

# SISTERLESS

Yaniya Mikhalina





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# Introduction

Marianne Zamecznik

## I AM SORRY

Bähil bulgız [Sorry for everything] *There are many ways to say “I am sorry” in Tatar, depending on the situation. Bähil bulgız means “sorry for everything” and is usually used before a person dies or goes on a lengthy journey.*

– Excerpt from the book *The Struggle Starts with the Struggle of the Tongue: An Affective Dictionary of Tatar*<sup>1</sup>

*Pain is not a competition. We have to live in a world where all types of pain can co-exist. It is not a competition about which territory feels worse.*

– Yaniya Mikhailina<sup>2</sup>

Trondheim kunstmuseum is proud to present the exhibition *Sisterless* by the Tatar-Russian artist Yaniya Mikhailina. Mikhailina is a PhD candidate at KIT in Trondheim. The exhibition follows her artistic research project that revolves around the notion of madness – not understood as a disease, but as a political category that attempts to draw up the boundaries of reality. Mikhailina explores the documentary film genre with a focus on the feminization of the production process, a methodological framework that allows her to create documentaries that promote listening rather than observation with care rather than efficiency.

## THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND RUSSIAN COLONIALISM

Yaniya Mikhailina took part in a panel debate *Boycott – What to do? What not to do?* at Trondheim kunstmuseum on 23 March 2022. Called by the urgency of the war in Ukraine, cultural institutions across Europe asked how efficient cultural boycotts can be in instigating political change. In the panel Mikhailina spoke to the urgency of a feminization of politics in times of war. In many ways, her work can be read as a resistance to the ongoing Russian imperialism. She spoke against the universality of boycotting something or someone based on belonging to a nation, to a gender, a race, religion or to anything. Instead we have to allow the picture to be complex – and painful.

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1 *The Struggle Starts with the Struggle of the Tongue: An Affective Dictionary of Tatar* by Joen Vedel and Yana Mikhailina (2022) published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, Köln.

2 Panel discussion: *Boycott - What to do? What not to do?* at Trondheim kunstmuseum 23. March 2022. <https://trondheimkunstmuseum.no/paneldiskusjon-boikott>



Yaniya Mikhalina, *Comrades, How Long Will You Torment Us?*, 2022, film stills



## THE COLONIAL MAP OF RUSSIA

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the republics which were geographically located on the edges of USSR gained their independence, such as Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Georgia and the Baltic states. The national republics which are located in the center of Russia never managed to separate. Currently there are twenty national republics, amongst them Tatarstan, where Yaniya Mikhalina is from, Karelia, Bashkortostan, Kalmykia, Buryatia and Chechnya, the Muslim republic in southern Russia that most of the world community knows since its fight for independence in the nineties. There are disturbing parallels between the war in Chechnya and the current invasion of Ukraine, in the use of heavy artillery and the indiscriminate attacking of urban centers. The war in Chechnya was initiated by Putin and an important reason why he came to power, which in turn led to the current puppet government of Kadyrov in today's Chechnya. There are over eighty ethnicities living in the territory of current Russia, including Sami in the north. In the panel discussion Mikhalina stressed that Ukraine is not the only target of Putin's white imperialism. As a Tatar woman, Mikhalina's claim is that in order to end the war, Russia needs to be decolonized, because these oppressions are interconnected.

*Good evening dear neighbors, I am very grateful for the Russian TV to visit our capital city Minsk and give people an opportunity to speak out. A small request: We are not going to kick anyone out, we are not going to oppress anyone, but please let everything be in its place. We don't claim back our Belarusian territories Bryanshina and Smolenshina, which are part of Russia now. We just ask you to leave us alone and give us the possibility to live how we want. Easy or hard, but it will be our own life.*

– Anonymous man in Minsk 1992

The video installation *Comrades, How Long Will You Torment Us?* (2022) is a letter from the past 30 years ago to the catastrophic present; from a very similar moment in Russia's history. The video material is an important documentation of Russian colonialism, not from its historical "beginnings" (which is different for each national republic) but in the transition from Soviet to Russian identity – told by those who did not fit in.

## A FEMINIZATION OF ART AND POLITICS

For Mikhalina, artistic practice is an important terrain for mobilization of non-nationalist thinking. She suggests that a feminization of politics might lead us out of this current inhabitable situation. As an artist and documentary film maker she speaks from the position of affect, claiming that it is politically important to stay emotionally engaged in the world discourse. Our responsibility is to act, to respond to this war, whether we feel that we have compre-

hensive knowledge about the conflict or not. This requires a fundamental shift from the capitalist logic to feminist logics where everything has its own place and we solidarize with not all things at once, instead we deal with each thing on their own terms. To Mikhalina, making art is a feminist act because it is a concrete act, dealing with concrete things, discourses and topics. Female labor is a labor of necessity. It is a labor that comes out of urgency, where, ethically, you cannot do it in any other way. It is important to think about war and speak about war and fight against war on feminist terms, in concrete terms. This allows for a collective experience in which every effort is appreciated and included. The feminization of politics is a direct opposition to totalitarianism, which is a state of generalization. The process of feminization breaks the construct of the united whole into a million concrete pieces. And thus, art is not a sacred thing but rather an infrastructure that allow silenced voices to be heard and silenced narratives to be presented.

## THE PSYCHOANALYTIC MAP

The exhibition at Trondheim kunstmuseum takes its title from the work *Sisterless* (2022), a documentary film that premiered in the Lumbung film program during documenta15 in Kassel in 2022. We follow Albina, a young Tatar woman who dreamed of becoming a psychoanalyst. Her eloquent and precise report of her reality, her analysis of her upbringing, family life and education give us a glimpse into the conditions for her young life as well as her grief and experiences of losing her grip on reality. In empathy, I am glued to her, another, a woman, a sister. There is no room for critical distance, reasoning, for modification or doubt. When Albina talks about how she struggles to find her place in a country and a culture that is unknown to me, the recognition and compassion for her, a woman, sister and daughter is unquestionable. How can I write about that compassion? I only wish that my tears could speak. I feel Albina's pain as she is unable to break out of her prison. Or is it a prison? With an aura of lightness Albina reports on her psychotic state as if it was a funny story:

*"It's as if you have fallen into a trap of your psyche. And there is no exit. You are governed by irrational laws. Locked in a mind that plays cruel tricks on you. and you're just a pawn in this game. There was a normal person once, and then kaboom, you start raving... Suddenly everything becomes so clear, people are divided into categories... You get a third eye, a fourth hand... You become a seer!"*

Her slipping mind has opened a door, opened a third eye that allows her to see what the rest of us cannot. She has become a seer, a knower, a sage. I want to see what she sees; I want to know the things that she has uncovered in her altered state. All I can do is stay glued to her and listen to her descriptions of how her world works, though a filter of psychoanalytic theories.

The psychoanalytic symbols constitute the perspectives that allow her reality to emerge, creating a map of a terrifying land I cannot access. Staying glued to her, I want to pick her up and free her from the immense guilt she feels for events that happened far beyond her reach; wars and the deaths and displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Her imagined guilt becomes unbearable for her in the end. It is easy for me as a reader (a reader with a relatively shallow understanding of the conflicts in Russia) to try to understand Albina's fate as a symbol of the Russian oppressed subjects, the victim of political events. She is not a symbol, she is just she. A woman like you and me.

It is our hope that the exhibition *Søsterløs* will contribute to challenging the established understanding of forms, themes and geographies that we usually associate with the East. Yaniya Mikhalina offers insight into how invasion and war have re-actualized forms of social and psychological alienation, aggression, and oppression in Russian territories.

In her text *She Who Documents*, Mikhalina unpacks how feminization of documentary practices entails being on someone's side and solidarity with specific localized and embodied knowledges.

Oksana Sarkisova will analyze cinematic representations of colonized subjects, with a focus on *kulturfilm* – early Soviet documentary project, directed mainly by Moscow-based Russian directors, aimed at presenting a "catalogue" of indigenous peoples and the "positive" transformation of their livelihoods through industrialization and progressiveness in the new Soviet state.

**Marianne Zamecznik**



Yaniya Mikhalina, *Sisterless*, 2022, film still

# She Who Documents

Yaniya Mikhalina

*She who knows she cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also knows that she cannot make a gesture without activating to-and-fro movement of life.*

– Trinh T. Minh-ha. *Outside in Inside Out*.

When I call myself a documentary artist and researcher, I do not insist on belonging to a specific tradition, nor on being outside of it. For me, 'the documentary' in a documentary practice means to situate form in the space of affect, making it accessible to others; it is also to be as materialist and literal as possible for those who aspire to stay in the reality of the embodied; and, at the same time, to be able to confront those who, in their views on reality, reproduce pathological systems without giving it a second thought.

By pathological forms of reality, including the reality of fantasy, I do not appeal to any 'norm'. Pathology, as I use it, is in opposition to an ethics that is determined by the capability of having a relationship with the Other. Psychoanalyst Alenka Zupančič conceptualizes this as an 'ethics of the Real', an ethics that is inseparable from the form it takes, a reality in which we insist on the non-removability of different subjectivities and the presence of the Other. In a text titled 'The Reality-Based Community', the film reader Erika Balsom speaks to this form of ethics as well. In her answer to the potential of film's reparative relation to an embattled real, Balsom proposes that 'it might involve assembling rather than dismantling, fortifying belief rather than debunking false consciousness, love rather than skepticism'.<sup>1</sup>

Through these two distinct readings, the notion of the documentary in documentary practices becomes an ethical position of problematizing reality – a refusal to perceive it as a neutral and objective space equally accessible from the perspective of different subjectivities. It is an evident thing yet to be read aloud with expression: objectivity is not centered; it is a relational space. As *she* is dealing with subjects and traces of subjectivities, it is impossible and unnecessary to ignore the projections and fantasies that any relationships inevitably produce. Rather, *she* offers to explore them as documents of reality.

The question of survival has always belonged to both the political and the linguistic realm at once. Who survives and how? And what does survival actually mean? In hindsight of moderated versions of history, it would have been oblivious to say that it is the abstract 'fittest' who survives – rather, it is those who fit into the historically relational definition of 'fittest'. In our modern, gendered, institutionalized, capitalist-friendly ways of living, we deal with fantasies produced by those structural divisions on a daily basis.

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1 Erika Balsom, 'The Reality-Based Community', E-flux journal Issue #83 (June 2017)

Fantasies that shape and sometimes even determine the very fact of our existence. Fantasies that establish a hierarchy of forms of production, modes of life, sexualities, political geographies, and representations. But what does it mean to be invisible to these fantasies, to stay beyond the history of misrepresentation, or to be put forcibly into one? What kind of documentary approach would this imply? Or, again, what kind of notion of ‘the documentary’?

My interest in engaging with fantasy – or to be more precise, in listening to the fantasies as documents – lies in the absence and lack of documents from where I come from, as well as the difficulty to fit this territory into one of the existing discourses of representation. Tatarstan, which used to be the Khanate of Kazan, and before that Volga-Bulgaria, is not associated with the Arab world nor the Global North. Yet, it is located in the middle of the East European Plain, while in Islamic geographies it has always been the most northern Muslim territory. Culturally speaking it is close to Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan (which is partly a result of the russian<sup>2</sup> empire's and soviet displacement of the Turkic communities), but due to vast geographical distance, rarely included in it by researchers. Despite a strong independence movement in the 1990s, its status has remained a so-called ‘ethnic republic’ of russia. And as recent as January 2023, any mention of the citizenship of Tatarstan and its sovereignty was removed from the constitution – together with the article that banned the ‘propaganda of war’ on the territory of the republic and stated that, ‘Tatarstan rejects violence and war as a means of resolving disputes between governments and people’.

In a reality shaped by coloniality and modernity,<sup>3</sup> negation, repression, ignorance, and appropriation are the main forms in which decolonial knowledges appear through. At the same time, it is important for me to emphasize that one should not treat decolonial knowledges – which can be characterized as specific, localized, and embodied knowledges – as a fetishized form which one has to aspire to, ‘upgrade’ technologically, or protect within corrupted academic or neoliberal market forms. This notion of protection derives from things like patriarchy or paranoia, something based on logics of exclusion and identification. Protection is another colonial fantasy, alas, a very real one – and this is the reason *she* decides to address it, too. Therefore, a fantasy of protection must be castrated with the practice of being on someone’s side. Solidarity as an act of supporting the desire and

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2 Whenever ‘russia’ and ‘russian’ in the text is referred to the state, I write it in lowercase to express solidarity with Ukrainians and participants of decolonial movements. In extension of this logic, the same applies to ‘soviet’ and ‘russian empire’.

3 Here, I am following a discursive decision from Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo on the irremovable interconnectedness between rhetorics of modernity (universal, delocalized, and disembodied) and the logics of coloniality. See Madina Tlostanova, ‘Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference,’ 2015



Yaniya Mikhailina, *In the Volga-Ural Sky (after Eisenstein) #1*, 2023, collage

existence of the Other, so that *she* can maintain her autonomy without having the paternalistic aftertaste of being 'saved' in her mouth.

From early on, the soviet ideological agenda had allocated cinema an important place in its obsession with the representation and production of the new future, the new man, the new economy, the new citizen, as well as the new Other. But how new was this proclaimed rupture with the russian empire in practice? As seen in numerous examples, the rationale of filmmakers of the newly founded soviet state was indeed not very different, on a structural level, to the logics of the 'old empires'.<sup>4</sup> And through the work of scholars like Oksana Sarkisova and Madina Tlostanova it becomes clear, that when entering the discussion of imperialism on the territories of the moscow state, the russian empire, the soviet union, and the russian federation from a decolonial perspective, one has to differentiate between 'external' and 'internal' Others.<sup>5</sup>

In the film *One Sixth of the World* from 1926, which promoted the sovietization of the newly formed territorial and political unity of USSR, the director, Dziga Vertov addresses indigenous populations of its vast territories directly

4 For example, the presence of Slavic Russians as a default category of citizens: 'Exempting "Russians" from the ethnographic gaze, Soviet *kulturfilms* opposed "backwardness" to a default modern identity which tied "Russian" and "Soviet" into a tight knot.' – In Oksana Sarkisova, *Screening Soviet Nationalities: Kulturfilms from the Far North to Central Asia*, 2016 p.8

5 'What seems to be missing from getting to the core of the contradictory nature of Russian imperialism is the concept of the external imperial difference which would help explain why the British compared Russia with India and not with themselves.' – In Madina Tlostanova. Book Review: "Internal Colonization. Russia's Imperial Experience". 2014.



Yaniya Mikhailina, *In the Volga-Ural Sky*, 2023, film still

through these schizophrenic intertitles: 'You / You Tatars / You / You Buryats / Uzbeks / Kalmyks / Khakkass / Mountaineers of the Caucasus/ You, the owners of the Soviet land / Hold in your hands a sixth part of the world'. I am calling Vertov's intertitles schizophrenic because such an appeal to all hostages of the empire at once strives to address a mythical 'everyone' constructed from above, which is a priori an impossible task. The imperial Other is heterogeneous, often mutually exclusive, and no ideology can remove this controversy. Incapable of being on the same distance to everyone, fantasies produced from above are forced to constantly oppose themselves, in a vain attempt to cover this impossibility.

Now, what kind of psychic space does Vertov's schizophrenic intertitles produce? First, the idea of ownership – instead of indigenous belonging – projected onto the land, which lies well with the soviet project of modernization. Second, the idea of enforced equality, or rather, sameness, between indigenous peoples of diverse backgrounds by the new/old common denominator – the soviet/russian identity. Third, it functions as a tool for a 'pedagogy of subalternization',<sup>6</sup> through which an identification with boundlessness of borders, imposed from above, creates underrepresentation and deficit of the symbolic in the psyche of colonized subjects, which, in turn, may trigger the reproduction of the imperial violence that becomes part of subjectivation, often in the form of (self-)aggressiveness or passivity. In a similar way, the decolonial thinker and psychiatrist, Franz Fanon, compared the experience of racism to the experience of the psychotic decomposition, by linking the experiences of oppression, and the fantasies produced by it, to the realms of the political, social, cultural, linguistic, sexual, and economic gaze.

Female writers and philosophers of various non-western backgrounds write in detail about the effects the imperial concept of 'boundless borders' have on the perception of the borders of the body, resistance, bordercrossings and border-construction. Here I think of Etel Adnan, Gloria Anzaldúa, Svetlana Alexievich, and Zakhida Burnasheva, among many. How to find herself belonging to something that represents *her* as an imperial fantasy?

In a better world, borders are the effects of relationships to the Other and created through bodies, languages, and landscapes. They are clear but un surveilled, strict but kind like Mary Poppins, sensitive to the weather like aggregate states of water, interdependent. In all worlds, they condition our desires, and our ideas about desires. In imperial worlds, they distort, isolate,

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6 This term comes from Tijuana activist intellectual Sayak Valencia: 'Violence in its different forms (physical, symbolic, economic, psychological, mediatic) has been used against us as a kind of pedagogy of subalternization applies to racialized, poor, feminized, or non-binary bodies. These accumulated violences have become part of our daily existence and our education, and have had different objectives depending on the historical, geopolitical, and economic context within which they are practiced.' In Sayak Valencia, 'Transfeminism is not a Genderism', *Pléyade* (Santiago) 2018, n.22, pp.27-43.

ethanize. *She* finds it politically important to document all of it, for what is not yet there.

In Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, from which I am repurposing excerpts in my video installation, the figure of 'the founding father' of the Russian imperialist project becomes a playground for the director's formal explorations. The tragic event of the destruction and conquering of Kazan, my home city, by tsarist-technologically-equipped troops against half-naked 'undercivilized' Tatar defenders, is shown in classic Orientalist manner, as a flat decoration to the tsar's complex identity. The film was liked by Stalin because it provided a deep insight into the psychology of modern power; he did not mind Ivan the Terrible being represented as a cruel ruler as long as his bloody 'unification' project was framed within the naturalized perspective of power itself. Without denying that Eisenstein's relationship with the state was often detrimental to the filmmaker and therefore full of compromises, his contribution to the film history cannot be separated from the Soviet state ideology and its 'external' and 'internal' othering, an ideology sounding so hollow since 24 February 2022.

Filmmaking has a life-long relationship with the gaze and fantasies, already on the level of technology. The gaze of the camera, the gaze of the Other, the gendered gaze, and the colonial gaze are participating in each other's worldmaking, constantly blending, and overlapping. Moving images allow us to touch these spaces and bring them together as they are, as well as something between them. For me as a documentary filmmaker it is important to support the knowledge about the illusionary character of any kind of representation, to work with the space between the 'I' and the gaze, so the viewers would feel the materiality of it, its openness, and lability. Structurally speaking, this fragile interlayer is what makes the reality-based community possible. While in the moment an implicit assurance in the reality of a certain identity occurs, the figure of the Other disappears and the reality-based community becomes an imaginary one. To use Lacan's example, 'If a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so.'

A bitterly ironic fact – the institutionalization of human mental sufferings was caused by the aftereffects of wars initiated by the state, sufferings produced by the very same wars on an unprecedented scale.

In *her* understanding, psychosis and the development of delirium cannot be treated as an individual disease. Ways of sharing it outside the repressive institutional settings, with its monodisciplinary medical approach, must be invented. *She* has experienced how delirium plays a reparatory role to the collapsed psyche, in the way that it rebuilds and reassembles reality from its broken pieces through an outburst of the repressed. And herein lies an urgency that dates back to the time of the Foucauldian birth of the clinic –



Yaniya Mikhalina, *In the Volga-Ural Sky (after Eisenstein) #2*, 2023, collage

one of listening, in opposition to the medical gazing. The urgency to listen to the worldmaking of the psychotic as a political category and take it seriously as a document, as a relationship of the subject to the discourse of the Other, to the signifiers, and to the borders of reality. Fantasy in its radical form of delirium is a collective enterprise which doesn't oppose the reality of social production. In delirium, the question of scale is very acute. Exactly because the relationship with the Other is fading, relationality is missing and things get distorted, big becomes small, and small huge. One category gets blown up, others shrink. And in this boundless space (akin to the one produced by empires!), there is nothing to lean on. Naturally, the reality in this space is made of the fantasies independently shared by everyone who has lost the sense of scale.

In *her* feminist world, however, any kind of representation is a deconstruction of the symbolic webs of various origins, at times entangled, or unified, or torn, or ingrown, or transparent. *She* does not believe that empires can be, nor should be, forgotten or ignored. That would mean to refuse things that do not belong to them and were taken without asking, appropriated, and imagined, or simply looked at. It would mean not to acknowledge politics behind every act of forgetting and the violence of ignorance. Documentary filmmaking with a focus on the feminization of production leans on a practice of listening rather than observing, and on the production of spaces in which listening and reflection can be recognized and enjoyed. *She* warns that nation-states should not only be seen as legislative and institutional structures, but also

psychic structures that react to those legislative and institutional constellations, as nation-states are using grand ideas – such as nation, freedom, equality – to legitimate and produce their power; to monopolize the forms of resistance, desire, and becoming. These grand ideas produce exterior representations often driven by generic masculine fantasies – fantasies, which constitute the form of violence in themselves. So please don't ever tell *her* that these fantasies from above do not kill.

The main heroine of my film *Sisterless*, Albina, committed suicide several months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and four months after the final edit of the film. She could not cope with the uncovered state of war. Her guilt delirium, which she reflects extensively on in the film, came back. Her own experiences of oppression, together with her brilliant capacity to reflect, became an unbearable and distorted burden instead of a tool for emancipation. It was the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness, in personal and political terms, that first produced the guilt and then didn't leave her a reason to live with it, disillusioned.

In films, we can escape temporality but not reality. I only wish there was another end. But in every embodiment shaped by necessity, impossibility, and interpretation; in every act of speaking that trespasses the established categories of gender, class, ethnicity, state, there could be another end for someone else. That is why *she*, despite staying a geopolitical pessimist, continues to practice and be practiced. That is why *she* is always present in the act of mourning and being mourned, in the act of sharing and being shared, in the act of filming and being filmed – with her eyes wide open, *she* does not forget to blink.

Yaniya Mikhailina



Yaniya Mikhalina, *In the Volga-Ural Sky*, 2023, film still

# Reclaiming the Voice

Oksana Sarkisova

A young woman wanders in a labyrinth of mirrors — lost and reappearing, going in several directions at once. A stranger, a riddle, a visual illusion. Later, we see her with a miniature “motherland” sculpture at the foot of “The Motherland Calls” monumental ensemble in Volgograd or dancing by the fire, her bare feet are filmed on a tree trunk, trying to hold a fragile balance. These evocative images from Yaniya Mikhalina’s documentary *Sisterless* linger in memory, just as her interlocutor and friend, Albina, whose story and whose voice are the core of this emphatic video work. The film constructs Albina’s dramatic life as a hall of mirrors, reflecting a multiplicity of angles, a “cubist” portrait of sorts, where each episode brings out a new dimension of her complex personality as the filmmaker rejects a linear narrative for her life story. Framing the centerpiece film with additional visual montages, Mikhalina turns the exhibition into a hall of simultaneous representations with multiple temporalities, in which fragments of audiovisual heritage are reframed and augmented through juxtapositions and uncanny parallels.

These visuals are guiding us into the fragmented, layered past — from the first post-Soviet years deeper into the origins of the Soviet visual experiment of forging new political and visual identities. In them, voices are polyphonic and discrete, singular yet speaking of collective experiences, at once affirmative and traumatized, shrouded in silences and enwrapped in dominant discourses. Reflecting on her personal stance towards visual documentation, Mikhalina strives for a dual position of an observer and interlocutor, approaching the act of documenting as a relational process and highlighting ethics of problematizing reality as her primary aim. What then, from the perspective of today, does the exhibition montage communicate to the audience? And how can visual material, partly coming from a



Yaniya Mikhalina, *Sisterless*, 2022, film still



Yaniya Mikhalina, *In the Volga-Ural Sky*, 2023, film stills

highly censored and controlled context, be approached in a critical, reflexive way as visual traces of the past times and their persisting legacies?

The image of Tatarstan and its capital Kazan, the artist's native place, is reflected in Mikhailina's montage in the video installation, *In the Volga-Ural Sky*, as space and culture both othered and appropriated in a long imperial and Soviet history. It emerges both as a reflection and projection. The installation highlights fragments from Soviet films — a silent costume film *Bulat-Batyr* (1928, Sovkino studio), an adventure drama from the time of the Pugachev uprising and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, Mosfilm/TsOKS) by Sergei Eisenstein, a famed Soviet classic, made during the studio's evacuation in Kazakhstan during World War II; a *kulturfilm* *The Country of Four Rivers* (Strana chetyrekh rek. Sovetskii Tatarstan, director Aleksei Dubrovskii, Vostokkino studio, 1930). All these films construct and perpetuate the image of Tatars as cultural Others portrayed by the film crews from the capital. The montage of historical films is edited parallel with sequences from amateur videos representing the daily life of the Tatar community in Tatarstan in the late 1980s and '90s.

To understand the use of the Soviet visual material, the original context of its production should be highlighted. *Bulat-Batyr* is a 1928 Moscow-made release directed by Belarus-born Yuri Tarich who started his career in art as an actor and director in Meyerhold's revolutionary theater. *Bulat-Batyr* was shot at Kazan's heritage sites and in surrounding Tatar villages, in line with the early Soviet aesthetics of the "life construction of art."<sup>1</sup> The story of rebel Pugachev, known to the Russian reading public through Pushkin's novel, *Captain's Daughter* (1836), is reframed here in line with the 1920s policy of "indigenization" [*korenizatsia*] which was pronounced to "fix the wrongs" of the Russian Empire and to gain the loyalty of Soviet nationalities. The policy initiated both administrative and cultural promotion of representatives of titular nationalities in each administrative unit and marked each institutionalized ethnicity with a set of recognizable visual characteristics.<sup>2</sup> With the help of cinema, the abstract category of nationality acquired recognizable visual embodiments. At the same time, the Soviet project of "cataloging" the national minorities has "exempted" Russians from the ethnographic gaze and visible ethnic markers.

In line with the indigenization policy, *Bulat-Batyr* foregrounds a Tatar *batyr* (a word of Turkic origin meaning a brave, fearless fighter, a hero, whose primary goal was to defend his kin and his father's honour). Bulat loses his wife during a militant Christianizing raid and one of his two sons is taken hostage by the imperial soldiers, raised in an imperial military school, and later assigned to "discipline" the Tatar rebels. This story written by Abdrahman

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1 Nikolai Fedorovich Chuzhak, ed., *Literatura fakta. Pervyi sbornik materialov rabotnikov LEFa*. (Moscow: Federatsia, 1929)

2 Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 25.

Shakirov, a Tatar amateur writer and a local party functionary from Agryz, a town 300 kilometers away from Kazan, was picked at a script competition run by a short-lived Tatkino studio.<sup>3</sup> It was “reworked” into a script by scriptwriter Nathan Zarkhi and director Yuri Tarich and made into a film by a Moscow-based production crew (with the only exception of assistant director Kayum Pozdnyakov, later a documentary filmmaker in Tatarstan). Rather than shooting with the studio props, the director filmed in Kazan and surrounding villages. Typical for the Soviet films of the time, the crew sought to make ample use of the local non-professional actors (*typazh*). One of the villages became the location for the opening episode of *Saban tuyı* (a.k.a. *Sabantui*) — a summer feast also known as “plough feast” popular in the Volga region among the Tatars, the Bashkirs, the Chuvash, the Kazakhs, and other Turkic communities.

Along with showing the transformation of Bulat’s son from an imperial subject to the hero with a reawakened national loyalty, the film foregrounded a strong female character Asma, who becomes one of the main agents of change, agitating the Tatar “poor” (Soviet-time stand-in for the proletariat in premodern times) to raise against the imperial oppression of the center. Ada Voitsyk, a Moscow-born actress, delivered an emotional performance of a young Tatar woman whose identity combines gender emancipation and national loyalty in an exemplary manner, in line with the declared policy of indigenization and gender equality. Although not appearing in Mikhalina’s montage, Voitsyk also implicitly connects the two films, making a cameo appearance in *Ivan the Terrible’s* second part as Ivan’s troubled mother, poisoned by the evil boyars and as such, “justifying” the tsar’s obsessive power hold. In *Ivan the Terrible*, the attack on Kazan is one of the central episodes that depicts the expansion of Moscow’s rule to the East, vilifying and Orientalizing the Tatars, who are shown “provoking” the conflict and “betraying” their own kin in a sequence of powerful visuals.

The third Soviet film used in the compilation is *The Country of Four Rivers* (1930), commissioned and produced for the 10th anniversary of the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic with the intention to “introduce” Tatarstan to the Soviet audiences, presenting it as “naturally” belonging within the new Soviet political entity. The notion of *kulturfilm*, originally used by the German film industry, was popular in the Soviet context from the mid-1920s until the early 1930s, featuring in the production plans of every film studio in the Soviet Union. Understood as edifying films implying the

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3 Tatkino was established in 1924 upon the initiative of the Tatar Narkompros. It was a shareholding company which originally included private shareholders and ran one cinema, Elektra. The organization started with distributing films supplied by the Moscow-based Sovkino distribution company but planned to start production and distribution of films with Tatar intertitles within the Tatar ASSR. In the fall of 1924, the enterprise became a fully state-owned shareholding company, and in a few years the assets of the company were merged with the newly created Vostokkino studio. V. G. “Deiate!‘nost’ Tatkino” in *Kino-nedelia* 37 (1924): 18; N. R. “Kino-delo v Tatarii,” *Kino-front* 5 (1927), 31.



Yaniya Mikhalina, *In the Volga-Ural Sky*, 2023, film still

status of objective truth along with “ideological intentionality,”<sup>4</sup> *kulturfilms* were made with the primary aim of supplying new knowledge and ordering the audience’s ideas about the world. They downplayed the notion of individual authorship, often used unattributed footage, combined location recording, re-enactments, animation, and staged episodes, and eschewed clear-cut genre definitions.

*The Country of Four Rivers* emphasized Tatarstan’s territorial unity foregrounding rivers as natural borders. The main intention of the film, according to the director, was not the “authenticity” of the material, but the impact on the viewer through the use of non-fiction material. The opening intertitle quoted Stalin claiming a rupture with the earlier colonial policy: “...tsarism intentionally transplanted the colonizing elements in the best corners of the country, in order to push away the natives to the worse areas and to promote national conflicts.” The film used the footage of the imperial family as well as other archival materials to construct a class-conscious historical narrative, constructing a national community and at the same time vilifying Tatar bourgeoisie and religious leaders.<sup>5</sup> Female emancipation was an important motif in the film, which demonstrated how newly established kindergartens “liberated” women for productive industrial labour.

Similarly to *Bulat-Batyr*, *The Country of Four Rivers* also foregrounded an anti-colonial and anti-clerical rhetoric. And yet it too included yet another scene of the conquest of Kazan, this time by the Red Army in the Civil War, using the period newsreel footage. What thus links these film fragments together most straightforwardly is the motive of the conquest of Kazan, by Ivan IV in 1552, Pugachev’s troops in 1774, and the Red Army during the Civil War in 1918. The juxtaposition of these fragments points to the persistence of colonial rhetoric in Soviet cinema and at the same time its entanglement with a proclaimed anti-colonial narrative. Despite the self-assumed rhetoric of anti-colonialism applied to the imperial past, the Soviet-time visuals — from exquisitely stylized artwork to documentary-like visual construct — highlight the discourses of othering used to normalize and uphold the idea of spatial conquest, and the recurrent appropriation of the “local” voices, speaking in the name of and on behalf of the represented community.

Revisiting and reframing this visual material allows Mikhailina to question both implicit and explicit power relations. Approaching them from the perspective

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4 William Uricchio, “The Kulturfilm: A Brief History of an Early Discursive Practice,” in Paolo Cherchi Usai and Lorenzo Codelli, eds., *Before Caligari: German Cinema, 1895–1920* (Pordenone: Edizioni Biblioteca dell’Immagine, 1990), 364; Oksana Sarkisova, *Screening Soviet Nationalities: Kulturfilms from the Far North to Central Asia*. (London: I.B.Tauris, 2017).

5 Milli Shura — a body set up by the First All-Russian Muslim Congress on May 1, 1917. On Milli Shura see Alexandre A. Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 216–220; Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–23* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 128–130.

of cultural decolonization, she explores the possibilities of highlighting these power hierarchies, reclaiming a subjective voice, and developing alternative interpretative frameworks by reframing the archival footage. The return of the local voices implies questioning the long silence, finding one's subjectivity which does not fully shed or cancel the shared, traumatic past. It faces not only the problem of recognition, but those of naming and language, entangled with questions of memory. The wealth of existing representations challenges a single concept of "authenticity." Reframing the film heritage and the concepts of "documentary" and "fiction" problematizes the notion of authenticity and points to the problem of borders and boundaries. Ultimately, as Ann Laura Stoler reminds us, archival production is "a consequential act of governance" and "a field of force with violent effect."<sup>6</sup>

Challenging the notion of unidirectional governmentality, Mikhalina also includes into the exhibition a video montage of excerpts from the *Vox Populi (Glas Naroda)*, a TV program from the early 1990s. This short-lived project started as *Glasnost' Booth (Budka glasnosti)* in the late Soviet Union and continued into the first post-Soviet years as a crossover between documentation and participatory art performance. An odd-looking yellow inflated booth set up in central urban spaces invited passersby to pause, enter, and engage in an act of "fearless speech," or *parrhesia*, speaking truth to power through the medium of camera, sending a short video message to the community across the post-Soviet media universe. Recorded in 1991-1993 in the new states by people uncertain of their future and struggling with daily survival, these spontaneous responses offer a cross-section of societal worries, prognoses, dreams, desires, and hopes, recorded in Almaty, Kishinev, Kyiv, Minsk, Moscow, Odessa, and Saint Petersburg. The differences overpower the similarities, generational ruptures outline different potential trajectories, while fears of violence and conflict along the new borders are looming large, enhanced today by the power of hindsight.

The Soviet-time visual discourses which estrange and manipulate the image of the cultural Other are juxtaposed with edited sequences from private home videos, challenging the "eye of power" as the only representational force and authority. Home archives also constitute an important dimension of *Sisterless*, allowing us to explore Albina's and her family's complex histories. The amateur, seemingly banal footages invite the viewer to share the feelings of loss and trauma and empathize with the (unsuccessful) attempts of self-healing. The main character's striving to take control over her life and to change the world around clashes with the harsh reality of the present. By presenting this struggle, the filmmaker creates a fragile balance, engaging with the decolonial challenge through the multiple cycles of (re)

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<sup>6</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

appropriation. While the world around Albina is off-balance and her grief remains unresolved, the artist calls for a specific, localized, and embodied relationship with the complex past, making the exhibition an open-ended quest for reflexive, ethical co-creation.

**Oksana Sarkisova (CEU)**



Yaniya Mikhailina, *Sisterless*, 2022, film still



## BIOGRAPHIES / CONTRIBUTORS

*Yaniya Mikhalina* is an artist, filmmaker and researcher in search of places for female ethics under patriarchy and colonialism. She is invested in documentary practices, and works with topics such as sickness and convalescence, Islam feminism and psychoanalysis. Her works take various forms such as films, short-term institutions and events. Since 2020, Yana has been a Ph.D. candidate in Artistic Research and lecturer at the Trondheim Art Academy.

*Dr. Oksana Sarkisova* is Research Fellow at Blinken OSA Archivum at Central European University, Director of Verzio International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival, Budapest, and co-founder of Visual Studies Platform at CEU. Her fields of research are cultural history, memory and representation, film history, amateur photography, and visual studies. She authored *Screening Soviet Nationalities: Kulturfilms from the Far North to Central Asia* (2017), co-edited *Past for the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989* (2008), and has published in peer-reviewed journals and collective volumes on film history, nationality politics, contemporary Russian and Eastern European cinema, and amateur photography. She also served as Jury member at International Film Festivals in Nuremberg, Kyiv, Zagreb, Warsaw, Tbilisi, Linz, the Hague, and Venice.

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Yaniya Mikhalina, *Sisterless*, 2022, film still

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Marianne Zamecznik

**Contributors:**

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Oksana Sarkisova

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