

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

one level, the film contributes to the genre of personal nuclear testimony: the babushkas and other characters in the film offer their own poignant narratives of the 1986 disaster and subsequent evacuation and hardship, in the vein of Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl*. Even thirty years after the accident, no one in the film can recount her experiences of the disaster without breaking into tears. Providing these women a space to offer their personal nuclear testimonies is one of the film's powerful interventions.

Without making too much fuss, the film addresses the question of nuclear contamination and long-term health risks head-on. We follow Chernobyl station and zone workers (including scientists, technical experts, and social workers) during their monitoring visits to zone residents' homesteads—they collect foodstuffs for lab analysis and conduct radiometric surveillance in and around the women's homes. Most information in the film about Chernobyl's radiation fallout and the effects of long-term contamination is delivered by "experts." These seemingly all-knowing specialists, with their technological devices and complicated scientific vocabularies, contrast sharply with the earthy babushkas and their care-worn hands and faces, endearing jokes, and folksy lexicons. But who are the true "experts" here? As we witness the babushkas' ties to the land, and learn of their intimate knowledge of its soils and plants both wild and cultivated, the viewer ponders the different ways of "knowing" and the enormous resources for coping that these women embody. Here the film contributes to scholarly and popular debates about authoritative knowledge, situated knowledge, and the existence of contradictory "truths."

The Babushkas of Chernobyl employs another contrast to bring into relief the admirable qualities and poignant devotion (to their "homeland," to one another) of the film's endearing heroines. The film juxtaposes the cavalier escapades of teenage boys—devotees of the popular Chernobyl-based video game S.T.A.L.K.E.R.—who illegally sneak into the exclusion zone to experience firsthand the thrilling dangers of the radioactive landscape. They dare one another with forbidden temptations: "Drink the water! For the camera!" Motivated by a modish post-apocalyptic curiosity, the teens sneak through abandoned homes, shuffling through the left-behind detritus of evacuated people's lives. Meanwhile, the babushkas, who grew up here and insist on living and dying here, tend their land, endure their aches and pains, reminisce about their shared experiences, and wish for more days to live. They care for and about one another deeply. The babushkas have endured hardships and challenges, yet have cultivated and insisted on a level of autonomy and freedom, that these teens probably cannot even imagine.

The Babushkas of Chernobyl offers no clear-cut conclusions, but prompts the viewer to ask important questions about nature, risk, place, aging, and personhood. The babushkas say, "Nature takes its own" (Ukr. *pryroda bere svoie*). This is an uneasy "truth" in a nuclear world, where "nature" is a source not only of vitality, strength, and collective resilience, but also of risk, uncertainty, and loss.

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