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The “Female Boom” in Russian Documentary Film (2012-2023)

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Women’s Cinema is a 21st century global phenomenon, especially when it comes to documentary filmmaking. In today’s feature film industry in Russia, only about 20% of film directors are women. Unfortunately, there are no statistics about their role in documentary film since Russian documentaries were not and are still not shown widely in movie theaters. Among the few documentaries that have been distributed in small cinemas, none have been made by women. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, documentary films were presented primarily at film festivals like Artdocfest in Moscow, which later moved to Riga, Message to Man in Saint Petersburg, Flaertiana in Perm, and a few other smaller events. Only Artdocfest, established in 2007, has never received any form of official backing or financial support from the Russian Ministry of Culture, which began to back film events in 2014. Thanks to festival director Vitaly Mansky, Artdocfest has continued to show truly risky films that combine politics and artistic merit, offering critical views of the Russian political regime while analyzing the most painful aspects of contemporary society. In 2022, the festival was imperiled by state intervention. Mansky was forced to move the event out of the Russian capital to Riga, the capital of Latvia. Now operating outside of Russia with international backing, Mansky has been registered as a “foreign agent” (i.e. an enemy of the state). Nevertheless, the 2022 edition, which turned out to be the largest film festival event in the post-Soviet space, would introduce attendees to many new documentary film directors, including women filmmakers. Manksy’s leadership would lead to the creation of Artdoc.Media, the largest online resource for Russian-language documentary films, where you can find information about filmmakers and links to their films.

Both the festival movement and the growing interest in documentary film rose from generational changes that occurred in the 2010s. A new generation of women filmmakers with graduate training would start working then, equipped with the skills they had developed in film schools that had sprung up in this

period. Without restrictive rules about who could study film or work with cameras, women started to establish “horizontal comradeship”. Ultimately, they went even further than that by creating a form of “communitas”, as per Victor Turner’s term for a workday socioeconomic structure that liberates human cognition, affect, volition, and creativity from the constraints of a hierarchical social status. It thereby enacts a multiplicity of social roles, and an acute sense of membership within this type of group. The new film schools that arose in the 21st century include the School of Marina Razbezhkina and Michail Ugarov, the Rodchenko Moscow School of Photography, the St. Petersburg State University of Film and Television (SPbGIKIT), and the Moscow School of New Cinema. The well-established Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) also became a freer space for women.

At the same time, this young group from the 2010s became our Internet generation. Cinematographers used light digital cameras that gave them greater mobility to shoot in the streets, say among the demonstrators who generated a wave of protests during 2011-2013. These protests drew people from post-Soviet generations, those who had grown up after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Vladimir Gelman (University of Helsinki) called them the “generation of grandsons”,[1] though he really should have added “and granddaughters”, for this generation of protesters was influenced by Western feminist ideas that pushed women to go to the streets en masse. Combining their notion of “horizontal comradeship” with a raised political consciousness, these women filmmakers built small “communities of resistance” to the authoritarian regime, actively participating in the large protest movement for democratization that became especially boisterous on Sakharov Avenue (2011-2012) and Bolotnaya Square (summer 2013). Despite their active role, these protests about Russia’s future were not centered around women.

The main concern of the protests was a call for the democratization of Russia. There were demands that the state guarantee fair elections, political and civil rights, and media freedom, and that the government respect the rule of law. “Russia will be free!” was the main slogan of this period. Moscow was the center of this movement, but it gradually spread to other Russian cities as well. Contemporary art of the period started to take on the form of political action, as with the public performance art of Pussy Riot or Petr Pavlensky, primarily in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. Art’s new propensity for creative political protest turned these artists into new leaders of the protest movement, demonstrating that politics can be aesthetic.

This creative impulse was also seen in *Chto delat’?*, a group of artists and scholars, and the independent Theater.DOC, a Moscow-based collective of theater actors, playwrights, and directors. At this time, the names of new filmmakers came to the fore, including the many female documentary directors who directly confronted official Russian politics. The list of such women is considerable. In this piece, I will focus on Taisiya Krugovykh, Natalya Pershina-

Yakimanskaya (Gluykla), and Daria Khrenova, but I must at least mention the women trained by Marina Razbezhkina. The alumni of Razbezhkina's film school deserve a portrait of their own, because they have made many exciting political documentary films. Thanks to Artdocfest, Message to Man, and a host of foreign festivals, they have become a most influential group in Russia, one which has had a major impact on the aesthetics of feature films. Their most important collective work was the political documentary *Winter, Go Away* (2012), which was made by 10 directors (5 women) before and after the 2012 presidential elections. In the US, there is little information about this example of a protest-centered "collective aesthetic", which presents different candidates and differing opinions of Muscovites about Russian politics and the possible choices for Russia's future. It also shows the increasing repressive measures of the authoritarian state, as well as the growing protest movement against Putin's return to the Presidency.

Films by Taisiya Krugovykh, Daria Khrenova, and Gluklya fall into the category of participatory political documentary cinema, which combines democratic vanguardism, contemporary art practices, and elements of different documentary genres, and draws the director into interactive relations with participants and events. New technology and new platforms allow them more flexibility and help to erode the division between documentary filmmakers and the artists they portray. All three filmmakers shot their films on small Sony cameras, were director-producers to their films and created visual forms of documentary based on encounter, contingency, improvisation, personal experience, and collaboration. Krugovykh lived in Moscow and emigrated to Paris after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Darya Khrenova is still based in Russia, while Gluklya, formerly based in Saint-Petersburg, moved to Amsterdam about 10 years ago (she is now a Russian-Dutch artist and filmmaker).

Taisiya Krugovykh began her art activism in the Rodchenko School. Her first works were connected to the radical feminist art group Pussy Riot. Since the group is rather well-known in the West, I will specifically address Taisiya's contribution to their activities. Taisiya shot all the group's performances in collaboration with Vasily Bogatov, who had formed a collaboration with the art group *Voina* ("War"). Using Panasonic Lumix DMC-GH2 and Sony cameras, they followed Pussy Riot around as quasi-participants in their exploits. Krugovykh shares the feminist and anti-Putin political ideas of the group members, and was often physically close to them, with her camera at the ready and her face not shielded by a balaclava. She was arrested by police approximately 20 times. Bogatov, as a "male feminist," also filmed unmasked, both at a distance and close up. Their collaboration eliminated issues of hierarchy, elitism, and individualism and traded a "female gaze" or "male gaze" for a more complex point of view, an organized authorial outlook where both the voices of Pussy Riot and the voices of the directors are significant. Everybody did what they could, but as an editor Krugovykh did not have the time or resources of an Elizaveta Svilova, who appeared in and edited Dziga Vertov's films in the

1920s. Krugovykh quickly edited footage in cafés not far from the performance space and downloaded clips to YouTube. Her amateur clips were included in all the documentary films about Pussy Riot, including *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer* (2013) by Mark Lerner and Maxim Pozdorovkin and *Act & Punishment* (2015) by Evgeniy Mitta. In 2002 Mitta, the son of the famous Soviet film director Alexander Mitta, invited Taisiya to edit his film about the Russian artist Pavel Peppershtein and included animation done by Taisiya Krugovykh's students in the Moscow Film School Shar, where she continues to teach to this day, now remotely from Paris.

Krugovykh and Bogatov made their international breakthrough in 2015 with *Pussy versus Putin*. The film won First Prize at the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival for Best Mid-Length Film. When Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky prohibited the film's screening at the Saint Petersburg International Film festival "Message to Man," the festival's late art director Alexei Medvedev showed it to Russian journalists on a computer in a café. Regrettably, the journalists were too afraid to write about it in the media, with the film proving to be too radical for them. I wrote about this documentary, as well as their second effort, *Putin versus Pussy* (2017), in an essay entitled "Riot Doc" in my book *Women Directors in the Modern World*.[2] To the best of my knowledge, it is the only Russian-language text about their political partisan documentaries to be published in print. The essay also contains remarks from Anton Mazurov, a Moscow-based film specialist, whose lectures about the history of world cinema have enjoyed considerable success online.[3]

Pussy versus Putin covers the most important period of Pussy Riot's activities in Russia: their participation in the 2011-2012 protests and a feminist conference, preparations and rehearsals for performances, and the performances themselves, including their most provocative and controversial one in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. After performing their punk prayer "Mother of God, drive Putin away", three members of the feminist art collective were arrested and sentenced to two years in prison. Montage of this episode was created from footage from two separate actions in Orthodox Churches: one in the Epiphany Cathedral in Yelokhovo, where many Russian Patriarchs are buried, the other at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. This performance was widely viewed as insulting to Russian Orthodox believers and thereby constituted a violation of Russian law. I view it differently, namely as an anarchist art amalgam of references to the Guerilla Girls, the Riot grrrl movement, Afro-American spirituals, Alexander Blok's poem "A Girl Sings in a Church Choir", the tradition of holy fools, and British oi-oi-oi punk music. This performance and the violent reactions to it by Orthodox activists were included in the film as well. The event divided society and propelled the Putin regime to enact more repressions. This, of course, was not what the group had intended. Through their action, Pussy Riot wanted to make spectators pay attention to the ossification of the Putin regime and its entanglement with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Pussy versus Putin is an example of a partisan movie created by two amateurs without financial support or support from art institutions. It looks very much like what Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino describe in their article-manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema”: a dramatic alternative to First Cinema that is produced in Hollywood to entertain audiences; or to Second Cinema, which helped increase the author’s freedom of expression. *Pussy versus Putin* can be analyzed as a participatory “film act” that also has a political anti-Putin agenda and subscribes to a pro-democratization philosophy, with its support for women’s rights in Russia’s “petromacho” society. It presents multiple points of views and viewer reactions in a cinema verité style, where the directors also have their voices, organizing footage through montage in a contemporary form of visual activism. At the same time, it shows Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokinnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samuzevich unmasked as young activists of the protest movements in 2011-2013.

A memorable early episode from the film features Pussy Riot perform a Situationist-style rendition of “Release the Cobblestones” in the metro station they occupied as part of the Moscow protests after the December 2001 parliamentary elections. Among those filming in the metro station was Petr Verzilov, then Tolokinnikova’s husband, who shot some of the footage for the news posted on Live Journal and Twitter, in keeping with the collectivist ethos of the group. Any snippets that members managed to hide from the police were later used for Pussy Riot clips. For this episode Krugovikh collected footage from seven different Pussy Riot events in the Moscow Metro. An analysis of the montage points to how active the Pussy Riot collective had been, and to the breadth of their political agenda.

Putin versus Pussy (2017) is the duo’s second film. It features street performances and a clip of the song “Putin Will Teach you to Love the Motherland” filmed during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Putin’s favorite city in the south of Russia. By this time Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina had been released from prison, and the Pussy Riot collective decided to head to Sochi to make a statement. The film’s title, along with the events depicted, show how much Putin’s power and repressions had grown in a rather short time. The degree of violence, cruelty, even sadism, on the part of the police, the Federal Security Services (FSB), and the “so-called” nationalist patriots, was also increasing at the time. Not surprisingly, this film is more pessimistic and in the final episode Pussy Riot’s performance recalls the black humor of Russian Necrorealism, the radical art style of the late 1980s. But this film is more contemporary and includes Pussy Riot’s dynamic punk music and a clip edited by Taisiya Krugovykh.

Interestingly, Krugovykh and Bogatov found a new platform in YouTube for free political action. It granted these amateurs access to diverse communities and media at a time when their status kept them from showing the film at festivals or other professional public spaces.

The second filmmaker I want to discuss, Darya Khrenova, started to make films after graduating from the Department of Film Criticism at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). Her shift to visual protest occurred somewhat later, during the 2014-2015 protests, and was motivated by her political solidarity with the controversial Russian artist and activist Peter Pavlensky.

At VGIK, students are taught to find a hero for their film and then follow his progression/development. After seeing an Internet version of Pavlensky's 10 November 2013 Red Square performance piece "Fixation", Khrenova contacted the artist on Facebook. After six months of correspondence, they decided to work collaboratively on a film along with Pavlensky's partner Oksana Shalyigina. It took two years to complete the project, but Pavlensky and Shalyigina rejected the final cut. They wanted authorship credits and at that point communication between them and Khrenova broke down. Meanwhile Khrenova's film, *Life Naked* (2016), appeared on the Internet, displaying Russian political activity during the most productive period of Pavlensky's work, including footage that Khrenova had shot during her collaboration with the artist along with interviews with key figures connected to him, as well as images and evidence of other artists standing in solidarity with Pavlensky.

Life Naked is an example of a "post-documentary" (as per John Corner's term), which transgresses the boundaries of the traditional documentary and mixes in montage elements from different aesthetics, such as cinema verité, direct cinema, investigative reporting, and news broadcasts with the goal of achieving a more participatory relationship with the audience. As a former film critic, Khrenova proposes a multifaceted portrait of Pavlensky during the major protests of 2011-2013. She presents him as a political artist-propagandist; as the co-editor (along with Olga Shalygina) of the independent online newspaper Political Propaganda; as a solo artist who draws attention to political and social conditions through performance art and carefully prepares for his public appearances by giving advance notice to important media photojournalists; as a father of two children who refuses to adhere to traditional family notions, provoking audiences with such performative events as a ménage à trois. He is also seen as a contemporary cultural prophet who openly speaks about the political apathy of Russian society through works in which his body is subjected to mutilation. During the judicial procedures following his arrests, he tries to convert the usual participants (policemen, lawyers, judges, psychiatrists) into "spect-actors". By assigning each the dual roles of actor and spectator, Pavlensky adheres to the practices of Augusto Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed" and seeks their active involvement to yield a fresh, transformative examination of events.

Pavlensky began his art activism in solidarity with Pussy Riot while they were being prosecuted for their church performance. Reuters photographer Maxim Zmeyev captured the famous shot of Pavlensky's performance, while Edward

Rush caught it on video. Artistically, the visual image of Pavlensky with his mouth sewn shut was far from original: that same act became an international image of protest against censorship and social violence in 1989, thanks to New York poet and gay activist David Wojnarowicz as well as subsequent re-stagings by prisoners, migrants, and political activists in different countries, including Russia. In Pavlensky's case, the image was communicable globally and showed his standing in solidarity with the protest of other artists. Naturally, Pussy Riot was grateful for his support.

Daria Khrenova met Pavlensky and Shalygina in the most radical period of their life. With a hidden camera (a video-registrar in her sleeve), she shot Pavlensky's strongest performance, "Threat" (9 November 2015). Pavlensky set fire to the main entrance of the Lubyanka, the headquarters of the Russian Security Services (FSB). The artist explained this act on the Internet: "Burning the Lubyanka door was the gauntlet that society threw down to the terrorist threat. The FSB acts with methods of unending terror and wields power over 146 million people. Fear makes free people into an agglutinate mass of single bodies…"[4] Pavlensky was arrested and imprisoned for 9 months and received a fine of half a million rubles, which he refused to pay. Khrenova was able to avoid the police and thereby saved this partisan footage. "Threat" was Pavlensky's last performance in Russia. His next one would take place in Paris and would not be filmed.

A remarkable visual exploration of the nature of Russian political actionism, *Life Naked* depicts new media as a tool for creative collaborations that can have a global impact. The film's title evokes Italian philosopher Georgio Agamben's well-known work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Adopting Agamben's distinction between "bare life" (*zoê*) and "political life" (*bios*), Khrenova shows the Putin regime's fundamental ambition to completely absorb *zoê* into contemporary biopolitics while revealing how protest art tries to draw attention to the necessity of *bio*.

Despite the recent rejection of Pavlensky after Shalygina exposed their abusive relationship in *He Did Not Beat Me on the Face*, Pavlensky's Russian period of political art resonated globally. *Life Naked* earned a special mention at Artdocfest and was screened at a few Eastern European film festivals. It pursues a similar approach to German director Irene Langemann's 2016 film *Pavlensky – Man and Might* (2016), also shown at Artdocfest.

The final filmmaker whose work I want to discuss in this article, Gluklya, the pseudonym of Natalya Pershina-Yakimanskaya, first became famous in the 1990s as a pioneer of Russian performance art. In the past decade she has achieved greater complexity by uniting her prior focus on clothing with documentation of the extreme social inequalities in contemporary Russia, post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, and the Netherlands. Her research revolves around sweatshop production, the issue of overproduction/consumerism, and modern

slavery. Working with migrants, textile workers, refugees, and others “who have no time to play”, Gluklya remained true to her aesthetic approach, examining garments as a vehicle of remembrance of personal stories. In displaying clothes from different types of people, she creates a record of cultural and subcultural codes and reinforces the political feminist notion that “the personal is political”. She established this method while working in the collective group “The Factory of Found Clothes” and then went on to collaborate with Chto delat’. This leftist group was founded in Saint Petersburg in early 2003 by critics, philosophers, and writers from St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Nizhny Novgord with the goal of merging political theory, art, and activism. With the rise of Putin’s dictatorship and the escalation of repressive laws in Russia, Gluklya’s political perspective has undergone a marked change. By collecting physical realia from historical moments and events, she hopes to inspire her peers to overcome their apoliticism.

Gluklya’s important breakthrough came in 2015, when she created “Demonstration Against the False Election of Vladimir Putin”, a clothing installation for the 56th Venice Biennale. This work originated in clothes that were really worn during the St. Petersburg street protests in 2011-2012. Many of the garments feature written slogans, such as “A Thief Must Be in Jail”, “Bring Back Our Voices”, “Russia Will Be Free”, “The Anti-abortion Law is Russia’s Shame”, “Russia without Putin”, “Students and Veterans against the Criminal”, reflecting the diversity among Russia’s oppressed. Gluklya’s installation enables the audience to penetrate and analyze the complex imaginative community of those opposed to Putin’s regime, a group whose only weapons are voices, work, art, and collaboration. Gluklya is determined to stand on the side of the weak while struggling with her personal fear of confronting the oppressors face to face.

Gluklya’s last major documentary is *May 1st (2017-2019)*. Using Sony cameras, she and students of Chto Delat’s Roza School shot three consecutive May Day demonstrations in Saint Petersburg. 2019 was the last year this demonstration was held in Russia. Since then, all meetings of this kind have been banned, including mass protests. For Gluklya, it was extremely important to record the events on Nevsky Prospekt, the main street of the City of Revolution, which had become the mental and physical meeting space for widely different political forces. They ranged from ultra-right nationalists, communists and anarchists to democrats and ultra-leftist activists including vegetarians, progressive critical thinkers and contemporary artists and performers with sharp and provocative banners: “Down with Fascism, Homophobia and Sexism”, “Down with the Police State”, “No to Forced Hospital Admission”, “Depression is an Engine of Revolution”, “I Hallucinate, Therefore I Am”, “Joblessness is Madness”, “Autism and Depression are Not Reasons for Aggression”, “Veganism is Humanism”, “Let’s Stop Torture”, or “I Am Not a Resource”.

Gluklya not only recorded these demonstrations, she was also strongly

involved in them, wearing her own protest clothes that she prepared for each event. Her utopian mix of textiles with handwritten slogans contributed to the carnivalesque dimension of the pro-democratic forces. When her film was screened in 2023 in Saint Petersburg's art-space Cinemorgue, poet Aleksandr Skidan referred to Walter Benjamin in criticizing its "aestheticization of politics". His phrase of condemnation was positively reappropriated into the new lexicon for street protests.

Gluklya's film *May 1st, 2017-2019* displays the features of a "documocracy" that Canadian independent documentarian Peter Wintonick describes in his "New Platforms for Docmedia: 'Varient of a Manifesto'".[5] Glukhya approached her 2017 Amsterdam project "Carnival of the Oppressed Feelings" with an artistic conception that fused documentary and democratic ideas, focusing on the fragility of democracy with its ideas of diversity and human rights. As Russian art critic Anna Bitkina wrote: "Through this video recording of a relatively short period of political history we can observe the making of the authoritarian regime, the peak of which we are seeing in today's Russia. In the video we observe year by year the growing control of public space and censorship of slogans. If in 2017 the demonstration body is framed by policemen who can adequately communicate with protesters, in 2019 we see different security forces with different uniforms and ammunition ready to act at any time".[6]

Since 24 February 2022, approximately one million people have left Russia. 300 media sources have been shut down. Public gatherings are forbidden. At least 1010 citizens have been imprisoned as political prisoners. The War in Ukraine still rages on. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has officially condemned Russia as a dictatorship. In such a political climate, Russian cinema cannot help but change.

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