Regimes and their Refuse: Filming Russia in Transition

Masha Shpolberg

Hanna Polak's 2014 documentary, *Something Better to Come* (*Nadejdą lepsze czasy*), condenses fourteen years in the life of a girl into an hour and a half. Like Richard Linklater's fiction film *Boyhood*, released the same year, it offered audiences the pleasure of seeing a child grow into an adult, of tracing considerable changes in character and appearance. Polak's protagonist Yula, however, is no ordinary girl: for much of the film, from age ten to twenty-one, she lives with her mother on the *svalka*,[1] the largest garbage dump in Europe—located just thirteen miles from the Kremlin.[2] Moreover, the years the film covers are not ordinary years: they mark Vladimir Putin's ascent, from his election as president of Russia in 2000 to his consolidation of power following massive protests in 2011–2012 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Consequently, the film becomes a meditation on the first decade and a half of Putin's reign, as well as the human and environmental cost of Russia's economic upturn.

"Longitudinal documentary," where a filmmaker returns to check up on her subject over many years, has an appropriately long history. The approach was pioneered by the East German *Children of Golzow* (*Die Kinder von Golzow,* 1961–2007) series, before being popularized by the more famous British *Up!* series (1964–2019) (Petraitis 2017, 1).[3]

1 In English, *svalka* translates as dump, landfill, or junkyard.

2 In transcribing Russian names, it is common to revert to the legal version, which in this case would be Iuliia. Polak chooses to approximate the diminutive form of the name in the film's promotional materials, however, and consequently gives it as Yula.

3 The fact that several of these projects were launched in the 1960s suggests a connection between more portable cameras, synchronized sound, and cheaper film

© masha shpolberg · 2023
Slavica Bergensia 14 · doi: https://doi.org/10.15845/slavberg.21.c130
This is an open access chapter distributed under the terms of the prevailing cc-by licence.

Both projects sought to trace the impact of social and political systems on participants' lives, from childhood to adulthood. The format quickly spawned imitations around the world, as well as explicit adaptations of the *Up!* series in South Africa, Russia, Japan, and the United States in the 1990s. The focus on children allowed all these projects to present the most visually engaging transformation possible while also defamiliarizing the customs of the society in question by presenting them through the eyes of a child.[4] It is no accident, perhaps, that these projects were frequently initiated by directors and producers who themselves were outsiders to the cultures they found themselves filming.[5] Moreover, the format allowed these series to index significant political changes. While *Children of Golzow* inadvertently captured the effects of a major geopolitical event—the fall of the Berlin wall—on participants' lives, the projects in 1990s South Africa and Russia very consciously set out to do the same.

This chapter situates Polak's film within two distinct traditions: the worldwide popularity of the longitudinal documentary, or "long doc," on the one hand and the specifically Russian interest in trash and garbage dumps on the other. This is an interest that came to the fore in Il'ia Kabakov's conceptual art of the late 1980s and peaked again recently with the 2018–2020 mass protests against a proposed landfill in Shies, between Arkhangelsk and the Komi Republic capital, Syktyvkar.[6] Looking back specifically at the cinematic representation of garbage dumps, or *svalki*, in El'dar Riazanov's *Promised Heaven* (*Nebesa obetovannye*,

---

and this kind of sociological inquiry. Similarly, one could argue that the arrival of digital cameras enabled the new "boom" in longitudinal projects in the 2000s.

4 Hanna Polak has made children her specialty. Her first documentary, *The Children of Leningradsky* (*Dzieci z Leningradzkiego*, 2005), about homeless children living in the eponymous train station, was nominated for an Academy Award. It was the children from the film who first brought her to the dump of *Something Better to Come*.

5 Specifically, the filmmakers were from neighboring countries or colonial offshoots. Tim Hewat, the producer who first came up with the idea for the Up! series, came to the United Kingdom from Australia; Rainer Hartleb, who made *Children of Jordbro* (*Barnen från Jordbro*, 1996), came to Sweden from Germany; and Hanna Polak, originally from Poland, studied filmmaking at VGIK, the Russian national film school, before making *The Children of Leningradsky* and *Something Better to Come* in Russia.

6 I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers of this chapter for drawing my attention both to Kabakov's engagement with refuse and to the Shies protests. Some examples of Kabakov's engagement with trash are the installations "Box with Garbage" ("Iashchik s musorom," 1981) and "The Man Who Never Throws? Anything Away" ("Chelovek, kotoryi nikogda nichego ne vybrasyvaet," 1988).

1991) and Roman Prygunov's *Soulless* (*Dukhless*, 2012), this chapter asks why this site figures so prominently in the post-Soviet Russian imaginary.[7] Ultimately, it argues that filmmakers were drawn to the dump at transitional moments, as a peripheral space from which to reframe the major political and economic shifts at the country's center. All three films become meditations on who is included in Russia's rapid-fire transformation to a capitalist consumer society, and who is excluded, as well as who gets to partake in the feeling of progress, and who is consigned to live in a nearly ahistoric "zone."

Considering Riazanov's and Prygunov's fiction films alongside Polak's documentary allows iconographic patterns to emerge in the way the relationship between Moscow and the dump is configured. It also highlights the increasing convergence between fictional and documentary storytelling. Paradoxically, it is Riazanov's fiction film that adopts the ensemble cast characteristic of the long doc. Polak, meanwhile, chooses to focus on a single individual, much as a fiction feature would. In this particular context, however, her approach takes on additional meaning. The sustained attention Polak affords her subject becomes a way, through the filmic form, of countering the disposable aesthetics of consumer culture and insisting on the human dignity of a population likened to the trash from which they eke out a living. The "closed" format of a single film, while likely a response to the realities of the film festival circuit, also presents a stronger indictment of Putin's regime than the open-ended, ongoing approach of most long docs. In this way, Polak's film models a more ethical, less exploitative way of engaging with the representation of waste and the people who live in its midst.[8]

Geographies of Exclusion

While *Something Better to Come* draws on the well-established tradition of longitudinal docs, the period over which it was produced saw the emergence of a new cinema centered on the representation of waste, and garbage dumps in particular. For the most part, this took place in similarly slow-paced, visually striking documentaries such as Marcos Prado's *Estamira* (*Estamira*, 2004), Lucy Walker, João Jardim, and

7 Alyssa DeBlasio, one of the editors of this volume, generously drew my attention to *Soulless*.

8 This comes across even in the film's title, which refers to Maksim Gor'kii's famous assertion in *The Lower Depths* (*Na dne zhizni*, 1902) that people live for something better to come.

Karen Harley's *Waste Land* (2010), Candida Brady's *Trashed* (2012), and Jiuliang Wang's *Besieged by Waste* (*Wei Cheng La Ji,* 2011), though the animated film *Wall-E* (2008) by Andrew Stanton also stands out as an important milestone.[9] Like *Something Better to Come*, *Estamira* focused on a single, female character, albeit in this case an older woman suffering from schizophrenia. Boris Mitić's 2003 documentary, *Pretty Dyana* (*Lijepa Dyana*), provides an interesting point of comparison within Eastern Europe: the film focuses on a Roma settlement on the outskirts of Belgrade whose residents survive by repairing dilapidated cars and using them to collect recyclable materials such as cardboard and bottles—even as they are continuously hassled by the police.[10] Structurally, however, the closest comparison might be to Jiuliang Wang's *Plastic China* (2016), completed two years after Polak's film, and, like it, focusing on an exceptionally smart and resilient eleven-year-old girl.

All the attention to the problem of waste at the beginning of the twenty-first century raises the question: To what extent does *Something Better to Come* participate in a global discourse and, conversely, to what extent does it reflect a specifically Russian state of affairs?[11] To get at the answer, one has to follow the trash. An underlying concern in all these films is where the trash comes from: whether it is imported from wealthier nations or locally produced. This determines the scope of the film's critique: whether it is aimed at what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has termed "the new planet-wide power hierarchies," or more modestly, at local governments and power structures like the mafia (Bauman 2013, 6). This is the case, for instance, in the documentaries produced during the waste emergency Southern Italy: D'Ambrosio, Calabria and Ruggiero's *Beautiful Country* (*Biùtiful cauntri*, 2007), Rossi-Prudente's *The Baby Needs Some Fresh Air* (*La bambina deve prendere aria*, 2008), and Angrisano's *A Mountain of Lies* (*Una montagna di balle*, 2009).[12] While the majority of the early twenty-first century films position the trash as the result of global capitalism, *Something Better to Come*, like the Italian documentaries, responds primarily to a national context.

9 Michael Glawogger's documentary *Workingman's Death* (2005), which chronicles the extremely difficult jobs human beings will do to survive, also belongs to this moment, even if it does not deal with garbage dumps.

10 The scholar Alice Bardan kindly drew my attention to *Pretty Dyana*.

11 Petraitis (2017) makes the inverse point about longitudinal docs: that they are primarily used to measure social change within a single national context and are rarely compared or looked at from a transnational perspective.

12 For more on these films, as well as the crisis, see Angelone (2011) and Past (2013).

Polak makes this clear in four ways. First, the title credits play over four wide shots of the city of Moscow, the last one setting us firmly in Red Square, facing the Kremlin. Second, the opening shot of the film itself shows trucks ferrying trash from the city to the dump that implies a direct connection between the two: as the city expands so, too, does the garbage dump. Third, the dump is consistently filmed using wide shots, never close-ups that might provide clues about the nature and origins of the trash. Instead of an assortment of individual objects, it is presented as the texture of the ground underfoot and the material substance Yula and the other residents mine for a living. Finally, the radio news broadcasts that the inhabitants of the dump listen to and that Polak carefully layers on the soundtrack refer consistently to events of national (rather than international or local) significance: Putin's election and reelection, and the Moscow theater hostage crisis.[13]

Paradoxically, though it was the collapse of the Soviet Union that led to the worldwide triumph of capitalism, it is never mentioned in the film.[14] This seems to be a common elision: in his book *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2013), Bauman examines the power imbalance between the "developing" and "developed" worlds. Though he comes from the former Soviet bloc himself (specifically Poland), he does not consider the possibility that the former "second world" might occupy a peculiar position between these poles—or amount to an entirely separate category. Where the formerly socialist countries fall is worth considering, however, as the shift from what Bauman terms "a society of producers" to "a society of consumers" has taken place there in a much more condensed and visible manner.

Natalya Chernyshova, Paulina Bren, and Mary Neuburger, among others, have used cinema to track this shift which, they argue, began

13 In October 2002, Chechen militants seized the Dubrovka Theater, holding some 850 people hostage and demanding an immediate end to the Second Chechen War. After four days of failed negotiations, Russian special operations forces pumped an anesthetizing gas into the theater and stormed it. All of the hostage-takers and up to 130 hostages were killed over the course of the crisis.

14 The only exception to this is when the young people at the dump listen to a slightly older man play the 1995 Chizh & Co. song "Soldier at Camp" ("Soldat na privale," 1995), which references the collapse of the USSR. We hear the lyrics: Серп и молот отправляется в зенит, / Ранний луч в пустом мозгу наводит грусть, / Матюгальник на березе голосит, / Как узбеков-латышей сплотила Русь. ("The hammer and sickle reach for the zenith / An early ray in an empty brain makes you sad / The megaphone on the birch tree proclaims / How the Uzbeks and Latvians were unified by Rus'.") (The English translation is mine.)

already in the late socialist period (Chernyshova 2011, 2013; Bren and Neuberger 2012). Due to perennial shortages, however, it played itself out largely in the ideological rather than the material sphere—Soviet consumption could never rival that of Western countries. In the early 2000s, however, the Russian economy experienced exponential growth, particularly in the retail and service sectors (Ivanov & Suvorov 2009).[15]

This expansion in consumption practices becomes apparent when one considers the precedents for Polak's film. Some of the most frequently cited examples of socialist consumption onscreen come from El'dar Riazanov's comedies. It is telling perhaps that the director's last Soviet comedy—and possibly the last film ever to be produced in the USSR—follows all this consumption to its logical conclusion: the garbage dump. *Promised Heaven* focuses on a group of elderly men and women who have, for a wide range of reasons, been driven out of their homes and forced to take up residence on a dump. They are politically organized, with an elected leader dubbed "the President," and represent a microcosm of Soviet society. We are progressively introduced to opposing dyads: the Jewish violinist and his anti-Semitic neighbor, and the Party hardliner and survivors of the Gulag. They refer to themselves, however, as a unified, if simple, people (narod), all the while pointing out that у бедных, как у богатых, нет национальности.[16] This solidarity is contrasted with the cutthroat mores of the Muscovites "out there": we witness sons driving mothers out onto the street and young women cheating old men out of their homes. At the dump, on the contrary, a woman offers her friend "the General" a van of his own, even though he has an apartment in town and only comes to the dump to visit.

On a literal level, *Promised Heaven* reflects the wild inflation that devalued retirees' pensions, plunging them into poverty even before distinct classes of haves and have-nots emerged in the 1990s. On a more conceptual level, the film is searching for narrative and visual tools with which to process the major shift that was perestroika and that would become the collapse of the USSR. Polak's film captures the dump and the forgotten people who inhabit it at a similarly pivotal moment in Russian history. Indeed, the two films may be thought of as inverse bookends,

15 Ivanov and Suvorov provide an astounding figure: "In 2007, retail turnover in comparable prices was 244% relative to 1999" (596). They also confirm that "the fastest growth in retail turnover was registered between 2004 and 2007"—the middle years of Polak's project (569).

16 "the poor, like the rich, have no nationality." (All film translations are mine.)

with Riazanov's film responding to the dissolution of a regime and the economic breakdown that followed, and Polak's—to the emergence of a new one, buoyed by increasing stability and prosperity. Moreover, where Riazanov crafts wickedly funny satirical fiction (albeit with a supernatural twist in this instance), Polak goes in for sincere nonfiction. Despite these differences, the filmmakers turn to the subject of the dump for the same reason: both see its value as a peripheral space from which to reframe the political and economic changes taking place in the urban center.

A somewhat unexpected additional data point is provided by Roman Prygunov's commercially successful comedy-drama, *Soulless*, produced toward the end of the period covered by Polak. The film focuses on an ambitious young banker who finds himself dissatisfied with the endless cycle of consumption that has become his life. Most of the action unfolds in the Moscow International Business Center, a neighborhood of glass towers and sanitized, seamless spaces that was being actively built up at the time of the filming, as well as restaurants and nightclubs around the city. The film is intended primarily for a domestic audience, and a large part of its appeal lies in the access it provides viewers to these elite spaces. The film is overtly critical of global capitalism, yet obviously relishes the variety and sensual pleasures it provides. Released in 2012, the film depicts the last innocent moment, as it were, as the country was transitioning from the "Medvedev years" back to Putin's control, just before the squashing of the opposition protests and the expansionist politics that would lead to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Consequently, the film feels more like a celebration of how far the country has come in the two decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union than any kind of genuine critique.

The only exception to this are the opening credits, which trace a trash truck's journey from the heart of the Business Center to the dump Polak was documenting at that very moment. Only at the end of the film do we realize that Max (Danila Kozlovskii), the film's protagonist, is inside the truck. In a typically Dostoevskian plot, Max, a banker, has lost everything over the course of the film—his money, his friends, his love interest—but has reclaimed his soul. After a particularly eventful night, he passes out in the trash truck and is driven out to the city's limits. The film may thus be read as a preamble to Polak's documentary, showing where the trucks are coming from—the world of the have-it-

alls as opposed to that of her have-nots. For a film that wants to be seen as socially conscious, this opening also becomes a way of acknowledging that the spaces of global capitalism are able to remain spotless only so long as the trash is removed on schedule; that their illusion of purity and minimalism is predicated on the labor of cleaners and trash truck drivers; and, finally, that for every self-made Max in this new economy there are a thousand "losers."

Interestingly, all three films emphasize their dumps' proximity to downtown Moscow and the forms of transportation that tie the two together. Riazanov's dump lies adjacent to the railroad tracks. Early on we see an American developer, who plans to build a condom factory and hotel at the site, film the territory from a railroad bridge. "It's not too far from the center of Moscow, that's also good," he remarks (in English). Prygunov's beautifully orchestrated images emphasize the trash truck's smooth movement through Moscow. The streets and highways come to resemble arteries connecting the International Business Center, Moscow's ravenous stomach, to the literal dumping grounds, the city's bowels. Along the way, the truck passes through a number of check points, suggesting that capitalism is a hierarchical system whose elites are invested in gatekeeping. Finally, with every successive shot, the truck moves from narrow to ever more open spaces, so that its final arrival at the dump is paradoxically associated with a feeling of release. In this way, the credit sequence articulates the tension at the heart of the film between lust for the lifestyle and prestige afforded to those at the top of the new system (associated with the verticality of the Business Center's skyscrapers) and the yearning for wide-open spaces (the famous Russian concept of *prostor*) and greater equality in human relations (associated with the horizontality of the dump).

Figure 1: An American developer surveys the dump in El’dar Riazanov’s *Promised Heavens*

Figure 2: The trash truck moves from the narrow, vertical spaces of capitalism to the wide-open, horizontal spaces of the dump in the opening credits of Roman Prygunov's *Soulless*

Figure 3: Europe's largest garbage dump, outside Moscow, in Hanna Polak's *Something Better to Come*

Polak similarly opens her film with an image that asserts the dump's connection to the city beyond: the aforementioned wide shot of a group of children walking on the high wall-like mound marking the border of the dump, while trucks ferry garbage to and from the shimmering white apartment blocks on the horizon. Over this image, Polak's voice-over (in English) proffers the shocking information that the dump is located "only 13 miles from Red Square and Kremlin." This comment reminds viewers that this kind of high angle shot is usually associated with a position of knowledge and power. In Riazanov's film, it is the gaze of ownership—it belongs to the American developer quite literally surveying the land his company has just acquired. In Prygunov's film, it is the gaze of the film-consumer, accustomed to easily legible and beautifully composed images. And in Polak's film, it invites viewers to imagine how whatever regime may be ensconced in the Kremlin views its territory. Both Riazanov and Polak additionally set up a tension between the land's use- and exchange-value: the on-the-ground view of the dump's inhabitants and the high-angle view of the developers in Riazanov's film; the motion of the trucks and the children in opposite directions in Polak's.

Though the protagonists of both films refer to the areas they inhabit using the Russian word *svalka*, Riazanov's dump is really more of an en-

campment: an agglomeration of rusted train cars and buses converted into hovels. The space around them is strewn with paper, tires, broken crates, and other debris, but it is not the site of consistent, daily dumping. The dump Polak films ten years later is, by contrast, the largest in Europe—two miles long, one mile across and fourteen stories high. As the dump has expanded, it has become harder to escape. Riazanov's protagonists were much more mobile than Polak's. His film begins and ends at the *svalka*, but most of its duration is devoted to sketching out each of the characters' backstories. Consequently, we see them come and go at will. Polak made the choice to film her protagonists exclusively at the dump, though presumably they must leave it now and then to purchase food and other critical supplies. As Małgorzata Sadowska writes, the dump in *Something Better to Come* becomes a kind of "zone," where regular laws do not apply, as well as a totalizing space in which people "grow up, work, have children, and die" (Sadowska 2015, 83).[17]

Ultimately, the films are equally pessimistic. Though Riazanov's characters might move back and forth between the two worlds with ease—the regular world of the city and the world of the dump—the cyclical structure of his narrative, too, suggests there is no way out, only up: in a somewhat heavy-handed metaphor, the dump's residents escape the brutal police force by climbing back aboard an engine car inhabited by a Bolshevik old-timer—a symbolic train of history—and being lifted into the air by friendly aliens who promise to take them to a place где можно жить, как люди.[18] In Polak's film, the lack of an outside reproduces the protagonists' sense of claustrophobia and inescapable dread. The film makes it clear that Yula's happy ending is an exception. What lingers long after the film concludes is a young man's assertion that волосы дыбом встают на голове, когда думаю о том, что я здесь проживу всю жизнь,[19] and Yula's own description of it as болото, которое засасывает.[20] It is a far cry from the romanticized release suggested by Prygunov's opening credits.

The only major difference between Riazanov's and Polak's visions concerns the presence of the state. In Riazanov's film, institutions might

17 "Tu się dorasta, pracuje, rodzi dzieci, umiera." (All English translations of Sadowska in this chapter are mine.)
18 "where they can live like people"
19 "it freaks me out when I come to think that I might be spending my whole life here"
20 "a swamp that sucks you in"

be falling apart, but they still exist.[21] The dump residents' shenanigans land them first in prison and then in a home for the elderly. It quickly becomes clear that the only alternative to life at the dump is an institutionalized life—or no life at all. When asked what will become of them, the translator working for the Americans responds that some of them will be sent to the home for the elderly and some to a home for the insane. Except for a brief hospital scene, there is no sense of this institutional landscape in *Something Better to Come*, only an ever-present fear of the police, who beat up the residents and burn their hovels, and a generalized mistrust of authorities. Russia's economic miracle appears to have been accompanied by a retraction, or at least a reinvigorated hostility of the state, towards its most vulnerable citizens. If, in Riazanov's film, the trouble was selling out to the West, at least the enemy was, to some extent, external. In Polak's film, it has become internal.

Expendable People

Although *Something Better to Come* features fascinating views of the dump, it is unapologetically anthropocentric: Polak's concern lies with the people she encounters first and foremost.[22] Like the *Up!* series and most other long docs, the film begins as ethnography, interested in capturing the day-to-day details of life on the dump and, as time goes on, morphs into biography—a chronicle of the more significant episodes in the protagonist's life. Early shots illustrate how residents survive by building huts from construction pellets and felt, boiling snow in the winter to get water, and frying potatoes for most of their meals, as well as how they have fun—they sing, play, dye their hair, and generally style themselves, even at the dump. As Yula grows, the focus shifts away from her lively group of friends and on to her exclusively. The tone grows somber. The camera is there when Yula's mother tells her she has been raped and, later, follows Yula's emotional state attentively when she finds herself pregnant at age sixteen, desperately searching for a place to live and raise her baby. She ultimately realizes the impossibility of the

21 When Efimiia, the artist, asks a prison guard for sheets, he affirms that she is entitled to them, but indicates there is a shortage.

22 Some of this is circumstantial. In an interview for *Film Quarterly*, Polak admitted that "this is also where I made a mistake. I was so concentrated on the life of the people that I didn't shoot enough in the surrounding environment. […] From the garbage dump where I was shooting, you could very clearly see the city […] In the editing I was looking for more of this kind of footage of how vast the dump was and how close it was to Moscow, but I didn't have it" (Shpolberg 2016, 71).

task; in the film's most heartbreaking moment, we see her walk away, leaving the baby behind at the hospital. The drama surrounding this moment points to the core ethical problem at the heart of the project: How to film people who have been deemed superfluous from society's point of view?

For Bauman, the problem of "human waste and wasted humans" is inseparable from the process of modernization (Bauman 2013, 6). In *Wasted Lives*, he argues that modernization has generated not only material, but also human waste. For centuries, colonial territories both supplied imperial powers with raw materials and served as "dumping grounds" for excess population (Bauman 2013, 5). This process of extraction and dumping continued unabated until the colonies themselves modernized, broke away, and became independent nations. The world, according to Bauman, is now "full": there is no place for the "refugees, the displaced, asylum seekers [and] migrants" to go—they have become "the waste of globalization" (Bauman 2013, 58).

Russia never had extensive overseas colonies, and its imperial expansion looked very different. Nevertheless, it is possible to think of Riazanov's and Polak's films as responses to a not-too-dissimilar but much more rapid process of resource extraction and monetization that took place in two stages: in the 1990s, with the privatization of previously state-owned assets and means of industrial production, and the 2000s, with the explosion in demand for consumer goods and services. Riazanov's film was produced just as the Soviet space was beginning to enter the free market economy; Prygunov's—as the success of the global banking system seemed guaranteed; and Polak's—at the same time that the term "Capitalocene" gained worldwide traction. Unlike the more general "Anthropocene," Capitalocene suggested that the dire, ongoing changes to the environment were the result of a specific economic order rather than human activity as such (Moore 2016). Both films point to the fact that these transitions—first to a market and then to a consumer economy—could not take place without rendering a whole layer of the population unnecessary, or obsolete. The shimmering city on the horizon could not grow without the dump growing in turn.

Moreover, each party—the city and the dump—relies for its self-definition on the other. In *Purity and Danger* (2002), anthropologist Mary Douglas argued for a dialectical relationship between order and dirt. "There is no such thing as absolute dirt," she wrote. "It exists in the

eye of the beholder. [...] Dirt offends against order" yet is "a by-product of the creation of [that very] order" (Douglas 2002, 2, 198). The film does not linger on this, but the repeated wide shots featuring the dump in the foreground and housing blocks in the background suggest that Moscow's new bourgeoisie both produces and sets itself against this new underclass. We get a glimmer of this dynamic in another heartbreaking moment, when a weary woman exclaims: В автобусе едешь, а на нас смотрят как на вшей, на блох, на тараканов. А чё, мы не люди? А куда нам деваться? А если у меня нет ни дома… Всё, нет ничего… Почему я должна пропадать? Я же тоже человек. [...] Я живу. Я же не могу пойти просто и умереть.[23]

The film's raison d'être is to move the viewer from a reaction of disgust like the one the woman describes to one of compassion. Yet it is worth pausing on why exactly this might be necessary. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva identified something she called the abject—that which precedes signification and forces us to confront our own animality and, therefore, mortality in the most direct way possible. "A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death," she wrote. "In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup and masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva 1982, 3). Societies deal with the abject by casting it out or purifying it through religion and art. In *Upheavals of Thought* (2003) and *Hiding from Humanity* (2006), Martha Nussbaum takes this argument a step further, studying the way disgust may be mobilized as a political emotion. She notes that disgust is not one of the built-in emotions. Children know only distaste; disgust develops as they grow older, making it a socially learned emotion (Nussbaum 2003, 200). Over time, Nussbaum hypothesizes, we learn to be disgusted by bodily fluids and functions because they remind us of our "animal body" and, consequently, "our vulnerability to decay and to becoming waste products ourselves" (Nussbaum 2003, 203). She writes: "So powerful is the desire to cordon ourselves off from our animality that we often don't stop at feces, cockroaches, and slimy animals. We need a group of humans to bound ourselves against, who will come to exemplify the

23 "When we ride the bus, people look at us as if we're lice, fleas, roaches. Aren't we human? Where are we to go? What if I have no home… I have nothing… Why am I supposed to vanish? I am also a person [...] I am alive. I can't just go and die."

boundary line between the truly human and the basely animal" (Nussbaum 2006, 107). Disgust thus plays an important role in constructing people of a difference race, ethnicity, gender, or class as "Other" by suggesting that they are unclean and not fully human (Nussbaum 2003, 347). This is why conservatives appeal to disgust (and shame) in their attempts to preserve hierarchies and contain social elements they perceive as threatening—and why Nussbaum finds it to be an "inherently problematic" emotion, "an enemy of the ideals of liberal democracy" (Nussbaum 2006, 88, 206, 102).

Both Riazanov's and Polak's films stage the process of othering by people who themselves have been brutally othered. The anti-Semite, in attacking his Jewish neighbor, condenses the discourse of Soviet state anti-Semitism into one monologue. Polak, in turn, judiciously includes a scene showing a teenage boy shaving another teenage boy's head on the dump. The latter, we learn, is hoping to join the army and take part in the ongoing war in Chechnya. He indulges in daydreams about how he would treat his Chechen prisoners of war and shares his belief that на войне, в Чечне, например, вырастешь, будешь настоящим, крепким мужиком.[24] Later, the film returns to the conflict in a striking way when Polak interpolates footage she herself had shot of the Moscow theater hostage crisis, specifically the bodies of the dead being brought outside. In a rare interventionist move in an otherwise observational documentary, she then prompts the children at the dump to talk about the event. Their responses are fragmentary and focused on the mechanics of what took place rather than the meaning of the crisis, demonstrating that, unlike the older boy, they have not yet succumbed to the desire to elevate themselves by debasing others.

In his article on "garbage aesthetics," Robert Stam notes that the term was pioneered in the Latin American context in order to "revalorize by inversion what had formerly been seen as negative, especially within colonialist discourse," and is defined by its "constitutive hybridity" (Stam 1999, 59). In Riazanov's film, this hybridity emerges in the characters' understanding of Soviet slogans as obsolete, "trash," and their ability to mix and swap ideological positions at a moment's notice—usually to great comic effect. Thus Efimiia, the artist begging in the street, asks passersby to give to a former first pioneer and a victim of Stalin's re-

24 "while at war in Chechnya, for example, you will grow up, become a real, strong man"

pressions in the same breath. By the time Polak was filming, all trace of these ideological positions has disappeared, replaced by a much more banal and universal mistrust of government. The only ideological discourse that remains is that of ethnic hatred and strife. Within this logic, it makes sense that the last reference to historic time in the film is to the war in the Donbas, implicitly positioned as the new Chechnya.

Divergent Temporalities

Time and again, *Something Better to Come* reminds us just how expendable the lives of its protagonists are. The young men who drive the trucks delivering and compressing the trash brandish their toughness by casually counting the number of times they have driven over people without realizing it. The residents themselves complain of the police burning down their hovels with people still inside. At one point, Polak makes a radical choice: as one of the drivers explains, бабка в коричневом пальто, представляешь? Слилась с мусором и её не видно,[25] Polak cuts to a wide shot that holds longer than usual: in the midst of the textured, trash-strewn landscape, we realize with horror, we can see a burnt body. This shocking image recalls another dialectic: the one Giorgio Agamben draws between an obscure figure of Roman law known as the *homo sacer* and the sovereign or *basileus*. The *homo sacer* was someone declared to be outside the law and who thus could be killed with impunity (Agamben 2015). Both the *homo sacer* and the *basileus* exist in a state of exception with regard to the law, but with one possessing all the power and the other—none of it. The people in Polak's film may be thought of as occupying the opposite pole from the government for the same reason: their powerlessness highlights the state's growing omnipotence.

Though Polak is, for the most part, committed to a non-interventionist, observational aesthetic, she allows for much more manipulation on the soundtrack. Much of the music we hear in the film is diegetically anchored and features contemporary rock bands. On top of the music, Polak carefully layers snippets from radio programs referring to Putin or featuring speeches by him. The result is a sense of two divergent temporalities: the cyclical time of the dump, where nothing happens, and the linear, political time of Putin's rise.

25 "the woman was in a brown coat, can you imagine? She merged with the trash and you couldn't see her"

As many of the residents point out, the most horrific part of their experience is its duration: how long they have been at the dump, the feeling of sameness every day, and lack of any indication that things will change in the future. As Sadowska writes: "If not for Yula's changing face and the succession of hair colors, there would be no way to know that years have passed, for on that largest European garbage dump nothing gives us an indication of concrete time" (Sadowska 2015, 83).[26] Polak reinforces this impression by including a shot of two young men burning a rolodex calendar in a fire, one day at a time, as well as a scene in which a younger boy asks Yula to tell a story and she responds, У меня в жизни вообще нет никаких историй.[27] Yula, again, refers to the dump as a swamp; Sadowska calls it a "zone" (Sadowska 2015, 83); and another dump resident calls it a polygon (a military testing ground). These terms all imply stagnation, isolation from the world, and a post-apocalyptic or post-nuclear atmosphere that draws attention to the invisible toxicity of the site.

The radio broadcasts, by contrast, give the impression of things moving steadily ahead for Putin after his election as president. As the years pass, however, his speeches come to sound increasingly cruel layered over images of the dump. In one speech, he says: Одна чрезвычайно важная тема, это то, как мы живём и где мы живём, каждый из нас, представьте себе, даже я. У меня тоже иногда ржавая вода из труб идет.[28] In another scene, shot on New Year's Eve, we see a group of dump residents, one holding a baby, listening to Putin's speech on the radio. He says: Особенно приятно, что за уходящий год у нас родилось больше новых российских граждан чем в прошлом. Это - хороший знак. Это значит, что люди в нашей стране увереннее смотрят в будущее. Пусть будут наполнены уютом ваши дома. Счастья вам. С новым годом![29] In this environment, Putin's words resound with bitter irony: they assume a world in which this particular

26 "Gdyby nie zmieniająca się twarz Juli i kolejne kolory farby na jej włosach, nie sposób byłoby dostrzec, ze mijają lata, bo na tym największym europejskim śmietniku nic nas nie odsyła do konkretnych czasów."

27 "In my life, there are absolutely no stories."

28 "One extremely important issue is how we live and where we live, each one of us, even I. Just imagine, sometimes rusty water comes out of my pipes, too."

29 "One particularly pleasing fact is that more people were born this year as compared to last year. This is a good sign. It means people in our country are looking to the future with confidence. I hope your homes will be filled with comfort. I wish you happiness. Happy New Year."

audience simply does not exist. As Susan Signe Morrison powerfully puts it: "wasted humans—disdained, ignored, and made invisible—are ontologically non-existent" (Morrison 2015, 97).

Conclusion

Scholars concur on two points: that attending to waste makes possible a particularly trenchant critique of modernity and presupposes an ethical orientation toward the world. Zygmunt Bauman, Gay Hawkins, Susan Signe Morrison, and John Scanlan all point out the ways in which trash can be subversive, "sticky," insurgent (Bauman 2013; Scanlan 2005; Hawkins 2006; Morrison 2013, 2015). *Something Better to Come*, produced over the course of the same decade and a half as their studies, provides a compelling case in point. Polak, like Riazanov, is a humanist: her mission first and foremost is to restore dignity to a population that has been othered, treated with disgust, and made invisible—in other words, likened to the trash they depend on to survive. At the same time, she does not romanticize her subjects, acknowledging the ways in which some of them perpetuate violence, othering people on the basis of ethnicity in the same way they themselves have been othered on the basis of class.

Along the way, she discovers, in Douglas's words, that "there is energy in the margins and unstructured areas" (Douglas 2002, 141). As the opening credits of the film make clear, she uses the peripheral status of the dump much like Riazanov had before her—to provide a subtle critique of events taking place in the center. She does this through the ironic juxtaposition of image and sound, the voice of the *basileus* and the faces of the *homo sacer*. The two films also share an intuition about how filmic form specifically might, in Susan Signe Morrison's words, offer "restitution" (Morrison 2013, 464). Riazanov already in 1991 sensed that the way to counter consumer aesthetics was through sustained attention. The backstories he provides for each of his characters can be thought of as a prototype for Polak's continuous observation of Yula. Amidst the wave of "dump" documentaries, Polak's longitudinal approach seems to offer an ethical and elegant solution to the cycle of commodification, consumption, and waste that even cinema cannot escape.

Considering Polak's documentary in light of Riazanov's fiction film also illustrates the extent to which the production context influences the form. The humor of Riazanov's films relied on a deep familiarity with Soviet culture, and they were always produced with a domestic audience

in mind. The straight vérité style of Polak's documentary, in turn, has to do with the fact that it was intended from the outset for the international film festival circuit. This is, in part, why the irony Polak deploys differs substantially from the comedy Riazanov became known for: its goal is to mark the depth of the cleavage between the powerful and the powerless rather than to restore community through laughter. It is also why the film works so hard to balance the national-context-specific brunt of its critique with the universality of its story.

The film's originality, however, lies in its rethinking of scale. Many of the documentaries produced on garbage dumps use the particular affordances of cinema—zooms, crane shots—to shock viewers into realizing the extent of the problem. *Something Better to Come*, in contrast, is not particularly invested in this. It is almost as if the film's ambitions regarding scale have been displaced from the spatial to the temporal plane. Instead of telling us what we already know—that the comforts of modernity come at the price of vast swaths of land surrendered to waste—the film challenges us to stick with it and, through our presence of mind, to redeem at least one person.

References

Agamben, Giorgio 2015, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Palo Alto, Cal.

Angelone, Anita 2011, "Talking Trash: Documentaries and Italy's 'Garbage Emergency,'" *Studies in Documentary Film* 5 (2–3), 145–56.

Angrisano, Nicola 2009, *Una montagna di balle,* Naples.

Apted, Michael 1964–2019, *Up!*, London.

Bauman, Zygmunt 2013, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Cambridge.

Brady, Candida 2012, *Trashed*, Oxford.

Bren, Paulina & Mary Neuberger, eds. 2012, *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, New York.

Chernyshova, Natalya 2011, "Philistines on the Big Screen: Consumerism in Soviet Cinema of the Brezhnev Era," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 5 (2), 227–54.

Chernyshova, Natalya 2013, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, London.

Chizh & Co. 1995, "Soldat na privalie," *O liubvi*, Moscow.

D'Ambrosio, Andrea, Esmeralda Calabria & Peppe Ruggiero 2007,

Biùtiful cauntri, Milano.
Douglas, Mary 2002, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London.
Glawogger, Michael 2005, *Workingman's Death*, Strasbourg, Vienna & Merzhausen, Ger.
Gor'kii, Maksim 1902, *Na dne zhizni*, Munich.
Hartleb, Rainer 1996, *Barnen från Jordbro*, Stockholm.
Hawkins, Gay 2006, *The Ethics of Waste*, Lanham, Md.
Ivanov, Vladimir & Alexander Suvorov 2009, "Incomes and Consumption of the Russian Population during the Crisis and Alternatives to the Government Policies in This Sphere," *Studies on Russian Economic Development* 20 (96), 569–77.
Junge, Winfried 1961–2007, *Die Kinder von Golzow*, Berlin.
Kabakov, Il'ia 1981, "Iashchik s mussorom," Moscow.
Kabakov, Il'ia 1988, "Chelovek, kotoryi nichego ne vybrasyvaet," Moscow.
Kristeva, Julia 1982, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York.
Mitić, Boris 2003, *Lijepa Dyana*, Belgrade.
Moore, Jason W. 2016, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Oakland, Cal.
Morrison, Susan Signe 2013, "Waste Aesthetics: Form as Restitution," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20 (3), 464–78.
Morrison, Susan Signe 2015, *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter*, New York.
Nussbaum, Martha 2003, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge.
Nussbaum, Martha 2006, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton, N.J.
Past, Elena 2013, "'Trash Is Gold': Documenting the Ecomafia and Campania's Waste Crisis," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20 (3), 597–621.
Petraitis, Marian 2017, "Exceeding National Borders? Grasping Everyday Life in Longitudinal Documentaries," paper presented at Exploring the "Transnational" in Film Studies Conference, Zurich, 7–9 June, *https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/168400/1/Vortrag_Transnational_Petraitis.pdf* (last accessed 2 April 2022).
Polak, Hanna 2005, *Dzieci z Leningradzkiego*, Warsaw.

Polak, Hanna 2015, *Nadejdą lepsze czasy*, Warsaw and Copenhagen.
Prado, Marcos 2004, *Estamira*, Rio de Janeiro.
Prygunov, Roman 2012, *Dukhless*, Moscow.
Riazanov, El'dar 1991, *Nebesa obetovannye*, Moscow.
Rossi-Prudente, Barbara 2008, *La bambina deve prendere aria*, Caserta.
Sadowska, Małgorzata 2015, "Nadejdą lepsze czasy," *Kino* 50 (581: November), 83.
Scanlan, John 2005, *On Garbage*, London.
Shpolberg, Masha 2016, "Looking Out for *Something Better to Come*: Interview with Hanna Polak," *Film Quarterly* 69 (4), 65–71.
Stam, Robert 1999, "Palimpsestic Aesthetics: A Meditation on Hybridity and Garbage," *Performing Hybridity,* eds. May Joseph and Jennifer Natalya Fink, Minneapolis, Minn., 59–78.
Stanton, Andrew 2008, *WALL-E*, Los Angeles.
Walker, Lucy, João Jardim & Karen Harley 2010, *Waste Land*, Sao Paulo & London.
Wang, Jiuliang 2011, *Wei Cheng La Ji*, Beijing.
Wang, Jiuliang 2016, *Plastic China*, Beijing.