

## FILM REVIEWS

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**The Event.** Dir. Sergei Loznitsa. The Netherlands: Atoms and Void, 2015. 74 minutes. Black and White. Russian with English Subtitles.

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Like his 2004 *Blockade* and 2007 *Revue*, Sergei Loznitsa's 2014 *The Event* is constructed from archival footage; in this case, material shot by eight cameramen in St. Petersburg during the attempted coup of August 1991. Yet it is with sound that the film begins, as Petersburg residents mass in the city's squares, hunched intently over radios, crowded around cars (doors open, stereos blaring), and pressing wirelasses to their ears. Broadcasts that contain very little news crackle with static, sonically encapsulating a situation in which, in the film's words, "no one understands anything."

*The Event*, indeed, depicts the coup as a period of suspended animation. Traffic and work seem to have stopped; pedestrians spill over sidewalks and onto the street. Petersburg's residents are caught up in the state of emergency's uncertain present: a group of protestors tentatively, then boldly, repurposes a trailer as a barricade, protecting against violence that never seems to arrive.

Gradually, it becomes evident that Loznitsa is using sound not only to depict the stasis and confusion of these August days, but also to lend them dramatic form. There is, for instance, *Swan Lake*, which, in the absence of news, was shown repeatedly on Soviet state television during the coup. In *The Event*, too, Tchaikovskii's motifs are cyclical: they appear and reappear over the black film leader, adding moments of tremulous suspense to the film, and marking its discrete acts, which take the viewer from the "event's" early moments to the point at which, several days later, the Russian flag flies over St. Petersburg.

Loznitsa, however, also subtly adjusts *The Event's* audioscape. At times, he adds non-diegetic sounds to the dominant vérité tropes of radios and feedback, Kino and Vladimir Vysotskii: a panikhida (requiem), crescendoing faintly. And at other points, he amplifies diegetic sounds such as the steady, soft drumbeat of rain on the crowd's umbrellas in Palace Square, creating a lulling counterpoint to the film's pervasive tension. As a result, it is both startling and moving when, in a later scene, the crowd raises a sea of hands in honor of the Lithuanians killed in the January Events of the same year, in perfect silence.

That the film is sonic in this way does not mean that its images do not tell a story in their own right, and *The Event* (a compilation film, after all) is keenly aware of its documentary status. However, while the revolutions of 1989–1992 are frequently associated with the watercolor palette of video, Loznitsa's film more closely resembles its predecessors from 1968. The Sixties marked the height of cinéma vérité, and like Czech director Karel Vachek's *Elective Affinities*, among others (also black and white, also shot on celluloid), *The Event* is concerned less with documenting the momentousness of the coup—many of whose principal events were confined to Moscow—than with the everydayness that persists in a state of exception. Loznitsa makes this

clear in a sequence in which the Soviet flag is folded, awkwardly but carefully, in preparation for its replacement by the Russian tricolor.

Such questions about media, history, and documentation structure the film's conclusion, beginning with a discomfiting ten seconds in which a news videographer's Sony camera films *The Event's* cinematographer in reverse shot. The final act, which follows, records "deputies and observers" at Smolnyi, the local Communist Party headquarters, as they attempt to preserve evidence of the Party's role in the now-failed coup. The ad hoc solution is to seal each office with a strip of paper, signed and glued to the door, a process undertaken with hurried gravity and documented by a gaggle of photographers, videographers, and reporters. As the crowd moves on, Loznitsa cuts to a series of long shots of Smolnyi's now-empty hallways. It is the end of the film, and the end of a reel, and the proverbial hair flickers in the gate. This reference to film's materiality suggests that, like the paper behind the sealed doors, it is a medium whose evidentiary weight differs from that of video—which, with age, has a tendency to blur and to squiggle. And though *The Event's* closing titles ask whether enough has been done with documents such as those at Smolnyi to interrogate the history of the Soviet Union, the film itself is an eloquent response to this very question.

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***The Babushkas of Chernobyl.*** Dir. Holly Morris and Anne Bogart. Powderkeg Productions, 2015. 72 min. Color.

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*The Babushkas of Chernobyl* follows the daily lives of a trio of elderly women scratching out an existence in one of the world's most contaminated landscapes—the "exclusion zone" surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, site of the devastating Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe in 1986. The film is a touching reflection on aging, friendship, "home," historical memory, and nature. The babushkas' intimate connection to this (contaminated) land—Chernobyl, they insist, is their "homeland" (*rodina*)—is the bedrock of their personal and collective identity. They are in love with this land, the source of much of their subsistence and conviviality. One babushka is a literal tree-hugger; she leans on trees to receive their fortifying energy. Some of the film's richest scenes portray the babushkas around a table, reminiscing and sharing a collective feast of food they've grown and gathered, right here in the Chernobyl zone—bright pickles and tomatoes, colorful berry jams, marinated mushrooms, and assorted greens and herbs. Indeed, the film is a vivid counter to the popular assumption that the Chernobyl zone is a deserted wasteland devoid of life and vigor. Although still and forever dangerously contaminated, the zone in fact is teeming with plant life and wildlife, and, as this film shows us, is still very much *home* to this group of plucky, resilient women.

With a welcome light touch, *The Babushkas of Chernobyl* intervenes in several scholarly and popular conversations about the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the politics and risks of nuclear energy more broadly. At