FILM REVIEWS

Blood. Dir. Alina Rudnitskaia. Brooklyn: Icarus Films, 2013. 59 minutes. Black and white. $390.00, sale of DVD.

Ia zabudu etot den'. Dir. Alina Rudnitskaia. St. Petersburg: SPB Studia Dokumental'nykh Fil'mov, 2010. 25 minutes. Black and white.

Two recent documentaries by St. Petersburg director Alina Rudnitskaia, *Ia zabudu etot den'* (I Will Forget This Day) and *Blood* (*Krov'*), offer unparalleled portraits of medical encounters in contemporary Russia, revealing the complex relationships between the person, the body, the state, and the neoliberalizing political-economic regime that shapes them all. These films depict the ways in which Russians, in the contexts of both everyday life and professional work, negotiate the structural contradictions of state services and market economics as they struggle to meets their personal needs.

Ia zabudu takes viewers into the waiting room of an abortion clinic. Women sit alone, anxious. They enter the operating room, one after another. There is a painful, uneasy quiet, interrupted only by cries from women undergoing the procedure nearby. The camera zooms in on individual faces, exposing us to the silent loneliness and isolation that women experience while waiting to terminate unwanted pregnancies. *Blood* follows a mobile blood bank traversing the country. This film examines not only the personal and individual experiences of medical encounters but also portrays collective dynamics—staff members' relations with each other and their interactions with the local residents who offer their blood for 850 rubles in compensation. It gives a glimpse into the phlebotomists' burdens, the toll of the travel, and the encounters with severe need. In an interview on the Russian TV channel 24_Doc, Rudnitskaia explained that blood serves as a potent metaphor for the relationship between the regime and its subjects: the state extracts and appropriates people's blood. This dynamic becomes clear in a scene where the blood bank team arrives at a city in which the coal miners are on strike, demonstrating against their work conditions and low salaries, the protestors' speeches invoking "the blood of the people." The film also links blood with two other vital liquids in Russia—oil, pumped from the earth to give society economic life, and vodka, which dilutes blood and dulls pain. Whereas *Ia zabudu* is a short, almost mute sketch, *Blood* is an hour-long film designed as an intensive journey. In spite of their differences, these films, which have both been awarded several prizes in the categories of international documentary and ethnographic film, engage broader issues, the most important being biological citizenship and the limits of human agency in the post-Soviet medical encounter.

In both films, the body is a terrain the state invades in a Faustian pact. Under the pretense of enabling people to realize their goals—to terminate their pregnancies or donate their blood—the state penetrates their bodies. Thus, each film presents compelling, empirical examples of the concept of biological citizenship, a condition in which the human body itself becomes a marked resource for obtaining basic needs for survival and social inclusion. The body becomes a vehicle, a key to accessing what used to be the elementary entitlements of citizenship. In one of the most important scholarly explorations of biological citizenship, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl* (2013), Adriana Petryna analyzed how, in the aftermath of the 1986 Chernobyl' nuclear power plant explosion and the collapse of the socialist welfare state, having a certified Chernobyl'-related disability or disease allowed one to access necessary resources that other, "healthy" citizens could not obtain. These films offer vivid scenes that illustrate the daily work of biological citizenship and could be

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usefully paired with analytical and ethnographic texts on this topic for advanced undergraduate or graduate classes.

While citizens must be deemed sufficiently healthy in order to give blood (rather than certifiably ill, which would allow them to receive state benefits), *Blood* reveals how people's bodily conditions still determine their access to basic necessities and thus their survival. The need for both blood and money unites the health care providers and donors. The theme of biological citizenship is less overt in *Ia zabudu*, yet if we grant that access to legal abortion is essential for women's survival, then the state here is recognizing women's citizenship through the minimalist provision of basic human existence. What is especially palpable in the case of abortion, however, is how the state's provision of citizenship as a vehicle for biological continuity seems to be less an "entitlement" than a punishment. Indeed, both films depict Russian medical institutions as sites of government service, but *servis* neither in the sense of providing a consumer service nor of providing care. These are spaces in which the patient and health providers' interactions are shaped by regulations, rules, and often a cold sterility. Both films depict people experiencing the state's failure to serve as a care-giving agent.

Another important theme in these films is the language through which the states relates to its citizens. A central message of *Blood* is that the very concept of blood "donation" is questionable in present-day Russia. Legally, blood is given gratis. The financial compensation a donor receives is represented as providing for the nutritional supplement necessary after giving blood. During the Soviet era, when blood donation took place at worksites and in higher educational institutions, donors received coupons for lunch in state dining halls. Currently, donors receive monetary compensation—modest and insignificant amounts that vary from place to place—but they receive it in cash and onsite, just following the blood donation. Amid desperate poverty and instability, these payments (from 3,500 rubles in Moscow to 850 rubles in St. Petersburg and a mere 100 in Pskov) become important resources. For some people, they represent the ability to purchase diapers; for others, a longed-for dose of alcohol; and for still others, this money may represent the gift of life itself, a gift for which they are willing to beg. Thus, it becomes clear to viewers that those giving their blood are not undertaking acts of voluntary gifting but are themselves receiving gifts—or perhaps, one could argue, they are receiving the meager wages of unskilled labor. It is notable that while this film was in production, a law was passed that abolished monetary compensation for donors and prohibited the payment for and purchase of blood. As a consequence, the supply decreased to a critically low level and protests arose. After four months, in mid-2013, the law was repealed.

Besides depicting the easy slide between "voluntary donation" (*bezvozmezdnoe*), selling, and exploitation at the mobile blood bank, the film raises important questions about the social conditions that enable donation. In western societies, the concept is of a private individual voluntarily giving to a collective institution or to another individual through an institutional intermediary. This issue thus takes on particular complexity in Russia, where the question of whether the human body belongs to the person or the state has historically been ambiguous. Indeed, personal resources, from property to emotions to labor, were not entirely personal but either mediated by or dedicated to the collective. "Voluntary gifting" was expected and even demanded and was not perceived as an act of choice but a normative moral behavior. For example, the Soviet concept of *lichnyi vklad* (personal contribution, that is, one's contribution to the collective's effort) was compulsory, not voluntary. Similarly, *pozhertvovanie* (sacrifice) is a sacred obligation to give in a religious context, based on church authority. "Donation," by contrast, is supposed to be based on the giver's personal decision. As a social practice, it takes a secular detour away from

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religious obligations of sacrifice to decisions based on personal choice. The difficulty of translating this concept has resulted in the Russified version of the English term, *daneishen*—a neologism for Russia's new reality which seems wholly inappropriate for the act of giving blood in order to procure minimal resources for survival.

Ia zabudu illustrates the fraught experience of "free choice" in the Russian medical context, even when the right to a procedure, such as abortion, is legally guaranteed. Here, the film illustrates the negotiations of state power and personal agency through particular uses of speech and silence. In one scene, a health provider strives to dissuade a patient from having the abortion she seeks. The clinician—whose voice we hear but whose face is not visible—does not ask the woman to reflect on her own needs and opportunities but suggests the "right" decision based on the state's normative interests. The woman does not want to discuss the issue. She refuses to open herself up to more invasions. Medical institutions, we realize, may be indifferent to women's subjectivity, but the state cannot access their hearts. Women carry their secrets and bear their suffering in silence, preserving a minimal degree of privacy. *Ia zabudu* thus implicitly conveys the state's limitations.

In *Blood*, remote towns' residents strive and connive to make ends meet. As with the women seeking abortions in *Ia zabudu*, we learn very little about the donors' perspectives. Their silence, as well as their apologetic, depressive, sometimes sneaky, and sometimes flirtatious interactions with the staff, represents one of the film's languages. They speak a very simple Russian, sometimes with a provincial pronunciation, intonation, and lexicon. More important, they avoid expressing any emotions, whether positive or negative. Their language is cautious, blunt, and unexpressive. Indeed, the donors are neither the subjects nor the heroes of the film. Instead, the camera zooms in on the phlebotomists, revealing their deeply ambivalent perspective. They recognize the destitution that local people face and which motivates them to sell their blood, but they nonetheless maintain the façade that this is genuine "donation." The staff's language is characterized by extensive use of diminutives. When the nurses tell the donors to make a fist, they do not say *kulak* but *kulachek*; when they ask for the doctor's referral certificate, they do not say *spravka* but *spravochka*. The medical personnel also address donors with terms that have affectionate meanings and in diminutive forms, such as *zolotko* (my golden one), *zaichik* (little bunny), and *moia khoroshaia* (my lovely one). As cultural studies of the widespread use of diminutives in Russian have shown, the meaning of these expressions cannot be defined outside of the specific situations and contexts in which they are used. In this context, such language serves to smooth over alienation, to inspire trust, and to blur hierarchies and dependencies, while revealing the staff's deep ambivalences toward their work.

Alongside the diminutive words and suffixes is a stern and even brutal, militaristic register expressed in the grammatical use of imperatives and the third-person singular without pronouns. It is also expressed in an infantilizing use of the second-person plural. In one of the most moving scenes in the film, a donor who appears to be cognitively impaired slumps over and loses consciousness after giving blood:

> NURSE TO DONOR: Breathe deeply! Even more deeply! Come on, come on! Let go and don't resist! Your head lower there! More, more. And look at me! (Aside: Oy, if she had just been put out of her misery.) Oh shit, oh shit. Sit down! Lie down over there! Yes! (Aside: Shit—she's resisting. Oh shit . . . she's collapsing on me now. What did you take her for?!) LIE DOWN, LIE DOWN, I SAID! What the fuck. Let her lie down. Lie down quickly, I tell you! Lie on your back! Don't move!

Another important linguistic register, inextricable from the medical personnel's lives in both their work with donors and their private interactions during their

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evening get-togethers, is *mat*. This classic Russian dialect of obscenity, which was long censored, currently enjoys a modicum of acceptance. While there are a range of theories regarding its origins, in its contemporary usage it is always linked with aggression (whether physical or symbolic), the rejection of existing boundaries and hierarchies, and claims to power.

What is the point of this code-switching with donors and among themselves? The staff's combination of linguistic registers—the diminutive and affectionate and the rude—is characteristic of so-called kitchen conversations, informal interactions within the formalized discourse of Soviet culture that created a specific form of intimacy and alternative form of collectiveness. They produced informal solidarity and moral control. This double meaning seems relevant for understanding the medical encounter as well: "Is everything all okey-dokey?" the nurse asks a donor after the needle is removed. But when another begs to be paid "just a little bit, even just half, just half. I really need money . . . Won't you even take it for even half the price?" she crossly responds, "That's it! Get out of here! Don't talk to me about money. Don't bother to return here either, since you've come here for the money. I'll remember you next time you come." This is the language of hypocrisy and false promises, as the staff take on the role of moral police to preserve the masquerade of voluntary donation. This duality is uncomfortable; it burdens and alienates them. Their ambivalence further manifests itself in the use of mobile physical barriers—screens with slots through which donors place their arms for the venipuncture, dividing them from the staff during the actual procedure. It is notable that when these physical barriers fall, the staff's level of aggression rises. While functional for a mobile blood bank, they are not used in other countries.

The rich portraits these films offer and their thematic overlap make them valuable resources for teaching about post-Soviet Russia. Yet Rudnitskaia portrays the conditions that shape Russians' daily struggles in a condensed, dramatic style, resulting in an intense viewing experience. Instructors should pair these films with carefully selected analytical texts and discussions, including conversations about the strengths and weaknesses of different representational genres, such as documentary film, ethnographic film, and ethnographic writing. The documentary view, in which the director and camera crew are invisible, risks viewers seeing these scenes as unmediated takes on Russian "reality." On the one hand, when filming *Blood*, Rudnitskaia and her crew joined the bloodmobile fifteen times over the course of six months, capturing all times of day as well as the change of seasons. This approximates an ethnographic vision of daily life, and the director seems to have had the full trust of the blood bank team. Where was artistic license taken and what effects does it create? Do these films offer insights into multiple and competing points of view, or do they force a single narrative? What realities are missing? Neither film commits itself to ethnographic ethics and rules of representation.

At the same time, these films also offer insights that texts alone cannot provide. For instance, *Ia zabudu* exposes the problems with a key conceit of ethnography: the notion that we, as concerned outside observers, can "give voice" to the people we study—the marginalized, violated, and silenced. *Ia zabudu* raises serious doubts about this pretense, as women's agency in the abortion clinic is expressed by keeping silent. Certainly, this is a constrained, limited agency born of a need for self-preservation, but the film genre captures this silence and helps us feel it in a way impossible for a written text to do.

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