itself manifest early on in this production. Citations from various scholarly and literary sources are read by the performers and simultaneously shown on screens and walls of the performance space. Architectural drawings, blueprints, and models of urban space design are taken from various material and digital media and presented within the production frame. They appear remediated from the digital space of the

internet or the material space of printed books and projected onto a flat cinematic screen, which, in turn, is a part of the stage space. These visual fragments function as a frame for the performance while themselves remaining contained by the stage space as a frame.

As Andy Lavender, a scholar and practitioner of devised and mixed-media theater, remarks: "Hypermediacy is not simply a question of the multiplicity of sources, images or image systems. It is expressed through *simultaneity*: two or more sources, images, systems and effects in play at the same time in a shared ecosystem."[112] Within *Stopping by Woods*, understood as an ecosystem, several distinct media coexist simultaneously: recorded video sequences and photographic images are projected on the screen, and performers move and deliver literary and documentary texts (Illustration 11). In one part of the performance, Bondarenko and Gordeeva report on their communication with a professional architect, Georgii Snezhkin, who was supposed to be a third performer but "disappeared" during the rehearsal process. While Bondarenko describes their collaboration with the architect, the screen shows his photo, followed by a video recording of him attempting to "express an architectural project through dancing." At the same time, Gordeeva improvises a movement sequence in front of the screen, responding to Bondarenko's narrative and Snezhkin's "dancing."



Illustration 11. Tatiana Gordeeva moving in front of the screen which shows an interview with an architect who was supposed to participate in the performance but disappeared during the rehearsal process. Photo by Roman Kanashchuk. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, Meyerhold Center in Moscow. (dir. Ekaterina Bondarenko, 2017)

[112] Lavender, Andy, "Mise en scène, hypermediality and the sensorium" in *Intermediality in Theater and Performance*, ed. by Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt (Amsterdam, New York, NY: Rodopi, 2006), 56.

Following the logic of hypermedial multiplicity, the audience simultaneously hears the story, sees the actors on stage, and sees the images of the architect on the screen.

The performers interact with the screen, which mediates and also "participates" in the action with the performers. Their interaction with the screen and the audience follows a call-and-response pattern. *Stopping by Woods* stages a break-away from a traditional lecturer-audience disposition by inviting the spectators to contribute to the opening scene of the lecture-performance in the following way: before the performance starts, the spectators are gathered in the lobby, where they are approached by Bondarenko and Gordeeva wearing plain lab coats. Everyone is given a task which they cannot discuss with other spectators (mine was an exercise in automatic writing based on observation of my immediate surroundings; I was given 10 seconds to finish writing and give my notes to the performers). At the beginning of *Stopping by Woods*, Bondarenko and Gordeeva improvise a movement sequence based on the various contributions from the audience. Their lecture-performance changes every time they perform based on the audience's response. Thus, the audience experiences a very direct contact with the lecture-performance, which is shaped, among other things, by the spectator's interaction with their immediate environment. Moreover, at the end of the performance, Bondarenko and Gordeeva put on their lab coats and take seats facing the audience for a Q&A session. At this point, the spectators are free to leave or stay for as long as they are interested in the discussion. *Stopping by Woods* prompts the spectators to reflect on and produce their response to the call in the finale.

As a documentary theatrical production, *Stopping by Woods* is deliberately self-aware and draws attention to its own theatricality, defined primarily through its spatial organization. Space in theater is a marker of its own specificity as a medium. Dramatic forms have been

successfully adopted by cinema and television, with the latter claiming a particularly wide audience. Belonging to the field of dramatic representation, theater and cinema borrow devices and techniques from each other. However, theater continues to be defined by its singular relationship to the space shared by performers and spectators during a given moment in time. As Gay McAuley reminds us, "Theater is a social event, occurring in the auditorium as well as on the stage, and the primary signifiers are physical and even spatial in nature."[113] In this production, the space of performance includes the stage and the auditorium, and instead of creating an effect of immediacy, it foregrounds different media that are brought together by the performers to achieve an effect of hypermediacy.

The hypermedial reality of this documentary performance is fragmented and multifaceted in its structure, and to return to the definition by Bolter and Grusin, it "tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience."[114] *Stopping by Woods* is narratively structured around documentary, literary, and theoretical texts. However, this production also documents and reproduces how we, in the present moment, construct the memory of the past and the image of the present that continues to impact our life today. This process is fragmentary and follows the logic of hypermediacy inasmuch as our perception of the real is itself hypermedial by nature, mediated *by* and composed *out of* visual, textual, and sonic fragments.

Through the White Noise of Technology

In recent decades, Russian theater has widely embraced new technologies and the scenographic possibilities that they offer, from simply replacing upstage back wall with a video screen to projecting intricately designed three-dimensional holographic images onto the stage.

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[113]McAuley, Gay, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theater* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 5.
[114]Bolter and Grusin, 34.

For now, it might still be an overstatement to claim that video streams, cinematic images, and digital animation have completely replaced traditional theatrical set designs.[115] However, there has been a steady growth in the number of stage productions that involve new media at all major theaters that define contemporary theater culture in Russia. For example, the Aleksandrinskii Theater in Saint Petersburg, one of the oldest theater companies in Russia, opened its New Stage in 2013, equipped with the most advanced light, sound, video, and media technologies.

The Noise (*Shum*), a documentary play by Ekaterina Bondarenko, was originally staged in Moscow, by Teatr.Doc in 2011. In 2014, a significantly altered version of it was produced by the New Stage of the Aleksandrinskii Theater, directed by Mikhail Patlasov. The play is based on investigative materials, interviews, and personal correspondence related to a murder in a remote industrial town in the Urals. In 2009, a teenager, Ivan Gorodilov, killed his classmate, was arrested and sent to a mental institution. Details of his crime and his motives were not clarified by the official investigation; official records contained unclear medical conditions for the diagnosis according to which Gorodilov was sent to a mental hospital after the trial.[116]

If the original Teatr.Doc production sets were minimalist, comprised of only a few everyday objects, such as a hospital bed, an electric kettle, a wooden stool, and a bedside table, the New Stage version is a tour de force of complicated visual effects done using state-of-the-art technology. Each side of the stage box is turned into a screen with simultaneous projections onto

[115]According to Ksenia Shaikomalova's article, "Kak novye tekhnologii meniaiut teatr," published in 2018, "around 17% of contemporary theaters have ceased to use material sets completely and 67% of theaters do not use them partially," ("около 17% современных театров полностью отказались от материальных декораций и 67% не используют их частично"), available at https://vc.ru/flood/36857-kak-novye-tehnologii-menyayut-teatr.

[116]For more on the material of the play, see: Bondarenko, Ekaterina, "Ia perestala iskat' motiv ubiistva: Istoriia odnogo zamysla," *Novaya Gazeta* 06/20 (2011), available at http://www.novayagazeta.ru/arts/47671.html.

five planes. The walls and the floor of the stage are equipped with moving mechanisms, allowing for changes in the width and depth of the stage space. Throughout the performance, two-dimensional and three-dimensional static and dynamic images are projected onto the stage, and performers interact not only with each other, but also with the projected digital pictures.

The physical reality of a three-dimensional theatrical stage is turned into the virtual reality of a computer game, as is indicated by a menu projected onto the walls at the beginning of the performance, as the protagonist Ivan Gorodilov (Vladimir Boikov) selects a "new game" option (Illustration 12). While one might be tempted to interpret the computer game imagery as an indication of the performance's stance that the actual murder resulted from the teenager's inability to differentiate between physical and virtual realities, a closer analysis yields a more complicated and compelling reading of *The Noise*. Specifically, I suggest that, even though the protagonist of the play and supporting characters are surrounded by "the noise" of technology and digital projections, this production invites its audience to pay attention to the actual physical space of the stage and the auditorium. Technologically complicated visual effects serve as effective distractions from the reality of the space in which both the actors and the audience find themselves for the duration of the performance. The actual three-dimensionality of the stage, however, resists being reduced to a digitally generated version of itself, much in the same way that the physical contact of real bodies on stage differentiates itself from the

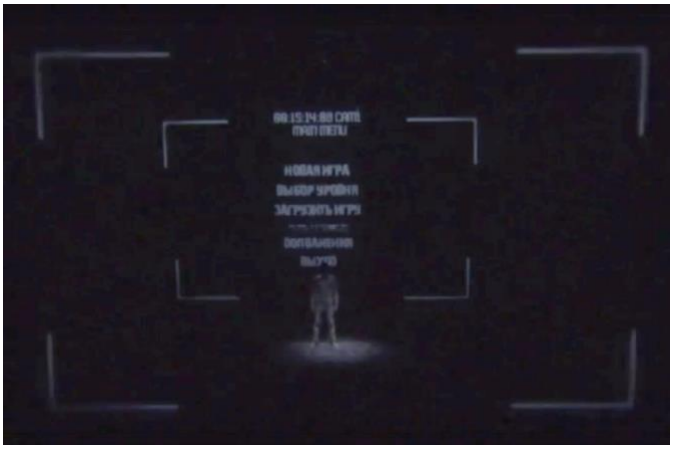

Illustration 12. *The Noise* protagonist Ivan Gorodilov (Vladimir Boikov) begins the performance by selecting "a new game." *The Noise* at the Aleksandrinskii Theater in Saint Petersburg (dir. Mikhail Patlasov, 2014)

manipulative interactions between the protagonist and the digital images of the supporting characters projected onto the stage.

At the narrative and visual level, this documentary performance emphasizes the problem of cognitive confusion between actual reality and its virtual double. The protagonist, Ivan, is presented as a person whose mind conflates video games, fiction, and reality, and who acts as someone entitled to control over other people, since he considers them intellectually and developmentally inferior to himself. He interacts with three-dimensional images projected onto the stage as he selects, as if from a video game menu, images of the background, everyday objects, and ammunition and military equipment, as if all these elements belonged to the same category of things (Illustration 13). Yet, he is not the only character in this performance who lives in the world of simulacra: scenes with the enthusiastic worker of the local museum (Marina Roslova) and the detective investigating Ivan's case (Leonid Taranov) show people whose lives oscillate between the imaginary and the real. Roslova's character describes the panorama exhibit of a World War II battle in the museum as if the fight is taking place at the present time and she is participating in it. Taranov's character gets carried away by the murder reenactment as a part of the investigation and repeats the chase and the shooting over and over again. Even though the production is based on documentary material and textually seems to insist on its accuracy and authenticity, the scenographic organization of the stage space contradicts the realistic pathos of the play. Transforming the traditional black box



Illustration 13. Ivan Gorodilov (Vladimir Boikov) manipulating digital images to "remove grandma" (Marina Roslova). *The Noise* at the Aleksandrinskii Theater in Saint Petersburg (dir. Mikhail Patlasov, 2014)

stage into a virtual reality cube filled with enlarged, pixelated digital imagery estranges the actual material space. Paradoxically, through the creation of distance, it draws the audience's attention to the tension between the real three-dimensional physical presence and the artificial digital simulacrum of it.

In *The Noise*, all of the screens around the actors on the stage are technically interactive: the digital images of different objects react to the movements of the actors on stage, and the pixelated animated pictures can be moved around, set into motion, or paused. These interactive screens almost take on the function of inanimate *dramatis personae* that lack the agency to act themselves, but without whom the actions of the actors on stage are impossible. These screens facilitate the drama and are an integral part of the action. In one scene, however, the audience and the actors are confronted by a flat screen on the back wall that, for a few minutes, switches its visual codes from an interactive computer game imagery to a televised video sequence. The screen shows an episode of the popular Russian television talk show *Let Them Talk* (*Pust govoriat*) that aired in 2011 and brought Gorodilov's father and the mother of Gorodilov's victim into a TV studio to tell their stories. The actress who plays the victim's mother (Elena Zimina), standing with her back to the audience, faces the screen (Illustration 14). In this moment, the audience's and the performer's gazes align in one direction, towards the flatness of the screen. The stage space apparently collapses, and the back wall, instead of creating the illusion of depth or three-dimensionality, emphasizes its



Illustration 14. The victim's mother (Elena Zimina) facing the screen that is showing a fragment of the TV show *Let Them Talk*. *The Noise* at the Aleksandrinskii Theater in Saint Petersburg (dir. Mikhail Patlasov, 2014)

vertical flat surface. The images on the screen are mostly close-ups which do not incorporate perspective but focus attention on the details of the human face. Television reality breaks into the space of documentary theater to challenge the claims of authenticity that this production makes: after all, the spectators see the real participants of the tragedy on the screen. At this point, life does not imitate art, as much as it *enters* art. In contrast to mobile interactive digital screens that react to movements and gestures by the actors, this video sequence presents itself as one continuous whole, solid and fixed. Yet, when the screen goes dark, the actress delivers a passionate monologue accusing the TV crew of deliberately falsifying the facts and butchering the stories for the sake of sensation. *The Noise* thus juxtaposes the flat surface of a video document that hides the seams and traces of its constructedness with a permutable three-dimensional space of the stage that lays bare its technological devices that allow for interactivity and mobility.

While the hypermediacy of *Stopping by Woods* exposes multiple distinct media involved in the construction of a theatrical piece and foregrounds the process of mediation, *The Noise* follows a different kind of logic related to digital media – the logic of intermediality. Patrice Pavis, a scholar of performance and theater and one of the first theorists to study this concept, asserts that intermediality "... does not mean the addition of different media concepts, nor the act of placing discrete works in relation to particular forms of media, but rather the *integration of aesthetic concepts* from different media into a new concept."[117] The scenography of *The Noise*, designed by Aleksandr Mokhov, integrates and adopts for the stage space the visual media of video games, while placing the technological apparatus and material vehicles of the mediating

[117]Pavis, Patrice, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, and Film* (Michigan: U of Michigan Press, 2003), 49.

process outside of the field of vision of the audience. The performance space, separated from the auditorium as a black box stage, acquires the visual properties of virtual reality, with the emphasis on a totality of visual and spatial transformation. The performers are immersed into the space, framed and animated by digital screens, but the audience observes this space from the outside. The spectator's experience resembles a process of watching someone else's video game unfold, with no control of or participation in it. Intermediality produces two effects in this documentary performance: the effect of defamiliarization of physical material reality and that of perceptual "shifting between different and conflicting medial realities."[118]

Intermediality predates the proliferation of digital technologies and is hardly a phenomenon limited to theater and performance arts.[119] However, this particular juncture between theater as a synthetic art form and digital media generates "new models of representation; new dramaturgical strategies; new ways of structuring and staging words, images and sounds; new ways of positioning bodies in time and space; new ways of creating temporal and spatial interrelations."[120] Documentary theatrical productions such as *The Noise*, which are heavily reliant on digital media visually and spatially, not only interrogate theater's own position with regard to other dramatic media, old and new, but also model what contemporary culture and mediatized reality might look like.

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[118]Nibbelink, Liesbeth Groot and Merx, Sigrid, "Presence and Perception: Analyzing Intermediality in Performance" in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, ed. by Sarah Bay-Cheng [and others] (Amsterdam: Amsterdam U Press, 2010), 218-229, 220.
[119]In the field of Slavic studies, Aage Hansen-Loeve offers historical analysis of intermedial relations between fine arts and literature in Russian culture of the early 20th century, see: Hansen-Loeve, Aage, *Intermedial'nost' v russkoi kul'ture: Ot simvolizma k avangardu* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo RGGU, 2016). For more on intermediality in the context of media studies and mass culture, see: Jenkins, Henry, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).
[120]Chapple and Kattenbelt, 11.

Reiterating Chapple and Kattenbelt's articulation cited earlier, intermediality in theatrical performance allows for a particular kind of perception that is in-between the audience, the stage, the performers, and the simultaneous yet distinct media at play. They argue that "reality, and inhabiting the spaces in-between realities is the proper subject for a philosophical approach to intermedial performance, which may help us also to perceive who we are in the 'real' world."[121]As a documentary theatrical production that is also truly intermedial, *The Noise* creates a space "in-between realities" at multiple levels: between the real factual event and its theatrical representation, between the physical space of the stage and the digitally constructed images that simulate three-dimensionality, between the live medium of theater and the visual medium of virtual reality and video games. The audience's perception during the performance constantly shifts between these multiple realities, registering gaps and tensions that arise from the logic of intermediality. Chapple and Kattenbelt suggest that intermediality might be instrumental in recalibrating our perception of "who we are in the 'real' world."[122] Moreover, as my analysis of *The Noise* demonstrates, it could help us also to perceive what the "real" world might be like at the present moment, marked by the cultural shift to the digital. From this, it does not necessarily follow that the reality of today is pathologically dislocated and immersed into a totality of digital simulacra. Instead, an image of the world emerges that is affected by our presence and actions: an image of reality that is in a constant process of transformation, which is documented materially as well as digitally.

Both *The Noise* and *Stopping by Woods* incorporate new media – projected cinematic, photographic, and video images on digital screens – in comparable yet distinct ways into their

[121]Chapple and Kattenbelt, 24.
[122]Ibid.

scenography in order to create a coherent reality in a stage box. Due to their documentary nature, these performances rely on new media not only to create a meaningful theatrical experience, but more importantly, to relate this experience to reality outside of the theater. Through its hypermedial organization of the performance space, Bondarenko and Gordeeva's production of *Stopping by Woods* reinforces the fragmented and mediated character of contemporary perception of reality, specifically as it is experienced in urban post-Soviet environments. Patlasov's *The Noise* integrates the aesthetic visual codes of video games into the stage design, following the logic of intermediality, and thus highlights the spectators' experience of reality that seems to be overshadowed by its pixelated double. The digital screen plays an important role in these documentary productions, contributing more to the action on the stage than to its decoration. In a similar fashion, the digital screen is the key actor in my final case study in this section, Anastasiia Patlai's *Out of the Closet*. Here, the effect of immediacy is achieved, paradoxically, by the presence of new media that is integral to the documentary narrative on stage.

"Out of the Closet" - Onto the Stage

In 2016, several theatrical productions in Russia openly touched upon the subject of homosexuality.[123] Among performances that put gay male characters front stage and center was *Out of the Closet* at Teatr.Doc in Moscow, based on a play by Nana Grinshtein. The documentary

[123] *All Shades of Blue* (*Vse ottenki golubogo*), dir. Konstantin Raikin, Satirikon Theater (Moscow), *I am Justine* (*Ia – Zhiustin*), dir. Dmitrii Zimin, The Center for Contemporary Drama (Ekaterinburg), *An Ideal Husband* (*Ideal'nyi muzh*), dir. Konstantin Bogomolov, MKhT (Moscow). For more on contemporary Russian theater and LGBTQ, see: Klepikova, Tatiana, "Foreword: Landscapes of Russian Queer Drama," in *Contemporary Queer Plays by Russian Playwrights* (London; New York: Methuen; Bloomsbury, 2022), xi–xvi. and Vilisov, Viktor, "Etot nelovkii moment: Kak rossiiskii teatr spravliaetsa s gomoseksual'nost'iu," available at https://birdinflight.com/ru/mir/20170714-gay-russian-theatre.html

production is based on interviews with gay couples and their mothers, as well as blog posts by gay men describing their desire and struggle to openly live the lives that they want for themselves. The play includes two parallel storylines; the first one is based on the interviews with Rustam and Felix, who talk about their relationship, while the other one is the coming-out story of Dima as told by himself and his mother.

In August 2019, Teatr.Doc brought *Out of the Closet* to Saint Petersburg. It took the theater crew and the venue staff by surprise when a performance of the play, which had been performed in Moscow for about three years, was interrupted by armed police wearing civilian clothes, demanding that everyone's IDs be checked. In 2013, the State Duma approved a Russian federal law "protecting children from information advocating for a denial of traditional family values," also known as the "gay propaganda law". This law made the distribution of "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships among minors" illegal and punishable by short-term detentions and fines.[124] The actors managed to resume the performance that night and then performed *Out of the Closet* the next day. Leaving Saint Petersburg, the production director Anastasiia Patlai posted on Facebook: "…We live in an unbearable country where innocent plays about and for peace, about and for love cannot take place without the police showing up. ... It turns out, the police responded to a call from a group of homophobes who claimed there were minors in the audience being 'corrupted'."[125] This incident in Saint Petersburg was, however,

[124]"Federal'nyi zakon ot 29 iiunia 2013 goda N135-FZ", *Rossiiskaia gazeta* (2 July 2013): https://rg.ru/2013/06/30/deti-site-dok.html

[125]"…Мы живём в совершенно невыносимой стране, где показы невинных спектаклей про и за мир и про и за любовь не могут пройти без прихода полиции… После выяснилось, что полиция приехала по доносу питерских гомофобов — искать в зале несовершеннолетних, которых мы 'развращаем'." Patlai, Anastasiya 2019. "U menia dovol'no gnetushchee sostoianie posle gastrolei v Peterburge." Facebook, August 27, 2019. https://www.facebook.com/Anastasiia.Patlai/posts/10157630252073200

only the first act in the orchestrated show of intimidation that took place once the theater company returned to Moscow. Even though this play had been performed peacefully by Teatr.Doc since 2016, in August of 2019, a group of far-right extremists known as SERB barged into the theater and started a fight with the actors and spectators. Responding to calls from both the attackers and the theater, the police showed up and detained Anastasiia Patlai and a member of the audience. The whole situation from the moment of the interruption of the show until the police walked the director and the spectator away, was captured by smartphones, and photographs and videos of the incident appeared on multiple social media networks and websites in real time.

This is a starting point for my analysis of *Out of the Closet* and a very telling example of the simultaneous processes of documentation and display happening in real time, transposed from real life into a theatrical black box. In *Out of the Closet*, the minimalist scenography by the set designer Konstantin Terent'ev highlights the screen, which functions as a safe space for transformation and transition, for a kind of public intimacy and renegotiation of positionality for performers and the audience alike.

The materiality of the screen surface matters in *Out of the Closet*: while in some other productions of Teatr.Doc, the upstage back wall itself is used as a screen for projections, here it is draped with a screen made of fabric that has texture, folds, and ornament.[126] The screen participates in the architecture of the stage space as it veils the back wall, separating the screen surface from the background and, at the same time, enhancing the depth of the stage by

[126]For example, in *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* (*Chas vosemnadtsat'*), directed by Elena Gremina in 2010, the images are projected directly onto the dark rough surface of the wall behind the backs of actors. For more on *One Hour Eighteen Minutes*, see Flynn, "The Trial That Never Was," 307-17.

providing an additional layer to it. In its pliant materiality, the screen is connected to the wall but is also separate from it. On the surface of the screen, images acquire definition and visibility, yet its opaqueness hides the wall behind it. The borders of the screen outline the limits of what is rendered visible by projection, but the back wall exceeds the limits of the screen itself, acquiring the properties of a frame for the screen surface. These qualities make the screen surface in this documentary production function as a site for the visual medium and as a structural element of the stage space. It is in this space - between the depth of the stage and the flatness of the screen – where the stories of the characters unfold.

In the stories shared with the audience in *Out of the Closet*, communication among gay men and between them and their relatives, friends, and colleagues, is often mediated by digital media. From smartphone chats to social network groups, messages are exchanged, and coming-out videos are uploaded and distributed. The content of these digital media often reflects reality and coincides with it temporally (live online videos, chats, phone calls, etc.), and is mediated by the flat screens of computers and smartphones. Similarly, the image projected onto the backwall screen comes from a laptop camera on Dima's desk (Illustration 15). Dima (Aleksandr Userdin) sits with his back toward the audience and faces his laptop; the spectators are presented with a double image of the character: his real three-dimensional figure within a three-dimensional space of the stage and his flat magnified image (from shoulders up) on the screen. He reads coming-out stories shared by other gay men on the pages of social media websites out loud, punctuating the

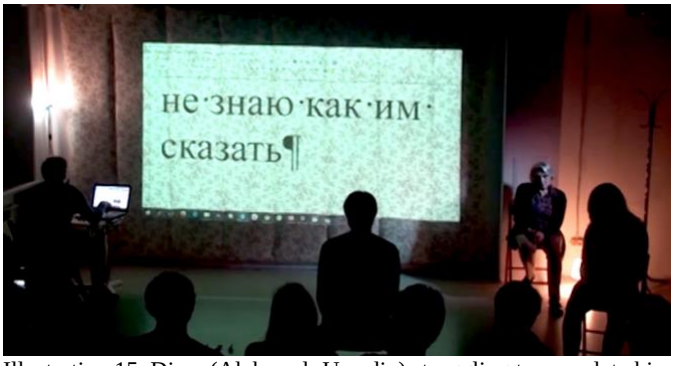

Illustration 15. Dima (Aleksandr Userdin) struggling to complete his coming out confession and writing "I don't know how to tell them…" on his laptop. *Out of the Closet* at Teatr.Doc in Moscow (dir. Anastasiia Patlai, 2016)

performance. The screen, thus, acquires the properties of "a site for mediation between subjects"" to cite Giuliana Bruno's formulation, where stories are exchanged, contacts are established, and virtual communities are formed.[127]

The screen allows not only for a carefully curated image of reality – after turning the laptop camera on, Dima properly checks how the background looks and moves a couple of potted plants so that they are seen behind him – but also for a safer version of it, where hateful and aggressive comments can be moderated away. Each individual experience shared on screen is singular, but not solitary; the surface of the screen becomes a space of transition in which stories are accumulated and projected at the audience in real time, in parallel with the story shared with the spectators by two other characters, Rustam (Rafael Durnoian) and Felix (Nikolai Mulakov). Together with them, the audience forms a temporary community: the actors interact with the spectators, directly appealing to them, asking questions, and trying to explain their actions. Thus, the real experience of coming out is presented to and reenacted for the audience in a dual fashion: by live action and via a digital screen.



Illustration 16. Rustam (Rafael Durnoian) and Felix (Nikolai Mulakov) downstage facing the audience of *Out of the Closet.* Teatr.Doc in Moscow (dir. Anastasiia Patlai, 2016)

Throughout the performance, Rustam and Felix are downstage facing the spectators; they sit next to each other, sometimes centerstage or at the opposite sides of the stage, but always in immediate proximity to the audience (Illustration 16). Their lines are addressed more to the audience than to each other, as they recall their story, which is based on Rustam and Felix's

[127]Bruno, *Surface*, 94.

interview and which forms the narrative arc of *Out of the Closet*. The audience takes the place of the interviewer; even though the spectators do not ask questions during the performance, it feels almost like a conversation between trusted parties. Perhaps it is likely due to this illusion of intimacy and immediacy, created in part by the set design, that occasionally during the three-year run of the show, as Patlai remembers in an interview, a compassionate spectator would say out loud to the actors in the middle of performance, "You should leave, guys! Move to Denmark! (Or some other country)", forgetting that these are performers and not the actual gay men opening up about their experience.[128] There are, however, moments in *Out of the Closet* that gesture towards the fabric of performance, its layered construction. These instances allow the audience to "see through" the act performed by Durnoian and Mulakov downstage, as if looking through a translucent screen onto the back wall and seeing there, on the actual material surface of the screen, a reflection of reality mediated by a digital medium.

One example of such a moment occurs when Rustam and Felix discuss what their characters should be called in *Out of the Closet*: whether they should keep their real names or pick different names to secure anonymity. This exchange between the protagonists exhibits the traces of the process of the performance's construction and opens a gap through which the spectator gets momentary access to the crux of the play: behind the documentary drama there is a real life that needs to be protected. Meanwhile, Dima, whose laptop screen is projected onto the back wall, brings up social media websites, reads real coming-out stories posted there, and struggles to finish typing up his own: "I do not know how to tell them…" (Illustration 15). In a dramatic reversal of the roles, the performers here act as a "see-through" screen, and the back

[128]Patlai, Anastasiia, Interview by Natalia Plagmann, recorded on March 27, 2018, in Moscow, Russia.

wall screen "participates" in the action by channeling the voices of the real-life Russian gay community.

In the present moment, when a flat screen of a tablet or a smartphone almost functions as a natural extension of the human body, it also becomes the locus of immediate connection and communication between people. *Out of the Closet* stages this kind of immediacy by means of incorporating a digital projection of a computer screen: the actor playing Dima might not turn to the audience even once during the performance, but the spectators see his face on the screen and follow his thought process as he attempts to type up his confession. The screen not only projects, but also records Dima's coming-out in real time and thus turns itself into a document. While *Stopping by Woods* and *The Noise* wrestle with the perception of reality and its representation, *Out of the Closet* operates in a different manner as a documentary theater production. Patlai's piece brings to the fore the capacity of a documentary performance, not only to record and document reality, but also to model and generate it. In approaching this task, neither the logic of hypermediacy nor of intermediality seem to work. The desired effect of this documentary performance is immediacy, an intimate connection to the people on the stage, and through this (theatrically created and mediated) connection, a possibility for change to take place in reality beyond the space of the theater emerges.

Conclusion

We currently live in a reality that exists simultaneously in its material presence and in digital representation. The processes of digitalization and mediation permeate the very fabric of our everyday life. Contemporary theater, especially documentary theater, invites us to think through these processes and to reflect not only on how our existence in the present moment is shaped by them, but also on how our perception of reality and history is transformed by media

and technology. In this section, I have argued that contemporary Russian documentary theater exhibits its "documentariness" not only *referentially*, that is, by showing and reenacting fragments of reality, but also *organizationally*, by registering and reproducing the way we construct and engage with reality, which we simultaneously experience in its material depth and in its mediated existence on flat screens.

I have chosen these contemporary documentary productions out of a rich *caché* of theatrical performances staged over the past several years in Moscow and other Russian cities because I believe that these productions are paradigmatic of contemporary Russian documentary theater. These performances explore issues that are intensely debated in Russia at the present moment: *Out of the Closet* does not only make visible lives that are denied visibility, but makes room for a conversation about queerness, personhood, family, and humanity. *The Noise* probes the limits of the interpenetration of digital technologies and physical reality. *Stopping by Woods* asks: what does it mean to live in an urban environment, and how does this experience reflect on our bodies? What does one do with a heritage and identity that are composed of fragments and pieces, out of someone else's stories, and one's own memories? These productions are also indicative of new theatrical trends interested in exploring the possibilities that may inhere in addressing these questions by means of the inter-medial mobilization of disparate documents.

The media theorists cited in this section assert that new media does not replace or cancel out old media. As Jenkins posits, "A medium's content may shift ..., its audience may change ..., and its social status may rise or fall ..., but once a medium establishes itself as satisfying some core human demand, it continues to function within the larger system of communication options."[129] Through the processes of remediation and adaptation, old media continue to evolve

[129]Jenkins, 14.

and exist in a constantly changing technological and cultural environment. As my analysis shows, contemporary Russian theater creatively and productively incorporates new technologies: for example, it actively employs visual media, such as photographic and cinematic projections, digitally composed images, and live video streaming to enhance its scenographic apparatus.

Stopping by Woods engages different visual media and deliberately exposes the process of mediation as a hypermedial performance. This production disrupts the borders between transparency and mediation, between spectators and performers. Through the simultaneous presence of multiple media, still and moving images, and the flat depictions and three-dimensional presence of the actors, this documentary lecture-performance generates a fragmented and heterogenous reality that resembles our present-day experience of reality as well as our perception of it. *The Noise* unleashes an avalanche of technological visual effects on the consciousness of the audience by turning a deep theater stage into a virtual reality simulation. By intermedially staging a reality overtaken by a world of video games, this production draws attention to the persistence of what is still material and human in a theatrically exaggerated, present-day, digitally influenced culture. In *Out of the Closet*, the screen serves as a safe space for reflection and self-reflection; it transmits and projects into the audience the live process of the transformation of reality. The performance reality, in a sense, reduplicates the everyday reality that the spectators share with the performers by staging its constant reflection online in social networks via flat screens. The audience of *Out of the Closet* witnesses and participates in a temporary community in which rules of communication, acceptance, and coexistence are renegotiated and rehearsed.

The audiences of these three productions find themselves encountering performance reality that is being transformed in and by their presence. In documentary theater, this reality is

staged not as a presence to reconcile with or push against, but as an environment that includes the multiplicity and simultaneity of images, identities, voices, and bodies. The form of these documentary productions, by which I mean the organization of performance space predicated upon the logic of inter- and hypermediacy, is intrinsically related to the multisensorial experience of present-day reality, which they seek to embody and document. On the surface of the screen and in the depth of the black box stage, by means of new digital media and old theatrical embodied practices of acting, contemporary documentary theater in Russia is a medium for creatively working through some of today's most pressing and important questions.

Part 2: "Exceptionally Exact Perception": Depth of Field in Documentary Film

In documentary cinema, the illusion of depth on the flat surface of the screen is one of the essential means by which film creates the most plausible and detailed imprint of reality. Film critics such as André Bazin and Jean-Louis Comolli in France and David Bordwell in the USA position depth of field, together with montage, as one of the key stylistic elements that defines entire cinematic movements. Even before Bazin explored the depth of field in his influential series of essays *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema* in the 1950s and thus began serious theoretical discussion of this cinematic technique among film scholars and critics, Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, and Vladimir Nilsen had engaged with the concept of the depth of field in their early writings on film. Kuleshov first mentions the camera-specific angle of vision and the spatial representation shaped by it in his essay *On the Artist's Work in Films* (1917).[130] He returns to the notions of depth of field and of rendering perspective on film in *The Art of the*

[130]Kuleshov, Lev, "On the Artist's Work in Films." *Selected Works: Fifty Years in Films*. transl. by Dmitri Agrachev and Nina Belenkaya (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1987), 30-31.

Cinema (1929).[131] For Kuleshov, who started his career as a set designer working with Evgenii Bauer, the illusion of depth in cinema can be achieved by the elaborate *mise en scène* with objects and people placed at varying distances from the camera. While conceptualizing the difference between theater and cinema in terms of representation of real space, Kuleshov focuses on the uniquely cinematic point of view of the camera, which coincides with the point of view of the spectator. He writes, "The conditions of shooting, from one point of view, present the opportunity for an exceptionally exact perception" of detail, gesture, or movement.[132] According to Kuleshov, this precision of representation of reality in deep focus shots explains the fascination of early filmmakers and spectators alike with newsreel. The depth of field in documentary footage, then, becomes an important vehicle for visual accuracy and authenticity of representation.

Nilsen, who worked as a cinematographer with Eisenstein and Aleksandrov, explores how depth of field can be used for expressive purposes in film in his monograph *The Cinema as a Graphic Art* (1936).[133] He outlines "perspective constructions" achieved by "juxtaposing and counterposing the objects distributed in the various planes of distance from the lens."[134] Nilsen further establishes connection between camera viewpoint, the spectator's perception of the object, and the meaning and significance of that object. He sees the depth of field "as a specific means of expression" related to the filmmaker's "motivation" for a particular visual image.[135]

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[131]Kuleshov, Lev, "The Art of the Cinema." *Kuleshov on Film: Writings by Lev Kuleshov.* transl. and ed. by Ronald Levaco (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 41-125.
[132]Ibid., 60.
[133]Nil'sen, Vladimir, *The Cinema as A Graphic Art: On a Theory of Representation in the Cinema*. transl. by Stephen Garry (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1959).
[134]Ibid., 36.
[135]Ibid., 60.

For Eisenstein, as well as for Bazin later, the relationship between reality and cinema lies at the crux of his interest in the depth of field as a cinematic phenomenon. Both Eisenstein and Bazin develop their theories of cinema in relation to the real; for Eisenstein, a cinematic shot, like a photograph, captures reality and thus is merely a reproduction of the real and acquires an aesthetic quality through the process of montage. In *Through Theater to Cinema* (1934), he writes, "Photography is a system of reproduction to fix real events and elements of actuality. These reproductions, or photo-reflections, may be combined in various ways."[136] Due to the inherent indexicality of the photographic image, any cinematic shot is a fragment of reality, according to Eisenstein.

Bazin's theoretical intervention into this conjunction between reality and its cinematic representation is based on his critique of montage, which, he argues, ultimately fails to capture the real. In *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema*, he states, "Montage as used by Kuleshov, Eisenstein, or Gance did not show us the event; it alluded to it."[137] According to Bazin, the aesthetic quality of a cinematic shot is correlated with its capacity to reproduce reality. This is where Bazin's analysis of the depth of field acquires its significance for the purposes of my discussion of documentary cinema in this chapter. Unlike montage, which only alludes to the real, the depth of field, for Bazin, "brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality. Therefore, it is correct to say that, independently of the contents of the image, its structure is more realistic."[138] Thus, through the process of montage, reality is replaced by its cinematic substitute, which lacks the ambiguity inherent to the real as

[136]Eisenstein, Sergei, "Through Theater to Cinema." *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. ed. and transl. Jay Leyda (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949), 3.
[137]Bazin, André, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema." *What Is Cinema?Vol. 1.* transl. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 25.
[138]Ibid., 35.

the object of perception. For Eisenstein, this process of crafting of a cinematic sequence that serves the purpose of guiding the audience's perception is precisely what constitutes the value of the film form. Bazin, however, criticizes montage for its negation of "the ambiguity of expression" and praises the depth of field for its capacity to reintroduce "ambiguity into the structure of the image" and "give back to the cinema a sense of the ambiguity of reality."[139]

Depth of focus is "the ability offered in both photography and the cinema ... to produce an equally clear image of an array of objects at varying distances, from the foreground to the background."[140] Unlike deep focus, shallow focus presents a part of the image in high resolution, rendering the rest of the shot out of focus. Historically, the ability of a cinematic camera to produce shots in deep focus depended on several technical factors, such as the focal length of camera lens and lens aperture, the sensitivity of film stock, lighting equipment, camera positioning, etc. Since the late 1920s, the technical properties of cinematic equipment have allowed filmmakers to generate footage either in deep or shallow focus depending on the quality of image they seek to produce, without being limited by available technology.[141] As David Bordwell remarks, "depth of field controls perspective relations by determining which planes will be in focus."[142] The depth of field, then, becomes one of the stylistic tools used by filmmakers to achieve specific visual effects in their films. Bazin argues that deep field images in film are more realistic in that they preserve the ambiguity of reality and afford more freedom to the spectator in the process. The spectator does not simply follow "what the director ... will

[139]Ibid., 36-37
[140]Comolli, Jean-Louis, *Cinema Against Spectacle: Technique and Ideology Revisited*. transl. and ed. by Daniel Fairfax (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 171.
[141]For more on deep focus in film history, see: Harpole, Charles H., "Ideological and Technological Determinism in Deep-Space Cinema Images: Issues in Ideology, Technological History, and Aesthetics," *Film Quarterly* 33:3 (Spring 1980), 11-22.
[142]Bordwell, David. *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2020), 173.

choose ... he should see," but exercises "at least a minimum of personal choice," and "from his attention and his will ... the meaning of the image in part derives."[143] Keeping in mind documentary cinema's particular relation to the real, and the specific capacity of deep field images to capture reality to the fullest, as Bazin argues, how do documentary filmmakers instrumentalize the depth of field in their work? More specifically, which stylistic choices do contemporary Russian documentary directors make using the depth of field, and what are the consequences of these choices for the meaning of their films?

In what follows, I discuss cinematic techniques of contemporary Russian documentary filmmakers Victor Kosakovskii, Vitaly Mansky, and Marina Razbezhkina, particularly in relation to the role of frame composition and depth of field in their documentary films released in the 2010s. Specifically, I explore how they visually represent three-dimensional real spaces on a two-dimensional documentary film screen. I address the use of deep and shallow focus in rendering spatial distance in documentary film, emphasizing the visual legibility and illegibility of objects in the background. All three directors belong to the same generation of documentary filmmakers whose work has essentially developed and gained recognition in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. They are critically acclaimed in Russia as well as abroad, which manifests in Russian and international documentary film awards, frequent participation in documentary film festivals around the world, and international funding for their work. Their documentary work does not have wide film distribution in their home country, with most audiences in Russia accessing their works through online platforms, including Mansky's Artdoc.Media, and/or at film festivals limited to large metropolitan centers of the country, such

[143]Bazin, 36.

as Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Ekaterinburg. Marina Razbezhkina is the only director of the three filmmakers discussed below who remains in Russia in 2023 and continues her work there.

Documenting Space in Films by Kosakovskii and Mansky

Kosakovskii and Mansky represent almost the extreme opposite trends in post-Soviet documentary filmmaking: while Kosakovskii is poetic, lyrical, and gravitates towards abstraction, Mansky is political, unapologetic, and leans on reportage. A figure of particular interest for Kosakovskii is the philosopher, which he has explored in his documentary film *Losev* (1989) and his ongoing project on Dmitri Galkovsky, while for Mansky, it is the politician, examined in films such as *Gorbachev. After the Empire* (*Gorbachev. Posle Imperii*, 2001), *Yeltsin. A Different Life* (*Yeltsin. Drugaia zhizn'*, 2001), and *Putin's Witnesses* (*Svideteli Putina*, 2018). Kosakovskii's documentaries include veiled visual references to masterpieces of world cinema and photography, from Niepce's first photograph and Farocki's *Videograms of a Revolution* in *Hush!* (*Tishe!*, 2002), shot with a static camera placed on the windowsill of his apartment, to Tarkovsky's *Mirror* in *Sviato* (2005). In its dynamics and provocative sharpness, Mansky's camera style is reminiscent of TV reportage. In his documentary film *Virginity* (*Devstvennost'*, 2008), the filmmaker scandalously pushed for a public discussion on the shifting codes of social acceptability and desirability in Russia in the early 2000s, portraying young girls from the provinces selling their bodies in Moscow in hope for better lives for themselves. Acknowledging these differences between Mansky's and Kosakovskii's work, it is productive to examine their "creative treatment of actuality" in conjunction, to better understand what kind of spatial reality emerges in their documentaries.[144]

[144]In 1933, the British filmmaker and critic John Grierson provided one of the first definitions of documentary cinema in English as "creative treatment of actuality" in the essay he co-authored

The two documentaries that I discuss below lend themselves particularly well for such analysis. In both documentaries, filmmakers translate real experiences of vast geographical spaces onto a flat surface of a documentary film screen by means of visual mediation. Following Emma Widdis's claim, made with regard to an earlier period of Soviet cinema, that "the visual frames that film places on the world offer models of experience," I explore models of experience that both of these documentaries offer through their visual frames.[145]

Viktor Kosakovskii's Twenty-First Century Kino-Eye

I begin chronologically with an earlier documentary, Kosakovskii's *Long Live the Antipodes!* (2011). Here, the filmmaker depicts four pairs of antipodes: people living diametrically opposite each other on the circumference of the Earth. Since most of the planet's surface is covered by water, there are not many inhabitable places that can strictly speaking be home to antipodes. Out of the four such location pairs – Entre Rios in Argentina and Shanghai in China, Big Island in Hawaii, USA, and Kubu, Botswana, Mira Flores in Spain and Castle Point, New Zealand, and, finally, Patagonia in Chile and the Lake Baikal region in Russia – I focus on the last one. In particular, I emphasize the camera movement between the macro and micro levels and between upright and reverse images, as well as images that play with the vertical and horizontal orientation of the frame.

In an early one-minute-long episode (00:23:54-00:24:58), Kosakovskii begins at a macro level, with a shot that shows the landscape at an angle that creates an image of the round surface of the Earth almost rotating in front of the spectator's eyes (Illustration 17). From a shot that

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with Michael Balcon (Grierson, John, Balcon, Michael, "The Function of the Producer," *Cinema Quarterly* 2:1 (1933-1934), 5-10.)

[145]Widdis, Emma, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 13

blurs the sky, the river, and the forest, the filmmaker cuts to a micro level shot in shallow focus that now shows soil in a close-up image (Illustration 18). The camera pans to the right, and the shot changes into a shallow focus frame, showing a girl's hands working in the soil (Illustration 19). Kosakovskii returns to this cinematic device playing with the spatial orientation, or rather confusion, of the spectator's gaze in the following sequence later in the film (00:30:21-00:31:45). Here, the episode begins with an image reversed along the vertical axis, depicting a landscape in Patagonia, only to change quickly into a shallow-focus upright shot of an old upside-down car on its roof; this footage shows the Baikal region again. The camera pans right, showing a cow slowly moving in the same direction as the camera. The following cut changes the level again, this time from micro to macro, with the camera slowly panning to the right as it shows the vast Siberian landscape. These camera movements and transitions in focus are consistent throughout *Long Live the Antipodes!* Kosakovskii's camera is not "a neutral recording instrument, a passive

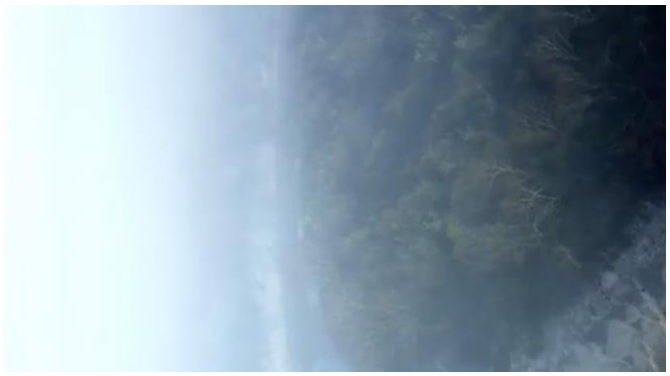

Illustration 17. The bird's eye shot of a landscape. *Long Live the Antipodes!* (dir. Viktor Kosakovskii, 2011)



Illustration 18. The shallow-focus shot of soil in close-up. *Long Live the Antipodes!* (dir. Viktor Kosakovskii, 2011)



Illustration 19. The shallow-focus shot of a girl's hands working in the soil. *Long Live the Antipodes!* (dir. Viktor Kosakovskii, 2011)

unarticulated registration of pro-filmic events."[146] He uses the uniquely cinematic optical illusions that destabilize the fixed point of view. The spectator's perception oscillates between identifying the images as depicting the object at macro- and micro-levels (Illustrations 17, 18, 19). Instead of producing clear images in deep focus, Kosakovskii defamiliarizes recognizable images of nature, land, and the planet and, contrary to Bazin's analysis of the depth of field, saturates these images with ambiguity by using predominantly shallow focus shots.

Kossakovsky's documentary uses advanced cinematic technology to present a version of Vertov's *kino-eye* for the twenty-first-century screen. Vertov developed his concept of a radically new, technology-assisted vision morphing the human gaze and machine optics of the camera in his theoretical writings and in cinematic practice in the 1920s.[147] In 1923, in his article "The Council of Three", Vertov writes, "I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects ...."[148] Speaking on behalf of the human-machine hybrid being, Vertov uses the first person here to address his readers and thus endows his kino-eye not only with a vision, but also with a consciousness. For Vertov, the kino-eye as a method of perceiving, recording, and deciphering of the world is markedly political. He states, "The establishing of a class bond that is visual (kino-eye) and auditory (radio-ear) between the proletarians of all nations and all lands based on the platform of the communist

[146]Harpole, 14.
[147]For Vertov's development of kino-eye as a cinematic method and a theoretical concept, see: MacKay, John, "Introduction: How Did It Begin?," in *Dziga Vertov: Life and Work*, vol. 1 (1896-1921) (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2018), xi–xcvi.
[148]Vertov, Dziga, "The Council of Three," in Annette Michelson and Kevin O'Brien, eds., *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Nachdr. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 17.

decoding of the world – that is our objective."[149] In *Long Live the Antipodes!,* Kosakovskii engages with formal cinematic experiments in continuity with Vertov's kino-eye method by allowing his camera to deploy the technologically enhanced human-machine optics: showing the world in motion, freely oscillating between macro- and micro-vision and between deep and shallow shots. Transitioning between points across vast geographical spaces, Kosakovskii's camera follows Vertov's proclamation almost to the letter: "... free of the limits of time and space, I put together any given points in the universe, no matter where I've recorded them."[150] However, unlike Vertov's understanding of cinema as a means of revelation of ideological reality – "the communist decoding of the world" – Kosakovskii's documentary does not exhibit a particular political stance. If anything, *Long Live the Antipodes!* visually connects disparate locations on the planet and highlights a kind of infinite continuity of all places and living beings inhabiting them and, instead of a relationship of antagonism, offers a sense of unity of these opposites. At the core of this documentary is Kosakovskii's interest in the human and in nature. Even though the visual frame of *Long Live the Antipodes!* is organized by preternatural technological optics, the experience of the world presented by the documentary is nature-centric. However, Kosakovskii's perception of ecocentrism, as shown in *Long Live the Antipodes!,* includes the human as an intrinsic part of the Earth's ecosystem.

Cinematic Mapping of Space in Vitalii Mansky's *Pipeline*

In a gesture opposite to what Kosakovskii does in his documentary, Mansky's *Pipeline* (2013) shows a linear movement along the imaginary axis between the East and the West and

[149]Vertov, Dziga, "The Essence of Kino-Eye," in Annette Michelson and Kevin O'Brien, eds., *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov,* Nachdr. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 50.
[150]Vertov, Dziga, "The Council of Three," 18.

traces the flow of gas from Urengoi in Russia to Cologne in Germany. As the pipeline transporting gas in buried underground and remains invisible, Mansky's documentary travels aboveground, following the trajectory of the pipeline and showing people and places along the route. Unlike Kosakovskii's camera that moves freely along horizontal and vertical axes and rotates and elevates high above the Earth's surface, Mansky's camera remains static throughout the documentary, fixed almost exclusively at an eye level. People and objects enter and leave the frame, but the camera itself remains motionless. Even when an illusion of the movement is created in the following episode, it is not the camera that moves, but the ferry on which it is statically fixed (00:54:57-00:57:08). This scene begins with a shallow focus shot with the rusty metal bridge of the ferry in the foreground and a blurry shoreline with bare trees and a van slowly approaching the camera as the ferry moves closer to the shore (Illustration 20). It touches the ground for just long enough to let a woman step on the ferry and walk diagonally in front of the camera from right to left, while the figures of people getting off a bus and standing on the shore remain out of focus. The shot composition emphasizes a kind of indifference of nature and the machine and rhymes visually with other sequences in *Pipeline* that foreground landscape and/or machinery.



Illustration 20. A shallow focus shot of the ferry approaching the shore. *Pipeline* (dir. Vitalii Mansky, 2013)

Human figures in such sequences seem to be almost intentionally left out of focus. However, as the following episode demonstrates, Mansky's attention is equally centered on people, who are often portrayed in this documentary in domestic spaces (1:17:40-1:18:50). Here, already in Belarus, an older man is shown in focus, with the figure of a maintenance worker

standing closer to the camera and out of focus (Illustration 21). This episode is quickly cut and followed by a close-up of a pile of mess in the old man's kitchen; then the camera moves again onto the white indifferent open space over which the old man's voice is heard (Illustration 22). In this documentary, the visual legibility of objects and people in the foreground and background is not predicated on a play between micro and macro levels. Instead, it communicates a sense of confinement with regard to domestic spaces and the experience of vastness and indifference with regard to landscapes. If the spectator anticipates a radical change in the visual composition of *Pipeline* once the film crew crosses the border with Europe (the first Europen border, between Belarus and Poland, is shown at the eighty-fifth minute of the film), this anticipation is not rewarded by the filmmaker. As the documentary progresses in its movement from Siberia to Europe, no intertitles or voiceover commentary announces the location change, and the geographical changes at times appear quite subtle. People in the documentary speak different languages, so the spectator can orient themselves visually, but hardly narratively. Everyday lives of people everywhere along the gas route are marked by weddings, funerals, church services, and family celebrations, filled with frustration, joy, loneliness, and desire.



Illustration 21. A shallow focus shot of the old man in his home in Belarus. *Pipeline* (dir. Vitalii Mansky, 2013)



Illustration 22. A snowy landscape with powerline posts. *Pipeline* (dir. Vitalii Mansky, 2013)

Mansky's cinematic experiment of following the gas transit trajectory by visually tracking the changes taking place along the way above the surface is informed politically. In several interviews discussing *Pipeline,* Mansky states that, by showing the difference in quality of life caught by the camera in his documentary, he intended to offer a critique of political regimes in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus that stifle the economic development of these countries. He also wanted to demonstrate a difference in the social and political engagement of people in different countries, emphasizing a depoliticized and atomized society in Russia.[151] However, the visual frames the filmmaker uses in *Pipeline* foreground affect rather than producing ideological commentary. The long shots of landscapes and machinery recorded by a static camera, shallow-focus footage depicting people preoccupied with daily routines, seamless transitions from one language to the next, one country to the next – all this produces a kind of detached observational documentary representation. Thus, in *Pipeline*, what looks like a cinematic exercise in compare-and-contrast proves, after closer analysis, to instead be a mediated experience of continuity.

Mansky's and Kosakovskii's documentary styles are situated at extreme opposite poles of post-Soviet documentary cinema. The field of documentary film produced since the 1990s in the post-Soviet space continues to grow and challenge our understanding not only of the art of documentary filmmaking, but also of the post-Soviet space itself: the space that is mapped out by documentary films, such as *Long Live the Antipodes!* and the *Pipeline,* among others. During the earlier period of the Soviet documentary cinema, to return to Emma Widdis's point, the key term to describe the relationship between the Soviet person and the space triangulated by the movie

[151]For example, see: Mansky, Vitalii and Moiseenko, Anna, Interv'iu s rezhisserom Vitaliem Manskim o fil'me "Truba," https://www.film.ru/articles/truba-0-1, July 31, 2013; Mansky, Vitalii and Iusipova, Larisa, "Truba" ob'ediniaet i simvoliziruet, Izvestiia, September 4, 2013, https://iz.ru/news/556510.

camera was "*appropriation*."[152] As I show in this section, continuity, if not detachment, could perhaps describe the relationship between the post-Soviet person and the space mediated by documentary film.

Photographic Optics and Its Nameless Object

Marina Razbezkina, a master of contemporary Russian documentary cinema, concerns herself as a director with questions of history, memory, and mediation in her documentary film *The Optical Axis*. Fascinated by the figure of the Russian fin-de-siècle photographer Maksim Dmitriev, Razbezhkina brings his photographs of seven distinct places and groups of people from the turn of the 19th century into conversation with her own footage, taken approximately a century later. Below, I discuss the relationship between these visual media – photography and cinema – and focus on the triangulation of gazes between photographic portraits, people being filmed, and the director's vision in *The Optical Axis.*

At the very end of her documentary, Razbezhkina places an episode featuring a meeting at a Nizhnii Novgorod bank of present-day bankers and financiers encountering a photograph of the same bank and its clerks and customers taken by Maksim Dmitriev in 1913. In the final few seconds of the film (01:26:44 – 01:26:55), one of the bankers suddenly turns around on his way out, faces the camera, and says: "I did not introduce myself. I was telling you stories, but I never introduced myself. Do you need me to do that or not?".[153] These are the last spoken words in the documentary, after which the screen fades into a shot with the title of the film: *The Optical Axis.* Razbezhkina puts her emphasis on the anonymity of the people in front of the camera – both in front of Dmitriev's camera a century ago and in front of the cameras in the hands of camera

[152]Widdis, *Visions of a New Land*, 62.
[153]"Скажите: я не представился, я там рассказывал, да, но не представился. Это надо или не надо?"

operators Denis Klebleiev and Irina Ural'skaia. Photography as a medium is marked by the namelessness of its photographic object, and in *The Optical Axis*, Razbezhkina remediates this signature photographic quality into a documentary film. In so doing, she collides two media – photography and film – not only quite literally by inserting photographic images into a cinematic narrative, but also formally, by appropriating the language of photography and playing with its conventions within a cinematic medium.

When the title of the documentary appears at the beginning of the film, it is accompanied by a dictionary definition of the term: "The optical axis is a straight line that goes through the centers of curvatures of all lenses and mirrors of the optical system."[154] In her documentary, Razbezhkina mobilizes the term "optical axis" both as a metaphor and an organizing principle. The photographic optics and the optical axis provide a straight line connecting the inception of Russian documentary reportage photography, represented by the work of Maksim Dmitriev, and Razbezhkina's own contemporary documentary work in film. In this sense, *The Optical Axis* is an origin story of documentary and a dialogue between two documentarians spanning a century of Russian history. Structurally, Razbezhkina uses the concept of an axis to organize each one of the seven episodes in a symmetrical composition where the central episode with the elderly *lozhkar*' (a maker of wooden spoons) divides the other episodes into semantic pairings.

[154]"Оптическая ось – прямая, проходящая через центры кривизны всех линз или зеркал оптической системы".

Each episode hinges on the following three points: location, a person (or multiple people) representing a particular social class, and the co-presence of a photographic and a cinematic image. For example, in the very first episode (00:08:13-00:14:55), Razbezhkina brings a very large (several meters in length and width) print of Dmitiriev's photograph to the location where it was originally taken at the end of the 19th century. The photograph depicts the Bugrov Homeless Shelter (*Nochlezhnyi dom Bugrova*) in Nizhnii Novgorod and a crowd of homeless people awaiting entry into the shelter for the night (Illustration 23). The people filmed by Razbezhkina in this episode are present-day homeless people and the police officers in charge of the shelter. The camera follows the homeless from inside of the shelter in the morning outside into the street, where they must spend the day before returning for the night. The footage is taken in winter, and as the crowd encounters the large photograph outside of the shelter, one can see streaks of warm air emanating from their lips when they speak. The homeless people in the streets today are looking at the photograph of homeless people from a hundred years ago at the same time as the documentary spectators are looking at them (Illustration 24). Razbezhkina carefully stages this triangulation of



Illustration 23. A large print of Dmitriev's photograph of the Bugrov's Homeless Shelter displayed in front of its historical location serving as a homeless shelter in the present-day Nizhnii Novgorod. *The Optical Axis* (dir. Marina Razbezhkina, 2013).

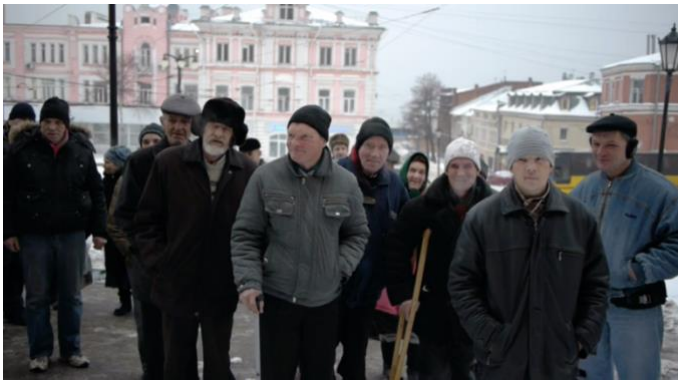

Illustration 24. Homeless people looking at a large print of Dmitriev's photograph of the Bugrov's Homeless Shelter from 1913. *The Optical Axis* (dir. Marina Razbezhkina, 2013).

gazes, inviting a range of reactions from everyone involved, including the spectators of the documentary. The question of who these people are can be asked by the spectators of the film as much as by the homeless crowd looking at the enlarged print of Dmitriev's photograph.

In *The Optical Axis*, the silent flat surface of the black-and-white photograph is juxtaposed with the moving cinematic image, which is accompanied by color and sound. In the following sequence (00:24:00-00:27:12), the camera zooms in on Dmitriev's photographs of street-fair entertainment girls (*ulichnaia shanson'etka*) and then zooms out, placing a present-day stripper against a background of a large photograph on the wall (Illustration 25). "I would not pose like that," she says. "I would choose a position that makes me look beautiful. Something like this."[155] In this episode, the cameraman Denis Klebleiev enters the frame. In her juxtaposition of photographic and cinematic optics, Razbezhkina stages two distinct ways of seeing: a dynamic camera (Klebleiev) which approximates its object and a gaze that is focused on detail and can promptly react to a change in movement. The opposite of which is a static camera (Irina Ural'skaia) that provides a stable framed image with carefully planned composition, light, and depth of focus. Razbezhkina uses these two distinct kinds of optics, placing an episode that exhibits them contrapuntally early in her documentary and guiding the spectator to instrumentalize both ways of seeing simultaneously in the process of watching *The Optical Axis.*



Illustration 25. A stripper posing in front of a large print of Dmitriev's photograph of a street-fair entertainment girl from the early 1900s. *The Optical Axis* (dir. Marina Razbezhkina, 2013).

[155]"Позировать на фотографии по-другому [стала бы], не так. Ну, наверное, вот так вот всё-таки. Мне выгоднее, когда вот так вот, полубоком".

Razbezhkina moves on to the next episode, which again focuses of a group portrait rather than a photograph of one person. It this episode, the camera repeats the movement from the inside to the outside, similar to the movement used in the first episode. Here, the episode begins inside the dark, loud, and dangerous interior of a metallurgic plant with red fiery streams of liquid metal and follows the workers outside into the plant yard, where they face the large photograph of their plant from the early 20th century (00:29:30-00:35:55). Razbezhkina's documentary is not only a study of the cinematic medium and its representative possibilities and limitations, but also an exploration of a relationship between the photographer/filmmaker and their objects. If photography conceals the interaction between the person behind the camera and in front of it, in her documentary, Razbezhkina pauses intentionally, allowing for a dialogic exchange of gazes and words. The staged character of Dmitriev's photographs is hinted toward here, only to be explicitly pointed out in the following episode. Here, though, the metallurgic plant workers enthusiastically pose for the camera and ask the cameraman for feedback: they all want to look good. They freeze as if for a still photograph, and in one instance, as the camera moves along the lined-up people, one of them utters to the person standing next to him through a frozen smile: "Smile, I am telling you! Smile for the camera!"[156]

At the center of this documentary, compositionally and semantically, is a lengthy close-up study of an elderly *lozhkar*' (a maker of wooden spoons). This episode splits the rest of the episodes according to a logic of socio-economic class opposition: the homeless people vs. bankers, entertainment girls vs. old believers, factory workers vs. doctors. However, this episode is central, as it is focused on a figure of a maker, a unique master of his craft, a tradition keeper. In front of our eyes and in front of the camera, he carves out a beautifully shaped object from a

[156]"Улыбайся, кому говорят! Улыбайся на камеру!"

plain dry piece of wood (00:37:17–00:52:30). This episode takes the time it needs for the process to be concluded and lingers on every detail, letting each layer of the complex visual narrative reveal itself in a process not dissimilar to that of studying a photograph carefully. In this episode, the single unique artist remains nameless to the spectator, and here the anonymity can be interpreted as a critique of the individualization of artistic production. We know the names of Maksim Dmitriev and Marina Razbezhkina, but the elderly spoon-maker remains nameless. Moreover, it is him who points out that Dmitirev's photograph is staged and presents an augmented version of reality: "This is not true," he says. "See how he holds the axe here, and this guy here, with a knife in his hand? That is simply wrong, they would never do that."[157] This tension between a desire to capture the real in its raw development and the obvious impossibility to do that, which punctuates documentary as a mode of artistic production – after all, the very presence of the photographic or movie camera changes this reality – is expressed quite strikingly and is at the core of this documentary.

The episodes of *The Optical Axis* are organized as pairs that complicate and highlight each other's contradictions. If the metallurgic plant workers are followed by the camera from the inside onto the outside, then in the episode showing rural doctors, the camera moves in the opposite direction: from the streets into the homes. Doctors are shown traveling through snow from one patient to another, the camera shaking together with the old emergency vehicle. Finally, when the doctors all come together to look at the photograph of their hospital taken in 1891-1892, the camera studies their faces in close-up before zooming out. Here, the relationship between photographic and cinematic optics and its object is presented through a tension that

[157]"Так невозможно делать. Вот, смотрите, вот, они рядом сидят. Ведь это же невозможно. Один с топором, другой с ножом. Невозможно просто."

exists between the surface of the image and the content hidden behind it. Cinema as a sounding dynamic medium allows for the processes of recognition and misrecognition to unravel and be narrated in real time: in this episode, the doctors describe and imagine what kind of medical equipment must have been inside the hospital depicted in the photograph. As the camera zooms out and situates the present-day doctors against the backdrop of the photograph, it visually inscribes them into a history to which they belong and allows for a kind of continuity to emerge that connects the past to the present. This, perhaps, is *the* gesture of this documentary – a gesture by which Razbezhkina simultaneously represents a history of Russian documentary and claims her own place in it. *The Optical Axis* not only traces a history of the documentary, but also powerfully inscribes Razbezhkina into this cinematic tradition dominated by male directors. Even though the photographic object remains nameless, it nevertheless persists and makes possible for a kind of history to emerge and be visualized and preserved.

Conclusion

In 2014, Razbezhkina wrote, "Today, there is again a demand for a very powerful symbolization of space (*prostranstva*), because, in reality, there are too many details and shades, there is not just black and just white; and it is better to rule people by means of simple symbols: 'your goal is to become a symbolic hero'."[158] Reflecting on the task of contemporary documentary cinema in Russia, the filmmaker insists on its responsibility to avoid symbolic depictions of space and instead emphasizes cinema's capacity to produce ambiguous complex

[158]"Сегодня снова возникла потребность в очень мощной символизации пространства, потому что в реальности слишком много подробностей и оттенков, нет просто черного и просто белого, а управлять человеком лучше с помощью простых символов: 'твоя задача — стать символическим героем'." Ratgauz, Mikhail and Timasheva, Irina, eds., *"Sinema Verite" Rossiia, 2014: Dokumental'noe Kino v Perelomnyi God* (Moskva: Colta.ru i fond imeni Genrikha Bellia, 2014), 57-58.

images of reality. By referring to "rul[ing] people by means of simple symbols," Razbezhkina comments on the use of the documentary cinematic image by the Russian political regime for ideological purposes. In her film *The Optical Axis,* as I show above, the filmmaker mobilizes documentary footage recorded by two cameras, one dynamic and one static, producing two distinct kinds of cinematic images, thus inducing her audience to engage both ways of seeing at the same time. The footage recorded by the static camera in the present-day Russia is further juxtaposed with static photographic imagery from a century ago. The spectator's perception is constantly destabilized and challenged by several visually and narratively conflicting images in the frames of Razbezhkina's documentary. The depth of filed changes in the film, oscillating between deep and shallow focus, as does the shot length. Long, deep-focus shots allow the audience to carefully study a fragment of reality captured by a particular episode of *The Optical Axis,* while short, shallow-focus shots propel the narrative of the documentary forward. Various visual techniques instrumentalized by Razbezhkina work together toward creating an ideologically complex and ambiguous image that resists being understood symbolically. This is in itself a political message of her work that embodies a logic of multiplicity and requires a kind of flexibility and freedom of perception on behalf of her audience.

In Mansky's documentary *Pipeline,* the space itself, with its visual and spatial characteristics reproduced and mediated by film, exceeds the imposed ideological frames. The documentary begins as a cinematic study of what makes Russia so different from its neighbors in the West, but, as my analysis shows, the effect the film produces is closer to a contemplative continuity and visual resemblance of natural landscapes and human daily life along the gas transit route. The omnipresence of deep focus footage recorded by a static camera in *Pipeline* emphasizes the ambiguity of reality and, like in Razbezhkina's documentary, resists a simplistic

symbolic reading along the lines of the eternal tension between the "East" and the "West." One possible reading of this device suggests that the ideological frames applied by the filmmaker are in conflict with the visual frames *Pipeline* places on the post-Soviet space and beyond. It is space itself that demands further and more nuanced comprehension and analysis by means of documentary cinema.

Finally, Kosakovskii's masterful use of cinematic technology in *Long Live the Antipodes!* allows for a documentary depiction and contemplation of the continuity of life on the entire planet. Visually striking and politically indefinite, the documentary shows randomly coupled parts of the world and fosters an illusion of the connectedness of humanity and nature. Playing with the depth of field, as well as with the horizontal and vertical orientation of the camera, Kosakovskii creates a "montage of attractions" that prompts the spectator to engage in a preternatural way of seeing, from distantly observing the Earth's rotation to a dangerous close-up of a volcano eruption. This documentary's ideological message is rather ethical than political, as the film suggests the embrace and overcoming of regional, national, and political differences in favor of finding one's place and role *vis-à-vis* the humanity's shared responsibility for the planet.

These documentaries explore vast spatial and temporal spans and use cinematic tools such as depth of field to visually and perceptually map out different spaces: a specific region of Russia in Razbezhkina's *The Optical Axis*, several countries in Mansky's *Pipeline*, and the entire planet in Kosakovskii's *Long Live the Antipodes!* These three documentary films offer detailed and complex imprints of reality; however, each individual filmmaker approaches reality with a particular set of questions. The "exceptionally exact perception", to return to Kuleshov's formulation, afforded by depth of field in cinema engenders the ambiguity of reception in these documentaries.

Chapter 3: Documentary Materiality: Physical Objects in Documentary Film and Theater

Following the previous chapter, which examines the spatial dimensions of documentary theatrical and cinematic productions, focusing primarily on instrumentalization of depth (of focus) and flatness (of screens), in this chapter I analyze the relationship between the documentary and materiality. Documentary spaces of cinematic screens and theatrical stages almost always necessarily incorporate inanimate material objects; such objects often function as documents themselves, material markers of actual physical reality. This chapter interrogates the complex relationship of the documentary to the material environment and seeks to overcome what is often understood in documentary film and performance studies scholarship as a binary – utilitarian/aesthetic – role of inanimate objects.

Physical objects, it is possible to argue, appear in documentary films and in documentary theatrical productions for quite opposite reasons. While each and every object is carefully selected and intentionally included into a documentary performance, documentary films often capture random objects that serendipitously appear in front of the camera. Leaving questions of intentionality and representational selection aside for now, it is the affective power engendered by the interaction between human subjects and material objects in the documentary that is my primary focus in this chapter. Studying materiality and the documentary through this lens allows me to think about physical objects beyond their symbolic and/or indexical function in documentary films and performances.

Deploying the method of contrapuntal reading in continuity with previous two chapters opens the possibility of analyzing the staged and filmed documentary encounter between human subjects and material objects in post-Soviet theater and cinema. I am not interested here in

theatrical and cinematic examinations of post-Soviet material culture as such. Rather, my focus is on documentary works where the narrative is centered on human subjects and which rely on their subjects' interaction with physical objects to create a particular sensory-emotional effect on their audiences. In Part I of the chapter, I analyze two documentary films released in Russia in the early 2000s: *Clean Thursday* (*Chistyi chetverg*, dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003) and *In the Dark* (*V temnote*, dir. Sergei Dvortsevoi, 2004). I then turn to documentary theatrical productions, including *Uzbek* (dir. Talgat Batalov, 2012), *Uprising* (*Vosstanie*, dir. Viacheslav Gulivitskii, 2016), and *Mel'nikov: A Documentary Opera* (*Mel'nikov: Dokumental'naia opera,* dir. Anastasiia Patlai, 2017).

Part 1: "Real Things in Real Surroundings": Inanimate Documentary Object

In an interview with the film scholar Zara Abdullaieva in 2009, Anatolii Vasiliev, a famous Russian theater director, reflects on the specificity of documentary cinema and its object; he notes, "I think that only an inanimate object (*predmet*) can be a document. Any inanimate thing is a documentary object (dokumental'nyi *obiekt*). Anything animated, however, ceases to be such an object because animatedness (*odushevlionnost'*) necessarily initiates a relationship with the camera (*obiektiv*)."[159] Vasiliev thus questions documentary cinema's claims of authenticity and truthful representation of reality, since it includes animated objects, whose interaction with the filming subject changes reality in the process. On the other hand, inanimate objects, according to Vasiliev, belong to reality, which can be documented without being

[159]"Документом, я думаю, может быть только предмет неодушевленный. Всякая неодушевленная вещь — объект документальный. А все, что одушевлено, перестает быть таким объектом, потому что одушевленность обязательно вступает во взаимоотношения с объективом."Abdullaeva, *Postdok: Igrovoie/neigrovoie*,13.

simultaneously altered in the process of making a documentary. Following his logic, inanimate objects occupy a privileged position in relation to people and animals depicted in documentary cinema, precisely because they remain unchanged, indifferent, and static and therefore manifest a kind of *faktura* of material reality which documentary cinema seeks to capture.

The term *faktura* is used in the English-language scholarship on Soviet art history and theory in its transliterated form, even though it is also sometimes translated into English as "treatment" or "texture." In her article "Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde," the art historian Maria Gough comments on the difference between *faktura* and texture: "While not incorrect, this rendering narrows the word's meaning to only the end result of the process of making, thereby suppressing its significant emphasis on the process itself."[160] Documentary film captures reality in the process of its unfolding in real time, and therefore using the term *faktura* allows me to keep this key emphasis on the process in focus while discussing the material properties of objects depicted in documentary films. While there are several competing interpretations of the term *faktura* within the art-historical and literary discourse in the specificity of the Soviet cultural context, my analysis draws on the connection between materiality, sense perception, and ideology implied in *faktura.*[161]

In the 1910s and 1920s, Soviet thinkers such as David Burliuk, Roman Jakobson, and Viktor Shklovsky, as well as artists engaging with the concept of *faktura*, including El Lissitzky, Varvara Stepanova, and Vladimir Tatlin, used *faktura* to signal a radical break from the mimetic

[160]Gough, Maria, "Faktura: The making of the Russian avant-garde," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 36 (Autumn 1999), 33.
[161]For analysis of *faktura* in art history see, for example: Bois, Yve-Alain, "Malevitch, le carré, le degré zero," *Macula 1* (1976), 28-49, and Buchloh, Benjamin H.D., "From Faktura to Factograghy," *October 30* (Fall 1984), 83-120; for a discussion of faktura in literature see, for example: Hansen-Löve, Aage, "Faktura, Fakturnost'," *Russian Literature 27* (January 1985), 29-37.

artistic method of the past.[162] Instead of privileging the "transparency" of the medium and the capacity of a flat pictorial surface to create an illusion of depth and a seeming realistic semblance of depicted objects, *faktura* – the material properties of the medium, its texture, color, density, volume, etc. – demands new forms of artistic production and affords new ways of perceiving art. Burliuk developed the concept of *faktura* in a series of essays, in which he highlights the connection between the materiality of the surface, artistic subjectivity, and sense perception.[163] For Burliuk, as Gough maintains, "The *faktura* of the work of art, rather than its subject matter, was the 'ground [*pochva*] upon which the viewer's most subtle feelings develop,' precisely because *faktura* stimulates the gamut of human sensory perception – not only vision but also the haptic and olfactory senses."[164] For constructivists, *faktura* is particularly important for conveying ideological messages and transforming material reality. *Faktura* becomes a vehicle of transformation by means of working on material in accordance with its physical properties (the opposite of imposing a form onto a material) and by refashioning "the outside world" through new forms of labor dictated by the material. For example, El Lissitzky elaborates this position in 1920 in his essay "Suprematism in World Construction" by stating, "The new element of treatment [*faktura*] which we have brought to the fore in our painting will be applied to the whole of this still-to-be-built world and will transform the roughness of concrete, the smoothness of metal, and the reflection of glass into the outer membrane of the new life, the new light will

[162]See Gough, 35-38, and Kurchanova, Nataliia, "Varvara Stepanova: faktura" in *Formal'nyi metod: antologiia russkogo modernisma*. Vol.2 (Ekaterinburg: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2016), 817-845.
[163]Burliuk, David, "Faktura" in *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (Moskva: Izdanie G.L. Kuz'mina, Tipografiia t.d. Ia. Dankin i Ia. Khomutov, 1912) and "Cubism (Surface – Plane)" in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934*, ed. and transl. by John E. Bowlt (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 102-110, 69-77.
[164]See Gough, 36-37.

give us new color and the memory of the solar spectrum will be preserved only in old manuals on physics. This is the way in which the artist has set about the construction of the world."[165] In other words, Lissitzky emphasizes the connection between materiality, sense perception, and ideology (here, a potential for world transformation through an encounter between the artist's work and the viewer). At the same time, Vladmir Tatlin uses his three-dimensional visual art to highlight the working of materials and the conceptual shift in agency from the artist to the material itself.[166]

Finally, reflecting on Tatlin's work in his essay "Regarding Texture [*Faktura*] and Counter-Reliefs," Shklovsky states in 1920 that *faktura* "is the main feature of that special world of especially constructed things, the aggregate of which we usually call art."[167] According to Shklovsky, works of art are perceived differently from other material objects precisely because they possess and display *faktura*. In the same essay, he claims that "the outside world is outside of art"; consequently, objects outside of art function differently and do not have *faktura*.[168] More precisely, an object can reveal its *faktura* when it is taken from "the outside world" and used to create a work of art. An example that Shklovsky uses in the essay to demonstrate his point is a word that does not operate in everyday speech the same way it operates in literature. In literature, the word "reverberates and we listen to it in its full potential."[169] Similarly, continuing

[165]Lisstzky, El, "Suprematism in World Construction" in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, letters, texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 332.
[166]For more on Vladimir Tatlin see Zhadova, Larissa, *Tatlin* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1988) and Bokova, Anna, *Avant-Garde as Method: Vkhutemas and the Pedagogy of Space, 1920-1930* (Zurich: Park Books, 2020).
[167]Shklovsky, Viktor, "Regarding Texture and Counter-Reliefs" in *Knight's Move* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 66.
[168]Ibid., 65.
[169]Ibid., 66.

Shklovsky's thread of thought, it is possible to argue that a material object used in everyday life, in the "outside world," can display its visual *faktura* when it is used in a documentary film.

In this section, I analyze how contemporary Russian documentary film instrumentalizes material objects to create a particular sensory-emotional effect on its spectator. Physical objects in documentary films analyzed in this section not only populate the material environment depicted on-screen, but also participate in a complex "orchestration of feelings," to use Béla Balázs's formulation.[170] In *Clean Thursday* (*Chistyi chetverg*, 2003), Aleksandr Rastorguev highlights the fragility and disappearance of material traces of existence by focusing on the interaction between soldiers and the objects that surround them in Chechnya. In his film *In the Dark* (*V temnote*, 2004), Sergei Dvortsevoi attempts to render cinematically palpable the world of a blind man who perceives and interacts with objects around him haptically. I argue that through their interaction with people on screen, inanimate documentary objects acquire affective power and material visual expressivity and that *faktura* plays a key role in this process.

Material Objects and Documentary Film

In film scholarship, discussions of physical objects in cinema tend to oscillate around two axes. One avenue of research is informed by 1920s theories of materiality and early cinema's interest in "the tremendous importance of objects" and "the matter of the world;" the other path of analysis is shaped by thing theory and New Materialism from the 2000s-2010s.[171] In the context of Russian and Soviet cinema, film directors Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein

[170]Balázs, Béla, "Russkaia fil'ma i ee kritika (po povodu fil'my 'SVD')," *Kino* 33 (Leningrad) (August 12, 1928), 3.
[171]Kracauer, Siegfried, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U Press, 1997), 45. For more on the early Soviet theories of materiality and film, see: Bulgakova, Oksana, "Novyi LEF i kinoveshch," *Russian Literature* 103 (2019), 61-94; for more on cinema and thing theory, see: Peucker, Brigitte, *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film* (Stanford, CA: Stanford U Press, 2007).

polemically elaborate their ideas on the relationship between material environment, physical objects, and the art of film as early as the early 1920s. Vertov's and Eisenstein's writings on objects and cinema participate in the broader intellectual debates of the productivists and constructivists focused on materiality and things - from Sergei Tretiakov to Nikolai Chuzhak, Boris Arvatov, and El Lissitzky, to name only a few.[172] Succinctly put, these debates facilitated a conceptual shift from a traditional perception of the material object (*veshch*) as dependent on human agency and subjected to human desire to a new understanding of it as a self-sufficient thing empowered by a certain force. It was not just the object *per se* that was at the center of their thought, however, but the way human sense perception is mediated and even shaped by the material objects with which people interact.[173]

How does this conceptual orientation towards the object manifest in film-theoretical thought? In a series of essays published in the 1920s, Vertov articulates the idea of the film-object (*kino-veshch*).[174] First, it is defined antithetically to non-documentary cinema: a film-object is based on facts and reveals real life as it is, while the latter is based on fiction and is shaped according to a script; a film-object is itself a form of reality and does not reflect life or create an illusion of life, but rather cinematically "quotes" reality.[175] Second, and more importantly, according to Vertov, the film-object is a self-sufficient thing whose form cannot be

[172]See Tretiakov, Sergei, "The Biography of the Object" (1929), *October*, 118, (Fall 2006), 57-62; Chuzhak, Nikolai, "Pod znakom zhiznestroenia," *Lef*, 1, (1923); Arvatov, Boris, *Art and Production* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Lissitzky, El, "Blokada Rossii konchaetsia," *Veshch*, 12, (1922).
[173]For more on formalist thought on materiality and modernism, see: Oushakine, Serguei, "Ne vzletevshiie samolety mechty': O pokolenii formal'nogo metoda" in *Formal'nyi metod: antologiia russkogo modernisma*. Vol.1 (Ekaterinburg: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2015), 9-60.
[174]See, for example, Vertov, Dziga, "We: Variant of A Manifesto" (1922) and "Kinoks: A Revolution" (1923), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. by Annette Michelson, transl. by Kevin O'Brian (Berkeley, CA: U of California Press, 1984), 5-9; 11-21.
[175]Ibid.

anticipated by a script; thus the film-makers producing film-objects (*the kinoks*) are committed to "proceeding from the material to the film-object (and not from the film-object to the material)."[176] Moreover, the audience's perception may be altered through interaction with the film-object: for example, Vertov writes, "In disclosing the origin of objects ..., the camera makes it possible for every worker to acquire, through evidence, the conviction that he, the worker, creates all these things himself, and that consequently they belong to him."[177] In a sense, Vertov's film-object is an ideal thing envisioned by productivists and constructivists. On the one hand, it is itself a material object capable of shaping and mediating human sense perception; on the other hand, its form is shaped by the materiality of the real world rather than simply embodying the design of the artist.

At the same time, Eisenstein emphasizes the "affective expressivity of the object" ("*affektivnaia vyrazitel'nost' predmeta*") in his unfinished essay "On the Play of Objects" (1925-1926).[178] This essay develops Eisenstein's thinking about the cinematic image and its affective power, particularly with regard to influencing the spectator's associations and emotions, which he introduced in his earlier piece, "The Montage of Film Attractions" (1924).[179] In "The Montage of Film Attractions", Eisenstein defines "attractions" broadly as "any demonstrable fact (an action, *an object,* a phenomenon, a conscious combination, and so on) that is known and proven to exercise a definitive effect on the attention and emotions of the audience ...."[180]

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[176]Vertov, Dziga, "On the Film Known As Kinoglaz" (1923), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. by Annette Michelson, transl. by Kevin O'Brian (Berkeley, CA: U of California Press, 1984), 35.
[177]Ibid., 34.
[178]Eisenstein, Sergei, "[Ob igre predmetov]," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 36/37 (1997-1998), 35.
[179]Eisenstein, Sergei, "The Montage of Film Attractions," *S.M.Eisenstein: Selected Works, Volume 1 (1922-1934)*, ed. and transl. by Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1988), 39-59.
[180]Ibid., 40 (the cursive is mine – NP).

Interested in the affective potential of a thing depicted on the screen within a montage chain of images organized by the film director (here, he polemicizes with Vertov and insists on the film creator's authorial agency), Eisenstein focuses on "inanimate objects" ("*neodushevlionnyie predmety*") in "On the Play of Objects."[181] Here, Eisenstein suggests that in cinema, unlike in theater, which "cannot move beyond *the play with objects*," it is possible to replace the *play* of actors with the *play* of objects.[182] Eisenstein seeks an alternative to the default cinematic device of the actor's play affecting the spectator emotionally. Inanimate objects, according to Eisenstein, can be selected and cinematically assembled in such a way as to reveal "a conglomerate of heterogenous schemes" and "to provoke the desired affects from the audience."[183] The goal is not to get rid of the actor's play in film completely, but to reorient cinema towards the object, in line with artistic experimentations in other art forms at the time. Besides, Eisenstein emphasizes the role of objects and their affective expressivity in training and recalibrating the spectator's "perception apparatus."[184] He is interested in using cinematic devices – "rhythm, color, *faktura*" – that serve the purposes of amplifying the affective power of material objects.[185]

As recent scholarship on film shows, the theoretical discussions of the 1920s about materiality in cinema had a lasting impact on Soviet and post-Soviet documentary and non-documentary films.[186] My analysis of contemporary Russian documentary films builds on these

[181]Eisenstein, "[Ob igre predmetov]," 34.
[182]Ibid.
[183]Ibid., 35.
[184]Ibid.
[185]Ibid.
[186]For the analysis of objectalism and post-Soviet documentary film and television projects, see: Oushakine, Serguei, "Totality Decomposed," 638-69; for more on materiality and affect in Soviet cinema, see Widdis, Emma, *Socialist Senses: Film, Feeling, and the Soviet Subject, 1917-1940* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 2017).

theoretical frameworks in the following way. In continuity with Vertov's and Eisenstein's examination of the relationship between film and physical objects, I am interested in the visual representation of materiality of things in documentary films. Instead of analyzing cinematic objects figuratively, I explore the role of *faktura* in the interaction between human subjects and objects on the screen. Since my focus is on documentary films with no professional actors, the emphasis on "the play of objects", rather than people, brings to the fore the representation of reality, the affective power of objects, and the potential impact on the audience's sense perception. How do contemporary documentary filmmakers exploit physical objects, material surfaces and textures on screen to provoke particular sensations?

Before I return to this question with my case studies, it is important to briefly point out the growing research in film scholarship informed by new materialism and thing theory.[187] Until recently, it seemed that the heightened attention to material things in film was bound by the limits of silent cinema and that there was therefore no rigorous theoretical development of the study of cinematic materiality after the 1920s. However, since the 2010s, perhaps in contrast to digital cinematic techniques and virtual reality, film studies have found the new materialist intellectual investment in objects and their materiality and complex relationship with human subjects to be productive again.[188] In short, thing theory is an umbrella concept covering multiple disciplinary approaches to materiality, from dialectical materialism to object-oriented

[187]For more on new materialism, see: Coole, Diana H., and Frost, Samantha, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Pfeifer, Geoff, *The New Materialism: Althusser, Badiou, Žižek* (New York, London: Routledge, 2015). For more on thing theory, see: Brown, Bill, *Things* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2010).
[188]For more on film studies, new materialism in connection to postcolonialism, gender, and posthumanism, see: Ezra, Elizabeth, *The Cinema of Things: Globalization and the Posthuman Object* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); for more on film and media studies and thing theory, see Pantenburg, Volker, *Cinematographic Objects: Things and Operations* (Köln: August Verlag, 2015).

philosophy, which seeks to overcome semiotic, language- and narrative-centered approaches to studying not only literature, but all forms of art. In the words of critical theorist Bill Brown, thing theory offers "new thoughts about how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects."[189] The new materialist approach to objects in the context of contemporary film studies, dovetailed with the early 1920s cinematic theories discussed above, allows me to consider how post-Soviet documentary cinema reorganizes subject-object relations on screen and what these subject-object relations reveal.

Film As an Object and Objects in Film: Aleksandr Rastorguev

At the beginning of Aleksandr Rastorguev's documentary *Clean Thursday* (*Chistyi chetverg*, 2003), immediately after the opening titles and a several-second-long establishing shot in color of a military base in Chechnya, the screen goes dark.[190] The surface of the film is mechanically scratched, leaving narrow, vertical, scar-tissue marks, and when projected, white light shines through the scratches, creating an abstract pattern of bright lines across the screen. For two minutes, the spectator sees only this chaotic movement of lines accompanied by a cacophony of sounds recorded during a fight between Russian and Chechen soldiers: automatic rifle shots and gunshots, the high pitch whistling of flying shells followed by the sound of explosions, male voices cursing, shouting, and screaming, the crackling of a radio, a moment of silence, and then more explosions, shots, and screams. This opening visual sequence is a result of the interaction between two materials: a fragile film surface (the documentary was shot on

[189]Brown, *Things*, 7.
[190]The documentary title in Russian, *Chistyi chetverg*, refers to an Orthodox Christian holiday, known in English as Maundy, or Sheer Thursday, celebrated on the Thursday before Easter. It commemorates the washing of the feet and the Last Supper of Jesus Christ.

Kodak), and a sharp pointed object repeatedly pressed and moved across the film, leaving traces on its skin. *Clean Thursday* exhibits its own materiality as a physical object, consisting of reels of film that were manipulated, scratched, cut, and edited. It also invites a particularly close attention to surfaces, materials, and the handling of objects depicted in the documentary.

In the early 2000s, the second Chechen war was underway, and a documentary film crew from Rostov consisting of the director Aleksandr Rastorguev, the writer Susanna Baranzhiieva, and the cameraman Eduard Kechedzhiian went to Khankala, the location of one of Russian military bases near Grozny.[191] Although, according to Baranzhieva, they were filming and recording synchronous sound during attacks and active military operations, *Clean Thursday* does not include any scenes of shooting, fights, and violence.[192] The synchronously and asynchronously recorded sound is layered over scenes of repose: moving trains and trucks, soldiers resting, washing up, marching, and doing chores. Rastorguev focuses on the



Illustration 26. A soldier mending his uniform. *Clean Thursday* (dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003).

[191]For more on Russian Chechen wars see Milyukov, Ilya, *Chronicles of the First and Second Chechen Wars* (Washington: Academica Press, 2020).

[192]Susanna Baranzhiieva on filming *Clean Thursday*: "Accompanied by helicopters, we started off towards the front line. When shooting began, soldiers would dive into the hatch, but Kechik [the cameraman Kechedzhiian's nickname - NP] stayed on top of the tank. When he was filming, he was not afraid of anything." ("И в сопровождении вертолетов мы отправились к линии фронта. Когда начинался обстрел, солдаты ныряли в люк, а Кечик с камерой оставался верхом на БТРе. Когда он снимал, то ничего не боялся.") In *Rastorguev*, ed. by Liubov' Arkus (Sankt-Peterburg: Seans, 2020), 88.

mundane side of the extraordinary violent experience of war. A mechanistic reproduction of every day in close proximity to death is captured by closeups of soldiers handling uniforms and boots, cooking and eating food, smoking, and napping. The footage depicting the process of handling *of* things and being handled *by* objects repeatedly occurs in the documentary and demands further examination.



Illustration 27. A soldier is asleep inside a train, facing the wall and covered by his uniform. *Clean Thursday* (dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003).



Illustration 28. A soldier is asleep inside a train, facing a table and covered by his uniform. *Clean Thursday* (dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003).

In an early scene in *Clean Thursday*, Rastorguev's camera zooms in on the hands of a soldier mending his uniform (Illustration 26). The shot is in black-and-white, focused on the gesture of the hands holding the fabric, piercing it with a needle, and aligning the edges of the white lining (07:46 – 07:50). The soldier's face and upper body are outside of the frame; the camera is static. The needle is pushed through the rough folded fabric with a degree of visible effort. The material of the camouflage uniform jacket blends in with the uniform pants, and only a narrow layer of the white lining renders the borders of the piece discernible. Before (07:42) and after (08:06) this brief shot lasting five seconds, the viewer sees images of sleeping soldiers wrapped in uniforms as if they were blankets (Illustrations 27

and 28). This rough camouflage fabric is designed to make bodies indistinguishable, both in the sense of blending in with the environment during battles and in making all soldiers look similar. These images of sleeping soldiers covered in uniforms, with their clean-shaven heads and almost identical positions (one arm extended and bent over the head, the rest of the body tightly wrapped by the uniform) show how this distinction-erasure function of the material works. The close-up shot of the soldier mending his uniform jacket (Illustration 25), then, can be read syntactically in this sequence. The process of sewing is shown here as an action that marks this particular object as belonging to this particular person. Rastorguev includes another shot of a different soldier mending his uniform, and again focuses on the soldier's hands holding the material (Illustration 29). The angle at which the camera captures this soldier's body and the fabric is similar to the first shot discussed above (Illustration 26). Yet, the director shows that this is a different person not only by briefly lifting the camera and showing his face, but also by zooming in on his hands, which are covered in bruises, scars, and spots of dry blood (08:07 – 08:16). These hands look nothing like the hands in the first sequence. By selecting these two visual sequences focused on the tactile contact between the soldiers' hands and the uniform material, Rastorguev emphasizes the details that separate each individual soldier from the rest. By placing these shots between visual sequences showing the same material used to cover the soldiers' bodies in a way that makes it almost impossible to make such distinctions, the director



Illustration 29. A soldier with bruised hands mending his uniform. *Clean Thursday* (dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003).

shows that it is the interaction between the object and the person that creates the effect of individuation.

The same effect of singling out individual soldiers by focusing on their handling of objects is achieved in the shots showing the soldiers receiving, opening, and reading letters later in the documentary. On the twenty-first minute of *Clean Thursday*, a series of sequences shows soldiers with the letters they received. The first shot depicts the opening of the envelope (Illustration 30). We hear the soldiers' names announced by a person outside of the frame, and the camera briefly shows a smiling face of a soldier who just received mail, and then quickly focuses on the soldier's hands holding and opening the letter (20:11 – 20:25). The scene is followed by a sequence of several soldiers in uniforms carrying heavy bags and loading them onto a train. Accompanying this shot, is the sound recording of soldiers speaking to each other and describing in the obscenest and most aggressive language their experiences of bullying, which are not shown or explained to the viewer. The soldiers are filmed mid-focus in black-and-white, their full-length figures moving towards a static camera capturing the train car and the dirt underneath the soldiers' boots. The scene cuts to another close-up of a soldier's hands holding a letter (21:18 – 21:21) (Illustration 31). The frame composition of these close-ups with letters mirrors the composition of the shots with uniform mending discussed earlier. In the



Illustration 30. A soldier opening a letter he just received. *Clean Thursday* (dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003).

former, the bodies of the soldiers are aligned with the right side of the frame; the arms are aligned with the lower-left/upper-right diagonal. Again, the focus is on the tactile interaction between the object and the person: the hands holding the paper. The similarities in composition and editing of these two sequences, which seek to capture the moments of the soldiers' intense focus on objects and to create the individuation effect (the letter is only for this particular person; each soldier fixes only his uniform), point towards Rastorguev's cinematic strategy in working with materials and objects in his documentary.



Illustration 31. A soldier reading a letter. *Clean Thursday* (dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003).

In contrast to visual sequences showing objects handled by people, *Clean Thursday* includes many shots of people handled by objects: large military vehicles carrying soldiers. These objects (military trucks, tanks, trains, and helicopters) are shown in color and black-and-white, at various angles, static and moving. Instead of including the footage of people driving or flying the large machines, Rastorguev shows these objects either with no soldiers inside or close to them, or captures the moments when soldiers are being transported, washed, or fed inside them. By avoiding images of the humans in control of these objects, the director shifts the audience's perception of the relationship between people and things to show how inanimate machines use soldiers' bodies in war.

Soldiers are delivered to the military base in Khankala by train; they sleep inside a train; they use train cars as their kitchen and laundry facilities; a special train is used as a washing

facility for soldiers. When speaking about the conception of *Clean Thursday* in an interview, the film's writer Baranzhieva uses the grammatical active voice to describe this train. She says, "We ... have read about this train, which stands outside of Khankala and bathes, and washes, and cleans the dirt, sweat, and blood of war off of our entire Russian military group."[193] In this description, the train, not the soldiers, is afforded agency. This vision manifests in the documentary, which reorganizes the subject-object relations on screen. The title of the documentary, *Clean Thursday*, refers to a key scene where soldiers are washing up inside this train (Illustration 32). The camera moves inside the narrow train car turned into a bathing station filled with naked bodies (27:13 – 31:05). The footage oscillates between black-and-white and color images, full shot and close-up, picking up details and zooming out to portray the intense closeness and intimacy of the moment. Over the sequence in the washing train car, the soundtrack plays recorded voices of the soldiers sending greetings home: "Hello my dear parents! I am doing well, and it seems like I will be going home soon... Hello mama! I just want to tell you not to worry about me – I will come home soon... I am sending my love to my mama,



Illustration 32. Soldiers washing up inside a special train used as a bathing station. *Clean Thursday* (dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003).

[193]"Мы уже к этому времени в новостях прочитали о таком поезде, который стоит на окраине Ханкалы и купает, и обмывает, и стирает грязь, пот и кровь войны со всей нашей российской группировки войск." Arkus, Liubov', Baranzhieva, Susanna, "Chistyi chetverg. Rastorguiev," available at http://www.open-lib.ru/dialogues/arkusbaranzhieva.

my father, to my dear and loved ones, my family…"[194] Like the many bodies and faces in the washing train car scene, the voices are many, and each single one of these voices is unique and floats above the image without identification to whom exactly it belongs. After all, these images and these voices are all that is left from the soldiers' short lives: the title shown twice, at the beginning and the end of *Clean Thursday*, says that the filming of this documentary ended two months before a military helicopter leaving Khankala for Grozny was shot down, and all 119 people on board died.

The ability of inanimate material objects to have a cinematic life of their own, which fascinated Eisenstein, is instrumentalized by Rastorguev in the images of soldiers' boots that punctuate the documentary from the first few moments of the film to the last. Unlike the objects mentioned above, which acquire affective expressivity through depictions of tactile contact with people, the images of boots in *Clean Thursday* are presented more autonomously and act as powerful vehicles of meaning and affect. This effect is achieved by the organization of footage and editing in such a way as to create a series of associations with the object in the spectator's mind. The fact that this material thing is a documentary object in the sense that it is encountered by the filmmaker and consequently by the viewer as a part of reality at a specific moment complicates and enriches the "play of objects." These objects, to return to Vasiliev's statement, do not initiate a relationship with the camera, but their images, mediated by film, engage with the audience's perception. The audience is provoked not only to perceive the image emotionally, but also to reflect on a kind of reality captured by the documentary film.

[194]"Здравствуйте, дорогие родители! Все хорошо, вроде, скоро домой…Здравствуй, мама! Хочу сказать, чтобы ты не волновалась. Скоро вернусь… Хочу привет передать маме, отцу, родным, близким, родственникам своим…"

The soldier's boots are shown in a series of visual sequences in *Clean Thursday*, from an earlier black-and-white footage of a pair of boots covered in dried dirt and placed next to a row of army shoes (07:39) (Illustration 33) to one of the last color images in the film, in which boots are dumped from a truck and burned in a furnace (38:54 – 39:00) (Illustration 34). Throughout the documentary, Rastorguev interlaces footage of soldiers marching through mud, in which the camera is focused on the boots, with images of large trucks driving through thick dirt. These images are positioned next to each other and organized by rhythm, color, and *faktura*. The image of the dark, rough surface of the boots dragged through a sticky mixture of dirt and rain-water rhymes visually with the image of the heavy jagged black tires of army trucks. The visual juxtaposition of these objects – truck tires and soldiers' boots – highlights their functionality. In his essay "Thing Theory", Brown delineates the difference between the notions of "object" and "thing" precisely along the axis of functionality or purposefulness. He writes, "We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of



Illustration 33. Soldiers' dirty boots piled next to army shoes. *Clean Thursday* (dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003).



Illustration 34. Soldiers' boots burning in furnace. *Clean Thursday* (dir. Aleksandr Rastorguev, 2003).

objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. ... We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us ...."[195] In other words, objects do not exceed purpose, while things possess an excessive quality which is related more to their materiality than to their functionality. When objects cease to function properly or be useful, they turn into things.

In *Clean Thursday*, the narrative arc comprised of the footage of the soldiers' boots follows this logic of objects turning into things: a kind of reduction of the object's purposefulness and revelation of its "thingness." One of the final visual sequences in the film shows a pile of boots thrown from a military truck down on the ground and then burned in the furnace, followed by an image of thick black smoke rising from the train's pipe. This sequence documents the process of destruction of the object reduced to a thing. Moreover, it captures the erasure of the material trace of the object's existence in reality while, at the same time, the film itself becomes a material carrier, proof of the object's disappearing presence.

Rastorguev focuses his documentary on the relationship between the human subject and a material object, and through a series of captured interactions between people and things, *Clean Thursday* shows a transformation not only of objects into things, but more importantly, a transformation by war of human subjects into objects and consequently into things. Rastorguev shows how soldiers' bodies turn into objects that can be handled, transported, and used and how this transformation works toward the erasure of the singularity of a human life. The moments of reclaimed individuality by the soldiers are rare, but Rastorguev highlights them against the backdrop of the military machinery, whose purpose is to make the soldiers indistinguishable. *Clean Thursday* shows how soldiers' bodies-turned-objects are used for the purposes of the war and how after they cannot serve these purposes anymore, these bodies are turned into things and

[195]Brown, *Things*, 4.

discarded. In the final part of *Clean Thursday,* the visual sequence shows an empty field with a military helicopter waiting for the dead bodies of soldiers sealed in heavy dark bags to be loaded onto the vehicle.

Rastorguev's documentary performs a kind of cinematic reversal of the war chronicle genre, which has a long history and an established set of conventions and expectations, by refocusing the audience's attention from the action onto objects.[196] In *Clean Thursday,* material objects acquire affective expressivity through depictions of interactions between people and things. A similar effect is produced in another documentary released one year after *Clean Thursday, In the Dark* (*V temnote,* 2004) by Sergei Dvortsevoi. The shooting and production of both documentary films took place in the early 2000s, and while Rastorguev's film shows the war occurring in the periphery of the Russian Federation, Dvortsevoi's *In the Dark* is filmed in the country's capital. This film is also an experiment with the documentary genre of the individual portrait, and like *Clean Thursday* it instrumentalizes "the play of objects" as a powerful visual device.

Seeing in the Dark: Sergei Dvortsevoi's Haptic Cinema

A few years after the release of *In the Dark* in 2004, its director Sergei Dvortsevoi said in an interview that it was his last documentary film.[197] Explaining his decision to abandon documentary filmmaking, Dvortsevoi says that he came to the realization that it was deeply

[196]For more on war chronicles in Soviet cinema see Dzhulai, Liudmila, "Opyt porazheniia. Opyt pobedy" in *Dokumental'nyi illiuzion: Otechestvennyi kinodokumental'izm–opyty sotsial'nogo tvorchestva* (Moskva: Materik, 2001), 81-93; *Tsena kadra: Sovetskaia frontovaia kinokhronika 1941-1945 gg.: dokumenty i svidetel'stva* (Moskva: Kanon++, 2010); Liber, George O., "Dovzhenko's War" in *Alexander Dovzhenko: A Life in Soviet Film* (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), 186-213.

[197]Sergei Dvortsevoi directed four documentary films including *In the Dark*: *Happiness* (*Schast'ie*, 1995), *Bread Day* (Khlebnyi den', 1998), and *The Road* (Trassa, 1999).

immoral and that "the more difficult it is for the person [you are filming], the better it is for you. The worse it is for them, the better it is for the film."[198] In the same interview, Dvortsevoi mentions that he realized this particularly clearly during the filming of *In the Dark*, a documentary about an old blind man. Since then, Dvortsevoi has made two critically acclaimed fiction films and has not returned to the documentary. As I show in this section, the film director's struggle with the ethical implications of filming a subject who cannot see and whose disability limits his control over the process of being filmed, manifests in a particular kind of haptic visuality in *In the Dark*. Here, Dvortsevoi's haptic cinema prioritizes images visualizing touch and tactile contact with objects, brings the camera close to the filmed subject, and pushes against spectatorial voyeurism.

In the Dark opens with a close-up in color of several balls of thread in a tight, poorly lit space that looks like a box or a drawer, and a pair of hands going through the balls of thread, touching, grabbing, and lifting them (Illustration 35). When the camera zooms out, it shows an old man in a loose soft sweater getting the thread from under a bed covered by a blanket. The camera captures the entire room, which is small and filled with objects: right next to the bed, there is a desk with a lamp, a radio, a telephone, and a doll sitting in the corner; there is a chair; across the bed, there is a wardrobe with a mirror, filled with



Illustration 35. Balls of thread in a box being handled by the old man in the opening sequence of *In the Dark* (dir. Sergei Dvortsevoi, 2004).

[198]"... чем сложнее герою, тем лучше для тебя. Чем хуже для него, тем лучше для фильма." Shavlovskii, Konstantin, "Myshelovka. Interview with Sergei Dvortsevoi," *Seans*, 2008, available at https://seance.ru/articles/myishelovka/

things that are seen through the glass doors - books, photographs, icons, and figurines; there is a TV set, covered in piles of newspapers, and stacks of paper laying around it (00:45 – 02:40). The two animated beings in this tiny bedroom, the old man and his white cat, are surrounded by material objects that occupy most of the lived, as well as cinematic, space. Until the ninth minute of the documentary, it is not obvious to the audience that the old man is blind: the disability is then signaled by his gesture of trying to locate an object on the surface of his bed by reaching out and repeatedly touching the blanket, instead of turning back and looking toward where he thinks the object might be. From this moment, every tactile interaction between the man and the objects in his room, as well as his interactions with the cat on screen, are marked by this heightened relationship of sense perception mediated by touch.

The balls of thread that appear at the very beginning of *In the Dark* (Illustration 35) play an important role in the film: the old man uses the thread to weave net grocery bags, which he then unsuccessfully tries to give away for free to passers-by in the street. The cameraman Alisher Khamidkhodzhaev films the process of weaving in detail: the camera is positioned close to the hands, the wooden base, and the tread and is focused on the trained slow movement of the old man's fingers (05:28 – 10:14) (Illustration 36). This visual sequence, like the entire documentary, is accompanied by the sound synchronously recorded on location: it includes the quiet whispering of the old man, a kind of rustling noise that the cat makes somewhere in the room, the voices heard from the outside through the window, and the subtle sound emanating



Illustration 36. The old man weaving the threads on a wooden base. *In the Dark* (dir. Sergei Dvortsevoi, 2004).

from the thread friction. Sound and touch are particularly important for the blind man as sources of information about the world around him, and accordingly, Dvortsevoi focuses the audience's attention on these two senses.

The concept of haptic visuality is instrumental in approaching such documentary films as *In the Dark*, which are focused on the depiction of contact between human subjects and material surfaces of objects. Articulated by the film theorist Laura U. Marks in her book *The Skin of the Film*, haptic visuality seeks to represent by cinematic means senses other than the gaze and to facilitate a more complex multisensory spectatorial experience. Marks writes, "While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality."[199] While acknowledging that cinematic images always involve both optical and haptic visuality, Marks makes an important distinction and emphasizes a heightened ability of haptic cinema to appeal to multisensory perception. Analyzing Dvotsevoi's documentary through the lens of haptic visuality brings to the fore cinematic strategies that create a particular sensory-emotional effect on their audience.

Like in the case of the footage of the net bag weaving mentioned above (Illustration 36), there are many visual sequences in *In the Dark* that draw attention to material properties of the surfaces surrounding the old man in the room. The camera captures the texture of the blanket and the carpets on the floor and on the wall and shows in close-up the fabric of the old man's trousers and of the handkerchief he is holding in his hand (30:05) (Illustration 37). The documentary

[199]Marks, Laura U., *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 163.

records the sound that the falling sheets of paper make when the cat accidentally pushes them from the top of the wardrobe. These visual sequences work towards provoking the audience's reactions based not only on the visual recognition or curiosity, but rather engendered by similar embodied experiences that the audience is reminded of and that can be evoked by the image.



Illustration 37. A close-up of the old man sitting on the couch and holding a handkerchief. *In the Dark* (dir. Sergei Dvortsevoi, 2004).

Following this logic, I suggest that Dvortsevoi effectively circumvents the exploitative interaction between the person being filmed and the spectator's gaze. Multisensory stimuli – not exclusively the gaze – are highlighted by the combination of the visual emphasis on the *faktura* of material objects and the auditory environment, bringing the spectator closer to the figure of the blind man in *In the Dark.*

Central to the composition of Dvortsevoi's documentary is an episode in the street, in which the old man is attempting to give away the net bags he made (23:54 – 27:40). Passing him by, people avoid interaction with him, and nobody takes a bag. He repeats over and over, "Please take a bag (*setochka*)! Stop for a moment, take a bag! I am giving them away for free…"[200] The camera juxtaposes the footage of people carrying plastic bags and quickly walking past the blind man



Illustration 38. The old man standing in the street, holding the bags he made, and giving them away to passers-by. *In the Dark* (dir. Sergei Dvortsevoi, 2004).

[200]"Возьмите сеточку! Остановитесь на минутку, возьмите сеточку! Я денег не беру…"

with the image of him standing still and holding the net bags (Illustration 38). A passerby briefly looks into the camera and says, "The time of these net bags (*setki*) is long gone!"[201] The objects made by the blind man are not commodities: there is no circulation for them along the lines of production/consumption. They exist as a reminder of the time that has passed, even if they have just been woven by the man trying to give them away. The repetition of the process of making these objects is their only *raison d'être*. However, the heightened attention that is drawn in the documentary to the process of weaving makes it meaningful in its own right. The camera follows the blind man back to his room, where he cries, and then the footage cuts to black. After an intertitle reading, "The spring and summer have passed," appears briefly on the screen, the footage shows the same room, the blind man sitting on his bed and setting up the weaving station. Dvortsevoi shows how the relationship that the blind man has with the inanimate objects in his room, overcrowded with things and covered in different kinds of material, stands in as a placeholder in the absence of relationship with people.

Conclusion

The depiction of soldiers' boots in their tactile materiality with an emphasis on the *faktura* of reality in Rastorguev's *Clean Thursday* alludes to Vertov's calling *kinoks* "the first shoemakers of Russian cinema" in his publication "For the Article: The Speech at the Debate [in the Malaia Dmitrovka Movie Theater]."[202] In this text, responding to an accusation of being a simple craftsman rather than a true cinematographer, Vertov proudly claims that being a "shoemaker of cinema" is an honor. He writes, "We know for sure, that a boot is made of leather,

[201]"Прошло время таких сеток уже!"
[202]Vertov, Dziga, "K Stat'e: Vystuplenie Na Dispute [v Kinoteatre 'Malaia Dmitrovka']," in *Iz Naslediia,* vol. 2: Stat'i i vystupleniia (Moskva: Eizenshtein-tsentr, 2008), 395.

not of wax which makes it shine."[203] Similarly, according to Vertov, cinema should not be treated as "shoe polish" applied to literary or theatrical pieces – instead, it should be understood and produced as its own separate film-object (*kino-veshch*). As Devin Fore states in his article "Dziga Vertov, The First Shoemaker of Russian Cinema," "Rather than making images using the medium of cinema (mere *kino-kartiny*, or 'moving pictures'), the 'shoemaker' Vertov constructed tangible *kino-veshchi*, film-things made of celluloid."[204] Both contemporary Russian filmmakers discussed above instrumentalize the capacity of documentary cinema to "quote" reality by producing new film-things through the technical means of cinema.

Dvortsevoi's actively uses this materialist orientation of documentary cinema in *In the Dark* by focusing on long shots capturing the *faktura* of everyday life. This *faktura* defines the shape of his documentary: being shaped by the materiality of the real world, Dvortsevoi's film is itself capable of refashioning and mediating the spectators' sense perception. In Rastorguev's *Clean Thursday*, the affective affordance of documentary is dominant. Using "the affective expressivity of the object" as conceptualized by Eisenstein, Rastorguev masterfully montages footage and sound to provoke an emotional and intellectual reaction from his audience.[205] *Clean Thursday* is a vehicle conveying an ideological message aimed at transforming the viewer's perception and thus changing material reality.

The documentary films analyzed in this section were produced and released in Russia in the early 2000s, a period of relative economic growth and political stability as described by

[203]"Мы твердо знаем, что сапог делается из кожи, а не из ваксы, которая заставляет его блестеть." Ibid.
[204]Fore, "Dziga Vertov, The First Shoemaker of Russian Cinema," 378.
[205]Eisenstein, "[Ob igre predmetov]," 35.

scholars of recent Russian history and economy.[206] However, Rastorguev's *Clean Thursday* and Dvortsevoi's *In the Dark* capture parts of the lived experience that testify to a reality damaged by war, economic degradation, and social isolation. As I attempted to demonstrate, in the environment of growing technological dematerialization, documentary cinema draws attention to material reality. By refocusing the audience's perception towards physical objects, their surfaces and textures, and towards the interaction between human subjects and inanimate things, *Clean Thursday* and *In the Dark* perform, to use Kracauer's formulation, "the redemption of physical reality."[207] In a way, these documentary films embody what for Kracauer was the ultimate purpose of film: "to record and reveal physical reality."[208] Moreover, through cinematically mediated interaction with material objects, *Clean Thursday* and *In the Dark* work towards de-automatization of the perception of physical reality by the audience.

Part 2: Inanimate Objects on Documentary Stage: *Veshch Na Stsene*

Discussing Dziga Vertov's documentary film *Enthusiasm* (1930) in connection to the philosopher Vilém Flusser's design theory, Devin Fore explains how Vertov's film-objects (*kino-veshchi*) participate in a kind of "materialist medialogy." He writes, "Vertov revealed that bodies of cultural knowledge are encoded into the seemingly most guileless and nonideological of commodities."[209] Referring to Flusser's theory that understands manufactured (non-natural) material objects as inter-subjective and dialogic, Fore claims that "social value and meaning are

[206]For more on Russia in the 2000s-2010s see, for example, Walker, Shaun, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); *Russia After the Global Economic Crisis*, ed. by Anders Åslund, Sergei Guriev, and Andrew Kuchins (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics and Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010).
[207]Kracauer, *Theory of Film*: xlix.
[208]Ibid.
[209]Fore, "Dziga Vertov, The First Shoemaker of Russian Cinema," 379.

not just effects of discourse, but can be found in all kinds of in-formed — that is, organized — objects."[210] In other words, Flusser's conceptualizing material objects as media as entities containing value and communicating information that need to be understood and decoded by the person interacting with them is useful for further understanding Vertov's film-objects (*kino-veshchi*), as Fore's article demonstrates. It is also instrumental for my analysis of physical objects (*veschi*) in documentary theater. Some documentary productions – for example, *Mel'nikov* – incorporate archival documents as material objects to communicate their historical authenticity, however fragmented, reduplicated, and mediated they may be. Physical objects other than photographs, video recordings, and archival documents can also function as documents if understood according to Flusser in terms of media carrying traces of real events, possessing value, and communicating information.

Physical objects, either specifically designed as props or repurposed from non-theatrical reality as ready-mades for theater, have been included in theatrical productions in a wide range of historical periods and contexts. Theater and performance scholars discuss the use of material things in theater, implementing a variety of approaches from phenomenology to semiotics and from cultural materialism to formalism.[211] In the context of Soviet theater-critical thought, three articles on this subject stand out, not only because they all share the same title — "The Object on Stage" ("*Veshch na stsene*") — but also because they track how material objects were used by

[210]Ibid., 381-382. For more on Flusser's media theory see Flusser, Vilém, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).
[211]For more on a phenomenological approach to the study of material objects in theater, see: Garner Jr., Stanton B., *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell U Press, 1994); for a semiotic analysis of things on stage, see: Fischer-Lichte, Erika, *The Semiotics of Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1992); for the perspective of cultural materialism, see: Harris, Jonathan Gil, and Korda, Natasha, *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Soviet theater directors and perceived by viewers and critics historically. The first Soviet "The Object on Stage" article was published in 1929 in the *Novyi zritel'* weekly journal (Illustration 42). In it, the theater critic Il'ia Berezark reflects on new challenges facing stage designers and the agitational potential of the material object on stage by comparing three productions in Moscow theaters at the time — *The Bedbug*, *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, and *Inga*.[212] Similarly to Eisenstein's concept of materialist transformation of reality by means of cinema, which has a particularly strong effect on the viewer's psyche, Berezark places this agitational task onto the theater set designer populating the stage with "examples [*obraztsy*] of a new dwelling, furnished rationally, comfortably, economically, and beautifully."[213] According to Berezark, the analyzed productions deliver minimally in response to the demand of the audience and the time in terms of presenting the new thing, the new socialist object on stage, but succeed in posing new challenges to the set designer. The author's main criticism of the set designers, including such famous artists as Aleksandr Rodchenko, who



ВЕЩЬ НА СЦЕНЕ: спектакли „Заговор чувств", „Клоп", „Инга" *)

В последнее время все шире ставится вопрос о новом вещественном оформлении нашего быта, о создании удобной мебели, утвари, костюма, о замене старых громоздких вещей, бездушных и украшенных новым целесообразным, рациональным и удобным оформлением наших жилищ.

Для того, чтобы этот вопрос был поставлен практически, нужна широкая агитация за новое оформление жилищ и зданий. Здесь театру, в частности, театральному художнику, несомненно принадлежит почетная роль. На сцене **должны быть показаны образцы нового жилища, обставленного рационально, удобно, экономно и красиво.** Зритель сумеет сравнить это образцовое жилище с собственным жильем, переполненным тяжелыми массивными, часто ненужными, вещами и воочию убедится в целесообразности нового оформления быта.

Эта тенденция начинает намечаться в последних постановках. Первая попытка—ударить по старому бытовому оформлению—сделала художниками Кукрыниксы в первой части спектакля «Клоп». Основное задание художников было создать «гротеск вещи», показать насколько отвратительно большинство старых вещей, заполняющих наш рынок. Удалось ли это? Увы, не совсем. Талантливые рисовальщики—карикатуристы на сцене чувствуют себя несколько беспомощно. Им удается собрать груду ненужных вещей на витрине в первом акте. Но они компонуют эти вещи в плане живописном, не используя сценических возможностей. Мало убедительна мещанская квартира, где происходит свадьба.

Что же касается «будущего», в оформлении Родченко, то здесь уже показан не новый быт, а некая жизнь в небытовом плане. Отсюда отвлеченное, геометрическое оформление сцены, собственно никакого представления о жизни в будущем не дающее.

Конечно, по сравнению с этой работой Родченко оформление Акимова в «Заговоре чувств» является известным шагом вперед. В сценах у Андрея Бабичева показана **действительно современная комната, обставленная достаточно просто, удобно и рационально,** комната, где есть новые удобные вещи (кушетка, вращающийся стул).

Но, к сожалению, ничего нового художник здесь не дал. Это одна из многих сотен, а то и тысяч комнат, которые можно увидеть во всех проспектах иностранных мебельных фирм, во всех альбомах заграничных архитектурных и мебельных выставок.

Конечно, Акимов гораздо талантливее и своеобразнее, когда он нам показывает старое бытовое оформление. Но беда в том, что здесь нам показывается не старые вещи, а скорее их скрытый смысл, нечто вроде кантовской «вещи в себе». Подход к вещи у Акимова, несомненно, идеалистический. Рядом с «Заговором чувств»—мы видим какой-то странный «заговор вещей»: недаром в сне Кавалерова движется задняя стена, стена—

Совкино—«Приведение, которое не возвращается»

Хозе Реаль—арт. Фердинандов

ковер, как будто символизирующий весь комплекс мещанских вкусов. А обеденный стол тоже, кажется, обладает какой-то жуткой силой. Зритель воспринимает его, как некий «натюр-морт». Гиперболизм, свойственный Акимову, как художнику, здесь особенно заметен.

Наконец, спектакль, где вопрос о новом быте поставлен достаточно широко, без гротескового утопизма «Клопа» и философской фантастики «Заговора». Это — «Инга». Вопрос о бытовом оформлении является здесь не фоном, не выдумкой художника, а одной из тем пьесы. И несмотря на все это, **в смысле агитации за новую вещь, в частности за новую мебель и костюм, спектакль дает очень мало.** В этом спектакле нет единого стиля. Бытовая пьеса, оформленная художником Родченко в крайне левом плане, оказалась старым вином, влитым в новые меха. Деревянная мебель, которая складывается на авансцене, воспринимается публикой, как некий занимательный трюк. Связь этой мебели с новым оформлением, даже с оформлением клуба или общественной столовой, остается для зрителя неясной.

Таким образом, в смысле агитации за новое бытовое оформление все три спектакля дают мало, но все же **ставят вопрос о новых задачах театрального художника, в области современного нового бытового оформления.** Театральный художник должен быть **подлинным конструктором быта.**

И. БЕРЕЗАРК

* Статья дискуссионная.

Передвижной театр Пролеткульта

«Преступление Сурнова» Бейчик—арт. Шток

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Illustration 42. Page 10 of the *Novyi zritel'* journal issue 32-33 (1929) with "The Object on Stage" article written by I[l'ia] Berezark.

[212]*The Bedbug (Klop),* written by Vladimir Mayakovsky, directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold at the Meyerhold Theater, stage design by the Kukryniksy group and Aleksandr Rodchenko; *The Conspiracy of Feelings* (*Zagovor chuvstv*), written by Iurii Olesha, directed by Aleksei Popov at the Vakhtangov Theater, stage design by Nikolai Akimov; *Inga*, written by Anatolii Glebov, directed by Maks Tereshkovich at the Theater of the Revolution, stage design by Aleksandr Rodchenko.

[213]"На сцене должны быть показаны образцы нового жилища, обставленного рационально, удобно, экономно и красиво." Berezark, Il'ia, "Veshch na stzene," *Novyi zritel'* 32-33 (292-292), (1929), 10.

worked on the set for *The Bedbug* and *Inga*, and Nikolai Akimov, who created the set design for *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, is that they use the object on stage not as the thing in itself, but as a representation of a thing, its "hidden meaning."[214] He writes, "The set designer must be a true constructor of everyday life."[215] In other words, Berezark echoes within a theater-critical context the constructivist viewpoint that an object functions as a medium itself and not as a representation or a reflection of an idea. If the set designer is to fulfill their task of constructing a new everyday life in theater, they must not only *represent* new things on stage, but they must create a stage version of a new everyday life where new objects *function* according to their design fit for this new reality.

The next iteration of "The Object on Stage", written by the theater historian and critic Irina Uvarova, appeared in 1967 in the *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo* journal. Uvarova analyzes material objects on stage in Soviet theaters and traces important influences and contradictions in the set design of previous decades. She outlines three mainstream approaches of Soviet set designers to the thing on stage from the 1920s to the 1960s: first, "the disappearance of the representation [*obraz*] of the thing" (what Berezark argues for in his original eponymous article); second, "the stabilization of a theatrical thing as equal to the everyday thing [*ravnoi bytovoi veshchi*];" and finally, the transformation of the physical thing into an element of the set design.[216] Uvarova writes about the set design in the 1960s, "The object loses its 'objective essence,' its real meaningfulness, it becomes a decorative element; its function is reduced to a

[214]Ibid.
[215]"Театральный художник должен быть подлинным конструктором быта." Ibid.
[216]Uvarova, Irina, "Veshch na stsene," *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo* 8 (1967), 7.

formal designation, to a color spot effectively highlighting the general use of color."[217] To support her argument, the author refers to Ol'ga Tarasova and Aleksandr Lapauri's production of *Lieutenant Kijé* in Moscow in 1963 and Vol'demar Panso's production of *Hamlet* in Tallin in 1966.[218] According to Uvarova, these very different theatrical productions — *Lieutenant Kijé* is a ballet performed by the country's leading ballet company on the stage of the Bolshoi theater, while this production of *Hamlet* is an experimental work of a youth theater in Estonia — exhibit a trend towards the theatrical instrumentalization of a material object as a prop whose main function is to let the actor play with it. The physical thing belongs on stage as long as it reveals something about the role or is included into the acting process as an auxiliary object. The actor acquires a dominant position on stage, while the material object is incorporated into the stage environment but has no agency.

Finally, in 1990, the theater scholar Alla Mikhailova includes a chapter titled "The Object on Stage" in her publication on Soviet theater set design, *Scenography: Theory and Practice* (*Stsenografiia: teoriia i opyt).*[219] Discussing the treatment of material objects in theatrical set design in the 1970s, Mikhailova notices the return of the authentic thing to the theater and calls it "the new historicism."[220] Physical objects repurposed for theater from everyday life as ready-mades or taken from archives and museum collections acquire a documentary dimension in the

[217]" Вещь утрачивает свою 'вещную сущность', реальную значимость, она – декоративный элемент, функция ее сведена к формальному обозначению, к цветовому пятну, эффектно оттеняющему общее цветовое решение." Ibid., 8.
[218]*Lieutenant Kijé* (*Podporuchik Kizhe*), written by Yurii Tynianov, directed by Ol'ga Tarasova and Aleksandr Lapauri at the Bolshoi theater, stage design by Boris Messerer; *Hamlet*, written by William Shakespeare, directed by Vol'demar Panso at the National Youth Theater of Estonian SSR, stage design by Mari-Liis Küla.
[219]Mikhailova, Alla, "Veshch na stsene" in *Stsenografiia: teoriia i opyt* (Moskva: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1990), 179-230.
[220]Ibid., 186.

productions analyzed by Mikhailova. Authentic pieces of furniture and material objects (umbrellas, watches, etc.) dating back to the end of the 19th century were collected and used together with Anton Chekhov's diaries and letters in the production *My Derisive Happiness* directed by Kama Ginkas, and Yurii Liubimov famously placed a WWII military truck on stage in his *The Dawns Are Quiet Here* in 1971.[221] As Mikhailova states, "The thing claimed its right for a special role in the theater: more and more often, it acted as life's silent and at the same time eloquent witness."[222] This newly discovered evidentiary quality of a physical object comes to the fore in the 1980s with more documentary and document-based theatrical productions staged in theaters throughout Russia, using material things as "witnesses" alongside actors on stage. Mikhailova goes as far as to suggest that the shifts in playwriting and directing in late-Soviet theater towards exhibiting documentary trends were prepared and determined by "the triumph of the thing:" authentic material objects on stage demanded a higher degree of authenticity from actors and worked better with less markedly literary fiction texts in theater.[223]

Directors and stage designers continue to experiment with the use of material objects in theater throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with the rapid advance of technology offering more and more elaborately built things and more complex methods of actors interacting with objects on stage. However, the following tendencies outlined in the three "*Veshch na stsene*" articles persist: the material object functions (and is not only acted upon) within the stage space; the presence of physical things shapes the stage space in a specific way and influences the actors' play; 'found'

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[221]*My Derisive Happiness* (*Nasmeshlivoie moie schast'ie*), written by Leonid Maliugin, directed by Kama Ginkas at the Vera Komissarzhevskaia theater, stage design by Eduard Kochergin; *The Dawns Are Quiet Here* (*A zori zdes' tikhie*), written by Boris Vasiliev, directed by Yuri Liubimov at the Taganka Theater, stage design by David Borovskii.
[222]"Вещь заявляла свое право на особую роль в театре: она все чаще выступала как молчаливый и красноречивый свидетель жизни." Mikhailova, 208.
[223]Ibid., 230.

material objects (authentic, every-day, ready-made things) carry excessive information and can be used to create a reality effect for the spectators. Leading Russian theater directors of the 2010s use authentic material objects in set design to bring elements of the recent shared Soviet past onto the post-Soviet stage, as the theater critic and scholar Ol'ga Roginskaia shows in her article on Alvis Hermanis, Dmitrii Krymov, and Nikolai Koliada.[224] Stage spaces in Hermanis's *The Long Life*, Krymov's *Kostik*, and Koliada's *Boris Godunov* are overcrowded with things bought at flea markets and in thrift stores and brought in from private homes.[225] Audience members sitting in close proximity to the stage can easily recognize familiar objects: the shapes, textures, and scents of old dusty things long forgotten in closets and on high shelves. The *faktura* of everyday life, past or present, anchors the viewer's affective reaction to the performance. As Roginskaia writes, "The 'raw' reality is replaced by a signifier which does not pretend to be real but is signified as such on the basis of the unspoken presumptions of mimeticism."[226] It other words, a material object taken from a non-theatrical reality and recognizable as such is not a representation (a sign) of reality; rather, it is a fragment of reality, a thing (*veshch*). In this capacity, it functions as a medium. It communicates (rather than represents) particular conditions

[224]Roginskaia, Ol'ga, "'Nastoiashchaia' veshch v sovremennom teatre: muzei — barakholka — veshchevoi rynok," *Peterburgskii teatral'nyi zhurnal* 1(71) (2013). https://ptj.spb.ru/archive/71/thing-in-theatre-71/nastoyashhaya-veshh-vsovremennom-teatre-muzejbaraxolka-veshhevoj-rynok/

[225]*The Long Life* (*Dolgaia zhizn'*), directed by Alvis Hermanis at the New Riga theater, stage design by Monika Pormale; *Kostik,* written by Anton Chekhov, directed by Dmitrii Krymov at the Pushkin theater, stage design by Valentina Ostan'kovich; *Boris Godunov*, written by Aleksandr Pushkin, directed by Nikolai Koliada at the Koliada theater, stage design by Nikolai Koliada.

[226]"'Сырая' реальность заменяется означающим, которое не выдает себя за реальное, но означается как таковое на основании негласных презумпций миметичности." Roginskaia, "'Nastoiashchaia' veshch v sovremennom teatre: muzei — barakholka — veshchevoi rynok."

of its extra-theatrical existence: where and when it was made and circulated, and its history, its material, social, and emotional value, among other things.

Documents are such organized and "in-formed," to return to Fore's argument, material things that have a particularly high capacity to store and communicate information.[227] For media and technology scholar David M. Levy, in fact, these two categories – materiality and communicability – are what differentiates documents from other kinds of entities. He writes, "[Documents] are bits of the material world – clay, stone, animal skin, plant fiber, sand – that we've imbued with the ability to speak."[228] For Levy, documents are created to speak for people, "on our behalf and in our absence."[229] In my further analysis, I combine the theoretical optics suggested by Levy, for whomdocuments are material objects communicating *for* people, and Fore's (via Flusser) analytical angle, whichelucidates the capacity of physical things to exceed the discursive. How does documentary theater instrumentalize this capacity of material objects as media? Do documentary theater-makers rely on physical objects already marked as documents as a source of authenticity when they incorporate them into their stage space? Can any *thing* (*veshch*) function according to the logic of a document within the stage space of a documentary performance?

Documentary productions in Russian theater of the 2010s instrumentalize a variety of textual and visual material objects: diaries, letters, newspaper clippings, photographs, chronicles, video recordings, personal belongings, and archival and museum items. The message of such theatrical productions is constructed intermedially by engaging with a heterogenous assemblage

[227]Fore, "Dziga Vertov, The First Shoemaker of Russian Cinema," 382.
[228]Levy, David M., *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age*, Second edition (New York, [New York]: Arcade Publishing, 2016), 23.
[229]Ibid.

of material documents and objects. Too often, scholarly and critical discourse on documentary performance follows two analytical tracks: the narrative of the play (what is *said* and how it is *said*) and the political and socio-ideological thematic of performance (human rights activism, political protest, social commentary, etc.). Yet, there is much to gain by deploying materially and visually oriented research tools as well.

While textual documents often constitute coherent narrative arcs in such productions, material documents play an equally important part not as mere illustrations of the plot, but as the performances' basic structure (*nesushchaia konstruktsia*). By referencing this principal architectural element, I want to make explicit the connection between designing a material structure and creating a performance out of building blocks. From the initial concept to the final product, both processes incorporate visual and material elements. To be able to "read" a performance based on visual and material documents necessarily also means to "see" it take shape across media. The intermedial quality of theater comes to the fore when it becomes apparent that to understand the performance one needs to be able to recognize, decode, and contextualize visual and material objects confronting the spectator.

In 2017, Anastasiia Patlai directed a theatrical production entitled *Mel'nikov* in an experimental form of a documentary opera based on Russian constructivist architect Konstantin Mel'nikov's unpublished diaries and personal correspondence. It was written by the playwright Nana Grinshtein and the musical score for the opera was authored by the composer Kirill Shirokov. The documentary opera *Mel'nikov* instrumentalizes static photographic images and dynamic video streaming and is performed at the Ruin (*Ruina*) building of the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow where, in the 1960s, Mel'nikov delivered his lectures on architecture. This museum-turned-theater space functions as a document itself, as it archives and

exhibits its own transformation history: from an architectural design to a finished building and then to a ruinated construction. Intermediality allows us to see how, in this play, architecture, photography, video, and embodied performance come together. At the same time, each medium contributes to the audience's perception of the relationship between Mel'nikov's life in the past and both its fragmentary and monumental traces in the present. Let us focus on the use of photography in this documentary production and on different ways of *seeing* enabled by the camerawork in *Mel'nikov*, which point towards combining the dynamic optics of documentary with a more static architectural one.



Illustration 39. The lower level of the *Ruina* Building of the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow during a performance of *Mel'nikov* (dir. Anastasiia Patlai, 2017). Photo by Shamil Hasyanzyanov, Muzei arkhitektury imeni A. V. Shchuseva, Moscow, 2019.

Throughout the performance, seated at the upper level of the building, the audience can see the actors perform at the lower level only to a limited extent. The floor separating the two levels is partially ruined, and the lower level "stage" is visible only through old wooden beams (Illustration 39). The material conditions of the space itself – the partial obstruction of the view and the visibly derelict construction elements - contribute to a regime of effort on behalf of the audience. The spectators must try hard to see what is going on at the lower level while never seeing the total picture, but



Illustration 40. The upper level of the Ruina Building of the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow during a performance of *Mel'nikov* (dir. Anastasiia Patlai, 2017). Photo by Shamil Hasyanzyanov, Muzei arkhitektury imeni A. V. Shchuseva, Moscow, 2019.

only its fragments. Reinforcing the idea of the past as accessible to the audience in the present only fragmentarily and always mediated by material documents, two cameras sharing the space with actors transmit live video onto several screens situated at the upper level (Illustration 40). The cameras follow the actors' movement, zooming in on their faces and picking up on details and objects, otherwise invisible to the naked eye of spectators. One such object is a photograph of Konstantin Mel'nikov, taken in 1936. The camera lingers on two identical photographs, the original image from the Mel'nikovs' archive and its enlarged copy, for a few moments rendering the details visible to the audience (Illustration 41). This photograph — a fragmentary, static, mute, material document of Mel'nikov's life — appears as its double on the wall downstairs and on the screen upstairs. Thus simultaneously mobilizing video and photographic visual regimes, thedocumentary opera enacts a complex relationship between historical reality, its material documentary traces, and the accessibility and/or legibility of the document in the present moment. By paying attention to the visual elements of the multimedia art form, such as theatrical production, we recognize the fundamental role that these visual material elements play in constituting the message of the performance. The emphasis on medium specificity proper to visual studies offers scholars of theater and performance studies an effective means to redefine the realm of the visual and material as complex perceptual web rather than as a homogeneous phenomenon.



Illustration 41. A still frame from the footage shown on the screens during the documentary opera *Mel'nikov*, zooming in on two identical photographs of Konstantin Mel'nikov (dir. Anastasiia Patlai, 2017).

The Museum Object as a Stage Prop in Documentary Theater

In the 2010s, many museums across Russia opened their public spaces to hosting theatrical performances.[230] Museums and theaters, often considered to be among the most traditional and conservative cultural institutions, sought to redefine their methods of storytelling, presentation of material, and engagement with the audience.[231] Experimental collaborative practices between museum and theater professionals yielded fascinating results ranging from a documentary opera performed at an architectural museum, discussed above, to a puppet show based on Chingiz Aitmatov's *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* at the GULAG History Museum, to mention just a few productions.[232] Many theatrical productions staged in cooperation with regional museums engaged with local histories. After all, museum collections in places outside of large metropolitan centers of Russia are often formed around local artifacts. Logically, documentary theater, with its interest in real events and working with documents and other material objects representing specific historical narratives, is a privileged form of theater when it comes to bringing local history, museum experience, and embodied performance together.

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[230]For example, *Zero Risk Does Not Exist* (*Nulevogo riska ne byvaet*), written by Patrick Bouvet, directed by Judith Depaule at the State Center for Contemporary Art in Nizhnii Novgorod (2011); *UralmashGO*, written by Polina Borodina, directed by Irina Liadova at the Museum of the History of Ekaterinburg (2015); *The Gods of Perm* (*Permskie bogi*), written and directed by Dmitrii Volkostrelov at the Perm State Art Gallery (2019).

[231]For more on history, memory politics, and museums in post-Soviet Russia, see: Zavadskii, Andrei, Sklez, Varvara, Suverina, Katerina, "Predislovie. Razum i Chuvstva: Publichnaia Istoriia v Muzee," in *Politika Affekta: Muzei Kak Prostranstvo Publichnoi Istorii* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2019), 7–48.

[232]*The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (*I dol'she veka dlitsia den'*), written by Chingiz Aitmatov, directed by Anton Kalipanov and Ol'ga Shaidulina at the GULAG History Museum (2017).

The documentary production *The Uprising* (*Vosstanie*, 2015) was staged at the Tomsk Museum of Local History as a part of a larger museum project called *In Siberia, By Will and By Force* (*Sibiriaki vol'nye i nevol'nye*). This research project explores the local history of the region through the family histories of the people who lived in and/or moved to Siberia, either by their own will or by the force of law. Museum professionals collect family histories and support these narratives with archival documents: trial and transportation protocols, official correspondence, photographs, local newspaper articles, etc. *The Uprising* is a result of collaboration between the museum and the Tomsk Youth Theater: the theater director Viacheslav Gulivitskii staged the production with Tomsk Youth Theater actors, and its set designer Alena Shafer created the stage design for the play. The playwright Mikhail Kaluzhskii, who already had experience with documentary theater at the Sakharov Center in Moscow in previous years, selected a local history of the peasant uprising in the Chainsk district of Tomsk region in 1931 for this production.[233]

The Uprising tells the story of the resettled peasants' armed revolt against the GULAG authorities and its fast and cruel stifling by the Soviet army. It also dramatizes the struggle of museum curators to connect to the audience by conventional means of the annotated object display and guided tours. The performance begins with a group of tech-savvy museum consultants (Evgeniia Parfionova, Igor' Savinykh, and Oleg Strelets) informing the peasant revolt exhibition curator Alina (Natal'ia Gitlits) that they are developing a video game based on

[233]For more on Mikhail Kaluzhskii's documentary theater work at the Sakharov Center in Moscow in 2010-2012, see Flynn, Molly, "History on trial: Performing memory in twenty-first-century Russia" in *Witness Onstage: Documentary Theatre in Twenty-First Century Russia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 51-73; for more on peasant uprisings in the 1930s, see: Viola, Lynne, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

the events of the uprising and that they need access to archival documents and museum artifacts to create a more authentic gaming experience for potential users (Illustration 43). The new video game based on real local historical events is supposed to appeal to a wider and younger audience and encourage them to learn more about the peasant riots by visiting the local museum. Alina, the exhibition curator, then proceeds to get the group (and, indirectly, the spectators) acquainted with the history of the Chainsk peasant uprising by referring to documents she shows on the walls and takes from folders placed on the stage. On the upstage wall, the audience sees enlarged copies of documents from the museum collection: photographs of peasants and officers who fought against the rebels, maps, newspaper articles from 1931, and museum labels. On their way to the stage and their seats, the spectators walk through the museum halls of the *In Siberia, By Will and By Force* exhibition, where the originals of these documents are on display, as well as material objects peasants used in 1931: aluminum flasks, bowls, and spoons, wooden stools, clothes, shoes, pitchforks, rifles, etc. When asked about the selection of objects to be placed on stage in *The Uprising*, the set designer Alena Shafer says that archival documents and some objects from the museum collection were too fragile to be used on stage.[234] For this reason, enlarged copies of documents were made, military uniforms from the 1930s were reconstructed using contemporary



Illustration 43. Museum consultants (left to right: Oleg Strelets, Evgeniia Parfionova, and Igor' Savinykh) and Alina, the museum curator (Natal'ia Gitlits) holding copies of original documents related to the Chainsk peasant uprising in 1931. On the walls, there are copies of maps and photographs from the museum collection; a reconstructed copy of a Soviet army uniform from the 1930s; and an original clock from the museum collection. *The Uprising* at the Tomsk Museum of Local History (dir. Viacheslav Gulivitskii, 2015)

[234]Shafer, Alena. Interview by Natalia Plagmann, recorded on April 19, 2021, by Skype.

materials, and authentic everyday things, like utensils and dishes, dating back to the time of the uprising, were purchased locally. Shafer mentions two original objects from the museum collection that were allowed to be securely placed on stage, but not touched by the actors during the performance – a clock and a loudspeaker (Illustration 43). Occupying their positions on the stage of *The Uprising*, but not handled by the actors during the performance, these two authentic material things illustrate the tension between the passivity of an object and a kind of mediatic agency that it acquires in documentary theater.

In her analysis of Russian New Drama, Susanna Weygandt states that, "in contemporary Russian theater ... drama can be, and primarily is, shaped by everyday objects, not gesticulating agents; ... it 'does things' with *things*, not people."[235] While this is an accurate observation in relation to experimental plays by Vasilii Sigarev and Mikhail Ugarov analyzed by Weygandt, it mostly refers to instances of inanimate objects acquiring "autonomy" through a physical connection with an actor, "in the hands of the human."[236] Can this proposition apply to the use of material objects on stage that are not touched by actors and therefore cannot be conceptualized as an extension of the actor's body? What form does this agency of an inanimate thing take in this instance, and what is the significance of the authenticity of the physical object?

The Uprising indeed "does things" with things: static museum objects that the spectators just passed by on their way to the theatrical space are incorporated into the performance. Copies of these objects function as props; the production comments on the relatively inferior communicative potential of static museum objects when actors suggest that, to connect to their

[235]Weygandt, Susanna, "The Object as Prosthesis and Performer in Russian New Drama," in *Russian Performances: Word, Object, Action*, ed. Julie Buckler, Julie Cassiday, Boris Wolfson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 245.
[236]Ibid., 250.

local history, they should be able to play with it. The stage lights go off and when the light turns back on, all actors are dressed in either peasant clothes or soldier uniforms reenacting the dramatic events of the rebellion (Illustration 44). Rifles and pitchforks, a telephone and a Morse code telegraph key, and simple aluminum bowls and spoons are used by actors to create visual and sound effects that connect the spectator to the past through the materiality of the thing in the present. As the scholar of theater and performance Stanton B. Garner claims in his study of theatrical objects, "Props function metonymically to designate the entirety of a dramatic world, signifying its fictional extension through specific points of materiality."[237] In this capacity, the objects in *The Uprising* have illustrative and instrumental functions. First, they illustrate a particular historical moment and a specific location by referencing the original museum objects on display at the exhibition. The spectators not only hear the story of the rebellion told by the actors and witness its dramatic episodes reenacted on stage, but also see and recognize fragments of this past reality represented in their visual, material, and tactile specificity by these objects. Second, actors enact an active haptic, as opposed to passive observational, mode of engagement with local history through tactile contact with these objects on stage using replica artifacts as instruments. This history



Illustration 44. Left to right: Sergei Parfionov, Igor' Savinykh, Natal'ia Gitlits (top row), Evgeniia Parfionova (bottom row) dressed as Soviet soldiers and peasants in the 1930s. Pitchforks are used as props; on the upstage wall there are copies of maps and photographs from the museum collection. *The Uprising* at the Tomsk Museum of Local History (dir. Viacheslav Gulivitskii, 2015)

[237]Garner, Stanton B., *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1994), 89.

comes alive on stage in *The Uprising* through inanimate objects that are involved by the actors in the act of storytelling. When the spectators see actors holding the rifles and pitchforks, using the Morse code telegraph key, or cutting bread on wooden cutting boards, they can extend this experience to imagine how these objects were used similarly almost a century ago. This experience compliments the spectators' previous exposure to the museum objects on display and activates a different, more highly engaging empathetic relationship with the narrative these objects illustrate. In a way, the production offers a solution to the problem it voices at the beginning of *The Uprising*: how do we encourage interest in and enthusiasm about local history without recycling obsolete museum techniques? It offers another ludic alternative to the video game option suggested in the play by engaging the spectators into a live collective experience shared with the actors in real time.

In addition to the replica historical objects used as props by the actors on stage, *The Uprising* also incorporates original museum items into its set design. A clock and a loudspeaker from the museum collection are placed on stage within view of the audience and out of touch for the actors. The authenticity of these objects is not marked or announced to the spectators, but the set designer Alena Shafer insisted on incorporating them into the production. In an interview, Shafer says that "the authentic *faktura* of things from that time was important for the feeling (*oshchushchenie*) in space."[238] The production set designer thus implies that material objects possess and display a *faktura* of reality to which they belonged and that the perception, the feeling of the space is shaped by their *faktura* regardless of the spectators' awareness of these objects' authenticity. This implied ability of things to influence space perception is tied to a

[238]"Подлинная фактура вещей того времени была важна для ощущения в пространстве." Shafer, Alena. Interview by Natalia Plagmann, recorded on April 19, 2021, by Skype.

communicative potential these material objects have. The production attempts to translate this material memory into a message for the audience but allows for a kind of interpretational freedom. For the producers of *The Uprising*, if the sought effect of the *feeling* in the space was achieved, it would not matter whether the audience knew that the clock and the loudspeaker were authentic historical objects from the museum collection.

The clock and the loudspeaker remain attached at the top of the upstage wall throughout the performance in *The Uprising*. Despite their static position and inanimate nature, material objects on stage can acquire what a theater scholar Jiří Veltrusky calls "the action force."[239] In his essay "Man and Object in the Theater," Veltrusky analyzes the subject/object relationship between actors and things, and states that the object's "function is determined by the antinomy of two opposing forces contained within it: the dynamic forces of action and the static forces of characterization."[240] For him, actors and things on stage equally participate in the living environment of theatrical production, and neither actors, nor things can be strictly contained within "sealed-off spheres" in which actors are always only acting subjects and things are always only objects acted upon.[241] Rather, Veltrusky suggests that "it is impossible to draw a line between subject and object, since each component is potentially either."[242] In *The Uprising*, at first glance, the authentic museum objects seem to only be engaged in "the static force of characterization," since they do not attract action from the actors and their (the objects') presence on stage contributes to the reconstruction of a specific historical *faktura* on stage. However, the specific functional characteristics of these museum objects – a clock and a loudspeaker – are

[239]Veltrusky, Jiří, "Man and Object in the Theater," in *The Prague School: Selected Writings, 1929-1946.*, ed. Steiner, Peter (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 83–92.
[240]Ibid., 87.
[241]Ibid., 90.
[242]Ibid.

important in considering their potential "action force." The clock contains a moving mechanism and tells time, and the loudspeaker is a communication device for mediating and amplifying sound. These material things are potential subjects of communication and, in this sense, their mediatic ability is connected to their action force. Moreover, the authenticity of these objects emphasizes the dynamic force of action in which they are engaged. As Veltrusky points out, the more real the object is, the higher its active potential is. In fact, he says, "only if it preserves its reality can it radiate its action force and suggest action to the spectator."[243] Even in the absence of and/or while not being handled by the actors in *The Uprising*, these authentic objects can be perceived by the audience not as passive static elements of the set design, but as objects endowed with mediatic agency.

In *The Uprising*, replicas of authentic material objects function metonymically, denoting a specific local historical reality via a reference to the original museum items on display. They also create the feeling of the space through a tactile contact with the actors, thus engaging the dynamic force of action. The authentic museum objects used in the set design also participate in the production of a feeling of the historical *faktura* of the space, but also function as a medium that contains and communicates information to be perceived and decoded by the audience. The case study of *The Uprising* shows that physical things can acquire functional characteristics of documents understood as organized material objects containing value and communicating information on the theatrical stage. In this particular case, location contributes to the perceived authenticity of the objects on stage, with the museum acting as a locus of authority confirming the objects' documentary status.

[243]Ibid., 88.

Legal Documents as Props in Documentary Theater

From material things acting as documents, I continue exploring the object on stage by analyzing legal documents used as props in documentary theater. I have chosen the play *Uzbek*, directed and performed by Talgat Batalov and co-written by Talgat Batalov and Ekaterina Bondarenko. The production premiered in 2012 at the Joseph Beuys Theater in Moscow. This one-actor performance is based on Batalov's own personal experience of relocating from Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to Moscow, Russia. His performance of an Uzbek (a term that in Russian refers either to a citizen of Uzbekistan or to a member of the Uzbek ethnic group) with a complicated national and ethnic identity engages with problems of displacement, racial and ethnic stereotyping, xenophobia, and social and legal injustice towards immigrant workers in contemporary Moscow. Batalov's character, an educated young creative professional, can hardly be described as an average Uzbek immigrant worker, who often has no other choice but to stay undocumented, doing hard labor for a fraction of the minimum wage and living under a constant threat of deportation. Nevertheless, the performer makes it clear that immigrant workers from Uzbekistan and other Central Asian former Soviet republics must not be treated as a necessary element of a dynamic life and economy of the Russian capital yet rendered invisible in the cultural sphere. Drawing on his personal archive and state-issued legal documents in *Uzbek*, Batalov creates a narrative for visibility of Uzbeks and for the issues of undocumented immigrant workers in Russia in general and pushes against their erasure from the public discourse.

There are two cardboard boxes on stage in *Uzbek*, representing two different archives, from which Batalov draws documents to build his performance (Illustration 45). One box contains recorded and printed out stories of people who, like Batalov, moved from Uzbekistan to Russia – for instance, Khamid, the "shawarma-man (*shaurman*)" working at the Kursk Railway Station – and conversations with those who stayed in Uzbekistan, like Batalov's parents (he includes a letter from his father and a recorded Skype conversation with his mother into the play). The other box contains official, state-issued documents: his birth certificate, Russian and Uzbek passports, work permits, military service cards, and receipts. Every document is an archive in itself bearing marks of institutions, affiliations and hierarchies, opening or shutting doors, inscribing and sealing into a narrative of belonging or exclusion, but also telling stories of despair and hope, disappointment and aspiration. In an extremely vulnerable, yet painfully mundane gesture throughout the performance, Batalov shows his documents to the audience, encourages the spectators to take these papers, examine them, and pass them around. This move allows for a particular kind of reenactment of document circulation – a number of hands and gazes through which a document has to pass before it ends in the hands of the subject, while at the same time rehearsing the situation when the audience finds itself seemingly and uncomfortably in the place of authorities in relation to whom Batalov's character occupies a vulnerable position.



Illustration 45. A cardboard box with documents on stage and Talgat Batalov's shadow reaching for a document in *Uzbek* at the Joseph Beuys Theater in Moscow. Photograph by Irina Poliarnaia at https://www.mn.ru/friday/81248 (dir. Talgat Batalov, 2012).

The narrative arc of *Uzbek* is based on real-life episodes form Batalov's journey through the Russian bureaucratic system to obtain a permanent registration certificate, a military service card, and a passport after moving there from Uzbekistan. Using Russian bureaucracy and its formal and informal practices, which are to a certain extent familiar to any spectator of his show, Batalov connects his singular story to the collective experience of the audience. He illustrates each episode by demonstrating and passing around the original documents – his prized possession, the motivation for action, and the goal of his adventures (Illustration 46). The singularity and authenticity of Batalov's state-issued legal documents, as well as his humorous and ironic retelling and reliving of the intricacies of obtaining them, elevate the value of these material objects for the audience.



Illustration 46. Talgat Batalov's military service card issued in Uzbekistan held by a spectator during the performance. In the background, Batalov is on stage wearing a track suit. Photograph by Asia Karagodina (*Uzbek*, dir. Talgat Batalov, 2012).

Original legal documents are rarely used as props in theater due to their particular status and significance for the owner and the risk of damage to or loss of the documents during the performance. The documents used in *Uzbek* serve in reality as media of Batalov's own administrative, legal, and social identification. In the context of the play, they also function as a theatrical device producing affect due to their specific material, legal, and aesthetic properties. Considering contemporary scholarly discourse on documents and documentality in culture, the Russian scholar Galina Orlova wonders, "Why are these [legal - NP] documents indeed not considered when scholars analyze and discuss the structure of cultural, historical, and social scene upon which the right of the medium was formed to produce the presence, the flawless

representation, the authority of the action, and the credibility of the testimony, which can only be granted by a 'document'?"[244] In other words, when conceptualizing documentary modes in culture in general and in theater and performance in particular, scholarly optics could benefit from analyzing documents, understood in their specifically narrow sense as material objects with a representative function that are endowed with the authority of state juridical institutions. From a legalistic perspective, it is the information contained in a document, rather than its aesthetic and material qualities, that bears significance. Yet, as the editors of the volume *Law's Documents: Authority, Materiality, Aesthetics* remind us, "In law, a document is a multimedia artefact."[245] Katherine Biber, Trish Luker, and Priya Vaughan highlight that, as multimedia objects, legal documents incorporate inscriptions (signatures, marks, symbols, writing, etc.), visual data (images, photographs, fingerprints, seals, etc.), and specific material characteristics (surface, thickness, and texture of material such as paper, leather, plastic, thread, etc.). When taken out of juridical circulation and placed into an artistic context, such as a theatrical production, the multifaceted material and aesthetic dimensions of documents come to the fore. In the words of Biber, Luker, and Vaughan, "Positioning law's documents within this broadly constituted aesthetic field reveals the way documents reflect and constitute legal aesthetics (and through this, legal operations) in visual, material, and intellectual ways."[246] What kind of

[244]"Почему же эти документы не принимаются в расчёт, когда выявляется и обсуждается устройство культурной, исторической, социальной сцены, на которой складывалось право медиума на производство присутствия, безупречность репрезентации, авторитетность действия и убедительность свидетельства, какое только и даёт 'документ'?" Orlova, Galina, "Izobretaia Dokument: Bumazhnaia Traektoriia Rossiiskoi Kantseliarii," in *Status Dokumenta: Okonchatel'naia Bumazhka Ili Otchuzhdionnoe Svidetel'stvo*, ed. Kaspe, Irina (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2013), 19–53.
[245]Katherine Biber, Trish Luker, and Priya Vaughan, eds., *Law's Documents: Authority, Materiality, Aesthetics* (London New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 4.
[246]Ibid., 18.

performative work is carried out by legal documents in *Uzbek*? And how is this (literally) documentary performance connected to the message of the production?

Using official state-issued documents, Batalov stages a performance full of contradictions: from the opening scene in which he explains that he is (by citizenship) and simultaneously is *not* (ethnically) an Uzbek, to the fact that obtaining a legal document is the easiest by informal, if not illegal, means (connections, bribery, deceit). Appealing to his own documents allows Batalov to emphasize the tensions implicit in the social fabric of contemporary Russia and reflected in the aesthetic qualities of documents. These documents are both unique and common, fragile and resilient, valuable and worthless, mundane and remarkable. Batalov's performance in *Uzbek* displays how these contradictions are used to form a kind of fluidity of social, national, and legal identity. At the same time, he presents a critique of contemporary Russian dynamics of power linked to the legal document circulation. For the audience, the direct tactile contact with the original document can emphasize the reality of the experience that Batalov is reenacting in his play. The affective power of authentic legal documents in the context of this production stems from their actual juridical and social validity beyond the confines of the stage.

In contrast to an official archive, private documents function in a different way in *Uzbek*. Batalov made a choice to deeply engage with embodied and experiential memory. A decision to privilege oral testimony as a way of transmitting meaning, memory, and knowledge, as opposed to a discursively fixed document, valorizes the practice of reenactment and bearing witness, so to say "live," chosen for the production. Live action, a movement, a performance produces, as the performance and theater scholar Rebecca Schneider points out in her book on reenactment practices, *Performing Remains*, "a collapse of the distance marking one thing as fully distinct

from another thing."[247] It produces an affect that dwells in between binaries such as text/behavior, mind/body, and original/copy. Schneider argues that "the affective turn resists replicating the body/text binary but situates itself more interestingly in spaces between such binaries – including self/other – as much affect is situated, like atmosphere, between bodies."[248] The theater thus becomes a space where liveness and recordability, the repertoire and the archive (to use Diana Taylor's formulation) are brought into a dialogue.

Flynn writes, citing sociological research published in 2015, "Some experts estimate that migrant workers make up no less than 10 per cent of Moscow's current population. Estimates by the Federal Migration Service include roughly 500,000 Kyrgyz immigrants, one million Tajiks, and two-an-a-half million Uzbeks who have taken up temporary residence in Moscow since the early 2000s."[249] Understanding that the official records significantly underestimate the accurate number of immigrants from the former Soviet Central Asian republics, it is reasonable to assume that these statistics err on the lower side. While they are seen everywhere in cities like Moscow cleaning streets, doing janitorial work, driving taxi-vans (the so called *marshrutkas*), or selling street food from carts, immigrant workers are almost completely absent from Russian media. With a few exceptions of recent independent documentary films, such as Pavel Kostomarov's *Life in Peace* (*Mirnaya zhizn'*, 2004), Denis Shabaiev's *Not My Job* (*Chuzhaya rabota*, 2015), and Sergei Dvortsevoi's fiction film *Ayka* (*Aika,* 2018), available to a relatively limited audience, there is little portrayal of and reflection on the living and working conditions of these masses of

[247]Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011).
[248]Ibid.
[249]Flynn, Molly, "Burden of Proof: New Sincerity and The Performance of Post-Soviet national identities," *Witness Onstage: Documentary Theater in Twenty-First Century Russia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 124.

people upon whose daily hard labor the life (and comfort) of the social classes dominating Russian culture and media depends. What media fails to do, or actively avoids accounting for, is not only the acknowledgment of the immigrant workers' presence, but also of the level of aggression, xenophobia, and police brutality they face on daily basis.

As a documentary production, *Uzbek*, on the one hand, dwells on the ambiguity uniting in its practice the materiality of actual documents and recorded data with creative intervention and subjective interpretation. On the other hand, it shows that the past, and memories of it, can be appropriated by communities and artists, as opposed to being sealed and stored away in archives, with access controlled by authority. It is important to note here that the audience is hardly a homogenous entity and that the way each individual spectator relates their own experiences to what is being staged depends largely on their own personal, political, and cultural backgrounds. Certain aspects of reality referred to on stage in *Uzbek* come to be recognized by the audience by evoking certain aspects of the audience's own experience of the encounter with the real. In part, the meaning of the documentary theater production is given through the process of creative selection of documentary material, through editing and working with these documents, and through providing a polyvocal perspective. In part, the meaning is co-created by the audience's perception and recognition of the realness of the documentary drama and its ability and readiness to either accept, reject, or question what they see on stage as true.

Conclusion

As I show in this chapter, the object on stage (*veshch na stsene*) in contemporary Russian documentary theater has many forms and functions. Understood beyond their mimetic and/or representational role in theatrical productions discussed above, material objects can act as physical evidence (*veshchestvennoe dokazatel'stvo*) that generates the audience's perception of

stage action as authentic or true. However, as my analysis shows, material things in documentary theater possess their own mediatic agency and action force. Balancing between real things and theatrical props, inanimate objects on the documentary stage participate in complex heterogeneous assemblages constructed according to the logic of intermediality.

In *Mel'nikov*, a photograph - an archival object – is included in the production but is only accessible for the audience when it is mediated by a video projected onto a screen. The documentary opera thus enacts a relationship to historical reality available to the present-day spectator in a fragmented, mediated, and restricted way. At the same time, the video stream affords the audience with a technologically enhanced way of seeing: the original photograph appears as an enlarged image, allowing for careful and nuanced studying of the visual information it holds. The fact that the original document – the photograph from the Mel'nikov's archive – appears as a double in this production comments on the perceived singularity of the authentic document and invites the audience to reflect on the processes of production and consumption of historical discourse.

By staging the documentary production of *The Uprising* in a museum space, the theater makers tap into the source of authority and authenticity museums enjoy as institutions. The original museum objects used in the performance, though they are not handled by the actors, create a feeling (*oshchushchenie*) of the space regardless of the audience's awareness of the documentary status of these objects. At the same time, replicas of objects from the museum collection function as props and participate in a different, haptic and more empathetic, way of engagement with history.

Through a personal archive of documents in *Uzbek*, Batalov invites his audience to reflect on the socially important issue of xenophobia and immigrant rights in contemporary Moscow. In

a rare instance of presenting original legal documents on stage and allowing his spectators to touch and pass around these documents, the performer offers a critique of the flawed bureaucratic system and reflects on the meaning of legality (a legal document/an illegal worker) in contemporary society.

In this section, I discussed the complimentary relationship between inanimate objects and performers on the documentary stage. The status of a material object – a legal document, an archival object, a museum item – informs the actions of performers, but the meaning created with the help of these objects exceeds the instances of direct interaction between a person and a thing. This capacity of material objects to function as media is analyzed by scholars such as Vilém Flusser, Devin Fore, and David M. Levy cited above. However, in the context of documentary theater, material objects acquire additional significance as they confirm, question, or invalidate the audience's assumption that a documentary performance's credibility is based on physical evidence presented on stage.

Conclusion

By analyzing post-Soviet Russian documentary theater and cinema, I have shown in this dissertation how artists working in these media engaged with the historical, social, and political reality in Russia from the end of the 1990s to the end of the 2010s. During this time, contemporary filmmakers and theater makers further explored documentary aesthetics in their films and theatrical productions by building on their Russian and Soviet predecessors' achievements in documentary forms of cinema and theater. Still mobilizing the implied sociopolitical orientation as one of the definitive features of documentary narratives, post-Soviet filmmakers and theater makers of this period gradually shifted their focus from the ethics of the document (its perceived inherent ability to deliver access to the real or present a shortcut to the truth) to its aesthetics. In search of new documentary aesthetics, documentary theater and documentary cinema sought to overcome their own limitations at the level of sound, space, and materiality.

Documentary theater in this period actively instrumentalized digital technologies to expand its *caché* of devices, to engage its audience through the digitally mediatized mode of interaction, and to highlight theater's specificity as a uniquely live medium. Documentary cinema in many ways rediscovered and repurposed early cinema's montage principles and, in a context defined by the need to compete for spectators with television and mediatized visual online documentary forms, sought to redefine the new documentary cinematic aesthetics. Although contemporary documentary theater and cinema respond to different sets of challenges, these two media adopt new technologies and redefine their own media specificity in order to remain relevant and appeal to new audiences. Documentary theater and cinema maintain their status as highly politically and socially engaged media in Russia namely due to their ability to

generate new aesthetic regimes that make their ethical, ideological, and political subject matter comprehensible. My argument is based on the analysis of formal aspects of post-Soviet documentary cinema and documentary theater, such as sound, space, and materiality, following the logic of counterpoint.

Contrapuntal reading as a method has allowed me to center elements of documentary aesthetics that are often overlooked in existing scholarship on post-Soviet Russian documentary cinema and theater. By considering these documentary media contrapuntally – in their multiple forms, as well as in their shared formal elements (sound, space, materiality) – this dissertation explores the network of different regimes of visual and narrative representation in the historical and socio-political context of contemporary Russia. In view of the case studies analyzed in this dissertation, it was my intention to demonstrate how post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater addressed important issues and pressing contradictions of culture and society in Russia of the 2000s and the 2010s. Considered in relation to one another, the documentary films and theatrical productions examined in this dissertation reflect how documentary as a mode of cultural production tended to operate in the post-Soviet context.

Taking a step back to survey the larger context of the 2000s and 2010s in Russia, a question remains that that begs further exploration for me: under what kind of political and economic logic did documentary theater and documentary cinema function and, ultimately, what kind of values did these documentary media articulate and promote during this period? In her recent article, “Political Theater in Russia: The Late and Bitter Experience of Self-Reflection,” the Russian theater critic Kristina Matvienko examines the relationship between politics and

theater and tracks the shifts in social and cultural perception of, and engagement with, politics.[250] One of the important conclusions that she draws is that Russian intellectual and cultural elites supported the *illusion* of liberalization and promoted the idea of political transformation brought about by colonial-style cultural missionary work. She diagnoses a failure of the post-Soviet Russian intelligentsia (the intellectual and artistic class, including the major theater makers) to transition from *speaking* about politics (generating political content) to actually *doing* politics (organizing, mobilizing, and supporting democratic institutions). In my view, documentary theater and documentary cinema occupy a privileged position in their ability to create opportunities for critical public and social engagement with politics. Yet, following Matvienko's intervention, it is important to continue to interrogate the ways in which documentary cinema and documentary theater can also be implicated in providing temporary and limited semblances of public and civic engagement.

While these questions deserve further and separate analysis, this dissertation focused on documentary aesthetics in contemporary Russian theater and cinema. Centered on the use of sound in documentary cinema and theater, Chapter One illustrated the parallel between reflections on the Soviet past in the documentary productions by Yurii Pogrebnichko and Andrei Stadnikov and the documentary films by Vitalii Mansky and Sergei Loznitsa (*The Event*). At the same time, it highlighted the use of polyphonic structure in documentary films by Liubov Arkus and Sergei Loznitsa (*Maidan*) associated with the image of contemporary reality that these documentaries aimed to create. In Chapter Two, by examining the role of space in documentary films by Viktor Kosakovskii, Vitalii Mansky, and Marina Razbezhkina and in theatrical

[250]Matvienko, Kristina. "Politicheskii teatr v Rossii: Pozdnii i gor'kii opyt samopoznaniia." Syg.ma, December 14, 2022. https://syg.ma/@resistancetheatre/politichieskii-tieatr-v-rossii-pozdnii-i-ghorkii-opyt-samopoznaniia

productions by Ekaterina Bondarenko, Tatiana Gordeeva, Anastasia Patlai, and Mikhail Patlasov, I showed how different forms of documentary engaged with media and technology and utilized screens to deliver their intermedially constructed message. The chapter addressed how, although thematically disconnected, these different documentary works interrogated the notions of continuity and human agency in the context of contemporary Russia. Chaper Three, meanwhile, demonstrated how documentary filmmakers and theater makers used the affective power of material objects on screen and stage. By analyzing theatrical productions by Talgat Batalov, Vitalii Gulivitskii, and Anastasiia Patlai, and films by Sergei Dvortsevoi and Aleksandr Rastorguev, I showed that inanimate physical things did not passively illustrate a narrative, but instead actively shaped the audience's perception of these documentary works and of the reality in which these documentary works were situated.

During the era under examination in this dissertation, documentary forms expanded into media previously not considered as having an endemic relationship with documentary. For example, after finding success with *Mel'nikov* in the genre of documentary opera, Anastasiia Patlai directed another opera in 2018 – *Mercy* (*Miloserdie*) – based on diaries of Russian female volunteer nurses, known as "sisters-of-mercy" (*sestry miloserdiia*), during World War I. A new documentary opera by the director Iurii Kviatkovskii – *The Ascetic* (*Asket*) – based on documents related to Andrei Sakharov's life and work, was staged in 2022 in Moscow. At the same time, some of the first experiments in documentary choreography were taking place on stage in Russia and were followed by a laboratory which brought together practitioners and theorists of documentary dance at the Sakharov Center in Moscow in 2019.[251] Works of Russian-language

[251]"Dokumental'naia khoreografiia. Laboratoriia dlia sovremennykh khoreografov i dramaturgov," Sakharov Center, https://www.sakharov-center.ru/node/12381.

documentary animation attracted the attention of spectators – from online projects, such as *How I Was Kidnapped… (Odnazhdy menia ukrali…),* a series of animated short films by Tat'iana Zelenskaia and Egor Tankov, released in 2017 in Kyrgyzstan, to the internationally-distributed full-length animated documentary film *Rezo* (*Znaesh, mama, gde ia byl?)*.[252] Several documentary works in hybrid performance/media forms, such as Viktor Vilisov's augmented reality performance *Sitting in A Room. I Am*. (2020), were released by Russian artists.[253] This ongoing proliferation of documentary forms across media in Russia and by Russian-speaking filmmakers and theater makers, dancers, artists, and performers, deserves a separate study. However, it is indicative of the particular capacity of documentary to continuously generate meaning for spectators across media, technologies, and platforms due to its specific relationship with reality – its "worldly affiliation," to use Said's formulation.[254]

To return to the statement made by the Latvian philosopher and journalist Uldis Tirons that I quote in the introduction, documentary cinema (and, I would add, documentary theater) functions as "an apparatus for understanding (*apparat dlia ponimaniia*)" that helps the spectator perceive reality.[255] This dissertation was envisioned as an exploration into the mechanics of this apparatus with an intention to not only elucidate the inner works of post-Soviet documentary cinema and theater, but also to better understand the specific moment in the history of Russia and

[252]Zelenskaia, Tat'iana, "Odnazhdy menia ukrali... Istoriia Nazik," *KLOOP.KG - Novosti Kyrgyzstana* (blog), March 8, 2017, https://kloop.kg/blog/2017/03/08/odnazhdy-menya-ukrali-istoriya-nazik/.
[253]"The Future of Theatre and Performance Is Queer, but in Russia This Sounds Unimaginable," HowlRound Theatre Commons, June 1, 2021, https://howlround.com/future-theatre-and-performance-queer-russia-sounds-unimaginable.
[254]Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiv.
[255]"Kakoe Kino Nam Nuzhno Segodnia? Otvet Glukhovskogo, Dapkunaite i Tironsa. Real'noe Kino," YouTube.com, Nastoiashchee Vremia. Dok, May 8, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSEtdb938Zw.

its multitude of contradictions, conflicting politics, and social movements. By positioning this research in dialogue with ongoing discussions among colleagues in the field of Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies, as well as in conversation with cross-disciplinary and transnational scholarly explorations in documentary cinema, theater, performance, and media studies, I sought to bring together a plurality of ideas, views, and interpretations. As my dissertation shows, documentary cinema and theater take on exceedingly more complex forms in response to the rapidly transforming realities in which they are situated. Our scholarly apparatus for understanding these media must reflect these processes. One possible path for scholarly investigation in our field, which my research probes, is to practice contrapuntal analysis with the intellectual openness, interpretative inventiveness, and political clarity it affords.

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