

Totality Decomposed: Objectalizing Late Socialism in Post-Soviet Biochronicles

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For us art means the creation of new things. This is what determines our gravitation toward realism, weightiness (*k vesy*), volume, toward the earth. ... Every organized work—be it a house, a poem or a picture—is a thing with a purpose; it is not meant to lead people away from life but to help them to organize it. ... Abandon declarations and refutations as soon as possible, make things!

El Lissitsky, “Blokada Rossii konchaetsia,” 1922.

A NEW SOBRIETY: OBJECTALISM

We proclaim the old feature films, with their romance, theatricality and so on, to be leprous.

— Do not get close to them!

— Do not touch them with your eyes!

— Lethal!

— Contagious!

We affirm the future of cinema art by denying its present.

“Cinematography” must die so that the art of cinema may live. *WE call for its death to be hastened. ...*

For his inability to control his movement, WE temporarily exclude man as a subject for film. ...

Kinochestvo is the art of organizing the necessary movements of objects in space and time as a rhythmical artistic whole, in harmony with the properties of the material and the internal rhythm of each object.

Thus spake Dziga Vertov in his manifesto “WE” in 1922.¹ Old cinematography, with its sentiments and psychology, had to free space for “kino-things” (*kino-veshchi*).² “Life with

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¹Dziga Vertov, “My. Variant manifesta,” in Vertov, *Iz nasledii* (Moscow, 2008), 2:15, 16. I have slightly amended the English translation of the text in Dziga Vertov, “WE: Variant of a Manifesto,” in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annete Michelson (Berkeley, 1984), 7, 8.

²Vertov, “‘Kino-glaz’ – eto pervaiia kino-veshch,” in *Iz nasledii*, 58.

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bones still soft” was to supplant artistic “surrogates”—that “literary skeleton wrapped in kino-skin.”³ Kino-eye and radio-ear were to provide a new type of bond between the Soviet proletariat and the proletariat of the world.⁴

By openly relegating “‘art’ to the periphery” of his creative consciousness, Vertov emphasized instead direct access to “life as it is.”⁵ The “immediate objective,” the filmmaker maintained, was to “see and hear life, to note its turns and turning points, to catch the crunch of the old bones of everyday existence beneath the press of the Revolution ... to record and organize the individual characteristics of life’s phenomena into a whole, an essence, a conclusion.”⁶ Delivered by “real and useful kino-things (without the moon, love, or detectives)” *kinopravda* was to become the epistemological and visual regime of the time, a method of “the communist decoding of the world,” to use Vertov’s own description.⁷

Predictably, Vertov’s polemical statements provoked heated debates. Among others, the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovskii argued that the primary object of cinema was not the thing exposed to the camera, but the position, the standpoint from which the camera captures the thing: “Cinematography requires ... semantic motion (*smyslovoe dvizhenie*) just as much as literature requires words. ... Only when the cameraman has a particular approach can a film shot have an effect.” In Vertov’s desire to replace “art” with “kino-things” Shklovskii saw a semantic impoverishment of things caused by a lack of individual reflection about the material world being filmed.⁸ Movement of objects did not necessarily guarantee a movement of meaning, and Vertov’s insistence on a plot-less, “non-artistic, non-aesthetic cinema” resembled, in Shklovskii’s view, “a complicated method of hammering a wall into a nail”: a laborious cinematic exertion not justified by the result.⁹

At the time, these aesthetic disagreements about the importance of things, actuality, and interpretative frameworks in early Soviet documentary remained unresolved.¹⁰ They were not forgotten, however. In 2005, eighty years after the initial debates, *Iskusstvo kino*, Russia’s major academic journal on film history and theory, published two manifestos written by Russia’s two leading documentarians. The manifestos reproduced the already familiar confrontation in which cinema and reality, document and documentary faced each other in an apparent deadlock.¹¹ Following tradition, both manifestos announced the death of cinema.

³Vertov, “‘Kino-glaz’ i vidimyi mir” and “Vystuplenie na dispute,” both in *Iz naslediiia*, 65 and 45, respectively.

⁴Vertov, “The Essence of Kino-Eye,” in *Kino-Eye*, 50.

⁵*Ibid.*, 49.

⁶Vertov, “Artistic Drama and Kino-Eye,” in *Kino-Eye*, 49, 47.

⁷Vertov, “Kinokam Iuga,” in *Iz naslediiia*, 93; and *idem*, “Essence of Kino-Eye,” 50. For a discussion of Vertov’s ideological commitment see Lev Roshal’, *Effekt skrytogo izobrazheniia: Fakt i avtor v neigrovom kino* (Moscow, 2001), 115–20.

⁸Viktor Shklovskii, *Za 60 let: Raboty v kino* (Moscow, 1985), 31, 32.

⁹*Ibid.*, 78. For an English version of the texts and extensive polemics on the topic see Yuri Tsivian, ed., *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Gemonia, 2004).

¹⁰On a similar polemic between Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein see Yuri Tsivian, “Dziga Vertov and His Time,” in *Lines of Resistance*, 5–8. See also Andrei Fomenko, *Montazh, faktografiia, epos: Proizvodstvennoe dvizhenie i faktografiia* (St. Petersburg, 2007), 166–68.

¹¹On document vs. documentary see Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis, 2001), chap. 6.

This time, it was the turn of documentary to die. Each author, however, offered a different anamnesis.

Sergei Loznitsa (b. 1964), an internationally acclaimed Russian filmmaker, started the discussion by proclaiming the “inappropriateness” of the word *document* in the traditional description of this genre: “It is impossible to perceive or evaluate a documentary film without [taking into consideration] its author, just as film material cannot not be perceived apart from the cameraman. What we see in the film (*v sniatom vide*) has nothing to do with objective reality (*ob'ektivnost'*); rather, the film fastens (*fiksiruet*) the observed/the observer into a single inseparable unity.” Closely following (albeit without referencing) Shklovskii’s ideas and style, Loznitsa suggested that it would be “wrong” to present documentary film as “a part of life.” Artistic tricks might be more apparent in the feature film, yet the higher degree of non-transparency of these techniques in the documentary could not hide the fact that it is creative illusion that fundamentally defines the film genre as a whole. The Lumière brothers’ train, Loznitsa reminded his readers, “continues to arrive at the white sheet of the screen, but hardly anyone leaves the room [in panic].”¹²

Five months later, Vitalii Manskii (b. 1963), another influential Russian filmmaker, published his own account of the demise of documentary cinema in Russia. In a laconic two-page manifesto, Manskii drew a clear bottom line: “As soon as documentary cinema became a form of art, it ceased to be documentary.”¹³ Presenting himself as an heir to Vertov’s legacy of *kinopravda* and the traditions of *cinéma vérité*, Manskii announced the arrival of a “new cinematographic movement”—real cinema (*real'noe kino*, hereafter realkino). The remainder of the manifesto listed seven points that characterized the new approach.¹⁴

For those familiar with the history of Soviet film, the realkino manifesto contained little that was new. Most of Manskii’s statements merely rephrased Vertov’s ideas about kino-eye as a new medium, albeit filtering them through the rhetoric of the Dogme 1995 movement.¹⁵ The filmmaker’s attempts to use the early Soviet documentary tradition to justify his own post-Soviet work were expected. Manskii had been associating himself with Vertov for quite some time: until very recently his private film company was called Studio Vertov i Ko, and his personal web-site was a part of the portal www.vertov.ru.¹⁶

¹²Sergei Loznitsa, “Konets ‘dokumental'nogo’ kino,” *Iskusstvo kino*, 2005, no. 6:51–52. For details see Loznitsa’s personal web site, www.loznitsa.com/eng/index_eng.html.

¹³Vitalii Manskii, “Real'noe kino. Manifest,” *Iskusstvo kino*, 2005, no. 11:99. For Manskii’s biographical details see his website <http://vertov.ru/manski/biograf.htm>.

¹⁴Six of these points cast off traditional artistic limitations. As Manskii proclaimed, realkino is not bound by plots and screenplays, ethical considerations, technical conditions (such as light, sound, and so on), a striving for the narrative closure, or even the length of a film. Nor does realkino rely on reconstruction or staging of events. Finally, the director’s on-screen interaction with reality could appear only in the form of subtitles that inform the viewer about the location and time-frame of the scene (Manskii, “Real'noe kino,” 99–100). For a discussion see Zoia Kosheleva, “Vybrannye mesta iz khronik tvorcheskoi zhizni,” in *Dokumental'noe kino: Illuziia vybora*, ed. Liudmila Dzhulai (Moscow, 2007), 162–76.

¹⁵It is, of course, hardly surprising that Lars von Trier, the main ideologue of the Dogme 1995 and Dogumentary movements, is an avid fan of Vertov’s aesthetic and politics. For manifestos and discussion see Jack Stevenson, *Dogme Uncut: Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and the Gang That Took on Hollywood* (Santa Monica, 2003).

¹⁶Manskii recently migrated to his own site <http://manski.ru>, and the film company has been named “Vertov. Real'noe kino.”

What was surprising, however, was the ostensible discrepancy between Manskii's manifesto and his own films. Despite his appeal to liberate realkino from the constraints of literariness, Manskii's most successful documentaries have strikingly solid narrative backbones. Despite his praise for unprocessed representations of reality, the film largely responsible for Manskii's international and domestic success, *Private Chronicles. Monologue* (1999), was a study in compilation—that is to say, an intricate montage of archival footage.¹⁷

This gap between Manskii's self-positioning and his actual cinematic work is important. As a former programming director of a major Russian TV channel, Manskii knew full well that plotless realkino had few chances to win over any sizable audience.¹⁸ The significance of this manifesto, however, was not in its radical attempt to get rid of traditional technological and narrative constraints. Like Loznitsa's essay, Manskii's manifesto implicitly reacted to the same fundamental change in post-Soviet documentary filmmaking—the disappearance of the systemic visual recording of the country's present.¹⁹

In the last decade of the USSR, almost thirty state-owned film companies produced about fifteen hundred documentary films annually.²⁰ Some of them preceded the screening of feature films in Soviet cinema theaters; some were shown on television. Most of them, however, were simply added to the state's extensive archival collections. This state-sponsored documentary *kinokhronika* might not have perfectly realized Vertov's idea of a "factory of fact," but it was certainly a very effective factory of footage that could be utilized for a variety of purposes, ideological or otherwise. As Liliana Mal'kova, a scholar of Russian film, put it, it is precisely this stock of visual information, collected throughout several decades in accordance with rigid thematic templates, that shapes our visual memory of the USSR today.²¹

As the main cultural institution through which documentary footage was created, accumulated, and distributed, *kinokhronika* slowly disappeared in the 1990s.²² Regional studios gradually died out, and in 2000 the federal government stopped funding newsreels altogether.²³ Radically decreased in their numbers, post-Soviet documentary films have become primarily the property of television.²⁴

Known for their innovative work with archival documentary footage, Loznitsa and Manskii suggested two different alternatives to the death of the Soviet documentary. In his

¹⁷*Chastnye khroniki. Monolog*, dir. Vitalii Manskii, 1999, 86 min. Manskii's controversial *Cuts of Another War* (*Srezki ocherednoi voiny*, 1993, 20 min.) was based on the same method: archival chronicles of military events were recycled to produce a visual narrative about war and sexuality.

¹⁸Viktoria Belopol'skaia and Vitalii Manskii, "Chelovek bez kinoapparata," *Iskusstvo kino*, 2005, no. 11: 100–101.

¹⁹Liudmila Dzhulai, ed., *Dokumental'nyi illiuzion: Otechestvennyi kinodokumentalizm – opyty sotsial'nogo tvorchestva* (Moscow, 2005), 101.

²⁰*Ibid.* 177.

²¹Liliana Mal'kova, "Kinopravda vne 'kommunisticheskoi rashifrovki mira,'" in *Dokumental'noe kino epokhi reformatorstva*, ed. G. Dolmatovskaia and G. Kopalina (Moscow, 2001), 7.

²²*Ibid.*, 7–8. See also Dzhulai, *Dokumental'nyi illiuzion*, 225–26.

²³Zoia Kosheleva, "'I korabl' plyvet...': Dokumental'noe kino," in *Rossiiskoe kino: Vstuplenie v novyi vek*, ed. M. Zak and I. Shilova (Moscow, 2006), 101–2.

²⁴The general situation started changing with the emergence of the Kinoteatr.doc movement (www.kinoteatrdoc.ru/eng.php). However, innovative documentaries associated with this movement could not replace the disappearance of systemic *khronika*.

Blockade (2005) and *The Revue* (2008), Loznitsa convincingly demonstrated the aesthetic and semantic potential of available Soviet footage. The success of his *Blockade*, for instance, is indebted not only to the skillful editing of the old *khronika* of the Leningrad siege but also to the striking effect of the soundtrack that Loznitsa created for and synchronized with the footage. By reproducing voices, whispers, rustles, squeaking, and so on, that were lost or not even recorded in the original film-reels, the new soundtrack added to the previously silent visual narrative some aural texture.²⁵

While Manskii's realkino did not reject the importance of such artistic retexturing of the past, it did highlight the secondary nature of this archival kinography: the production of a new meaning of the past is not the same as the production of new footage of the present. Leaving aside problems of interpretative strategies and editing techniques, Manskii's realkino was concerned primarily with finding a new way of capturing "raw life" on film.

Although neither the "raw life" of Manskii's realkino, nor the artfully recoded past of Loznitsa's archival aestheticism provided a satisfactory solution, this replay of the early Soviet debates about the nature of cinematic documents and purposes of cinematic documenting is a critical sign of a larger concern with mechanisms and processes of self-understanding and self-description in contemporary Russia. Using these paradigmatic debates as my starting point, I will highlight several tendencies that shape the field of Russian documentary film.

Through an analysis of two important visual projects of the late 1990s—Manskii's *Chronicles* and Dzhanik Faiziev and Leonid Parfenov's forty-three-episode series *Lately* (1997–2004)—I intend to show how these filmmakers decompose the visual legacy of monolithic and totalizing late socialism. In these documentaries, the last three decades of the USSR emerge as a "tangible time" (*predmetnoe vremia*), to use Shklovskii's term.²⁶ Each project achieves a certain degree of temporal and spatial granularity of the period by breaking late Soviet history into material units of meaningful analytic and everyday experience. Autonomous and usually disconnected, these kino-things of sorts bring with them no coherent story. In fact, through their concreteness, they decontextualize identities and destabilize dominant narratives of socialism while simultaneously producing a grounding effect of mnemonic and historical palpability.

Following the insightful work of André Green, I will refer to this tendency to transform "epistemophilia into an object" as *objectalism*.²⁷ Objects are called upon to differentiate—to puncture and anchor—periods, processes, or events of the past. However, a constant shift of emphasis from the semantic linkage to physical texture, the perpetual play between indexicality and materiality of these embodiments of the Soviet, provides no final closure but only reveals a ceaseless slide down the signifying chain.²⁸

²⁵See Elena Stishova, "Vozvrashchenie opyta," *Iskusstvo kino*, 2005, no. 5; and Denise J. Youngblood, "A Chronicle for Our Time: Sergei Loznitsa's *The Blockade* (2006)," *Russian Review* 66 (October 2007): 693–98. For the films see *Blokada*, dir. Sergei Loznitsa, 2006, 52 min., St. Petersburg Documentary Film Studio; and *Predstavlenie*, dir. S. Loznitsa, 2008, 83 min., St. Petersburg Documentary Film Studio.

²⁶Viktor Shklovskii, "Tetiva: O neskhodstve skhodnogo," in his *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh* (Moscow, 1974), 3:548.

²⁷André Green, *The Work of the Negative* (London, 1999), 238.

²⁸Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York, 1977), 154.

Despite its fascination with the object, objectalism of post-Soviet filmmakers is neither objective nor fetishistic. In a peculiar fashion, it absorbs and transforms earlier forms of object-driven strategies of symbolization. In many respects, post-Soviet objectalization of the recent past is not dissimilar to the factographic experiments of Russian avant-garde artists in the 1920s. Both want to move away from the stifling monumentality of old forms of visual narration. Both share the same desire to “render reality visible without interference or mediation.”²⁹ Both envision the object as a primary site of investment and collective experience. However, there is a clear reluctance among post-Soviet documentarians to follow Sergei Tret'iakov's famous suggestion to leave behind the trials and tribulations of the individual “within a system of objects” and explore instead “the object proceeding through the system of people.”³⁰ As I will demonstrate, Tret'iakov's idea of “the biography of the thing” is still alive in post-Soviet Russia. But the suggested move from “comrades to commodities” has been slowed by the persistent questioning of the very premise about the *systemic* organization of people and objects in the Soviet universe.³¹

There is another important predecessor of post-Soviet objectalism. The distancing of Russian documentarians from emotionality and ideological exuberance, their attachment to the concrete and the material, and their tendency to isolate things of the past, share the social and aesthetic disillusionment of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement in prewar Germany.³² However, the post-Soviet edition of New Sobriety could not be further removed from the Weimar artists' attempts to respond to a new “*Rappel à l'ordre*” with endless classifications and typecasting of the material world.³³ Instead, the material world of late socialism is presented as a dazzling cacophony of things, events, and people, as an example of “programmatically instability” of clashing, inverted, and/or superimposed narratives, as a result of “mechanical operations that systematically produce disassociation in space and time,” if only cinematically.³⁴

In spite of their profound resistance to the narrative closure and continualist perception, objectalizing strategies of representational disjunction have produced an effective compositional structure for their disparate kino-things: Vertov and Shklovskii were finally reconciled. The sequencing of autonomous visual objects was arranged chronologically: newsreels have reappeared as biographic chronicles, as a genre of the generational documentary. In an idiosyncratic way, these *biochronicles* combine the post-Soviet

²⁹Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” *October* 30 (1984): 103. For more on factography in the early Soviet documentary see Devin Fore, “The Operative Word in Soviet Factography,” and Leah Dickerman, “The Fact and the Photograph,” both in *October* 118 (2006): 95–131, and 132–52, respectively.

³⁰Sergei Tret'iakov, “The Biography of the Object,” *October* 118 (2006): 62.

³¹For a discussion see Ekaterina Degot, “Ot tovara k tovarishchu: K estetike nerynochnogo predmeta,” in *Pamiat' tela: Nizhnee bel'e sovetskoi epokhi. Katalog vystavki. 7 noiabria 2000–31 ianvaria 2001* (Moscow, 2000), 8–19. See also *Liudi i veshchi v sovetskoi i postsovetskoi kul'ture* (Novosibirsk, 2005).

³²For a review of this movement, which is usually translated as New Objectivity or New Sobriety, see Steve Plumb, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1918–33: Unity and Diversity of an Art Movement* (Amsterdam, 2006), 37–38.

³³On “call to order” and New Objectivity in Weimar Germany and early Soviet Russia see Ekaterina Degot, “Different Things: Soviet Realist Painting in the Context of the New Objectivity of the 1920s,” in “*Novaia veshchestvennost'*” *Nikolaia Zagreкова i russkie khudozhniki: Katalog vystavki 9 apreliia – 10 iunia 2007* (St. Petersburg, 2007), 134–42. See also Maria Makela, “‘A Clear and Simple Style’: Tradition and Typology in New Objectivity,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 28:1 (2002): 40.

³⁴Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 203, 213.

fascination with the visual authenticity of life-caught-unawares, and the equally powerful striving to find a way to organize disjointed objects of Soviet and post-Soviet life in a plausible constellation. Chroniclers visualize past and current events as a life-account of the late Soviet generation, and radically dislodge Soviet “kino-epics” and “kino-monuments,” with their emphasis on industrial successes and class achievements.

While weak in plot, these postsocialist projects are by no means nonartistic. *Kinopravda* meets here a postmodern “montage of daily life excitors.”³⁵ As I will show, the intricate interweaving of scattered visual elements becomes the main technique that establishes and emphasizes cultural disjunction. Put differently, the death of Soviet-style documentary proclaimed by Loznitsa and Manskii did not mean the death of the document. Creative audio and visual editing allowed the new generation of Russian filmmakers to re-access and reconfigure not only the available stock of visual representations of late Soviet life but also the basic assumptions about this life itself.

BIOCHRONICLES: FILMING RAW LIFE

The scenario is a fairy tale invented for us by a writer. We live our own lives, and we do not submit to anyone’s fictions.

Dziga Vertov, “Kino-Eye,” 1926.

In his short essay “The Stage Set of the Epoch,” Boris Eikhenbaum explained the ubiquity of nonfiction literature in early Soviet Russia by suggesting that the material of postrevolutionary daily life (*byt*) was still too one-dimensional to be used as the content for such literary constructions as drama or novel. Its very “topicality” prevented the new order of things from fitting the stylistic and narrative constraints of the plot. To become “plot-able” (*siuzhetosposobnym*), to evolve into a full-fledged narrative, daily life of the present had to undergo a “preliminary literary framing”: an internally coherent story (*fabula*) can be achieved through organizing the raw life material according to some *external* logic—be it the logic of time (as in chronicles), biography (as in memoirs), space (as in travelogues), or events (as in reportage, sketch, *ocherk*).³⁶

It was hardly surprising, Eikhenbaum noted, that the framework of biographic chronicle provided the most popular literary “container” for emotionally charged bits and pieces of the new life under construction. The present unfolded not as a combination of purposeful *processes* but as an open-ended portrayal of *people* “constructing their own life” (*stroiaishchikh svoiu sud'bu*).³⁷ The object of aesthetic experience in this case was not the formal organization of the material, but the material itself.³⁸

³⁵Eisenstein used the expression “montage of daily life excitors” (*montazh bytovykh razdrzhitelei*) in his critique of Vertov’s *Kino-eye*, which was rejected as “a plagiarism of the daily construction (*bytostroitel'stvo*)” for its mimetic “montage of the everyday (*byt*).” See Sergei Eisenstein, “Nabroski k stat'e,” in *Eizenshtein: Popytka teatra. Stat'i. Publikatsii*, ed. Vladimir Zabrodin (Moscow, 2005), 249.

³⁶Boris Eikhenbaum, “Dekoratsiia epokhi,” in his *Moi vremennik* (St. Petersburg, 2001), 129–30.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 130.

³⁸Shklovskii, *Za 60 let*, 103.

Since the second half of the 1990s, Russia has been experiencing a similar explosion of the genre of biographic chronicle. In a situation where socialist forms of emplotment have been abandoned and new narrative conventions have only begun to take shape, memoirs, diaries, and personal correspondence convey a sense of historical materiality through descriptions of details and objects.³⁹ Literature has been a major source of these “ego-documents,” with increasing contributions by feature films and television projects.⁴⁰

Several documentaries made by prominent Russian filmmakers during the last fifteen years suggest that the popularity of biographic chronicles is not a temporary artistic fashion, but an expanding tendency. For instance, in 1997, Viktor Kosakovskii finished his *Wednesday. 19.07.1961*, in which he set out to film all those people (fifty males and fifty-one females), who were born on the same date (July 19, 1961) and in the same place (Leningrad) as the filmmaker himself. Kosakovskii ultimately managed to locate only seventy individuals, and *Wednesday* presents them as a succession of independent visual fragments (cinograms), which have their own structures and which could be assembled in multiple ways.⁴¹ Linked narratively only by the birth date of their subjects, these visual sequences did not merge into a coherent biography of the cohort. Yet this cinegrammatic depiction does create a diverse mosaic of the generational environment, highlighting the ambiguity of the title: *sreda* in Russian means not only Wednesday but also milieu, setting, inhabited space.

In a very different way another important Russian documentarian, Sergei Mirochnichenko (b. 1955), has continued his longitudinal project. For his *Born in the USSR*, every seven years Mirochnichenko interviews and films the same group of people who went to school in 1991, when the Soviet Union was about to collapse, and who are now scattered all over the world. The project is a long-term cooperation with BBC. To date, three films have been released: *7 Up in the Soviet Union* (1991), *14 Up Born in the USSR* (1998), and *Born in the USSR: 21 Up* (2005).⁴²

It is Manskii, however, who has been using the biochronicle format most intensively. His *Chronicles* and *Gagarin's Pioneers* (2005) directly and forcefully addressed the fate of

³⁹This increasing importance of the detail in rendering the unstable meaning of post-Soviet changes is discussed at length in my “Aesthetics without Law: Cinematic Bandits in Post-Soviet Space,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 51:2 (2007): 357–90. On emplotment see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), 7–11. See also Viktor Shklovsky, *The Energy of Delusion: A Book on Plot* (Champaign, IL, 2007), 110–51.

⁴⁰Since the end of the 1990s, Russian publishers, journalists, and scholars have been talking about a “memoir rush” or a “memoir boom.” Biographical literature firmly occupies a leading position among bestsellers, competing only with detective and crime stories. See Olga Kostuikova, “Rossiiane liubiat detektiv i memuary,” *Segodnia*, September 8, 1997; A. A. Iskanderov, “Memuarnaia likhoradka,” *Voprosy istorii*, 2001, no. 4; Maia Kucherskaia, “Gvozdi' v sapoge,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, March 24, 2004; and Viktor Pritula, “Nevymyshlennost' zhanra,” *Slovo*, April 18, 2008.

⁴¹*Sreda. 19.07.61*, dir. Viktor Kosakovskii, 1997, 93 min., BB, Docstudios, Roskomkino. For more on the usage of cinograms see Bernard Tschumi, *Cinegram Folie: Le Parc de la Villette, Paris, Nineteenth Arrondissement* (Princeton, 1987), vi.

⁴²For details on *Born in the USSR* see Maria Beiker, “Rozhdennye v SSSR: suzhet v razvitii,” *BBCRussian.com* at http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/russian/news/newsid_6251000/6251376.stm. On the films themselves, all directed by Sergei Mironchnichenko, see *7 Up in the Soviet Union*, 1991, 65 min., Gosteleradio; *14 Up Born in the USSR*, 1998, 75 min., Granada Television; and *Born in the USSR: 21 Up*, 2005, 71 min., Granada Factual North.

the late Soviet generation. The goal of his other ambitious documentary project, *Russia—The Beginning* (2001), is to record the life of the generation born in the first year of the new millennium. The opening installment presents twenty-six episodes about women giving birth to these children. Filmed in different parts of the country, these stories of beginnings are intended as a panoramic preface to the documentary study of the generation. Like Miroshnichenko's *Born in the USSR*, the project is a version of extended cinematic observation; the crew plans to revisit these children every several years in order to produce in the end a continuous ensemble of disjointed generational narratives.⁴³

Still too topical to succumb to a proper literary reframing, these cinegrams of Soviet and post-Soviet experience often present a blend of political clichés and everyday objects, “a boeuf Stroganoff of platitudes (*poshlostei*),” as Eisenstein called it.⁴⁴ There is, however, a major difference between the daily records of Vertov's *kinopravda* and the documentation of late Soviet and post-Soviet *byt*. While catching “the crunch of the old bones of everyday existence,” the new generation of Russian documentarians openly resists Vertov's appeal to produce an organized “whole.” The postcommunist decoding of the Soviet world is not intent upon discovering a new, solid basis underneath the ephemeral superstructure of daily life. Rather, the point of these new Russian documentaries is to demonstrate the absence of any *coherent* Soviet totality by “defocusing” it.⁴⁵ What unites the various elements in these retrospective pictures of Soviet life is not its ideology but its calendar.⁴⁶

A change of medium—the shift from Soviet cinema theaters to post-Soviet TV sets—also played a role in this reluctance to commit to a homogenizing plot: the television format had its own narrative and visual requirements. Overall, the change of the medium stimulated more individualizing approaches. Formal experiments with camera-work, sound, lighting, and editing became more prominent. Preoccupation with audience (and ratings) also resulted in a noticeable shift toward more human-oriented issues. Such a traditional Soviet topic as the history of the working class and the peasantry, as well as detailed documentary studies of major political events, have almost disappeared.⁴⁷

⁴³*Nasha rodina*, dir. Vitalii Manskii, 2005, 101 min., Vertov Studio, ma.ja.de. Filmproduktion; *Rossiia-Nachalo*, dir. V. Manskii, 2000, 26 episodes, 26 min. each, Studio Vertov. See Viktoriia Belopol'skaia, “Chastnoe litso bol'shoi istorii v Kreml'e i v otdelenii militsii,” *Vechemiaia Moskva*, February 1, 2001. See also Anna Starobinets, “Bez perezhima emotsii,” *Ekspert* 24 (2002): 62–63. In 2006, *Rossiia-Nachalo* was followed by a new installment called *Generation (Pokolenie)*, which consists of 12 episodes, 44 min. each. Manskii's company has had difficulties with showing his project, and at the moment the director is preparing a documentary film *Pokolenie* (104 min.), which would include materials from both installments (personal communication with Manskii's studio). For a discussion of the method of extended photo-observation see Sergei Tret'iakov, “From the Photo-series to Extended Photo-Observation,” *October* 118 (2006): 71–77.

⁴⁴Sergei Eizenshtein, “Zametki kasatel'no teatra,” in *Mnemozina: Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX v.*, no. 2, ed. V. V. Ivanov (Moscow, 2000), 232. See also a discussion of “discursive platitudes” of late socialism as the main object of aesthetic and social attachment in today's Russia in Mark Lipovetskii, *Paralogii: Transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russkoi kul'ture 1920–2000-kh godov* (Moscow, 2008), 729.

⁴⁵Lars von Trier, “Defocus,” in *Dogme Uncut*, 86.

⁴⁶On a similar approach in Edgar Reitz's television project *Heimat: Chronicle of Germany* (1984) see Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca, 1990), 91.

⁴⁷Mal'kova, “Kinopravda vne ‘kommunisticheskoi rashifrovki mira,’” 14. For a brief review of the genre see G. Dolmatovskaia et al., “Dokumental'noe kino,” in *Stranitsy istorii otechestvennogo kino*, ed. D. L. Karavaev (Moscow, 2006), 180–231.

Abandoning altogether the monumental style of late Soviet documentary epics, many new documentary films reproduced instead the deliberately fragmented structure of the newsreel. Documentary plots are usually divided into a series of relatively independent semantic segments. For instance, in Loznitsa's *Portrait* (2002), cinegrams of motionless people replace one another, as if in a slide-show.⁴⁸ In Kosakovskii's *Wednesday*, separate cinegrams have no visual connection either. Kino-things are combined, without producing a coherent—or even predictable—whole.

The narrative autonomy of cinegrams is often underscored structurally. Transitions from one to another are not masked but emphasized. The bridging role of fade-ins and fade-outs is radically diminished. Lev Roshal', a film scholar, describes this visual texture of Russian documentaries as “consciously torn.”⁴⁹ To highlight discontinuity, some post-Soviet documentarians frequently punctuate the film by specially designed transition elements that separate (and link) the chapters of the film. This visual “curtain” (*shtorka*), as Kosakovskii called it, however, is devoid of the informative function that original intertitles performed in silent films.⁵⁰ The purpose of this curtain today is not to inform the viewer but to maintain the rhythmic structure of the spectacle (figs. 1–3). Semantic motion is realized through a series of visual stops.

The structural salience of jump-cuts and segment breaks is emphasized further by the visual foregrounding of the object. The television format tends to privilege close-up and medium shots. As a result, the on-screen space is often visually shortened. The background plane and the depiction of the context give place to talking heads and macro-shots of things. Late Soviet *byt* becomes equated with exaggerated detail taken out of its primary web of everyday relations. There is no need to hammer a wall into a nail anymore: for a close-up shot of the nail, the wall is irrelevant.

LATELY: FIELD NOTES OF THE ERA

We have made things that still keep us beholden. We reject the old [order]
but we do not disavow it.

Viktor Shklovskii, “Tetiva,” 1970.

Given the increasing prominence of television for post-Soviet documentary, it is only logical that a new trend of biochronicles was most vividly manifested by a TV series. In March 1997, NTV Channel began broadcasting a massive project—*Lately: Our Era. 1961–1991*—produced by the film director Dzhanik Faiziev (b. 1961) and the TV journalist Leonid Parfenov (b. 1960).⁵¹ For several months in a row, NTV ran weekly a documentary account of a particular calendar year. In these forty-minute episodes, old Soviet footage of political events, clips from film and animation, and musical videos were interspersed with comments

⁴⁸*Portret*, dir. Sergei Loznitsa, 2002, 28 min., St. Petersburg Documentary Film Studio.

⁴⁹Lev Roshal', “Khlebnyi den' neigrovogo kino,” in *Dokumental'noe kino epokhi reformatorstva*, 88.

⁵⁰Viktor Kosakovskii, “Stop. Spasibo. Prozhito,” *Seans* 32 (2008), available at <http://seance.ru/n/32/vertigo32/stop-spasibo-prozhito/>.

⁵¹The series was supplemented later by post-Soviet episodes and rebranded as *Namedni. Nasha Era. 1961–2003*. The project is available as a DVD set (11 discs) published by the NTV Channel in 2004.

by post-Soviet experts—two cinema stars (Renata Litvinova and Tat'iana Drubich), a journalist (Anatolii Strel'ianyi), a politician (Egor Gaidar), and a pundit (Sergei Karaganov).



FIG. 1 Still from Vertov's *Three Songs About Lenin* (1934), a cinegram with two female figures fades into an intertitle (*My kolkhoz*) that clarifies the meaning of the scene.



FIG. 2 A curtain from *Private Chronicles* (1999)—Leonid Brezhnev and Mikhail Suslov kissing. Courtesy of Studio Vertov. Real'noe kino.

Through his voice-over and on-camera presence, Parfenov, the anchor and author, lent the series (some) illusion of cinematic consistency. The creators of the forty-three-episode series billed it as an “encyclopedia of Soviet life.”⁵² The slogan with which Parfenov began every episode of the series summed up the project as a collection of “events, people, and phenomena that have defined a way of life. Without this, it is hard to imagine us, let alone—to understand.”⁵³



FIG. 3 A curtain from *Lately* (1997) that segments the narrative, without providing any additional information. Courtesy of the NTV Channel.

In the series, Parfenov never explained why he had decided to begin in 1961. Two other biographical accounts that appeared around the same time—Manskii’s *Chronicles* and Kosakovskii’s *Wednesday*—likewise used 1961 as their point of departure. In a 2005 documentary about his classmates from a provincial secondary school, Manskii came up with the term “Gagarin’s pioneers” to describe the generation born around 1961.⁵⁴ Gagarin figures in the first episode of *Lately*, but his role is no more significant than that of

⁵²Newspapers also reported that it was the most expensive documentary project on Russian TV of the time. See, for example, Anton Charkin, “Leonid Parfenov: Ia nikomu ne pytaius' zadurit' golovu,” *Novaia gazeta*, April 6, 1998.

⁵³Following the overwhelming success of *Lately*, in 2001, Nikolai Svanidze from the TV channel Rossiia began airing his own long-term version of biochronicle, *Istoricheskie khroniki s Nikolaem Svanidze*. In this case, each year of the last century is presented as a biography of a famous personality (for example, 1902 as a story about Savva Morozov; 1964 as a story about Mikhail Suslov). Many of the films are available from <http://www.miruma.ru/istoricheskie-hroniki/>. See also a book version of the project: Marina Svanizde, *Istoricheskie khroniki s Nikolaem Svanizde*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 2007).

⁵⁴*Gagarin’s Pioneers* is the English distribution title of Manskii’s *Nasha rodina*. For a review see Iuliia Larina, “Rodina pervogo klassa,” *Ogonek* 25 (2008): 37–38.

others.⁵⁵ In fact, the collection of kino-things assembled by Parfenov for the first episode suggests that the year was seen as an important watershed that significantly distinguished different historical periods in Soviet history. The year started with the introduction of new ruble bills that would be in circulation for the rest of the Soviet period. Moreover, the year witnessed the Bay of Pigs invasion and the erection of the Berlin Wall. In addition, in 1961 the Communist party adopted its new program, promising the achievement of fully fledged communism by 1980, while Stalin's body was removed from Lenin's Tomb (and buried right next to it). In other words, 1961 marked a significant break with the Stalinist past, a break accompanied by the adoption of new (Communist) goals. A signpost for the new era, the year also became an imaginary starting point for constructing a biographical account of the last generation whose perceptions, approaches, and dispositions were fundamentally shaped by Soviet reality.

Often credited with discovering a new "postmodernist" way of visualizing history by "fusing the cultural avant-garde with television," as one critic put it, *Lately*, in fact, was not that original.⁵⁶ Indeed, late Soviet documentary actively utilized the format of chronicle for narrating the history of the country. For instance, in 1977 a large group of filmmakers produced a state-sponsored "video cycle," *Our Biography*, in which sixty episodes covered the sixty-year history of the Soviet state (one year per episode).⁵⁷ *Our Biography*—not unlike Faiziev and Parfenov's *Lately*—combined different genres and media (on-screen commentaries, archival footage, poetry, music, film, and the like) to recreate a sense of historical authenticity. A loyal cultural functionary, Galina Shergova, the artistic director of the cycle, saw the series as a "dialogue with history," as a cinematic way of fleshing out the "fuzzy shadows of memory." Symptomatically, such a dialogue often relied on the objectalization of history: reconstructed props of *byt* acted as a bridge connecting the present with the graspable past. For example, in the episode about the year 1928, the authors recreated a typical living room of the time and used it as a literal stage set of the period to interview people who had been active in 1928 and to talk to representatives of younger generations who were invited to temporarily "inhabit" a (fake) living space of the past.⁵⁸

The ideological climate of late socialism provided an overarching epic framework that could easily absorb the everyday and the heroic. Despite its title, *Our Biography* was construed not as a biographic chronicle of a specific generation, but as a "biography" of the October Revolution: the series was dedicated to the sixtieth anniversary of the event. Similar to the accounts of annalists analyzed by Hayden White, "years" here were perceived as

⁵⁵In a book version of *Namedni*, Parfenov somewhat clarified this point, maintaining that Gagarin's space flight and the victory in the Second World War continue to be used as the main reference points in people's perception of their *own* national past (Leonid Parfenov, "Ot avtora," in his *Namedni*, vol. 1, 1961–1970 [Moscow, 2009], 6). Recently, the role of 1961 was reinterpreted in two important feature films: *Dreaming of Space* (*Kosmos kak predchuvstvie*, 2005), by Aleksei Uchitel', presented Gagarin's space flight as a romantic promise of a new and different life, while in *Paper Soldier* (*Bumazhnyi soldat*, 2008) Aleksei German, Jr., frames the space program as an inhuman social and technological experiment conducted by Soviet megalomaniacs.

⁵⁶Boris Kagarlitskii, "Podryvniki i dekonstruktory," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, July 23, 1998.

⁵⁷*Nasha biografiia* (Moscow: Ekran, 1977). The series replicated the format of the montage film used in 1967 for creating a similar "kino-monument"—the fifty-episode series *The Chronicle of Half a Century* (*Letopis' poluveka* [Moscow: Ekran, 1967]). For details see Liliana Mal'kova, "Kinodokument-monument," in *Posle vzryva: Dokumental'noe kino 90-kh*, ed. G. Dolmatovskaia and G. Kopalina (Moscow, 1995), 25.

⁵⁸Galina Shergova, *Ekho slova: Zapiski o zvuchashchei publitsistike* (Moscow, 1986), 148.

manifestations of a higher power to “cause the events that occur in them”; “Lord” was replaced by “Revolution.”⁵⁹ Revolutionary pathos and revolutionary teleology, in other words, were used as a form of emplotment of the *byt* that had been so elusive in Eikhenbaum’s time.

Faiziev and Parfenov’s rendition of the era of late socialism completely erased such traces of teleology, revolutionary or otherwise. From this point of view, *Lately*’s synchronic narrative was indeed a cinegrammatic story of stagnation (*zastoi*), for it documented a period of immobility—both semantic and social.⁶⁰ This abandonment of the purposeful (narrative) progression activated other dynamics. Syntax drove the semantic motion of *Lately*. Ideas unrolled on the screen through the “montage of attractions,” a montage of “arbitrarily selected independent ... effects” aimed at producing “certain emotional shocks,” as Eisenstein put it (figs. 4, 5).⁶¹ Radical thematic incompatibility of segments became the rule. Thematic shifts were presented as clashes of cinegrams, the length of each segment varying from thirty seconds to three minutes. The first episode of the series, for example,



FIG. 4 To avoid visually static footage, Faiziev and Parfenov often split the screen, running two mirror images at the same time. The commentator Renata Litvinova explains a fashion item of the year. Courtesy of the NTV Channel.

included the following array of people, events, and phenomena (in the order of their appearance on the screen):

⁵⁹Hayden White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), 16.

⁶⁰For a useful analysis of a similar rejection of the diachronic and teleological in the work of Russian formalists see Dickerman, “The Fact and the Photograph,” 20.

⁶¹Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Sense* (New York, 1947), 232, 230.



FIG. 5 Delegates to the Twenty-Second Party Congress listen to Khrushchev's speech. Courtesy of the NTV Channel.

newly introduced money bills; the birth of six puppies by Strelka, one of the two dogs that had been sent into space in 1960; the forceful (and universal) introduction of corn by Khrushchev; the smashing success of the science fiction film *Aqua-Man* (*Chelovek-amphibiia*); Gagarin's flight; a new hobby—sculptures from tree roots and brunches; stiletto-heel shoes; the Bay of Pigs invasion; the beginning of the mass construction of prefabricated panel housing (*khrushchevki*); the decline of operetta, and its last star, Tat'iana Shmyga; the construction of the Bratsk hydroelectric power station; the opening of the Palace of Congresses in the Kremlin; Valerii Brumel's achievements in sport; the Twenty-Second Congress of the Communist Party and its new program; the burial of Stalin's body; the first publication of the collected works of Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov; the black market in currency and the court trial of the hard currency dealer, Ian Rokotov; the first meeting of the nonaligned movement in Belgrade; the international popularity of the Soviet clown Oleg Popov; Nikita and Nina Khrushchev's official meeting with John and Jacqueline Kennedy; the song "Do the Russians Want War?" by Evgenii Evtushenko and Eduard Kolmanovskii; the Berlin crisis; Leonid Gaidai's comedies and the trio of slapstick-comedians, Vitsin-Nikulin-Morgunov, who starred in them.

The proportion of the political and the everyday would fluctuate from one episode to another. The 1960s and the 1970s, with their often unexpected combinations of daily routine and political rituals, would be replaced in *Lately* by the predominantly political perestroika years of the 1980s. In the 1990s the visual pendulum of the series shifted again, and new forms of daily life would become the main focus of the project.

Despite the differences in theme and duration, all these stories fit into the structural mold of the chronicle. Entry logs of sorts, these visual and narrative molecules of *Lately*

provided a diverse table of primary elements of late Soviet life; yet none of these episodes presented an in-depth analysis of an event, a personality, or a phenomenon. Objects and people would pop up for a minute or two in the Soviet space of *Lately* only to disappear forever. None of them determined the other. The transformation of a chronicle into a story was deliberately frustrated: no object was emphasized, no motif was privileged, no diachronic logic was hinted at.⁶² The meaning of sequencing did not determine (nor did it derive from) the meaning of cinegrams.⁶³ Conducting an on-screen inventory of Soviet life, producing a diverse list of its objects seemed to be the ultimate goal. Decomposition of the available visual stock, a persistent assault on any form of narrative linearity was its main method.

On-screen commentaries likewise offered no conclusions. Parfenov and his experts did not redefine history by grafting new judgments onto old visual records. Rather, commentaries and records coexisted in the series without undermining each other. With the same candor Parfenov would read a joke of the period, an official statement from *Pravda* about a series of public protests against the Soviet troops staged in Czechoslovakia in 1969, and a report that the USSR was the world's biggest producer of shoes (three pairs per capita). Commentators, of course, knew that all 155 kilometers of the Berlin Wall would eventually come down, but this knowledge did not influence their story about the original decision. They also knew that the year 1980 would be marked by the Olympic Games in Moscow, not by the beginning of full-fledged communism Khrushchev had promised. This knowledge, however, manifested itself only in a slight change of intonation, tacitly off-setting the excessive enthusiasm of Khrushchev's party program. The synchronic approach to history was realized here as a temporal mimicry: "fuzzy shadows of memory" were used as an invitation to revisit and reconnect with objects of the time, not to restore (or denounce) them (fig. 6).⁶⁴

Many reviewers of the first installment of *Lately (1961–1972)* deemed the project a failure precisely because of Parfenov's decision *not* to provide a clear-cut message that could guide the audience through the uneasy process of comprehending "our era." Expecting a completed story with an obvious message, if not a verdict, these critics found the chronicle too disorganized, and they dismissed *Lately* as the vanity show of a TV star.⁶⁵ Some perceived deconstruction as destruction.⁶⁶

Today, more than ten years after the premiere of *Lately*, this critique seems utterly misplaced. As the urgency of distancing from the Soviet past, so characteristic for the mid-1990s, subsided, it becomes more and more apparent that *Lately* was neither an "alternative" version of late Soviet history nor "a search for truth in its multiplicity."⁶⁷ Instead, it was a search for multiplicity itself; an effective attempt to document the polyphonic texture of a

⁶²For more on chronicle vs. story see White, *Metahistory*, 5–6. On story-framing see also Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose* (Champaign, IL, 1990), 52–71.

⁶³Tschumi, *Cinegram Folie*, 12.

⁶⁴For other contemporary examples of temporal mimicry see Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "'We're Nostalgic but We're not Crazy': Retrofitting the Past in Russia," *Russian Review* 66 (July 2007): 451–82.

⁶⁵Oleg Davydov and Igor Zotov, "Zakat Parfenova," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, June 7, 1997; Anastasia Boichenko, "Obyknovennyi snobizm," *Moskovskii komsomolets*, March 3, 1998.

⁶⁶See Mal'kova, "Kinopravda vne 'kommunisticheskoi rashifrovki mira,'" 15.

⁶⁷Shklovsky, *Energy of Delusion*, 178.

society that had been routinely reduced to its most authoritarian genres.⁶⁸ Politically, it was a search for a framework in which the story about the Helsinki Watch group in Moscow would not look alien next to a report about a new version of the Soviet anthem (1977).



FIG. 6 A “curtain” from *Lately*. In the still, Leonid Parfenov digitally inhabits the era (behind Leonid Brezhnev). A mechanical calendar (right top corner) says: “Rotate slowly.” Courtesy of the NTV Channel.

Culturally, it was the quest for a narrative structure, in which the popularity of Il’ia Glazunov’s folk-pop paintings could be placed side by side with the overwhelming success of Paul Mauriat’s French orchestra and the West German disco group *Boney M* (1978). Fieldnotes of the era, *Lately* was preoccupied with the process of inscription that could turn the “flow of action and discourses” into visual elements.⁶⁹ Detailed interpretations of these kino-things were left for a different project.

What was important about these decomposing cinegrams of reality, though, was their counter-hegemonic effect. By attributing the same historical value to all late Soviet discourses and artifacts, *Lately* openly questioned the established hierarchy of practices and representations, without suggesting a new one. As Parfenov put it in one of his interviews: “All newsmakers are equal.”⁷⁰

The setting of Parfenov’s on-camera appearance made this point even more obvious. Each episode of the series started and ended with a scene in a library room with the anchor surrounded by cabinets with catalogue drawers. Events and discourses of the past, the

⁶⁸See Alaina Lemon, “Hermeneutic Algebra: Solving for Love, Time/Space, and Value in Putin-Era Personal Ads,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 18:1 (2008): 236–67.

⁶⁹James Clifford, “Notes on (Field)notes,” in *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*, ed. Roger Sanjek (Ithaca, 1990), 51.

⁷⁰Charkin, “Parfenov: Ia nikomu ne pytaius’.”

setting seemed to suggest, were not just equal in their importance (all are catalogue cards now) but also they all became the property of history (fig. 7).



Fig. 7 A catalogue room of *Lately*. Courtesy of the NTV Channel.

The same search for multiplicity was realized syntagmatically. The screen was often divided into two or three or four sections, presenting different cinegrams at the same time. As if making a programmatic point about the value of interpretation, in some cases, two identical visual segments would run on the screen simultaneously, with one of them being flipped 180 degrees horizontally. Such “radical reversibility” of the footage not only forced the viewer to choose his/her own trajectory of reading but also—and perhaps more importantly—it upset the orienting function of the horizon of history itself.⁷¹ History, as this visual metaphor implied, could be easily read in many directions and perceived from many points of view (fig. 8).

Yet *Lately* was not just a whimsical reconstruction of the late Soviet period but also a dialogue with the past. It was an invitation to achieve an almost tactile, hands-on sense of historical experience, not to learn history’s lessons. At times this materiological desire for “raw” objects of the past was realized in *Lately* quite literally. Each episode of the series contained a few segments with Parfenov revisiting the place of the event described in the

⁷¹Yve-Alain Bois developed the idea of “radical reversibility” in his discussion of structurally similar projects of El Lissitzky. See Bois, “El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility,” *Art in America* 36:4 (1988): 188.

story. The coverage of the Berlin crisis ends with Parfenov in front of the last—memorialized—remains of the Wall. The story about the U.S. invasion in the Bay of Pigs includes a scene with the anchor walking down the Cuban beach. The account of Khrushchev’s speech to the Twenty-Second Party Congress was accompanied by a segment with Parfenov delivering parts of the speech from the historical podium of the Palace of Congresses in the Kremlin.



FIG. 8 Documenting multiplicity. 1963. Twist is the dance of the day in the USSR. Officially disapproved, the dance is, nonetheless, performed everywhere: on a construction site (during a lunch break); in a dancing hall (left), and during a wedding (bottom right). Courtesy of the NTV Channel.

In *Lately*, Soviet history was not a new stage set built to display the biography of the revolution. It was an authentic location that could be reinhabited—albeit belatedly—in order to convert a heavily ideologized and clichéd period into one’s own era. To highlight his approach, Parfenov often used the same method of objectalizing decomposition: a panoramic view of a large industrial site or a historical location would have a barely noticeable dot far in the background. Then, the camera would rapidly zoom in, turning the “dot” into a close up shot of the anchor. The visual disposition would be reversed: an overwhelming historical location suddenly would acquire a human dimension by becoming Parfenov’s own background. The temporal distance between the past and the present would be overcome—at least partially—by shortening space and by radically inverting the perspective (figs. 9, 10).

Remarkably, in this postsocialist attempt to get in touch with events and phenomena that had vanished, Soviet ideology was neither whitewashed nor denounced. But by decomposing the period to its elementary particles Faiziev and Parfenov convincingly revealed that dreams about non-Soviet or even anti-Soviet enclaves that could be carved

out of the Soviet space were just that: dreams. Without ideological signposts, political borders, and cultural boundaries, all these cinegrammatic shards of actually existing socialism—from the Cultural Revolution in China to the Soviet obsession with amber jewelry (1966); from the first Soviet automobile, the Lada, to Angela Davis (1971); from the death of Vladimir Vysotskii to the murder of John Lennon (1980)—became part and parcel of late Soviet text, with Lennon and Lenin on the same page; or, to be more precise, on the same screen. Archival footage made this coexistence believable; the chronological approach made it graspable.



FIG. 9 Bringing history closer. The Kremlin Palace of Congresses. Parfenov on stage is barely noticeable. Courtesy of the NTV Channel.



FIG. 10 Parfenov reads quotes from Nikita Khrushchev's speech to the Twenty-Second Congress of the Communist Party from the historical lectern. Courtesy of the NTV Channel.

By decomposing the realm of the Soviet life, *Lately* significantly reformatted the traditional picture of late socialism. Perhaps the biggest historical achievement of the visual archeology of the Soviet life undertaken in *Lately* was one persistently conveyed point. Approaching any information through the human subject (*pokazyvat' "cherez cheloveka"*), Parfenov compellingly demonstrated that late socialism was the period when private life ceased to be a privilege of the Soviet *nomenklatura*.⁷² For the first time in the Soviet period, institutional and organizational frameworks such as separate apartments and two-day weekends made private life possible for a large group of people. It was a profoundly Soviet way of life, but it had a degree of privacy that earlier Soviet generations had never experienced.⁷³

This poetics of the everyday significantly determines the aesthetic and thematic preferences of the generation born in the early 1960s. Just as World War II became the organizing plot for the Thaw generation, and the chaos of the 1990s is used as a master narrative by people born in the early 1970s, for the generation of Brezhnev's *zastoi* the intricacies and pitfalls of the daily life provided a historical and experiential interface in their dialogue with history and the present.⁷⁴ In this respect, the story about new ruble bills chosen by Parfenov to open both the series and the era is highly symbolic. One of the dominant features of late socialism was indeed a chronically frustrated desire to exchange banknotes for consumer goods. These monetary signs of unfulfilled demands would disappear together with the period.⁷⁵ Introduced in 1991, new money would signify the arrival of new regimes of consumption.⁷⁶

The importance of the everyday, however, should not be reduced to consumption only. Weary of the excessive emotional self-exposure of the Thaw's *shestidesiatniki*, the generation of *zastoi* would also find in the world of material objects an important refuge from the world of inflated ideas. For instance, when showing footage of Gagarin's official walk on the runway of a Moscow airport soon after his space trip, Parfenov did not miss a chance to point out an untied lace on Gagarin's shoe. It is exactly these details of the everyday

⁷²Leonid Parfenov, "Ia ne rabotaiu s 'kholodnym nosom,'" *Zvezda*, 2002, no. 10; Denis Korsakov, "Leonid Parfenov: Brezhnev byl normal'nym obyvatel'm. I liudiam pozvolil stat' takimi," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, December 12, 2006.

⁷³See, for example, Lewis Siegelbaum, ed., *Border of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (New York, 2006); Maiia Turovskaia, *Blow up ili Geroi bezgeroinogo vremeni-2*, (Moscow, 2003), 187–96; and Irena Andreeva, *Chastnaia zhizn' pri sotsializme: Otchet sovetskogo obyvatelia* (Moscow, 2009).

⁷⁴See, among others, Dzhulai, *Dokumental'nyi illiuzion*, 103–4; Serguei Alex. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, 2009); Olga Shevchenko, *Crisis and the Everyday in Post-Socialist Moscow* (Bloomington, 2009); and Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca, 2008), 195–225. For a useful historical comparison with Eastern Europe see John Borneman, *After the Wall: East Meets West in the New Berlin* (New York, 1991), 57–82.

⁷⁵In 1996, Parfenov even initiated a project called "New Money." Together with the magazine *Den'gi*, he proposed a series of new bills that would display major Russian cultural personalities—from Pushkin and Gogol (for the 100-ruble bill), Mendeleev and Gagarin (50 rubles) to Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich (10 rubles). See Dmitrii Ludmirskii, "Razgovor s poetom o fininspektsii," *Den'gi* (October 30, 1996.).

⁷⁶On the emergence of new regimes of consumption see Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism* (Ithaca, 2002); Dale Pesmen, *Russia and Soul: An Exploration* (Ithaca, 2002), chap. 3; and Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "The Quantity of Style: Imaginary Consumption in the Post-Soviet Russia," *Theory, Culture and Society* 17:5 (2000): 97–120.

that would often provide in *Lately* a precarious counterpoint to the grand Soviet rituals and gestures (fig. 11).



FIG. 11 Splitting images of the time. Gagarin walks (with an untied shoelace) to report to the commander-in-chief about the successful completion of his space trip. Courtesy of the NTV Channel.

Lately's decidedly multimedia nature and implicit ironic distancing from the past attracted a serious and loyal audience.⁷⁷ After Parfenov converted the TV program into book format, all three of the *Lately* volumes published so far not only became bestsellers but also drew praise from the traditionally snippy critics.⁷⁸ For almost two decades Parfenov has remained an author whose pioneering electronic and print projects have been defining the intellectual and aesthetic development of Russian media. *Lately's* model of working with archival evidence and historical artifacts had an immense impact on the scope and form of the post-Soviet documentary, too. In short, Faiziev and Parfenov created, with *Lately*, a new visual and narrative paradigm.

With their cinegrammatic assemblages they consciously broke down the boundaries between the private and the political; they intentionally merged high and low cultures; they convincingly reminded their audience about the affective importance of montage; they rejected any attempts to fit their material into a unifying plot; and they deliberately refused to commit themselves to any form of ideological or aesthetic closure. The materiality of

⁷⁷*Lately's* highest TV ratings were among viewers aged 15–39; the series was the least popular among those who were 55 and older (Anna Filimonova and Leonid Parfenov, “Ja – otdel'no,” *Moskovskie novosti* [June 19, 2001]: 23).

⁷⁸Leonid Parfenov, *Namedni* vol. 1: 1961–1970; vol. 2: 1971–1980; vol. 3: 1981–1990 (Moscow, 2009); Natal'ia Kochetkova, “Leonid Parfenov: ‘U nas ne priniato perevodit' istoriiu v formu interaktivna,’” *Izvestiia*, December 4, 2009.

the object and grid points of chronology appeared to be the only consistent principles that bound together the otherwise disparate molecules of actually existing socialism.

“BECOMING SOVIET MADE NO SENSE”

[It] looks like a chronicle of events but it acts like a drama.

Sergei Eisenstein, “O stroenii veshchei,” 1940.

Faiziev and Parfenov’s playful experimentation with details and fragments of late socialism predictably provoked charges of neo-Soviet nostalgia or, at least, of a revisionist rewriting of recent history.⁷⁹ Defending his aesthetic and thematic approach, Parfenov spelled out his position in several interviews. “I had no nostalgia whatsoever,” maintained the journalist:

That epoch had all kinds of things, but overall it was a pretty frightening (*strashnaia*) period. Under the leadership of the sweet petty bourgeois Brezhnev, the country moved nowhere. ... Worse than that, it was an epoch with no initiative. And a lot of people drank themselves to death: their attempts at self-realization failed; and they considered themselves—not without a good reason—a lost generation. Timelessness, the lack of any big ideas, which were still around in Khrushchev’s period ... all that had a detrimental impact on several generations. This is what matters most.⁸⁰

The scope and rhythm of *Lately*’s chronicles and their structural fragmentation made any consistent reading of “our era,” if not impossible, then at least nontransparent. A coherent story required a different “preliminary treatment” of visual and textual documents. To go beyond striking visual effects, field notes of the late Soviet period needed a literary framework that would be able to translate the records of the era into a convincing plot: construction had to be turned into a composition.⁸¹

From this point of view, Manskii’s internationally acclaimed *Chronicles* was a successful operation of emplotment in which visual shards and slivers of the period were reworked into a developing story. In *Chronicles*, the “detrimental impact” of the era emphasized by Parfenov took the shape of an extensive obituary for the last and lost Soviet generation. Formally, the transformation of the chronicle into a tale was achieved through the superimposition of three different texts: the amateur footage of the time (the chronicles themselves), the off-screen commentary written in the late 1990s (the “Monologue”), and a haunting musical soundtrack composed for the film.

⁷⁹For a sophisticated example of this critique see Kagarlitskii, “Podryvniki i dekonstruktory.” See also Aleksandr Vasil’ev, “Nadys’ sluchilas’ nasha era,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, March 7, 1997. There is an interesting parallel between these accusations and similar charges of political and aesthetic conservatism addressed to the New Objectivity artists in Germany. For a discussion of the German case see Olivier Lugon, “‘Photo-Inflation’: Image Profusion in German Photography, 1925-1945,” *History of Photography* 32:3 (2008): 219–34; and Olaf Peters, “On the Problem of Continuity of New Objectivity Painting During the Consolidation of the Third Reich: the Case of Rudolf Schlichter 1930–1937,” *History of European Ideas* 24:2 (1998): 93–112.

⁸⁰Korsakov, “Leonid Parfenov: Brezhnev byl...,” 5.

⁸¹On construction vs. composition see Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Ratsionalizm – “formalism”* (Moscow, 2007), 104–5. See also Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” 90–91.

The film was a product of intense collective collaboration: Manskii's authorship of *Private Chronicles* is only true in part. Igor Iarkevich, a writer from Moscow (b. 1962), created the witty and ironic life-story, and Aleksandr Tsekalo (b. 1961), a popular comedian from Ukraine, lent his voice to this monologue. Aleksei Aigi (b. 1971), a Moscow violinist and the leader of the musical group 4'33, composed a captivating minimalist score. Finally, and most importantly, the visual narrative of the film itself was a meticulous montage of autonomous cinegrams, which were shot during the 1960-1980s by more than a hundred people all over the Soviet Union.

The idea to produce such a film developed gradually. In 1995, Manskii, already known for his interest in archival footage, worked as a producer at Ren-TV, an independent Moscow television station with national audience. Allegedly, *Private Chronicles* started with a film reel that a friend brought to Manskii. The reel contained amateur footage from the 1960s with bits and pieces of somebody else's private life: kids running around, half-dressed adults, parties and drunken guests. Manskii broadcast a brief episode from the reel on Ren-TV, asking those who recognized themselves in the footage to contact him. Shortly after the broadcast, Manskii received about two dozen phone calls from such diverse places as Voronezh, Novokuznetsk, and Vladivostok. All these people claimed that the episode was a part of their own private life. This reaction, improbable as it was, prompted Manskii to organize a campaign called "The Private Life of a Big Country." Through Ren-TV, he asked people to send in their old reels for a newly established archive of amateur footage of the late Soviet period. The campaign met an enthusiastic response: Manskii received more than five thousand hours of recording, and for three years Ren-TV broadcast excerpts of this footage under the title "Private Chronicles."⁸²

It was precisely this amateur factory of late Soviet facts that provided Manskii with a stock of visual material for his own *Private Chronicles*. In 1999 he assembled some facts about the private life of a big country into a single story. Dozens of visual bits and pieces were surgically stitched into a fictitious biochronicle of an "average Soviet man."⁸³ The protagonist's off-screen voice privatized this visual material, turning a collection of disjointed kino-things into a personal video-album accompanied by the commentaries of its "owner."

The timeframe of this biography roughly paralleled the late Soviet period: the protagonist was born in April 1961 and vanished in August 1986. Following each year of the protagonist's life, *Chronicles* exhibited and explained life under late socialism. Each year had its own episode and consisted of several large "chapters" that unpacked the meaning of major rituals and symbols of Soviet life: the first day at school, meetings of young pioneers, trips to the South, rock-n-roll parties, student summer construction teams, and so on.

⁸²Viktoriiia Petrova, "Lichnaia zhizn' sovetskoi obshchestvennosti," *Izvestiia*, October 1, 1999; Andrei Gamalov, "Govorit i pokazyvaet Kreml'," *Profil* 24 (2001).

⁸³Since the 1980s, Svetlana Aleksievich has used a similar approach in literature. Monologues and interviews of her informants are presented as an artful montage of extended quotations. The author's own textual interventions are mostly minimalist and predominantly structural. See Aleksievich, *Poslednie svideteli: Sto nedetskikh kolybel'nykh* (Moscow, 2004); and S. Alexievich, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War* (London, 1992).

The combination of two distinctive forms of narration—silent visual records and an oral life-history—produced a significant narrative effect.⁸⁴ Structured as a video-chronicle—every year was introduced and concluded by its own “curtain”—the film, however, had all the qualities of a *Bildungsroman*. Reinforced by the music, the film’s monologue meaningfully “clarified” or “dramatized” visual scenes. This *Bildungsroman* had a negative dynamic, though. The monologue transformed the traditional story of personal growth and self-development into an account of the protagonist’s gradual disintegration and ultimate collapse.⁸⁵

As a documentary, Manskii’s *Chronicles* was, of course, a fabrication, a masterful montage of a biography that was never lived. Yet the power of the film had little to do with the authenticity of its monologue. As Manskii himself explained in an interview, “the documentarian could be biased, but chronicle is impartial (*bespristrasna*).”⁸⁶ Fictitious linkages and commentaries simplified the perception of the footage. But this artful organization of previously disconnected archival materials could not undermine the quality of historical documents of the era. And it was precisely this “raw life”—not the problematic composition of the film—that attracted a lot of interest. In their responses, audiences and critics animatedly described moments of recognition of “daily life excitors” recorded by somebody else’s camera.⁸⁷ At the same time, very few wanted to identify with the protagonist’s monologue. It is perhaps Dmitrii Bykov, a literary critic, who framed this position most tellingly. Reproducing the argument and phrase of Boris Eikhenbaum, Bykov cast the verdict: in *Chronicles* “the visual story is raped by the text.”⁸⁸

This polarized response reflected, in part, a basic Soviet tension between the world of material objects and the world of articulated ideas. There was another important reason, too. Forced to homogenize the visual story, Manskii could no longer rely on the montage of colliding cinegrams. Instead of juxtaposing video-segments, Manskii created a semantic dissonance between the visual narrative and the soundtrack. Sometimes the monologue contradicted the footage it was supposed to annotate. Occasionally, it would turn itself into a free-standing manifesto. This counterpointal relationship between image and sound was amplified by a profound affective incongruence: the remarkable impersonality of the visual story radically contrasted with the intimacy emphasized in the monologue.⁸⁹ The tone was set in the opening scene: Carried by his mother, the protagonist appeared on the steps of a Soviet maternity ward as a swaddled newborn baby. The protagonist’s name was not disclosed (yet the viewer was informed that it was a “standard” Soviet name). The name of

⁸⁴With some rare exceptions, there is almost no original soundtrack in *Chronicles*.

⁸⁵Viktor Matizen, “Nadgrobnii pamiatnik sovku (1986–1961=25),” *Novye izvestiia*, December 5, 1999.

⁸⁶Zara Abdullaeva, “Vitalii Manskii: Drugie mesta pamiati (O ponimanii khroniki i istorii v dokumental'nom kino),” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 4 (2005): 419.

⁸⁷See, for example, Iurii Gladil'shchikov, “Shchitaite menia Kinotavrom,” *Itogi*, June 22, 1999; and Viktor Matizen, “Real'noe kino: Nizkie istiny bez vozvyshaiushchego obmana,” *Novye izvestiia*, January 15, 2000. See also a collection of critics’ responses in *Seans* 27–28, available at <http://seance.ru/n/27-28/perekrestok/manskii/chastnyie-hroniki/>.

⁸⁸Dmitrii Bykov, “Chastnye khroniki. Monolog,” *Iskusstvo kino*, 1999, no. 11, available at <http://old.kinoart.ru/1999/11/9.html>; Eikhenbaum, “Dekoratsii epokhi,” 132.

⁸⁹On counterpointal structures see S. M. Eisenstein, *Selected Works*, 4 vols. (London, 1987), 1:161–80; and Sergei Eizenshtein, *Neravnodushnaia priroda* (Moscow, 2006), 2:367–72.

the hometown—as well as other “individual” details—were not specified either. The protagonist’s date of birth (“one day before Gagarin’s flight”) remained the only personally specific information.

Given the type of footage used in *Chronicles*, this namelessness of both the protagonist and his environment is understandable. The lack of prominent individual features is, first of all, a consequence of the composite nature of the film. As I have mentioned, most chapters (“a holiday,” “a demonstration,” “a wedding,” “a funeral,” “a party,” and so on) were created through an elaborate suturing of totally independent cinegrams, originally not connected by space or even time. Yet even with this stitching, many scenes are quite short, lasting several seconds only. The intensity of this rapid visual succession of frames has its own semantic effect: faces change too quickly to leave any meaningful impression. Moreover, many compound chapters present people through long- and medium-length shots. Close-up shots are rare, and depictions of settings tend to dominate the portrayal of people. With a few exceptions, individuals are usually filmed in groups or as a part of a landscape with mountains, lakes, and the like. Creating distance, this representational strategy upsets any stable identification of the viewer with the protagonist (or his parents). The protagonist’s progression in age, that is to say, his constant physical changes, impedes any possibility of a consistent visual identity even further. Cinematically, the *Bildungsroman* of *Chronicles* is a *roman* without a visible hero.

Certainly, such thwarted identification is more than just an unexpected outcome of formal technicalities. In *Lately*, Parfenov had to produce a cacophony of cinegrams in order to unleash the period’s latent polyphony and, simultaneously, to avoid the privileging of any new dominant theme, event, or person. In *Chronicles*, by forcing his visual, vocal, and musical narratives in a contrapuntal—almost adversarial—interaction, Manskii similarly suppressed the possibility of any lasting identification with the period in order to convey the facelessness of the time. The faceless and nameless protagonist functions in this context as the Jakobsonian shifter: the main purpose of the protagonist’s “I” is not to present the speaking subject but instead to identify the context, to switch the flow of discourse from one theme or thing to another.⁹⁰

Significantly, Manskii refrained from presenting the depersonalizing effect of late Soviet collectivity through traditional images of Soviet citizens parading in uniform rows through the country’s main squares. Instead, he achieved the same semantic effect by constantly exposing the lack of anything idiosyncratic about Soviet citizens’ privacy. People’s personal rituals, objects, and spaces were decidedly uniform. Nothing went beyond the limits of the expected. Nobody crossed the boundaries of the predictable. The same semolina porridge (*mannaiia kasha*) was fed to every baby around the country. The same film by Andrei Tarkovskii was watched (and discussed) by all the Soviet intelligentsia. Strikingly, *Chronicles* is a biography of people who failed both to create distinctive lifestyles and to recognize the lack of this distinctiveness.⁹¹ It is a life story of an anonymous Soviet man born to a family of “bright representatives of the gray Soviet intelligentsia,” as the off-screen commentary put it.

⁹⁰Roman Jakobson, “Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb,” in his *Selected Writings*, 7 vols. (1–5, 7–8) (The Hague, 1971), 2:131–32.

⁹¹Zara Abdullaeva, *Real'noe kino* (Moscow, 2003), 264.

This visual dissolution of the late Soviet subject was compensated by an expected move toward objectalizing. Instead of a biographical account of a person who “builds his own fate” (as Eikhenbaum would have it), *Chronicles* becomes the story of a material world in which a fate-building process never occurred. Members of the late Soviet generation did not just dissolve in the air; they dispersed in the material fabric of late Soviet *byt*. While depersonalizing the subject, Manskii objectalized history.⁹² Knowingly or unknowingly, the documentarian seemed to follow the suggestion of the Moscow theater director Nikolai Foregger not to reduce the development of the plot to “acting characters” only, but also to use “acting things” (*deistvuiushchie veshchi*)—animated as well as nonanimated objects—to convey “the tangibility (*osiazhaemost'*) of all collisions.”⁹³ People might be silent in *Chronicles*, but every object has a story to tell. Rituals themselves might be dreary, but the stories behind them are not. Thus, the wedding of friends of the protagonist’s parents is used in *Chronicles* to remind the audience that it was not only the civil act of marriage that was pointedly and almost universally supported by the pronatalist state. In many cultures, the extraordinariness of an event is usually marked by the extraordinariness of consumption; yet in a country of perennial shortages, this convention was hard to follow without the help of the state. As a result, throughout the country, brides and grooms were officially entitled to some purchasing privileges. Special “Newlywed Salons” were designed to supply betrothed couples with some crucial ritual attributes that were unavailable in regular stores: wedding rings, Czech or Yugoslav shoes, or white shirts, for example. On their wedding day couples could even rent (for four hours) the ultimate sign of late socialist success: a Chaika, the Soviet-made limousine normally reserved for high-level governmental officials and diplomats. The decision to marry might have been private, the episode seems to suggest. But the actual process of marrying cemented many times (and on many levels) the crucial link between the state and the couple.

Things chronicled in the film are far from being “objects of affection.”⁹⁴ Eliciting nostalgic sentiments is not their goal; nor are they meant to decode the present or to inspire reflections about the future. Instead, like a good ethnographer, Manskii uses every object for recreating the polyphonic structure of a world that has vanished. Often, these kino-things collapse metonymy and metaphor. Fragments of daily life lead metonymically to the original whole, but they also point metaphorically toward nonobvious connections and comparisons. For example, a durable lamb coat (*tsigeikovaia shuba*) of the baby-protagonist—its “life-expectancy exceeds the life-expectancy of its owner,” as he remarks—serves in *Chronicles* as an entry point for a story about Russia’s long winters (fig. 12).

The coat also acts as a bridge to a segment that muses on the Russians’ famous ability to ignore any confessional or calendar differences in order to merge Christmas and New Year’s Eve celebrations into a three-week holiday.⁹⁵ Taken together, these objects and

⁹²For a useful discussion of a similar replacement of the hero with objects in Pasternak’s early work see Roman Iakobson, “Zametki o proze poeta Pasternaka,” in his *Raboty po poetike* (Moscow, 1987), 328–35.

⁹³Nikolai Foregger, “P’esa. Siuzhet. Triuk,” in *Mnemozina: Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii russkogo teatra XX veka*, ed. V. V. Ivanov (Moscow, 1996), 67.

⁹⁴Man Ray, “Preface from a proposed book, One Hundred Objects of My Affection,” in William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York, 1961), 48–49.

⁹⁵The holiday starts with the “Western” Christmas on December 25, continues through the New Year and the Orthodox Christmas (January 7), and ends on January 13, when the old (*Julian*) New Year is celebrated.

events endlessly drawn in time—everlasting coats, everlasting winters, and everlasting holidays—work as a compound symbol for a life in which the passage of time was made irrelevant by the permanence of things.⁹⁶ *Zastoi* as an absence of movement emerged also as a period that erased major distinctions—political, social, sartorial, or even climatic: “The USSR was a country of winter,” the monologue concluded.



Fig. 12 The Soviet world of things. The life-expectancy of this lamb coat exceeded the life-expectancy of its owner. Still from *Private Chronicles*. Courtesy of Studio Vertov. Real'noe kino.

Covering predominantly the same historical and cultural terrain as Parfenov’s *Lately*, Manskii’s *Chronicles* goes beyond a mere inventory of people and events. While similarly relying on objectalization as its main method of reconfiguring the past, the film also decomposes Soviet totality by documenting its semantic instability. It is a montage film in which everything seems to be connected—however plausibly—with everything else; but everything has at least two meanings here. For instance, a visual segment about a high school drama studio quickly morphs into an oral narrative about late Soviet performance, double game, duplicity, and, finally, a lack of any moral foundation. In a similar fashion, a segment about pioneer camps deconstructs the very notions of separation and protection. The episode starts with a cinegram of children separated from their parents by the camp’s tall fence. Within seconds, this story about a “preserve (*zapovednik*) for kids” evolves into a cinegram about the dacha. Also a preserve of sorts, the dacha is described as a “territory of one’s own, with no plans and deadlines; with the state left behind the fence.”

⁹⁶Katherine Verdery convincingly demonstrated that this irrelevance of time had a lot to do with people’s structural inability to control their own usage of time. See her *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996), 39–58.

Theater as a form of life or play, fence as a symbol of containment or freedom—such transmutation of objects and reversals of meaning are typical for *Chronicles* as a whole. The story of stagnation, the film is also a story about a profound crisis of representation in late Soviet society, a crisis in which ossified rituals, symbols, and taxonomies failed to guarantee semantic stability.⁹⁷ As the film demonstrates again and again, by imposing their structure on daily life, these rituals and symbols could successfully distribute people and things throughout Soviet space—either to a construction site in the Far East or to a *subbotnik* nearby. Yet these routines and procedures did not determine the outcome of such distribution. The mandatory attendance at an official November march (*demonstratsiia*) was turned into a dancing party. The compulsory participation at an institutional *subbotnik* in April would be used as an occasion for collective drinking.

Contrary to the usual picture of late Soviet society, *Chronicles* demonstrates a surprisingly limited role of politics in private life.⁹⁸ As a separate, autonomous sphere, politics (and the official world in general) is almost completely absent in *Chronicles*. The personal and the political did not oppose each other in the film; in fact, in many cases, these two allegedly distinctive worlds were not even differentiated. For instance, a story about the Jewish emigration in the early 1970s is personalized in the film in a segment about the Jewish boyfriend of the protagonist's mother. The news about the boyfriend's decision to leave for Canada, however, is immediately turned into a story about the famous series between Soviet and Canadian ice hockey teams, and the role of sport in the USSR in general (the year 1972). While objectalizing history, *Chronicles* used acting things to proliferate links and connections, not to create a well-organized political taxonomy.

Of course, it would have been naïve to expect from amateur filmmakers of the period any extensive coverage of political gatherings—whether party conferences or dissident meetings. Given the relatively high costs of such filmmaking, it is also reasonable to suspect that people filmed situations that they wanted to remember: they filmed events and things that were not that ordinary. And this is, perhaps, the most essential contribution of the film. Without any sentimentality and pity, *Chronicles* underscores again and again the sobering predictability of supposedly *extraordinary* events and rituals that were voluntarily exposed for the camera. These slices of daily life had almost nothing that could even remotely deviate from the basic canons of Soviet life. As Zara Abdullaeva, a Russian film scholar put it, the film made clear that the long cherished desire to create a safe distance from the political regime, to maintain a gap between the official and the underground (*ofitsioz i podpol'e*), was only a “self-gratifying delusion” (*samouteshenie*).⁹⁹ As *Chronicles* shows, the late Soviet generation—even when left alone—would still voluntarily mock rituals of baptizing (the year 1978) and regret a missed opportunity to visit Lenin's residence in a town called Gorki (1970).

⁹⁷Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “Crimes of Substitution: Detection and the Late Soviet Society,” *Public Culture* 15:3 (2003): 426–52. See also Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), 36–76.

⁹⁸Elena Zdravomyslova discusses this tendency in late Soviet Leningrad in her “Leningradskii ‘Saigon’ – prostranstvo negativnoi svobody,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 100 (2009): 660–77.

⁹⁹Zara Abdullaeva, “Vitalii Manskii: Drugie mesta pamiati,” 428. I also discuss this tendency in “The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat,” *Public Culture* 13:2 (2001): 191–214.

It is not that *Chronicles* completely erased social and aesthetic borders between the world of politics and the private world; rather, it reinforced the fact that such standard binaries as “public vs. private” and “official vs. unofficial” consistently fail to explain in any meaningful way the kind of life that the late Soviet generation actually lived.¹⁰⁰ The official and the unofficial could easily trade places in the Soviet time. With no difficulty, the public could quickly morph into the private, and vice versa. Depending on the context, the same bulky Chaika acted both as a status symbol of the Soviet *nomenklatura* and as a dream vehicle of the Soviet newlywed. The world of material objects united the official and unofficial spheres in a way that ideological schemes could neither predict nor reflect. Manskii highlighted this amalgamated state of late Soviet life even further by using “curtains” to introduce a set of visual editorial comments. Each curtain is unique: against a black background, white digits indicate the year (1961, 1962, and so on), while a combination of photos and video provides an indexical link to a significant event of the year. Thematically disconnected from the materials that preceded and followed them, these “curtailed” images create a peculiar mosaic of the period. Political icons are interspersed with celebrities of the time.¹⁰¹ Snapshots of major political events (the Prague Spring, 1968; the Afghan War, 1982) are followed by excerpts from private video-archives. Like in Parfenov’s *Lately*, late socialism emerges in *Chronicle* as a multilayered and multivocal visual text. As both projects vividly suggest, the problem of late socialism was not so much a lack of cultural or intellectual diversity but a radically constrained ability to translate this diversity into a meaningful individualized action.

This plurality discovered post-factum could hardly be attributed to Manskii’s romantic nostalgia for things Soviet. Clarifying his own attitude to the protagonist, Manskii explained that

I do not know whether the life of our hero was useless. But I do know that he was prepared for a life that had nothing in common with the life we have now. Imagine an intelligence officer who has been trained to go to China but who ends up in the USA instead. He does not know a word, and does not have a slightest idea how to find his way out. Likewise, becoming Soviet (*sovetskaia podgotovka*) made no sense, either.¹⁰²

As the film progresses, the anti-Soviet tenor of its monologue grows stronger.¹⁰³ And the internal vacuity of the discourse (and life) rooted in negation becomes more prominent. By the end of the film, scenes of “everlasting drinking” develop into the dominant feature of *Chronicles*, until the viewer is informed that the protagonist drowned in the Black Sea, aboard the tourist cruiser *Admiral Nakhimov*, which sank near Novorossiisk in August 1986. Manskii’s fictitious last Soviet man disappeared with the period, and his monologue, as it

¹⁰⁰Jochen Hellbeck traces the emergence of this trend as far back as the 1930s in his *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 53–115.

¹⁰¹Gagarin in 1961; Khrushchev in 1962; Kennedy in 1963; Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1967, Mao in 1970; the figure skaters Liudmila Pakhomova and Aleksandr Gorshkov in 1976; pop-star Alla Pugacheva in 1983; and Princess Diana in 1984.

¹⁰²Matizen, “Real’noe kino: Nizkie istiny.”

¹⁰³The film was even used as a part of anti-nostalgia campaign during the parliamentary elections in December 1999. See Viktor Matizen, “Dokumental’nyi vybor Rossii,” *Novye izvestiia*, December 12, 1999.

turns out, was a post-mortem message of a lost Soviet ghost, faceless and timeless. The last line of this ghost of late socialism, though, was: “It seems to me that I am still alive.”

Starting in the 1990s, studies of everyday life brought attention to fields and forms of activity that previously remained outside the scope of academic studies. Following the work of Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu, many scholars have pointed out the autonomizing potential of daily routines and structures. The everyday is often conceptualized, if not as a form of tactical resistance to the pressure of dominant political and cultural forces, then, at least, as a creative way of avoiding such pressure.¹⁰⁴ Manskii’s *Chronicles* provides a way to conceptualize private life that has not yet become a visible part of this fascination with the mundane. Late Soviet *byt* reveals here its darker side.¹⁰⁵ Far from being a refuge or a ground for resistance, this *byt* “stifles life in its tight, hard mold.”¹⁰⁶

In his poignant essay “On a Generation that Squandered Its Poets,” Roman Jakobson claimed that it was precisely this “stagnating slime” of *byt* that had propelled the generation of the Russian Revolution toward radical political and aesthetic gestures. Abjecting the “alien rubbish offered by the established order of things,” this generation “strained toward the future,” only to realize by the end of the 1920s that it had completely missed its present. Writing on the occasion of Maiakovsky’s death, Jakobson drew the sad conclusion,

All we had were compelling songs of the future; and suddenly these songs are no longer part of the dynamic of history, but have been transformed into historic-literary facts. When singers have been killed and their songs have been dragged into a museum and pinned to the wall of the past, the generation they represent is even more desolate, orphaned, and lost—impoverished in the most real sense of the word.¹⁰⁷

Bringing history full circle, *Chronicles* documented yet another biography of a lost and impoverished generation; a generation that gradually forgot its “songs” and lost the view of its bright future. All it had instead was “the swamp of *byt*,” a set of ossified daily routines that kept the generation busy but that provided little meaning to the life it had squandered (fig. 13).

It is tempting to see in the two documentaries that I have described here yet another attempt to attach a new “human face” to the deceased body of Soviet socialism. The biochronic format of these projects would certainly make such a reading possible. Yet throughout the article I have been suggesting that these renewed attempts to “humanize” socialism could

¹⁰⁴See, for example, Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA, 1994); Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*; David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (New York, 2002); and Susan Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (New York, 2000).

¹⁰⁵For an elaboration of a similar point see also Nancy Ries, “Anthropology and the Everyday, From Comfort to Terror,” *New Literary History* 33 (2002): 725–42.

¹⁰⁶Roman Jakobson, “On a Generation that Squandered Its Poets,” in his *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 277.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 300.

also be understood as a response to the dominant tendency to perceive late Soviet society as a culture in which cynical double-dealers were dominated by state control. The “discovery” of private life in the USSR undertaken in *Lately* and *Private Chronicles* does not excuse political oppressions or whitewash the ideological constraints of the period. But it does not rely on these practices of domination to turn the raw life of late socialism into a coherent story, either.



FIG. 13 A squandered generation. In one scene of the *Chronicles*, the camera focuses on a wall poster, cutting the sign in such a way that for several moments the viewer can see above and behind people’s heads only the word “Sovki,” a derogatory description of those who were born in the Soviet Union. The full sign (“Sovkino,” an abbreviation for “Soviet cinema”) would be revealed briefly only much later. Still from *Private Chronicles*. Courtesy of Studio Vertov. Real’noe kino.

Decomposing the visual legacy of socialism, the late Soviet generation of filmmakers pointedly avoids unifying frameworks and overarching conclusions. Their new sobriety tends to privilege the concrete. And their engagement with history leans toward the tangible. Rooted in personally experienced socialism, the objectalism of these chroniclers often takes the shape of a decidedly discordant narrative. Strategies of disjunction and practices of dissonance become their main way of linking incompatible objects and concepts together. However, by locating the facts of their chronicles within the biographical account of the generation, post-Soviet documentarians managed to overcome the gap between the document and documentary, between the object and the plot that split apart early generations of Soviet filmmakers. Their final product is not a story. It is not even a proper biography. It is a list of things and events. It is an inventory of objects and people. Yet without their catalogues of these crucial phenomena, it is hard to imagine late Soviet culture now, let alone—to understand it.