



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

To Be Continued

Post-Soviet Nostalgia in Sergei Miroshnichenko's Time-Lapse Documentary Series Born in the USSR

Noordenbos, B.

DOI

[10.4324/9780429318931-7](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429318931-7)

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Post-Soviet Nostalgia

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care>)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Noordenbos, B. (2020). To Be Continued: Post-Soviet Nostalgia in Sergei Miroshnichenko's Time-Lapse Documentary Series *Born in the USSR*. In O. Boele, B. Noordenbos, & K. Robbe (Eds.), *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire's Legacies* (pp. 133-153). (Routledge Studies in Cultural History). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429318931-7>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

6 To Be Continued

Post-Soviet Nostalgia in Sergei Miroshnichenko's Time-Lapse Documentary Series *Born in the USSR*

Boris Noordenbos

The documentary series *Born in the USSR* (*Rozhdennyye v SSSR* 1990–) is the Soviet/Russian variant of Michael Apted's celebrated *Up* series. In 1964 Paul Almond directed a documentary for British television that depicted the lives of 14 seven-year-old British children from different socio-economic backgrounds; although the first program was not filmed with a sequel in mind, Michael Apted developed it into a documentary project in which the lives of these individuals are revisited every seven years (some of the original participants have dropped out either permanently or for extended periods of time before rejoining the project [Barnouw 1993, 324]). Since its start in 1990, the Soviet and later Russian variant of the franchised *Up* project (a Russian-British coproduction) has released four films. The first installment from 1990 (*Age 7 in the USSR*) catered to a Western audience, with its English voiceover being dubbed into Russian for the Russian edit. In the subsequent films the celebrated Russian director Sergei Miroshnichenko not only conducted the interviews but also provided commentary on the children's fates. While the first releases went largely unnoticed by the Russian public (even though the second film was the co-winner of the 1999 Emmy Award for Best International Documentary), part four (*Born in the USSR: 28 up*) premiered on prime-time Russian television and garnered overwhelming media attention both for the film and its Russian director.

Apted's original documentary project set out to explore the influence of the participants' diverse class origins on their subsequent lives, citing the Jesuit maxim "Give me the child until he is seven and I will give you the man" (Bruzzi 2007, 9). The Soviet/Russian project, set in what was officially a classless society, by contrast, derives its interest largely from its compelling depiction of the transition from childhood to adulthood amidst world-shaking change: the first and second film (*Age 7 in the USSR* and *14 Up: Born in the USSR*) both portray the dramatic effects of the demise of the Soviet Union on the individual lives of twenty participants from the republics of Russia, Kirgizia, Georgia, Lithuania, and

Azerbaijan. These children are all “born in the USSR,” but after the revolutions of the late 20th century many found themselves in independent countries or had immigrated to other parts of the world. The contrast in their living conditions—already noticeable at age seven—has been intensified, often in dramatic and surprising ways, by the time they are 14 or 21. It is this sheer unpredictability of the children’s fate that sets the series apart from the premise of the British *Up* films. In the Soviet/Russian version, unprecedented political, economic, and demographic upheavals preclude the predetermination implied in the Jesuit adage and in the attitudes of the 1960s British Left underlying the early stages of the British project.¹ As can be seen in various moments in the films, the disruption of the political and economic establishment, and the dislocation of previous forms of sociality, make untenable any predictions about what paths the children’s lives will take.

Part of the films’ charm resides in their filtering of the seismic changes of the late 20th century through the perceptions of the children. In 1989, seven-year-old Anton, the grandson of the editor of the newspaper *Pravda*, sums up the major problems of the Perestroika era to Miroshnichenko: “Some think it’s better one way, and others think it’s better another way. There is a struggle going on. Each side wants its own way. Both lots.” When Miroshnichenko asks what will come of this, Anton (who is labeled “the little prophet” in the subsequent episode) responds: “I don’t know, some sort of turnaround.”

In addition, many viewers were struck by the children’s apparent lack of materialism. Asked what she would do if she had “a lot of money,” Rita, who lives on the shores of Lake Baikal in Siberia, promptly responds that she would give it to the poor. The ethnically Russian Katia from Lithuania answers the same question by displaying wisdom beyond her years: “moral qualities are more important [than money].” And Andrei, who lives in an orphanage in Irkutsk, reacts by decisively stating, “I wouldn’t take it [. . .] I don’t want to be rich.” Over the course of 21 years the participants’ dreams and aspirations shift, as do their attitudes toward money. Fourteen years after making those charitable remarks about giving her money to the poor, Rita recants and says that now she would find a purpose for the money in her own life.

In the later installments the futures envisioned by the children as seven-year-olds often appear, to the viewer and to themselves, to have been mere whims, and over the years many of them have grown sadder and wiser. In the later episodes, the participants regularly look back on the “good old days” that are, for some of them, tinged with the warm glow of childhood memories. Sometimes these personal recollections are conflated with a rose-tinted vision of the Soviet Union as a political system that had cultivated a level of equality and social solidarity that is felt to be painfully absent in the post-Soviet era.

Analyzing the cultivation of nostalgia in this longitudinal documentary project, this chapter does not treat nostalgia as stemming from the *participants'* “emotional response to time’s passage” (Hutton 2013, 1). Rather than concentrating on these occasionally nostalgic expressions by the films’ protagonists, my analysis instead focuses on the nostalgic premise, structure, and (visual and verbal) rhetoric of the films themselves. What particular structuring of time is wrought by the seven-year intermissions? How do the documentaries, through their editing and use of voiceover, integrate the participants’ private experiences into a larger metanarrative of post-Soviet development? To what extent are personal expressions of nostalgia (or the lack thereof) appropriated for a prevalent (and state-backed) rhetoric of loss or restoration in contemporary Russia? And how has the political orientation of the films shifted as the project progresses?

Practices of Nostalgia

In posing these questions, I subscribe here to the idea that nostalgia, rather than a static set of emotions, is a dynamic cultural practice, “an action rather than an attitude” (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 937), one that is open, moreover, to ongoing additions and adjustments that fit contemporary social concerns and political needs. I argue that *Born in the USSR*, exploring as it does in ever-shifting ways the possibilities of continuity and (biographical and collective) identity in the face of dramatic ruptures and upheavals, vividly exemplifies some of the tropes and devices that are typical of nostalgia’s meaning-making practices. While the political implications of these practices are a major concern in all parts of this chapter, I address the politics of nostalgia explicitly in the conclusion, where I briefly contrast the intertwining of personal and historical narratives in Miroshnichenko’s films with the devices employed in a comparable documentary project: *My Perestroika* (Robin Hessman 2010).

In her analysis of *Born in the USSR*, Daria Shembel comments on the changing political orientation of the series. She remarks that the project, ever since its third installment, has progressively aligned itself with the Putin government’s (selective) rehabilitation of Soviet values. The documentary, in her view, embraces the “rhetoric of the rebuilding of Soviet Russia” (2016, 70). She also asserts, however, that the documentary’s specific format resists the easy co-option of its material in the service of the hegemonic patriotism and restorationism of Putin-era Russia. This argument is based on Shembel’s interpretation of the films as “database documentaries” (*ibid.*): the project takes an almost mathematical approach to the lives of the participants, one structured through the repeated seven-year interval separating each interview period and through the fixed set of questions posed to the interviewees. This rigid and recurring format,

she contends, guarantees an unbiased approach, and shields the films' multifarious messages against mobilization for the rhetoric of the state:

Like a computer database, the essence of database cinema is the links between its elements. *Born in the USSR* is not a random collection of events, people, and places; there is an algorithm to its presentation; the film is arranged into separate sections of family, education, religion, money, etc. The task of the filmmaker is to choose a structure and method and let them play out, while the viewer is expected to actively construct a meaning rather than passively observe, keeping track of scenes and events and juxtaposing them herself . . . [T]he database structure exists independently of its author. And even though it is possible to detect the state's presence—in the voice of its leading filmmaker Miroshnichenko—in the last instalment of the series, its content remains unbiased.

(*ibid.*, 82)

I will argue, by contrast, that the films, rather than simply organizing “segments of historical material” according to the logic of an “algorithm” (*ibid.*, 82, 83), engage in an active interpretation and narrativization of the material presented. The selection of scenes—10–15 minutes per participant in each film, condensed from 600 hours of footage (Gorodetskaia 2012)—already hints at the extent to which the participants' experiences are submitted to careful organization that does not ensue simply or directly from the application of an unvarying interview format. As we will see, the voiceover, editing, and insertions of historical footage all work to cultivate relations between (individual and collective) pasts and presents in ways that enforce an interpretation upon the material. The films essentially create a series of plots out of the disparate experiences of the participants. Such a process of emplotment, as Hayden White has famously asserted, comes, by definition, with the imposition of coherence and meaning, as well as with the impetus to moralize (1990, 14).

Arguably, it is precisely the (apparent) database-like approach and the reliance on the traditions of documentary film that obfuscate these processes of interpretation and narrativization. As Bill Nichols reminds us in his seminal work on the documentary tradition: “Documentaries are not documents. They may use documents and facts, but they always interpret them” (2010, 147). However, ever since its emergence, documentary film has often relied on distanced, observational, and expository modes of presentation that tend to produce an aura of neutrality and objectivity. In alignment with this tradition, *Born in the USSR*, I argue, obscures its own mediation of the scenes presented. In the interviews conducted, Miroshnichenko always remains off-screen, and often relies on the technique of the masked interview, in which the viewer does not hear the interviewer's questions but is given only the interviewees' “monologue” answers. Shots

of these monologues are interspersed with scenes of the participants engaged in their day-to-day activities while the director's "voice-of-God commentary" (ibid., 157) explains (and interprets) the developments in the participants' lives. Miroschnichenko's approach, rather than being unbiased, thus employs the typical devices of the expository and observational documentary tradition (ibid., 167–79) to gloss over its imposition of meaningful relations between disparate moments in biographical and historical time. Every episode in the *Up* series includes material from earlier films and engages, as Stella Bruzzi remarks of the British project, in a "perpetual negotiation between the established narrative and new material" (2007, 63). Thus, while creating the suggestion of aloof ethnographic or sociological fieldwork—Miroschnichenko emphasized the status of the project as a "study," or as research into "how the environment influences human being[s]" (Afanas'eva 2012)—the films in fact continually (re)structure and (re)negotiate the relations between past and present, to different rhetorical and political effects.

I locate nostalgia in these meaning-making practices, and especially in the documentaries' exploration of the ruptures and continuities between the Soviet era and the present time. Creating carefully structured juxtapositions of old and new visual material, overlaid by the voiceover's interpretive comments and moralizing evaluations, the films ponder which elements from the Soviet empire are to be mourned and which can be saved, where (cultural and biographical) continuities can be found and in what respects Russians have decisively broken with the Soviet legacy. The documentary project thus builds a nostalgic narrative that does not always coincide with the participants' personal evaluations of the passage of time.

For my conception of nostalgia I rely on the work of scholars like Kathleen Stewart, who have been keen to avoid essentialist characterizations of what nostalgia *is* and have instead focused on what it *does*, treating nostalgia as a "cultural practice, not a given content" (Stewart 1988, 227). Inspired by Fredric Jameson's diagnoses of postmodern culture, Stewart explains that "[i]n positing a 'once was' in relation to a 'now' [nostalgia] creates a frame for meaning, a means of dramatizing aspects of an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life" (ibid.). Elaborating on these meaning-making effects, she adds that nostalgia is a "function of language that orders events temporally and dramatizes them" (ibid.). This ordering of time is not naturally dictated by historical events themselves but ensues from a situated perspective within the social world and the cultural landscape. That is, the forms and implications that nostalgia may take are situational; they depend "on where you stand" (ibid., 228).

In his well-known 1979 study *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, the sociologist Fred Davis had already observed that "nostalgia uses the past—falsely, accurately, or [. . .] in special reconstructed

ways—but it is not the product thereof” (1979, 11). More recently, scholars have explored nostalgia’s uses and structuring of time in greater detail. They generally agree that an alleged “break from the past” is, as Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko put it, “the precondition for [nostalgic] discourses of return and recovery” (2004, 491). Stuart Tannock, too, sees the postulation of a disjuncture in time to be the fundamental springboard for the practices of nostalgia:

there is always and everywhere, for nostalgia to logically exist, a positing of discontinuity. A critical reading of the nostalgic structure of rhetoric should focus, then, on the construction of a prelapsarian world, but also on the continuity asserted, and the discontinuity posited, between a prelapsarian past and a postlapsarian present.
(1995, 457)

Nostalgia, in these interpretations, relies on the notion of a broken relationship between the past and the present, a condition that, in turn, serves as the starting point for the exploration of continuity or identity over time. Underscoring this two-pronged orientation in nostalgic practices, Nadia Atia and Jeremy Davies cogently remark that “nostalgia serves as a negotiation between continuity and discontinuity: it insists on the bond between our present selves and a certain fragment from the past, but also on the force of separation from what we have lost” (2010, 184).

Dramatizing Discontinuities

Progressing at seven-year intervals, the *Up* series, regardless of where they are filmed, engage precisely in such negotiations of (dis)continuity. The documentaries generally derive their arc from the protagonists’ increasing distance from their childhood experiences and from the contrasts and resonances provided by carefully chosen visual “returns” to earlier moments in life that the subjects themselves often do not remember. The convention of the seven-year interval thus foregrounds the (biographical) discontinuities, the breaks or cuts that according to Tannock (1995, 459–61) form a key component in nostalgia’s rhetoric. What makes the Soviet/Russian variant of this format unique, however, is that the lapses in the participants’ lives also bring to the fore the tectonic changes in their environment. The films’ editing devices (the back-and-forth movement between old and new material, interspersed with historical footage depicting social unrest and economic deficits) underscore that what separates the seven-year-old children from their adolescent and adult versions is not merely a temporal lapse in their (universal) biographical development but also a series of unprecedented historical developments that have redirected the course of their lives.

As Fred Davis argues, nostalgia is essentially an attempt to hold onto identities, especially at moments when they are felt to be “badly bruised by the turmoil of times” (1979, 107). While vividly presenting such turmoil and the threats it poses to the consistency of individual and collective selves, *Born in the USSR* does something more than merely cling to a desire for cultural and biographical sameness over time. The documentaries, paradoxically, invoke individual and collective identities precisely through an exuberant dramatization of their irretrievable loss. As a validation of Stuart Tannock’s observations, the films’ insistence on unbridgeable ruptures is thus part of the search for cultural and biographical origins and continuities.

Understandably, the project’s “dramatization of discontinuity” (Fritzsche 2004, 1610)² is largely absent from the first film. Despite the signs of roiling interethnic strife and political upheaval, the first installment, released in 1990, underscores how the participants’ experiences are (still) very much in sync. Notwithstanding the sweeping panorama of the Soviet Union’s disparate localities and the children’s diverse living conditions, their lives develop according to a homogeneous script. Emblematic is the depiction of the first school day, a moment that marks the children’s introduction into public life. Dressed in the same uniforms, they enter school on the same day (September 1st), and they all bring flowers to their new teachers.

This sense of a shared biographical script has decisively collapsed when Miroshnichenko’s team returns to visit the children seven years later. The director’s voice, introducing the second installment in a ponderous tone, meditates on the time that has passed since the making of the previous film:

It’s strange, but for them—and for me—it was a completely different life. Lenin, Communism, the October Revolution. But it existed. In their birth certificates will always be stamped: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. We will show how our children have changed, and how the world has changed around them.

Later in that same episode Miroshnichenko picks up the subject, stating that “many of our subjects are already living abroad, though they did not move anywhere.”

Here, in the opening sequences of the second film, the project’s new (and current) title, *Born in the USSR*, is introduced—a title conceived only at a moment when the USSR, in which the protagonists were born, had decisively disappeared. The opening scenes are compiled of footage of the fourteen-year-olds posing motionless for the camera, as if their picture were being taken. Overlaying these “portraits” are close-up shots of a Soviet birth certificate (**Figure 6.1**). Subsequently, the portraits of the children disappear and the certificate’s letters grow sharper. A still of



Figure 6.1 Sasha's portrait overlaid with a Soviet birth certificate, as shown in the opening scenes of *Born in the USSR: 14 Up*.

one of the children, Sasha, is now pasted, as it were, into the document. Then red English words are “stamped” onto the certificate: “Born in the USSR.” Finally, we hear the fizzy sound of a spray-paint can, and the text “14 up” is added to the document in graffiti lettering (Figure 6.2). This multilayered compilation cues the viewer into adopting a particular perception of the subsequent scenes. The birth certificate presents the children's origin in the Soviet Union as the prism through which their progressive biographical time-tracks are to be seen, and the “Born in the USSR” stamp supports the voiceover's statement that their lives have forever been marked by their shared roots in the vanished empire.

The belated emphasis on the participants' (lost) place of birth adds a political dimension to their separation from their earlier childhood selves. Interestingly, at the moment when the daily lives of most of the children have been uprooted by radical post-Soviet change, the documentary emphasizes their common roots in the bygone stability of the Soviet political order. In close alignment with Davis' and Tannock's remarks about the workings of nostalgia, the notion of a shared (political) home³ gains relevance as a marker of identity precisely when that home is presented as lost and its inhabitants as dispersed.

In this context, “exile” often works as a metaphor that dramatizes the participants' geographical and temporal “removal” from the Soviet



Figure 6.2 “Sasha’s birth certificate,” marked with a stamp and graffiti lettering, as shown in the opening scenes of *Born in the USSR: 14 Up*.

motherland, for instance in the storyline of the Jewish twins Zhanna and Leonid. At the age of seven they flee anti-Semitism and economic crisis in their native Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg) and leave for Israel. At the city’s railway station the children and their parents say farewell to those relatives who are staying behind. Asked what their greatest wish in life is, Zhanna responds, “to stay here,” and Leonid adds, “because Granny will be left on her own here.” The English voiceover straightforwardly explains the reasons for the family’s emigration. When the second film cuts back to the farewell scenes, the commentator, now Mirosznichenko himself, strikes a different chord. In his words, Zhanna and Leonid had left Russia to embark on a journey to “the country that their ancestors had called the ‘Promised Land’.”

This shift from matter-of-fact explanation to high-flown biblical language exemplifies the increasing dramatization of post-Soviet dislocation and drift, as well as the film’s fascination with the possibilities of homecoming and return. If the rhetoric of nostalgia essentially relies on a perceived rift with past conditions (Boym 2001, 25; Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2004, 492; Tannock 1995, 459–61), the exile motif conflates, in its presentation of this rift, spatial and geographical dimensions. The scenes of Leonid’s and Zhanna’s departure now come to function as a metaphor for the way that *all* the participants are “exiled” from their

Soviet origins. Whereas the twins can return to the ancient land of their ancestors, the other children are denied any such “return.” For them, the director suggests, home remains irretrievably distanced in time and (for many of the dispersed protagonists) in space. Combined, the stress on the children’s birth in the USSR and the motif of exile mark the first film—to which the subsequent installments repeatedly “return”—as the moment of temporal, geographic (but also cinematic) origin, against which the later moments in the series acquire their meaning.

The emphasized removal from domestic origins, however, also includes references to the perceived loss of *cultural* values. The newly introduced affordances of capitalist consumerism, the second film suggests, have infused the collective home with an *unheimlich* quality. The first film portrays Tania from Leningrad who, together with her playmate Ira, glances through the pages of what appears to be a Western mail-order catalogue. The girls pretend to “eat” from the overfull refrigerators displayed on its pages. In the context of Perestroika-era shortages, the gastronomic abundance exercises an irresistible appeal to the seven-year-olds. Western clothing, too, exerts a magnetic attraction, which is only reinforced, it seems, by its unattainability. Ira, in a precocious tone that seems to echo the perspective of her parents, says that the fashionable dresses and jackets “will never be sold here”: “it’s offensive to even show them to us.”

Seven years later, in their renamed city of Saint Petersburg, the hunger for everything Western has been replaced by inurement and boredom. The products in that now worn-out catalogue are, according to the fourteen-year-old girls, “outdated.” Subsequent shots show Ira shopping for a top in a huge warehouse. It is hard to miss Miroshnichenko’s distaste when he comments that her behavior is “particularly picky.” A later scene follows Tania during a visit to a supermarket, the shelves loaded with exotic fruits. Both girls, the film suggests, have experienced a 180-degree reversal of identity. They have restyled themselves, in garb and in attitudes alike, entirely “in Western fashion” [po zapadski], as the director notes.

Scenes like these, which aim to foreground the detrimental effects of newly introduced market principles, make it hard to contend, as Shembel does, that the time-lapse documentary is structured by the disinterested logic of the database. Visually and verbally, the portrayal of Tania and Ira accentuates how capitalist values and practices, introducing choice overload and boredom, have corrupted the dreams and charms of childhood. Other scenes, too, explore the market economy’s corrosive effects. At fourteen, Almaz from Kirgizia is re-introduced to the viewer: “Here, together with friends, Almaz acquaints himself with the notions of money, market and business. Many of our children, unfortunately, already have a clear understanding of these [principles].” These words accompany shots of Almaz frantically seeking buyers for his stack of newspapers.

In the subsequent interview the boy explains that he, apart from his current merchandise, has been selling lemonade and chewing gum, all in an attempt to support his family financially. When Miroshnichenko returns to the same shots seven years later, his evaluation is even harsher, explaining that Almaz, who had tried to set up his own company, was confronted, again, with the principles of the “callous market.”

The later installments thus repeatedly associate the advent of capitalism with the loss of childhood innocence, confirming a widespread perception in post-socialist societies that their inhabitants “were collectively forced into adulthood by the political transition, no longer sheltered by the hand of state paternalism” (Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2004, 510). In repeating this trope, Miroshnichenko’s documentaries, rather than adhering to the neutral accumulative logic of the database, infuse the documentaries’ time-lapse structure with a moral evaluation: the scenes depicting Tania’s bored consumerism and Almaz’s economic troubles work to associate the temporal lapses of the documentary’s structure with a “fall” from grace. Stuart Tannock writes that this notion of a “lapse (a cut, a Catastrophe, a separation or sundering, the Fall)” (1995, 456) is one of the key ideas in nostalgia and is often associated with “forces external to a previously stable and utopian system” (ibid., 460). This emphasis on corrupting influence wrought by forces from the outside may “mystify or displace the extent to which the decline—that is, the changes that are interpreted as decline—is caused by pressures and forces internal to the past, utopian world itself” (ibid., 460–1).

In *Born in the USSR*, the capitalist realities that have presumably cut off the participants from the non-materialistic charms of their childhood are marked, almost without exception, as external and Western. At age fourteen Almaz wears a cap with the text “New Yorker” that, according to Miroshnichenko, fits him “like a glove”; the voiceover underscores, as seen above, that Tania’s and Ira’s inured attitudes entail the reshaping of their identities “in western fashion”; and at the age of fourteen the party boy Sasha, who frequents discotheques and collects Western cigarette packages, is shown opening a crown-capped bottle of Pepsi-Cola—a widespread icon for newly introduced Western-style consumerism—with his teeth. The latter scene visually resonates with an earlier image in the same film, in which Sasha eagerly sinks his teeth into an apple that he has just picked in his parents’ orchard. Miroshnichenko comments that Sasha, in contrast to seven years earlier when he had talked about his homework, now “tastes completely different fruits, far from those of the Tree of Knowledge.” The biblical reference is ambiguous, as the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is the shared point of reference for two moments in time that the documentary aims to contrast (discipline and education in the Soviet Union versus the hedonistic pastimes provided by the economic liberalism and moral permissiveness of the new Russia). Evident, however, is the analogy the director draws between

Western-style consumerism and the eating of the forbidden fruit. In the portrayal of Sasha, Almaz, Ira, and Tania, the time-lapse format supports the director's insistence on a "fall": the temporal intervals are interpreted as marking a dramatized and moralized disjuncture with the interviewees' former selves, a break supposedly wrought by the arrival and rapid ascendancy of external, capitalist forces.

Reimagining the Soviet/Russian Family

So far I have demonstrated how the documentaries invoke the lost times, spaces, and values of a collective "home." But how exactly do the films turn the subjects' *personal* experiences into the building blocks for a narrative about the *collective* fates of post-Soviet peoples? In *Yearning for Yesterday* Davis argues that "the life cycle affords us a bridge from the apparently intensely private quality of nostalgic experience to its sources in society and its consequences for collective life" (1979, 54). Above I have demonstrated how socioeconomic developments in the former Soviet Union were indeed projected onto the participants' life-paths. Entering adolescence was presented as an experience that ran parallel to the confrontation, experienced by the former Republics at large, with freshly introduced Western products and behaviors. This "collectivization" of individual experiences, however, is also brought about through other means, most importantly through a pervasive metaphor of family kinship.

The anthropologist Gediminas Lankauskas reminds us that the nostalgic trope of home is inseparable from "an idyllic imagery of familial togetherness, well-being and coherence" (2014, 39). *Born in the USSR*, bringing together children with whom the viewer becomes increasingly "familiar" over the years, solicits an assessment of the participants as relating to one another—or even to the director and the viewers—along the organic logic of family ties. The family metaphor is implicitly invoked at the outset through the stress on the participants' "origin" and "birth" (*Born in the USSR*) as a uniting factor, and it is elaborated in the director's repeated references to the interviewees as "our children." This view was further substantiated in media performances, for instance when Miroshnichenko in a 2007 interview with Anna Kachkaeva remarked that "there were cases in which we [the team] had to participate in certain events literally as parents." Apart from the children serving as (symbolic) family members of the director or the viewer, the films take a keen interest in the participants' familial relations and conflicts, often mobilizing family trouble as metaphoric shorthand for the fragmented social cohesion of post-Soviet life itself.

Much attention is drawn, for instance, to the relationship between the twins Stas and Denis. In the first films we see them, dressed identically, in their Moscow apartment, frolicking and completing each other's

sentences. At age fourteen they tell us, through their tears, that their father has recently died from a heart attack at their *dacha*, and that none of the fellow *dachniks* were willing to help the family transport the dead body to the morgue. At 21 the twins begin to part ways. Stas works as a waiter in a high-end restaurant (where he once served Vladimir Putin), while Denis makes a career for himself in commercial maritime transportation. At age 28 Denis has furthered his career in shipping, whereas Stas has lost his job. Their joint portrayal is now directed and edited in such a way as to point up the increased emotional distance between them. In one scene they sit on a bench in the park, Denis dressed in a chic jacket, Stas in a stained shirt. In the ensuing interview Miroshnichenko tells the twins that they no longer look alike and that even their haircuts are now different. When the brothers explain that they do not see each other much, they immediately begin fighting about the frequency of their visits with each other. The twins' distanced body language is juxtaposed with footage from 21 years earlier, when they sat on a bench in their parents' apartment and lovingly touched and teased each other. A later scene, revolving around a fight between Denis and his mother, drives home the point that the family, so tightly connected in the early installments, has now decisively fallen apart.

The scenes with Stas and Denis, as well as others depicting fraternal conflict and parental loss, carry a weighty significance. The allegory of (post-)Soviet society as a disintegrating family works on many levels: post-Soviet upheaval and financial inequality is shown to harm the fraternal relations between Stas and Denis; it sends the participants ("our children") to the four corners of the earth; and it erodes the "fraternity of peoples" that (at least in Soviet propaganda) existed among the Soviet Union's multiple ethnic groups. This last dimension is highlighted in scenes showing the 28-year-old Almaz, who has emigrated from Kirgizia to Novosibirsk in Russia, where he now works at the local market. Almaz struggles with Russians' unfriendly attitudes towards Central Asian guest workers and declares to Miroshnichenko that he belongs to an "orphaned generation." In a scene not included in the shorter English cut of the fourth film, Almaz says that "it was better during the Soviet Union. Everything functioned . . . the plants and factories . . . people lived in equality. If one compares . . . I'd probably choose that state in which I lived until I was seven." As these scenes suggest, the vanished "paternal" patronage of the state has "orphaned" its former inhabitants, and the ("fraternal") ideals of social and ethnic equality have been sullied.

The family metaphor also works as a prism with which to view the (severed) relations among the peoples of the Soviet Union in the scenes portraying the fourteen-year-old Algis. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, his father had been an active campaigner for the independence of Lithuania, and Miroshnichenko's voiceover explains that although the family

speaks Russian fairly well, they now prefer to converse in Lithuanian. Shots of a family dinner and of Algis driving a dirt bike are interspersed with an interview, the Lithuanian dubbed into Russian. Algis enthusiastically explains that his coming of age gives him new privileges, possibilities, and experiences. He cannot wait for the next seven years to pass. Mirosznichenko comments that “maybe in seven years he, too, will separate from his family and from his home.” The referent of this “too” is not specified, but the word, apparently, aims to metaphorically link Algis’ increasing independence from his family with the independence of his country, a development championed, as Mirosznichenko emphasizes, by people like Algis’ father. The implication is that Lithuania has “come of age” and has severed ties with the multi-ethnic “family” of nations that was once its “home.”

The family metaphor realizes its full potential, however, in the scenes with Andrei. His story has attracted more attention from Russian and from foreign audiences than that of any other participant in the project. The first film featured a heartbreaking interview with the boy in the orphanage in Irkutsk where he lived. Mirosznichenko asked what Andrei, who had lost his mother when he was two, dreamed about, and the boy, with tears in his eyes, explained: “Once I dreamt . . . I heard my mother’s voice. I was lying there and I heard a shout: ‘Andrei!’ I woke up.” Mirosznichenko asked how Andrei knew that the voice was his mother’s. “I recognized it at once,” the boy replied. After the international release of the first film, the orphanage received dozens of foreign requests to adopt the boy. In the next film we see Andrei again, now in the house of his American foster parents. It turns out, however, that his recent adoption is not a success. While Andrei gets on well with his adoptive father, he clashes with his foster mother and has difficulties adhering to her “many little rules.” She wants to send him back to Russia, but with the help of the film crew, we learn, another family was found, this time in Florida.

Andrei’s situation squarely fits the films’ increasingly patriotic and anti-Western take on post-Soviet change. As Shembel remarks, “Andrei’s negative experience with his first adoptive family resonates with a massive Kremlin anti-American propaganda campaign that told Russians that the majority of U.S. parents adopting Russian children are sadists, pedophiles, and child abusers” (2016, 79–90). The sequences with Andrei, however, do more than hammer in the Kremlin’s anti-Americanism. Having lost his parents and his country, and having exchanged the poor living conditions in Irkutsk for an environment of alluring capitalist pleasures in Florida, Andrei, within the logic of the documentary, symbolically epitomizes the destiny of his generation at large.

As one of Svetlana Boym’s informants remarked in 1995: “it seems that the whole of the former Soviet Union went into emigration, without leaving the country” (2001, 328). Cultural tropes of exile and emigration, combined with a notion of “orphanhood” brought about by the

loss of paternal protection by the Soviet state, invest Andrei's fate with exemplary significance. In this light, Andrei's stated loyalty to his country of birth is all the more important. At age 21 he remarks, in still flawless Russian, "you can't change a person. You can't take him out of his skin, put him in some other shell." Later he adds: "I've always felt Russian, and I will always be Russian. I even plan to live in Russia in the future. I will be buried in Russia." The fact that an adoptive family and a new country, despite the apparent comfort they provide, cannot replace the primordial markers of home once more underscores the inalterable naturalness of Soviet/Russian belonging.

Later, when the 28-year-old Andrei refuses to participate in the project, Miroshnichenko comments lightheartedly on the situation: "In our project, as in life, people leave and return." Just as Andrei says he will one day return to Russia, this prodigal son will also inevitably return, Miroshnichenko suggests, to the symbolic family of "our children." We find the same hope for reunification, phrased in terms that evoke the effect of kinship, in the references to Pavlik. In the 1990 episode, the Russian Pavlik had fled ethnic strife in Baku, living with his parents in a refugee camp in the center of Moscow. Seven years later Miroshnichenko's team could not trace him. In the second film the director explained: "We could not find him now, and we do not know what happened to that boy." In a concerned tone he continued: "Where is he? Is he alive? May God grant it." Twenty-one years later, in an interview with Konstantin Kosachev, Miroshnichenko announced that his team might have found Pavlik (or rather Pavel now) on social media: "his age corresponds, and his face is very similar. I was so excited that it might be him, I would be so happy. It would be curious if our hero appears again in the next episode, if he returns."

In 2004 Serguei Oushakine already remarked on the stunning ubiquity of the terminology of kinship in contemporary Russian culture: "Over the course of the last decade metaphors of social and blood kinship became a virtually hegemonic form for conceptualizing political, economic and cultural development" (2004, 10). As Oushakine underscores, the omnipresent symbolism of the family generally works to invest the relations between individual lives with an order that is seen as "organic, 'natural'" (ibid., 11). In *Born in the USSR* the family metaphor indeed invokes imagined communities that become invested with a natural gloss. The metaphor suggests organic and unalterable ties among the members of both the "micro-family" of the films' participants and (in a rhetoric that perpetuates Soviet notions of the "fraternity of peoples") the macro-family of formerly Soviet ethnic communities.

Conclusion: The Politics of Nostalgia

Above we have seen that the films' nostalgic rhetoric relies on a two-pronged strategy: a dramatization of temporal and spatial displacement,

but also, on the contrary, an emphasis on the continuities implied in a metaphorically evoked familial togetherness. Taken together, these two rhetorical gestures confirm scholarly observations that nostalgia is an affective cultural practice premised on a perceived rupture or fall from grace, but one simultaneously directed toward explorations of the possibility of continuity, sameness, identity, and return.

Even within the films' pervasive metaphor of family kinship, notions of disjuncture and loss are never far away. Put more strongly, family is evoked, as seen in the analyses, primarily through its negative cognates of orphanhood, conflict, and fraternal rejection. On the one hand, these recurring, negative points of reference inflate the drama of lost social cohesiveness, vanished inter-ethnic harmony, and abated "paternal" protection by the state. On the other hand, these references evoke, precisely through these losses and conflicts, an organic "homeliness" that supposedly existed before the "fall," that is, before post-Soviet strife and fragmentation struck. It is the displayed drama of the (post-)Soviet family in disarray that, paradoxically, works to invoke notions of collective belonging as structured by the natural ties of birth and kinship.⁴

It is important to see that in *Born in the USSR* this Janus-faced nostalgia hardly ever emerges from the views or utterances of the participants themselves. It is the structure, editing, and voiceover that appropriate the experiences of the participants for these narratives: the director, in his comments, aligns Algis' celebration of his adolescent freedoms with the fate of Lithuania; contrastive editing of material from disparate periods underscores the increased emotional distance between Stas and Denis, making these scenes resonate with the motif of lost Soviet brotherhood elsewhere in the film; and even Andrei's refusal to participate in the fourth film is cast, by the director, as a natural and transient phase in the generational and cultural solidarity among those who are united by having been born in the Soviet Union.

The experiences of the participants are thus appropriated within a narrative that increasingly resonates with the hegemonic discourses of the Putin government. The project's swelling pathos of a lost Soviet/Russian "home" and "family" shows noticeable parallels with the Russian state's rhetoric of loss and restoration. Echoing Vladimir Putin's famous statement about the collapse of the Soviet Union being "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (2008, 272), Mirosnichenko has remarked that his films portray the "catastrophe of the great empire" (Interview by Konstantin Kosachev). He has also explicitly supported the annexation of Crimea (*Izvestiia* 11 March 2014), and the fascination in his documentary project with organic ties and inevitable returns (be it on a micro or macro level) resonates with Putin's speeches in the wake of the Crimean campaign. As mentioned in the introduction to this volume, the president's statements about the 2014 events underscored that Crimea had always served as a common home for various ethnic groups and that the

reunification with Russia amounted to a return of Crimea to “the native shores, to the home port” (Putin 2014).

Miroshnichenko’s compliance with the Putin government’s restorationism raises questions about the political implications of nostalgia. In their article *The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices*, Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko make a convincing case against the prevalent idea “that the very structure of nostalgia endows it with a particular political meaning” (2004, 490). Challenging the essentialism implied in this view, they submit that nostalgia is premised precisely “on the non-partisan quality of memory which alone can lend it an aura of objectivity” (ibid., 506). Zooming in on the post-socialist context, the authors write that the recollection of childhood memories by the last socialist generation often comes with an evasion of politics, as these recollections are tied to a “period when perception is by definition pre-political” (ibid., 510). Given nostalgia’s apolitical, non-partisan aura, scholars, they argue, cannot cling to distinctions between “good nostalgia” (apolitical or subversive) and “bad nostalgia” (“explicitly reactionary”) (ibid., 504). Picking up on Kathleen Stuart’s remarks about nostalgia’s situationality, Nadkarni and Shevchenko propose that nostalgia research focus on the (often similar) structures of nostalgic expressions, whose intentions and political functions can differ radically “depending on the context in which they unfold” (ibid., 507).

I submit that it is precisely the apparently non-political character of nostalgia, repeatedly pointed up in Miroshnichenko’s films, that opens this project up to co-option by the forces supporting political restorationism. Already in 2001 Svetlana Boym had remarked on the seemingly apolitical character of nostalgic discourses in post-Soviet Russia, pointing out that in Russians’ longing for the certainties of childhood, “personal affective memories” were often projected “onto the larger historical picture” (2001, 58). Precisely by disguising itself as deeply private, Boym feared, nostalgia could take on markedly political forms: “Nostalgia works as a double-edged sword: it seems to be an emotional antidote to politics, and thus remains the best political tool” (ibid.). Boym’s emphasis differs from that of Nadkarni and Shevchenko. She stresses how the seemingly apolitical character of (restorative) nostalgia may function as a disguise for its inherently political agenda, while Shevchenko and Nadkarni reject the idea of nostalgia’s inherent political orientation and underscore that identical practices of nostalgia may result in different effects depending on their social and political embeddedness. What these scholars share, however, is the (paradoxical) view that the “non-political promise of nostalgia” (Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2004, 514) is also the major prerequisite for its possession of political potential.

This view provides a useful perspective on *Born in the USSR*. The project’s stress on private and family life, with its supposedly natural developmental stages, allows the political implications of its stories of

origin and return to be obfuscated. While the recurring family metaphor gives a natural quality to the relations between individuals and groups, the documentary's format, and in particular its "archival" logic, invests the films with a sense of objectivity.

These naturalizing and objectifying effects stand out more clearly when *Born in the USSR* is compared with another documentary with a similar scope. *My Perestroika* (2010) by the American film director Robin Hessman (who graduated from the All Russian State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow) traces the lives of five ordinary Russians from Moscow, four of them alumni from School #57. The documentary's main subjects, Boris and his wife Liuba, work as history teachers at that same school and live in a small apartment with their son Mark. Ruslan, a former classmate and longtime friend of Boris, is a single father and freelance musician who is (and has always been) an outspoken nonconformist; Ol'ga, formerly the prettiest girl in their class, is now a single mom who is a manager in a company that services billiard tables in bars; and their adaptable ex-classmate Andrei is currently a successful businessman, selling high-end French shirts, suits, and ties in shops across Moscow.

The documentary zooms in on three phases in the characters' lives and in the history of their country: the stable Stagnation years of the late 1970s when the protagonists were kids, the era of Perestroika and the roaring 1990s, and the Putin and Medvedev period of the film's present. These various epochs are represented not only through Soviet propaganda footage, period newsreels, and (masked) interviews with the characters but also through unique 8-mm home video material shot by Boris' father. It becomes clear that the "Perestroika" of the film's title signifies not merely the upheavals of 1985–1991 but also the *personal* transformations that these Muscovites have undergone over the decades. As the film's tagline has it, "a nation's history is personal." Hinting at the original meaning of the word *perestroika* ("restructuring"), the film explores what Sheila Fitzpatrick has described as the "reimagining of self" (2005, 310) that late- and post-Soviet citizens had to bring about in their lives.

Like *Born in the USSR*, *My Perestroika* portrays the effects of radical personal and national transitions but also explores what are sometimes surprising continuities. Abstaining from extradiegetic comments, or from any other narrative intervention, the director relies on the words of the subjects and on an editing style that works with associative connections between rhyming and contrasting images. A compilation of short home-video shots, for instance, shows Boris' face as it evolves throughout the years; a contemporary scene of Andrei lifting and hugging his daughter in their spacious Ikea-furnished home is contrasted with home-video material from decades earlier of Andrei embracing a little girl (possibly his sister) in a crammed Soviet-style apartment; and the film shows

Ruslan—otherwise a vocal critic of Western-style consumerism—visiting a Pizza Hut restaurant with his son. The scene is contrasted with old footage showing Ruslan in a pioneer costume during an unspecified event in School #57. The film ends with contemporary scenes depicting the September 1st ceremonies at School #57. Andrei accompanies his daughter to her first day at school. We also see Ruslan with his son, while Boris and Liuba attend both as parents and teachers. The children, in their Sunday best, bring flowers to their teachers. The images are strikingly similar to the old home-video scenes of the same ceremony that are inserted into the film's finale.

The resulting panorama of changes and continuities is varied, as are the interpretations of the post-Soviet transition by those who experienced it firsthand. Boris reminisces about his happy childhood before Perestroika and fondly recalls the nonconformist subcultures of which he took part, and also expresses his fears about the return of increasingly authoritarian policies in the present. Ruslan is nostalgic for the liberal and experimental music scene of the Perestroika era. Unable to find his footing in the new capitalist realities of the post-Soviet period, however, he opts for a life as an outcast. Andrei, who seems flexible enough to flourish within any social reality, welcomes the possibilities provided by the market economy. By no means, however, does he support the Putin government. While the viewer senses the director's sympathy for Liuba, Boris, and their son, who receive the most intimate portrayal, the film is open to these other perspectives, too. Resisting the temptation to incorporate the experiences and views of the subjects into one monologic narrative, *My Perestroika* retains a strong multivoiced character.

The basic nostalgic logic of *Born in the USSR* and *My Perestroika* is rather similar. These films dramatize disjuncture while also exploring parallels and continuities between disparate epochs. The difference between the documentaries lies in the extent to which they naturalize and unify these practices. While *Born in the USSR* glosses over the nostalgic "work" it undertakes—presenting its methodology as objective and its proposed links as natural—*My Perestroika* self-consciously flaunts its own devices, using an editing style that is associative, defamiliarizing, and sometimes ironic. It is this self-conscious display of nostalgia's negotiating (and open-ended) work that sets it apart from Miroshnichenko's project and that shields it against facile political instrumentalization.

Notes

1. Even in the British *Up* series, however, the Jesuit determinism is hard to maintain because of the many unexpected events and developments that frequently disrupt the lives of the participants (see Bruzzi 2007, 75–86).
2. For Fritzsche nostalgia is a "fundamentally modern phenomenon" in that it depends on a view of historical progress as "the continual production of the new" (2004, 1589). Ever since the French Revolution, Fritzsche emphasizes,

- intellectuals have relied on nostalgic discourses to dramatize and accentuate the breaks in time wrought by modernity.
3. As the anthropologist Gediminas Lankauskas reminds us, nostalgia “is a pre-eminently ‘homey’ or domestic concept,” which often comes with related notions of safety, comfort, predictability, and togetherness (2014, 39).
 4. This logic is reminiscent of what Serguei Oushakine has described as the “patriotism of despair.” Reflecting on the ubiquitous post-Soviet litanies on social dislocation and fragmentation expressed by his informants from the provincial city of Barnaul, Oushakine points out that precisely these references to loss often had a constitutive effect, serving as the focus for fantasies of collective belonging (2009, 38).

Works Cited

- Atia, Nadia, and Jeremy Davies. 2010. “Nostalgia and the Shapes of History.” *Memory Studies* 3 (3): 181–6.
- Barnouw, Erik. 1993. *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bruzzi, Stella. 2007. *Seven Up*. London: British Film Institute.
- Davis, Fred. 1979. *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. New York: The Free Press.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. 2005. *Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fritzsche, Peter. 2004. *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gorodetskaia, Alena. 2012. “Serial na vsiu zhizn’.” *Bolshoi Gorod*, August 31, 2012. http://bg.ru/society/serial_na_vsiu_zhizn-11731/.
- Hutton, Patrick H. 2013. “Reconsiderations of the Idea of Nostalgia in Contemporary Historical Writing.” *Historical Reflections* 39 (3): 1–9.
- Izvestiia. 2014. “Deiateli kul’tury podderzhali pozitsiiu prezidenta po Ukraine i Krymu.” March 11, 2014. <https://iz.ru/news/567299>.
- Lankauskas, Gediminas. 2014. “Missing Socialism Again? The Malaise of Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Lithuania.” In *Anthropology and Nostalgia*, edited by Olivia Angé and David Berliner, 35–59. New York: Berghahn.
- Miroshnichenko, Sergei. 2007. “Molodezh’ na televisionnom ekrane.” Interview by Anna Kachkaeva. *Radio Svoboda*, June 25, 2007. www.svoboda.org/a/399389.html.
- Miroshnichenko, Sergei. 2012. “Kontrol’naia dlia rozhdenykh v SSSR.” Interview by Elena Afanas’eva. *Ekho Moskvu*, September 9, 2012. <https://echo.msk.ru/programs/tv/927145-echo/>.
- Miroshnichenko, Sergei. 2013. “Sovremennoi Rossii nuzhna masshtabnaia dokumental’naia letopis’.” Interview by Konstantin Kosachev. *Golos Rossii*, June 17, 2013. <https://news.rambler.ru/community/19634086-sovremennoy-rossii-nuzhna-masshtabnaya-dokumentalnaya-letopis-razgovor-s-konstantinom-kosachevym/>.
- My Perestroika*. 2010. Directed by Robin Hessman. Red Square Productions.
- Nadkarni, Maya, and Olga Shevchenko. 2004. “The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices.” *Ab Imperio* 2: 487–519.

- Nichols, Bill. 2010. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Oushakine, Serguei. 2004. "Mesto—imeni—ia: Sem'ia kak sposob organizatsii zhizni." In *Semeinye uzly: Modeli dlia sborki*, edited by Serguei Oushakine, 7–52. Moscow: NLO.
- Oushakine, Serguei. 2009. *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Pickering, Michael, and Emily Keightley. 2006. "Modalities of Nostalgia." *Current Sociology* 54 (6): 919–41.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2008. "Poslanie federal'nomu sobraniuu Rossiiskoi Federatsii [25 April 2005]." In *Izbrannye rechi i vystupleniia*, 271–90. Moscow: Knizhnyi mir.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2014. "Address by President of the Russian Federation." *The Kremlin, Moscow*, March 18, 2014. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.
- Rozhdennye v SSSR*. 1990—. Directed by Sergei Miroshnichenko. Gosteleradio, Granada Media, Sovtelexport, Studio Ostrov.
- Shembel, Daria. 2016. "Born in the USSR: Children vs. Ideology and the Impact of Database Cinema." *Slovo* 28 (2): 69–84.
- Stewart, Kathleen. 1988. "Nostalgia—A Polemic." *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (3): 227–41.
- Tannock, Stuart. 1995. "Nostalgia Critique." *Cultural Studies* 3 (9): 453–64.
- White, Hayden. 1990. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.