

Born in the USSR: Children vs. Ideology and the Impact of Database Cinema

DARIA SHEMBEL

San Diego State University

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, state-controlled television channel *Russia 1* chose prime time on September 1, when schools celebrate Knowledge Day, to premiere the fourth installment of *Born in the USSR*. The documentary series launched in the Soviet Union in 1989 and was based on the same premise as Michael Apted's acclaimed UK-based project *Up Series* that tracked the lives of 14 British children at seven-year intervals starting from 1964. Since 1989, when *Born in the USSR* introduced a group of 20 seven-year old children from different parts of the Soviet Union, the series, directed by the leading Russian documentarian Sergei Miroshnichenko, has released four episodes.

Given that the first two segments of *Born in the USSR* aired only on cable channels late at night and without promotion, the fact that the fourth installment was granted such auspicious airtime is rather conspicuous. Why the sudden change of heart?

In the first two installments, we observe those portrayed advance into adolescence and young adulthood during chaotic and painful social and economic changes in a country on the brink of disaster. Severe ethnic rioting, stores routinely lacking milk, bread, and meat, political turmoil, a sharp rise in poverty, and rampant drug and alcohol abuse were not an ideal showcase of the country's chosen path. And the participants in the project are not shown rising above their circumstances. In the third and fourth installments, many of those portrayed in *Born in the USSR* have been displaced from their homelands, and some have even lost citizenship in any country. They haven't become exemplars of the current regime, either. As they look back at their childhood in the USSR as a time of hope, purity, and dreams, their longing resonates with the new state ideology, in which some Soviet values resurface and revive. With the restoration of the Soviet anthem and emblems, discussions of restoring Soviet-era names for streets and landmarks (including Stalingrad), strong anti-American

propaganda, and the re-absorption of Crimea, it is as if the Russian ruling elite wants to recreate the country of its childhood.

The *Up Series* was exported around the world, but nowhere else did its launch coincide with the unprecedented scale of social, political, demographic and economic change that resulted from the sudden demise of the world's largest multinational empire.

The study will investigate how children and then adolescents made sense and reflected on the challenges that their new nations were facing in the post-Soviet era. It explores how tensions and ambivalences, felt by subjects of Russia and its dominions during rapid socio-political change, are crystallised and rendered through the child's perspective. I will also examine how a 'database'¹ logic embedded in the structure of the series affects its narrative and makes it resistant to the country's rapidly changing history as well as interpretations in different ideological contexts.

Born in the USSR functions as a database on multiple levels: it represents a historical archive of personal data collection, assumes totality of coverage (to report on an entire life and cover the map of the USSR); every element of it works for a larger picture; there is a basic algorithm that generates a larger whole, and it unites all kinds of data, while each element of it is attributed equal significance. I argue that the database structure of the film makes it resistant to the country's attempts to frame it within the rhetoric of the rebuilding of Soviet Russia. Thus, the last section of this article will focus on the series' database structure to support this claim.

The *Born in the USSR* project began in 1988 when, following the success of the *Up Series* in the UK, the BBC decided to franchise the concept to other countries. The producers of the program chose to begin with the world's superpowers, exporting the idea first to the US and USSR in 1989, and then to Japan, South Africa, and Germany in 1992.

Although Michael Apted considered a broad array of leading documentarians in

¹ Lev Manovich was the first to relate database to cinema when discussing how the principles involved in computer software and hardware interfere with the cultural logic of new media objects' production. The most important computer technology infiltrating the realm of aesthetics, according to Manovich, involves the database, which emerged as an application for computer data access and organization and has since been elevated to the status of a new cultural form in its own right. According to him, 'many new media objects do not tell stories, they don't have any beginning, they don't have any development; instead they are collections of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other'; Lev Manovich, 'Database as Symbolic Form,' *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 5.2 (1999): 80-99.

today's Russia and Ukraine, including Vitaly Mansky and Alexander Rodniansky, he chose Sergei Miroshnichenko, a graduate of VGIK, and by then a winner of international film festival awards. Miroshnichenko notes a critical factor in the decision was that he had two young daughters at the time (who now work on the project with him).

Today, Miroshnichenko is part of the official establishment, a member of the Council for Culture and Arts under President Putin, a winner of the State Prize of Russia, and the Secretary of the Union of Cinematographers. On March 11, 2014, he signed the Ministry of Culture petition endorsing the annexation of Crimea – an act that echoes Soviet methods when prominent cultural figures had to support the ‘party line.’ Miroshnichenko’s status of a leading state filmmaker certainly cannot hinder the re-discovery and popularization of *Born in the USSR* within the current ideological climate.

While the main premise of the British series was to reveal the influence of social class on personal success, the ostensible goal of *Born in the USSR* was to survey regions of the country’s vast landmass, from Europe to Central Asia and to Siberia. Participants were selected from four of the Soviet Republics: Russia, Georgia, Kirghizia (now Kyrgyzstan), and Lithuania. Miroshnichenko’s second priority was to document the lives of children with diverse social backgrounds and material settings. Among those selected were children from the families of factory workers living in hostels, those from Soviet intelligentsia elite and party *nomenclatura*, children from small villages, and a boy from an orphanage in Siberia.

The very fact of exporting the model of the British series to a country with a dramatically different socio-political order opens up a vast range of concerns linking the concepts of childhood, nationalism and transnationalism: does the series draw on the themes that stem from national politics or is it more concerned with perennial topics, universal for all children and re-visited in every episode: love, hopes for the future, motherland, money, family, education? How do national politics affect children in terms of forming their worldview, morality, sense of identity and belonging?

I. BORN IN THE USSR: ‘HAPPY SOVIET CHILDHOOD’

One of the tenets of contemporary childhood studies is that the understanding of children and childhood cannot be disentangled from the context of time, place, society and

culture.² While exporting the *Up Series* format confirms that many childhood experiences are universal, there were, of course, peculiarities of growing up in the USSR.

The state's efforts to raise model Soviet citizens included comprehensive regulation of children's education and organized leisure activities.³ The educational system was famous for its lock-step homogeneity; on any given day, schoolchildren in nearly nine million square miles of the empire were expected to be reading the same page of the same textbook. The first episode of *Born in the USSR* captures a life-changing moment in young lives as the children experience their first grade school day. Kindergarten was a relatively undemanding experience, and many of them lament the rigidity of the first grade.

Political indoctrination, with emphasis on venerating leaders past and present and the claim that Soviet children lived in the best country in the world, started as early as kindergarten and continued through school years. The Octobrists, Pioneers, and Komsomol youth organizations were the main conduits of Soviet ideological teaching. The series provides insight into the seven-year-olds' varying degrees of understanding of the ideological indoctrination as they try to make sense of their roles as Young Octobrists and discuss the importance of Lenin as the founder of the Bolshevik revolution.

Question: Who was Vladimir Ilyich Lenin?

Answer: Lenin saved Lithuania.

Answer: He doesn't walk, he lies. You walk through the Mausoleum and there is Lenin. He is in a jacket and trousers and shoes, in some sort of tennis-shoes.

Answer: He got top marks at school so his portrait is in the star.

Question What is the October Revolution?

- Now they call it a coup.
- Well, who won in that coup?
- Nobody told me that. Not even my mother has told me who won.

Question: What do you know about the Revolution?

- They fired a shot from the Aurora Ship at the Winter Palace.
- What happened next?

² Allison James and Alan Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (Psychology Press, 1997).

³ Rebecca Knight, 'Representations of Soviet Childhood in Post-Soviet Texts by Liudmila Ulitskaia and Nina Gabrielian.' *The Modern Language Review* (2009), 790-808.

- Revolution.
- And then?
- Peace.

Question: What does the Octobrist star mean?

- It means I'm a helper of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.
- What with?
- Well, a helper of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. *Long pause*
- But how can you help him?
- *Long pause.* Nobody told us.

Although some of these answers evoke American 'reality' programs featuring kids, such as *Funniest Home Videos*, occasionally one of the seven-year-old Soviets offers precocious insight into the role of children in the system. Anton is a grandson of a journalist who edited the Party newspaper *Pravda* and wrote speeches for Brezhnev. He lives in the famous House on the Embankment, an apartment complex built for the Soviet elite, with Nikita Khrushchev and the aircraft designer Artem Mikoyan among its former residents. Responding to the question 'Who are the Octobrists?' Anton demonstrates a surprising awareness of children's place in the party hierarchy: 'The Octobrists are those in the first group of small people. It's like having a party of their own.'

When the series was about to launch in 1989, the country entered an era of great ideological confusion and disorientation. The myth of Soviet childhood began to erode alongside regulation of the education system with the advent of *glasnost*. Reports of poor conditions in schools and other child welfare institutions due to under-funding and understaffing gradually destroyed the romantic notion of children being 'the only privileged class.' As well, children were no longer bedazzled by rhetoric about their countries' radiant future.

It had become clear that Gorbachev's attempt to implement a fresh approach to politics and economics through *perestroika* had gravely failed and hopes for 'socialism with a human face' had vanished, but the Soviet educational institutions were not ready to adapt, and the cornerstones of the old Soviet moral upbringing were still very much in place. While history exams in high schools and universities across the country were cancelled and the Russian literary journal *Novy Mir* published Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Archipelago Gulag*, the state education system continued to preach virtues espoused by Lenin, and in *Born in the*

USSR the children learn the hymn of the Young Leninists. How did children experience and understand the contradicting cultural politics that informed their daily lives in the epoch of *perestroika*?

A country girl from Baikal region, Rita, recites the postulates of the Octobrists by heart – rote memorization was an important method in the Soviet education system. Zhanna and Lenia, twins from a Jewish family emigrating from Sverdlovsk to Israel with their family, answer the question ‘Who is Vladimir Ilyich Lenin?’ They respond in unison: ‘Lenin is the leader of the entire world.’ Upon realizing they were leaving the country forever, they had asked their parents to take them to visit Lenin’s Mausoleum in Red Square. At the same time, Lado, a boy from the Georgian party elite reports ‘I never wanted to find out about Lenin, and all those presidents, deputies, and the like; they are of no concern to me. I’m just not interested.’ The authority of Soviet leadership had been undermined with the exposure of Stalin’s crimes under *glasnost*, and by 1989 Gorbachev’s popularity had plummeted to historical lows.

Faced with a choice between what they hear in school and at home, some choose to emulate their parents’ grievances against *perestroika*. The most forceful criticism of Gorbachev’s attempts to re-structure the old system comes from Asia, a vivacious girl who loves to dance and lives in a big apartment in downtown Leningrad with her mother and grandparents. ‘I don’t love this country. I can’t help it. I simply can’t live here. Everyone screams, “*Perestroika! Perestroika!*” What’s the point of it? Goodness! Politics, they call it! They could at least give us something to eat!’ Asia seems to transmit the pessimism of several generations of Soviets who instinctively knew that any change to the system was useless. Anton is the only child who in 1989 still speaks of *perestroika* in terms of its dedication to the socialist ideals. ‘Through *perestroika*, we help the Revolution and maintain equality,’ he says. This seven-year-old’s reserved manner and mature revelations are striking. To a provocation from Miroshnichenko — ‘Do you think this is how we are catching up with capitalist countries... through empty shelves?’ — Anton calmly responds ‘This is how, perhaps, we are gaining strength.’

The last Soviet generation was born in a country which declared itself to be an international state based on ethnic equality. However, despite 70 years of propaganda, the

people of the USSR did not fully believe themselves to be citizens of one great multiethnic country.⁴

In the late 1980s, as many ethnic groups across the country demanded rights to self-determination, ethnic rioting broke out in the southern and central Asian republics of the Soviet Union alongside mass protests in the Baltic republics. While the first installment of *Born in the USSR* was in production, the Soviet Union experienced the 1989 Tbilisi massacre (the killing of 16 civilians during anti-Soviet protests), the Sumgait pogrom in Azerbaijan (during which Armenians were attacked and killed in their apartments and on the streets), severe ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kirgizia, and the rise of the Popular Front movements in the Baltic. Some of the children selected for the project found themselves at the epicenters of these conflicts.

Pavlik lives in a refugee camp in Red Square with his family. ‘I used to live in Baku. I was born there. When they brought the troops in, when they brought the tanks in, they smashed up our flat. There was no furniture left, nothing. They even broke the windows. We lay the whole time in the bathroom. We were afraid to come out. They’ve also blown up the hospital.’ Pavlik refers to the events of ‘Black January’ in Azerbaijan. On January 19, 1990, 26,000 Soviet troops entered Baku, crushing the Azerbaijani Popular Front that sought independence from the Soviet Union following the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Around the same time, massive anti-Armenian pogroms took place in Azerbaijan, resulting in the emigration of much of the Armenian population. After his appearance in the first installment, the series producers were unable to find Pavlik again.

A Russian girl Nastia and a Kyrgyz boy Almaz live in the capital of Kirghizia, Frunze (now Bishkek). At the age of seven, they already know what martial law is.

- Miroshnichenko: What’s going on in the city?
- Nastia: Uprising. They are in revolt.
- Miroshnichenko: Who?
- Nastia: Kirgizians
- Miroshnichenko: What’s martial law?
- Nastia: It means you can’t go out at 10... no, at 12... onto the streets

⁴ Dimitri K. Simes, *After the Collapse: Russia Seeks its Place as a Great Power* (Simon and Schuster, 1999).

- Miroshnichenko: Or else?

- Nastia: They will kill you.

Here is how Almaz renders the conflict between Kirgizians and Uzbeks: ‘It is so that Kirghizians and Uzbeks fight. That’s why we have martial law. It’s because young guys go to the cinema at night. Kirghizians and Uzbeks go. They could knife each other.’

Although ethnic tensions affected children living in Russia to a lesser degree (one Russian girl states indifferently, ‘Let them go if they want to’), it became a major issue for 25 million of Russian ‘settlers’ living outside the borders of the Russian Republic. The children living in the Caucasus and Central Asia seemed to have a lot to say regarding emergent ethnic boundaries that a ‘single Soviet people’ experienced already before the dissolution of the USSR. We are shown Lado stating with confidence that he’d never marry a Russian; Alena, a Russian girl from Georgia claiming that she wouldn’t want to live in Georgia, and Nastia from Kyrgyzstan saying that she doesn’t have friends among Kyrgyzs because she is scared of them.

II. THE 1990S AND BEYOND

The next time the project entered the children’s lives, when they were 14, the country in which they were born no longer existed. Following the sudden demise of the communist system, the post-Soviet republics encountered challenges establishing private enterprise and developing new forms of political and social life,⁵ and dealt with inter-ethnic and inter-republic tensions. Russia was in a state of acute economic depression. The early and middle 1990s were especially tough for Russians, when the savings they had amassed during the Soviet period disappeared overnight. The country’s attempts at transformation through price liberalization led to prolonged economic decline. More than 30% of the population reported being unable to afford normal nutrition, 80% of families could not afford household

⁵ David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*. Vol. 22. (Cambridge Univ Press, 1998).

appliances and inexpensive furniture, and two-thirds could not pay for cheap footwear and clothing.⁶ Many relied on the home production of goods and services.

In its second installment, the series re-introduces us to Dima, a boy from the Moscow suburbs whose family now has a rooster and two hens in their small apartment. Meanwhile, Almaz in Kyrgyzstan sells newspapers, lemonade, and gum on the hot and dusty roads of Bishkek to help his mother raise his younger brothers and sisters. Identical twins Stas and Denis come from a suburban district of Leningrad. At seven, they seemed happy and carefree, enjoying the comfort and security of their family. When they were 14, their father died of a heart attack. In the second installment, they appear with tears in their eyes and explain they were unable to afford to bury their father near home and had to buy a plot hundreds of kilometers away. As well, before their father died, he had not received his factory salary for months, while their mother's pension was miserly despite her working steadily for the same employer for many years.

It was as if the children found themselves victims in the horror stories of capitalism their elders told them while they were Octobrists in the Soviet Union. But the situation had become even grimmer for those in the non-Russian countries of the Soviet empire. Alongside the economic turmoil of decolonization, they dealt with severe ethnic conflicts and civil wars.

A pampered child playing with expensive imported toys at seven, Lado looks very different at 14. Beginning in 1988, Georgia experienced many violent ethnic conflicts and two civil wars caused by minority separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Five years of ethnic clashes resulted in the deaths of hundreds of citizens, the exodus of hundreds of thousands of refugees, and prolonged financial and social crises. Lado talks about intermittent gas and electricity supply in the city of Tbilisi and how people resort to pulling up hardwood flooring to feed bonfires in their apartments. Alena, who at seven declared that she wouldn't live in Georgia, still lives in Georgia, but has opportunities to travel to Turkey to visit her stepfather. Her comparison of these two countries certainly does not reflect well on her home country: 'Everything is cheaper there than in Georgia. There is no electricity, no gas, no water in many districts of Georgia, while Turkey has everything.'

Fortunately for the children from Lithuania, Katia and Algis, the transition to independence and democracy went more smoothly. Algis, the son of a lawyer who fought for

⁶ Viktor A. Artemov, 'The Village in the 1990s', *Sociological research* 42.6 (2003), 27-43.

the independence of Lithuania in the late 1980s, does not have to learn Russian any more. This does not concern Katia, since her family is Russian and they speak Russian at home. At seven, Katia struck everybody with her brilliant taxonomy of religions and a strikingly mature discussion of moral values. This is how Katia evaluates the fall of the USSR at 14: ‘In my opinion, it is not capitalism or socialism. I don’t know what it is. It is a transitional stage from the socialism we never had to the capitalism that might not come.’

When we see these children for the first time in the 1980s, they appear to be part of a settled social system, albeit one we now know to have been crumbling. They are amazingly lyrical. Nastia from Kirghizia says that her most cherished dream is that ‘everyone live in peace, all things grow and become beautiful, and there are lots of beautiful white hens.’ They are free of materialistic values. When asked what they would do with their money if they became rich, the answers include ‘I would give it all to the poor’ and ‘I wouldn’t take it; I don’t want to be rich.’ When Algis is asked whether there is anything better than money, his answer is ‘Yes, a fern flower.’

In the 1990s, these children were not only affected by ethnic clashes, economic turmoil, and corruption and plundering, but were also caught up in a constant search for new moral and social frameworks as Russia and the other post-Soviet republics pursued new identities. Participants experienced a rapid series of value changes: the revival of religion, the reinvigoration of *sobornost*, obsession with Old Slavic mythology, the emergence of radical nationalism. One of these changes was the transition from communism to a capitalist democratic regime, which engendered a euphoric hope which for many turned out to be false.

The most recent two installments of *Born in the USSR* are difficult to watch; they show the end of a dream. Almaz from Kyrgyzstan, who at seven wanted to be a documentary filmmaker, now works at a provincial market as a *gastarbeiter*. *Wunderkind* Katia at 28 is still working toward her BA while employed at a call center. Nastia and Alena completely abandoned any professional ambition and became stay-at-home mothers. Dima, who at seven wanted to be a cosmonaut, works as a driver at Moscow subway. Stas is a poorly-paid waiter who also works as a part-time security guard. Denis is unemployed after working in the navy for seven years.

Anton and Lado seem to be the most successful of all project participants. Lado lives in Luxembourg and works as a financial analyst at Ernst & Young, while Anton is editor-in-chief of the Russian edition of *Men’s Health*. The success of these two prompts one to

consider the validity of applying the concepts of class difference and class mobility to the Soviet Union. Is it a coincidence that the only heirs to the Soviet elite also happen to be the most well-off?

The rest are confused and lost in the new capitalist world. Some of them come to terms with failure, admitting that they would live their lives differently if they could turn back time. However, as the montage cuts back and forth between lyrical children living in the USSR and young adults unable to embrace the new economic reality of the free market society, it looks as if the new state ideology happily embraces their failures. And the more these young adults lament lost Soviet values, the more it suits the country's new ideological discourse.

Hardly capable of defining the 'Soviet Union' at the age of 14, at 28 Almaz says 'We are like orphans. Of course, the countries have separated, got lost maybe, and twenty years of my active life have disappeared. I think things were better before in the USSR. Everything worked. Factories, plants, people lived equally. If I could choose, I'd rather live in the country I lived in before I was seven.' Stas complains about the disappearance of morality among the young generation as well their indifference to authority. Lenia, who emigrated to Israel in 1990 and now lives in Argentina, goes as far as concealing his Israeli citizenship and unearthing his USSR birth certificate.

One of the most ideologically convenient justifications for the 'happy Soviet childhood' myth is the story of Andrei, a boy living in a Siberian orphanage. Through tears, this bright, mature seven-year-old tells us he hears the voice of his mother, who died when he was two, in his dreams. After the first installment aired internationally, the orphanage received thousands of letters from foreign families willing to adopt Andrei, and in the second installment we are told he lives in the United States with his new family. However, during the course of the interview, we see him crying, and it turns out Andrei has been rejected by his first American mother, who wanted to send him back to Russia. Fortunately for Andrei, he has been adopted by another family, which turns out to be very loving and supportive, but Andrei's negative experience with his first adoptive family resonates with a massive Kremlin anti-American propaganda campaign that told Russians that the majority of U.S. parents

adopting Russian children are sadists, pedophiles, and child abusers.⁷ The campaign led to an adoption law banning Americans from adopting Russian children, effective January, 2014.

While children represent the future, childhood also evokes an idyllic past in the minds of many adults, who associate childhood with stability and rootedness. It places them in a temporally distant place of peaceful innocence.⁸ It is not by accident that advertising of the Russian brands that originated in the Soviet Union always feature children.⁹ As the Russian people and the ruling elite become increasingly dissatisfied with capitalism, the myth of ‘happy childhood’ acquires a status that it never attained during the Soviet years, when it was considered to be part of communist propaganda.

Newfound interest in the series is thus driven by the resonance between the life stories of some participants and state ideology, which sees in these stories a repudiation of capitalism and even justification for anti-American propaganda.

III. BORN IN THE USSR AS DATABASE NARRATIVE

Responding to Miroshnichenko’s question about the country’s political situation, seven-year-old Anton famously predicts a coup:

Miroshnichenko: What’s going on in our country right now?

Anton: I think that some people think it’s better one way and others think it’s better another way. There is a struggle going on. Each side wants its own way. Both lots.

Miroshnichenko: What will come of that?

Anton: Don’t know... some sort of coup.

Taken in isolation, this remark is merely precocious, but when we hear his voice over footage of the actual coup of August 1991, a correspondence between life and history reveals itself. We experience a similar effect hearing a seven-year-old boy dream of becoming a

⁷ Michael Bohm, ‘Why Russia is No.1 in Anti-Americansim,’ *The Moscow Times*, Jan 24, 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/why-russia-is-no-1-in-anti-americanism/493260.html> [last accessed: June 21, 2014].

⁸ Kristen E. Cheney, *Pillars of the Nation: Child Citizens and Ugandan National Development*, (University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 10.

⁹ Linor Goralik cited in Knight, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*.

cosmonaut as we see him, at 28, driving a subway train; and when a seven-year-old girl who wishes to become a doctor, at 21, ‘sees no point in education because everybody can buy a diploma.’

The series is of demonstrably outstanding artistic quality. Its second installment, *Born in the USSR:14*, won an International Emmy Award for best documentary in 1999. At the same time, it remains one of the most frank and merciless diagnoses of contemporary Russian society.

Some other Russian documentaries have adopted a longitudinal approach (e.g. *Test for Adults*, dir. Igor Shadkhan [*Kontrol’naia dlia vzroslykh*] (1977-1992); *Russia The Beginning* [*Rossia. Rozhdenie*], dir. Vitaly Mansky (2000-...)). One is Juris Podnieks’ influential *Is it Easy to be Young?* (1986, Latvia, USSR) which follows the lives of several young people who attend a concert of the banned rock group *Perkons* in Latvia in 1986. Even though it is a compelling portrait of the lives of Soviet youth during *perestroika*, it was too characteristic of its time. In the sequels (1988’s *Is it Easy to be?* and 2010’s *Is it Easy?*), the producers found it necessary to add new participants to keep the project fresh. Meanwhile, *Born in the USSR* has survived unprecedented political change, transcended its director’s shift towards state ideology, and overcome severe budget challenges to become one of the most significant cinematic events in Russia since *perestroika*.

What makes *Born in the USSR* stand out among other longitudinal studies of the post-Soviet states?

In the beginning of the project we hear seemingly meaningless statements, while interviews seem to be neither provocative nor particularly insightful. The model for all franchised projects is the same: the children are asked the usual set of questions about their country, families, religion, love, education and hopes for the future as they grow up. However, the project’s impact turns out to be deeper than one might expect from such trivial beginnings. It develops into a commanding perspective of a nation’s history unfolding by means of personal stories.

I argue that the project resembles a *database* in that its narrative structure is modular and encourages constant juxtaposition of the material and temporal travels back and forth, while each part of the series remains incomplete if kept separate. *Born in the USSR* presents a historical archive of personal data collected over the period of 20 years. It aims at a totality of coverage: to represent an entire life and to cover the entire map of the USSR. The series’

conception corresponds to post-modern *archival fever*, which aims at the totality of preservation as if everything could eventually have some historical significance, and also reflects on the current tendencies of constructing the national narratives not through traditional institutions of family, church, school and state, but rather through individual memories.¹⁰ It is notable that in recent sociological studies childhood is increasingly seen as a social and political space, while childhood memories play a significant role in national history representations.¹¹

Like a computer database, the essence of database cinema is the links between its elements. *Born in the USSR* is not a random collection of events, people, and places; there is an algorithm to its presentation; the film is arranged into separate sections of family, education, religion, money, etc. The task of the filmmaker is to choose a structure and a method and let them play out, while the viewer is expected to actively construct a meaning rather than passively observe, keeping track of scenes and events and juxtaposing them herself. Given the role of the viewer in the meaning production process, database cinema is thus a realm beyond authorial control. And this is what makes *Born in the USSR* such a unique and clear-eyed document of the post-Soviet transformation: the database structure exists independently of its author. And even though it is possible to detect the state's presence — in the voice of its leading filmmaker Miroshnichenko — in the last installment of the series, its content remains unbiased.

The structure of database cinema is open-ended and prone to unexpected turns in the narrative. When the *Up* project was franchised to the USSR, the producers intended only to document the lives of children from different regions of the world's largest country; they had no idea participants in the project would witness one of the most colossal transformations of the twentieth century.

The method of the film is meta-cinematic; it continually quotes itself, while its subjects comment on their past statements and experiences and even edit them. A 21-year-old Nastia, who at seven wished for peace in the world and for hens to be beautiful and white, remarks that Americans deserved the September 11 attacks because 'they interfere in

¹⁰ Olivier Asselin, 'Chapter Six Database Cinema and the Museification of National Histories Olivier Asselin, University of Montreal,' *Zoom In, Zoom Out: Crossing Borders in Contemporary European Cinema* (2007), p. 150.

¹¹ Robert Coles, *The Political Life of Children*, (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000).

everybody else's business.' At 28, she takes those words back and apologizes 'before those whom she offended.'

In the database narrative of *Born in the USSR*, there is no dominant authorial voice, no artistic acuteness, and no shocking material; it presents a series of interviews, brief sequences about the subjects, and short segments of historical material. Similar to how a computer database works, it is not the elements themselves that are important, in fact, they could be easily reduced to 0-1 variables. What is important is the scale and the nature of their connections. When we look at *Born in the USSR* series from this perspective and from the grandeur of its scale, we see that every single utterance acquires a historical significance and shows how valuable every detail from the life of every participant is; the value that their lives could never acquire in traditional media, where they could be easily indistinguishable from 0-1 variables.

The database approach employed by the series corresponds to methods emerging in contemporary science in which large and complex processes such as changes in cultural paradigms, social evolution, and behavioral patterns of groups are processed via algorithms which work not with selected samples but with all available data.

Other longitudinal documentaries have attempted to choose articulate participants who were also symbols of their epoch (*Is it Easy to be Young, 1986*), and although those projects were successful at the time of their release they now seem dated. By contrast, those depicted in *Born in the USSR* are not celebrities but 'little people' who are usually of limited interest to traditional media. In its attempt to render the *dataflow* of the epoch by documenting the dramatic arcs of individual lives, the project proves that the true insight is revealed not through exceptions but through the sum of interactions. The project is not only an affirmation of humanism but also a unique document of the epoch: life after the collapse of the Soviet empire, with rapidly changing historical, ideological, and cultural currents. Most importantly, it resists the current regime's attempts to frame it within the rhetoric of rebuilding of Soviet Russia. Despite the series director having joined the state establishment, the database structure of the series leaves us a chance to interpret the transformation ourselves, without political interference of the current regime.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. This license lets it to be freely shared and adapted in any medium and format and for any purpose, including commercially. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

REFERENCES

- Artemov, Viktor A., 'The Village in the 1990s', *Sociological Research* 42.6 (2003): 27-43.
- Asselin, Olivier, 'Chapter Six Database Cinema and the Museification of National Histories
Olivier Asselin, University of Montreal', *Zoom In, Zoom Out: Crossing Borders in
Contemporary European Cinema* (2007): 128-154.
- Cheney, Kristen E. *Pillars of the Nation: Child Citizens and Ugandan National Development*,
University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Coles, Robert, *The Political Life of Children*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000.
- Goralik, Linor, 'Rosargoeksporta Syrka: Simvolika i Simvoly Sovetskoi Epokhi v
Segodniashnem Rossiskom Brendinge', *Teoria mody*. 3 (2007).
- James, Allison, and Alan Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the
Sociological Study of Childhood*, Psychology Press, 1997.
- Knight, Rebecca, 'Representations of Soviet Childhood in Post-Soviet Texts by Liudmila
Ulitskaia and Nina Gabrielian,' *The Modern Language Review* (2009): 790-808.
- Laitin, David D., *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad*, vol.
22, Cambridge Univ Press, 1998.
- Manovich, Lev, 'Database as Symbolic Form', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research
into New Media Technologies* 5.2 (1999): 80-99.
- The Language of New Media*, MIT press, 2001.
- Simes, Dimitri K., *After the Collapse: Russia Seeks its Place as a Great Power*, Simon and Schuster,
1999.