

**Bringing Oil to Life:
Corporations and Conspiracies in Russian Oil Documentaries**

Douglas Rogers
Department of Anthropology
Yale University
Box 208277
New Haven, CT 06520-8277
douglas.rogers@yale.edu

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Abstract: This article examines several documentary films made by and about the Russian oil industry in the period from 2003 to 2016, with a particular emphasis on the ways in which they portray intersections between oil and post-Soviet “life.” It divides these films into two major sub-genres: the corporate documentary (2003-present) and the conspiracy documentary (most widespread after about 2012). Corporate documentaries have been instrumental in fashioning new, post-Soviet links between the oil industry and everyday life, especially through “commodity chain” documentaries shown widely on television and in other media. The conspiracy films of the 2010s then extended these commodity chains into the realm of shadowy international cabals and, in some cases, fantastical alien worlds. Together, these sub-genres speak to the cultural imagination of life in Russia as a “petrostate,” complete with agents and victims, usable pasts and presents, and a variety of “energopolitical” subject positions that viewers might inhabit and shift among. Although oil documentaries and science fiction generated around the world have long imagined non-hydrocarbon energy futures for humankind, recent Russian oil documentaries in both sub-genres envision a world in which oil and human life will become ever more tightly enmeshed.

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Oil-dependent political and economic orders are not created or sustained just by oilfield production figures, global oil prices, state budgetary inflows and outflows, or battles at the commanding heights of states and corporations. They are also—crucially and inextricably—cultural orders: worlds in which a wide variety of actors produce and consume discourses about what it means to navigate lives suffused by oil. This centrality of oil and oil derivatives to everyday life has been a recurring theme in the cultural production of the twentieth- and twenty-first century capitalist world, from the popular television serial *Dallas* in the United States to the enormous pan-Africanist festivals of 1970s oil-boom Nigeria. Since the early 2000s, oil-saturated cultural discourses have proliferated Russia as well. In the first minutes of the 2016 documentary *Oil and Blood*, for instance, the narrator makes a case for the film’s significance to its Russian television viewership:

Maybe someone will ask, ‘Why should we care how much some barrel of oil costs on some New York Stock Exchange?’ There are other things to worry about—home, work, getting a pension. Some people have gardens. . . . Many don’t even guess how durably and deeply that simple 159-liter barrel of crude oil has been ingested into our lives, how much depends on its cost.¹

On display and at stake in *Oil and Blood* and the other documentary films I take up in this article are questions about the intersections of power, oil, and subjectivity in contemporary

¹ *Neft’ i Krov’*, Gvardiia Production Center (Moscow, 2016).

Russia—questions, that is, about the kinds of human beings shaped in, by, and occasionally against Russia’s hydrocarbon-dominated political economy. I suggest that, by elaborating for wide audiences a range of links between the movements of oil, on the one hand, and representations of “life,” on the other hand, these documentary films cast Russian citizens as new kinds of subjects and posit the turbulent political and economic order they inhabit as natural, long-lasting, and inevitable.² My argument is framed by analytical, topical/methodological, and historical considerations.

I understand the term subject to refer to the “historically and culturally specific, and semiotically mediated, construction of the nature of the human and its capacities.” These constructions are, moreover, most evident in “forms of self-understanding immanent in cultural discourses and associated practices.”³ In recent decades, scholars have traced the formation and re-formation of an ever-increasing variety of subjects. These range from biopolitical subjects, shaped by the “governance of a population” and classically elaborated in Foucault’s writings, to, for instance, environmental subjects, people for whom “the environment is a category that organizes some of their thinking and a domain in conscious relation to which they perform some

² My attention to the articulation of oil and life draws inspiration from a number of studies of oil, life, and cultural production dedicated to other times and places, including Brian C. Black, “Oil for Living: Petroleum and American Conspicuous Consumption,” *Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (2012): 40-50; Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (New York, 2014); and Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis, 2013).

³ Webb Keane, “From Fetishism to Sincerity: On Agency, the Speaking Subject, and Their Historicity in the Context of Religious Conversion.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (1997), pp. 674-693.

of their actions.”⁴ My concern here is with still another domain of subjectivity, which Dominic Boyer usefully terms “energopolitical” and which orients our analyses toward human beings created in relationship to energy sources and flows.⁵ Energopolitical subjects, then, are humans formed at the intersection of energy systems and political economies. They vary tremendously across time and place—even within a single state—and they might be looked in on at a range of sites, from consumption practices to infrastructures to textual or visual representations.⁶

My contention is that one particularly fruitful domain for the analysis of energopolitical subjects in recent Russia is documentary film, a genre in which cultural discourses and practices that tie energy sources to the imagination of human life have proliferated rapidly.⁷ I focus on the two most prominent sub-genres of these documentary representations of oil, each of which offers distinct visions of how oil and life have become entwined in new ways in the post-Soviet period.

⁴ Foucault citations. Arun Agrawal, “Environmentality: Community, Intimate Government, and the Making of Environmental Subjects in Kumaon, India.” *Current Anthropology* 46, No. 2 (2005), 161-190.

⁵ Dominic Boyer, “Energopower: An Introduction,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2014): 309-333; on energopower in Russia, see also Tynkkynen, “Energy as Power” and Douglas Rogers, “Energopolitical Russia: Corporation, State, and the Rise of Social and Cultural Projects.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87 no. 2 (2014): 431-452.

⁶ For one study that takes up this general issue from a quite different starting point than the present article, see, for example, the shifts in geographical imaginations theorized in Stefan Bouzarovski and Mark Bassin, “Energy and Identity: Imagining Russia as a Hydrocarbon Superpower,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101, no. 4 (2011): 783-794. Peter Rutland suggests that a good number of Russian elites push back at the notion of Russia as hydrocarbon superpower. See Peter Rutland, “Petronation? Oil, Gas, and National Identity in Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 1 (2015): 66-89.

⁷ On the importance of visual representations of “the Russian idea” and other issues of national identity, especially on television, see Marlene Laruelle, “The ‘Russian Idea’ on the Small Screen: Staging National Identity on Russia’s TV,” *Demokratizatsiya* 22, no. 2 (2014): 313-333; Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, *Television and Culture in Putin’s Russia* (London, 2009); and Stephen Hutchings and Verz Tolz, *Nation, Ethnicity, and Race on Russian Television: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference* (London, 2015).

The first is corporate documentaries, which took off in the early aughts and are well exemplified by some of Lukoil's documentary projects and the hydrocarbon sector's support for documentary filmmaking more generally. The second is conspiracy documentaries, represented in this article by a pair of recent "special investigations" commissioned by and broadcast on the federal television station REN-TV beginning in 2012. Both sub-genres of oil documentary are significant because they are widely familiar to Russian television audiences—if not the actual documentaries I discuss then others in a broadly similar style. Both also have significant correlates outside of television: as I note in more detail for each case, they are closely linked to popular books, websites, blogs, advertisements, news accounts, corporate museums, and other genres of cultural production that also grapple with the profound impacts of oil on Russian life. Documentaries and the types of oil visuals they present are likely the most widely circulating and widely encountered elements of oil-infused cultural production in contemporary Russia.⁸

My aim is not to evaluate viewer response—something about which I have not collected direct data—but to consider Russian oil documentaries as visual texts produced and circulating in specific political and social circumstances. Methodologically, I draw primary inspiration from a strand of anthropologists' engagement with the role of media in the "production of new kinds of selves," especially as those selves are imagined to relate to nations, states, and, in the case at

⁸ Both sub-genres also add some specifically Russian and postsocialist dimensions to the venerable global genre of the oil documentary; see Rasul Sorkhabi, "Historical Documentary Films on Petroleum Industry," *Oil-Industry History* 13, no. 1 (2012): 187-192; Imre Szeman, "The Cultural Politics of Oil: On *Lessons of Darkness* and *Black Sea Files*," *Polygraph* 22 (2010): 3-15; Imre Szeman, "Crude Aesthetics: The Politics of Oil Documentaries," *Journal of American Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012): 423-439; Geo Takach, "Visualizing Alberta: Dueling Documentaries and Bituminous Sands," in Robert Boschman and Mario Trono, eds., *Found in Alberta: Environmental Themes for the Anthropocene* (Ontario, Can., 2014); Ion Bogdan Vasi, Edward T. Walker, et. al., "'No Fracking Way!' Documentary Film, Discursive Opportunity, and Local Opposition against Hydraulic Fracturing in the United States, 2010 to 2013," *American Sociological Review* 80, no. 5 (2015): 934-959.

hand, corporations.⁹ In these analyses, the task is to connect the narrative arcs, visual techniques, and other aspects of media representation to shifting territories of subjectivities that stretch into other domains of everyday experience commonly encountered in ethnography. In 1990s Kazakhstan, for instance, the soap opera *Crossroads*—financed by the British Foreign Office’s “Marshall Plan of the Mind” program to spur free-market thinking—featured storylines full of model entrepreneurs and successful privatizers. In practice, Ruth Mandel shows, this effort to fashion new kinds of capitalist subjects by projecting exemplars into people’s living rooms clashed with other genres of didactic visual representation, especially the socialist realism familiar to Kazakh audiences and producers, to subvert much of *Crossroads*’ subject-forming agenda.¹⁰ Or, to take a less overtly didactic example, Bruce Grant demonstrates that the “prisoner cycle” of popular films featuring the kidnapping of Russians in the Caucasus combine with everything from Pushkin classics to the decor of trendy Moscow cafes to produce a multimedia “arts of emplacement” that helps to naturalize Russian presence—and ongoing military intervention—in the Caucasus.¹¹ Taking an analogous approach, I argue that Russian oil documentaries intersect with other arenas of post-Soviet social life, such as widespread, recurrent anxieties about the affordability of foodstuffs and the reliability of the money supply, to place viewers in a variety of energopolitical subject positions. These subject positions, in turn, are

⁹ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Egyptian Melodrama—Technology of the Modern Subject?” In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, eds. (Berkeley, 2002), 116; see also many of the other essays in this collection.

¹⁰ Ruth Mandel. “A Marshall Plan of the Mind: The Political Economy of a Kazakh Soap Opera.” In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, eds. (Berkeley, 2002): 211-228.

¹¹ Bruce Grant, “The Good Russian Prisoner: Naturalizing Violence in the Caucasus Mountains.” *Cultural Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2005): 39-67.

situated in and predicated on the omnipresence and inevitability of oil in Russian life in the present and far into the future.¹²

The salience of post-Soviet worries about food, money, and crisis in these films points to my third and final frame: history. Although corporate and conspiracy documentaries featuring oil are not new, their recent appearance in Russia—against the backdrop of Soviet and early post-Soviet history—has made for some notable departures from the shape of these genres elsewhere in the world. To begin with, for all its massive oil reserves and exports the Soviet Union did not produce many significant entries to the global cultural archive of “oil culture.”¹³ The centralized

¹² FIX NOTE! Subjectivities are many and come in fields, and oil documentaries are far from the only territory of subject formation and debate about “life” that is significant in post-Soviet Russia. To give but a few other examples: The entire “transition” period of the 1990s has been usefully described as a time in which everyday life took on outsized importance, as familiar encompassing structures disappeared with the abrupt end of socialism and commonplace activities took on uncommon significance. Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery, eds. *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World* (Lanham, MD, 1999). Members of the last Soviet generation searched eagerly for “normal life,” a search that often led them—and indeed Russians of all generations—into the bewildering world of post-Soviet politicized consumption. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2005); Olga Shevchenko, *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow* (Indianapolis, 2008). More recently, powerful state and corporate representations of everyday life have roared back from their ebb tide in the 1990s, and debates and experiments involving life, death, and potential rebirth have surged in both religious and secular registers. Rogers everyday life; Anya Bernstein, “Freeze, Die, Come to Life: The Many Paths to Immortality in Post-Soviet Russia,” *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 4 (2015): 766-781; Anya Bernstein, “Love and Resurrection: Remaking Life and Death in Contemporary Russia,” *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 1 (2016): 12–23. In the same years, less realist genres of Russian cultural production have offered up their own explorations of new forms of life, notably in the rise of what Alexander Etkind calls “magical historicism,” a literary and filmic world often inhabited by ghosts, vampires, zombies, werewolves, and other not-quite or no-longer living creatures. On these dimensions of post-Soviet life, and Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Palo Alto, 2013).

¹³ In a quickly growing scholarship see, for instance, Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, eds., *Oil Culture* (Minneapolis, 2014); Hannah Appel, Arthur Mason, and Michael Watts, eds., *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas* (Ithaca, 2015); Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago, 2005); Petrocultures Research Group, *After Oil* (Alberta, Canada, 2016).

socialist economy privileged heavy industry and defense sectors over natural resource extraction, and official cultural production followed suit by heroizing urban factory workers, metallurgy, and human labor rather than the dirty and unpredictable (and thus hard to squeeze into the planning bureaucracy) labors of drilling for oil. Soviet revenues from oil exports were centrally controlled, never transforming production sites into the boomtowns that have long enchanted and repelled documentarists, journalists, and novelists around the capitalist world. To the extent that oil featured in Soviet cultural production at all, it was largely at the small-scale level of celebrating the not-so-prestigious profession of the socialist oil worker within his or her own workplace.¹⁴ The post-Soviet period, and especially the years from around 2003 to the present, has thus served as a crucible for the formation of quite new cultural associations among oil, oil prices, and the everyday in Russia—or, as the opening of *Oil and Blood* puts it more evocatively, for the ingestion of oil into the lives of homes, work, and gardens in ways that were not at all common in the Soviet period. Many of the distinguishing features of post-Soviet oil documentaries—from their frequent invocation of 1990s food shortages to the mainstreaming of the conspiracy documentary genre as a whole—spring from this recent, tumultuous, and specifically post-Soviet historical context.

Corporate Oil Documentaries

In the capitalist world, documentary film came of age along with the modern corporation—especially the modern oil corporation. Some of the biggest and most enduring supporters of British documentary filmmaking in the second half of the twentieth century were

¹⁴ On socialist oil, see Douglas Rogers, *The Depths of Russia: Oil, Culture, and Power after Socialism* (Ithaca, 2015).

Shell and British Petroleum. (Shell's own film division had, in fact, been created decades earlier, in the 1930s.) The Iraq Petroleum Company established its film unit in 1951, and Aramco screened its first major film, *Island of the Arabs*, in New York in 1955.¹⁵ As Mona Damluji succinctly summarizes these early decades of documentary filmmaking in the oil industry: “Since the turn of the twentieth century, British and American oil companies have extensively filmed their operations in producing countries and used cinematic representations to craft images of postcolonial modernity.”¹⁶ Through heroic narratives of discovery and tales of technological triumph, these films helped cast oil as the engine of modernity—and the oil corporation as modernity's chief patron, facilitator, and developer.

Corporate oil documentaries began to appear in Russia in the early 2000s, where they took on a distinctly postsocialist—rather than postcolonial—characteristics. These documentaries emerged as the privatization battles of the 1990s slowed, oil companies and their subsidiaries opened public relations and government relations departments to tend to their interests, and climbing oil prices lifted both corporate budgets and the need to manage public opinion in the face of mounting critiques of post-Soviet inequality. Over the next decade and a half, major Russian corporations produced the most widely circulated oil and gas imagery of the post-Soviet era, including documentaries, long-form commercials, and extensive footage provided to news agencies. By now, there is scarcely a refinery, oil town, pipeline, or corporate division in Russia that is not the subject of some sort of documentary narrating the story of its

¹⁵ See Patrick Russell and James Piers Taylor, eds., *Shadows of Progress: Documentary Film in Post-war Britain* (London, 2010): 87-95; Rudmer Canjels, “From Oil to Celluloid: A History of Shell Films” in J. Luiten van Zanden, ed., *A History of Royal Dutch Shell*, Vol. 4 (Oxford, 2007); and Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Palo Alto, 2006): 121-123.

¹⁶ Mona Damluji, “Petrofilms and the Image World of Middle Eastern Oil,” in Appel et al., eds., *Subterranean Estates*.

history, current operations, and significance to the local, regional, and national economy. The easy access of these films to both regional and national television audiences has been aided by the fact that many Russian television stations have been owned, in part, by energy companies.¹⁷

The Corporatization of Post-Soviet Life

The vertical integration of the capitalist oil industry—in which a single corporation controls operations all the way from underground reservoir to corner gas station—has long lent itself to a particular style of documentary film: the commodity chain documentary.¹⁸ Perhaps in part because vertical integration is new to the postsocialist period, Russian oil documentaries have followed commodity chains with particular alacrity. Veli-Pekka Tynnyken’s instructive analysis of Gazprom’s long-form promotional video *Gazifikatsiia Rossiia* (*The Gasification of Russia*), for instance, places special significance on the film’s portrayal of gas’s journey “from the soil to the soul.”¹⁹ As Tynnyken might predict, Russian oil documentaries often move rapidly back and forth between the “life” of oil as a commodity and possibilities for human life more generally—the first of the several intersections between oil and life that I take up in this article.

“Imagine,” intones the narrator of *Vankor: The Strength of People* (2011) in the film’s opening moments, “that all of the oil in the whole world disappeared. The consequences would

¹⁷ A small sampling of region-based films focused on the oil industry would include *Kachaia Neft’: Real’nye Budny* (TMC Group and Discovery Channel, 2015), about Almatevsk in Tatarstan; *Liudi Nefti* (Omsk, 2010), about the Omsk Oil Refinery; and *Vankor – Sila Liudei* (Krasnoyarsk, 2012) about Rosneft.

¹⁸ See also Jennifer Wenzel, “Consumption for the Common Good?: Commodity Biography Film in an Age of Postconsumerism” *Public Culture* 23, no. 3 (2011): 573-602.

¹⁹ Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen, “Energy as Power: Gazprom, Gas Infrastructure, and Geo-governmentality in Putin’s Russia,” *Slavic Review* 75, no. 2 (2016): 376.

be catastrophic.²⁰ In the absence of new, powerful, and safe energy sources, the question of the survival of civilization is precisely this: oil or life?” Having thus established Rosneft’s operations the Krasnoyarsk region of Eastern Siberia as foundational to human life itself, the short documentary goes on to follow the path of oil from subterranean reservoir to national pipeline, interviewing workers and showcasing industry equipment along the way. Likewise, *Oil in Transit*, a Rossiya-24 documentary about the Caspian Pipeline Consortium—which moves oil from Kazakhstan’s Tengiz oilfield to the Black Sea—begins and ends with variations on this same oil-and-life theme. Host Robert Frantsev’s opening lines establish that, “The modern human depends on the quick and safe transport of hydrocarbons no less than on the resource itself. If oil is life, then without pipelines, life would simply stop.”²¹ Half an hour later, after a 1500-kilometer visual journey along the pipeline, and standing with his back to a massive tanker setting out to transport oil across the Black Sea, Frantsev concludes: “That’s it, tanker by tanker, practically non-stop, 365 days a year—the real road of black gold’s life.” The lives of humans, in this framing, depend quite precisely on the metaphorical life cycle of oil as skillfully managed by a corporation or group of corporations.²²

Lukoil-Perm’s *Oil is Life*, produced in 2004, is illustrative of the ways in which it both includes and transcends this commodity chain tale of oil’s “life.”²³ Lukoil’s operations in the

²⁰ *Vankor – Sila Liudei* (Krasnoyarsk, 2012).

²¹ *Neft’ v Dvizhenii*, Rossiia-24 (Moscow, 2016).

²² Although not a corporate documentary, perhaps the most well-known of these commodity chain documentaries is *Truba*, which ends its journey following the Druzhba pipeline from Siberia to Germany. Appropriately enough for the theme of life and death, the film ends in a crematorium, where both humans and gas are consumed. *Truba* (Hypermarket Film, Prague, 2016).

²³ *Neft’ eto zhizn’*, Kucher (Perm, 2004).

Perm region of the Russian Urals began just as the Soviet Union ended, with the acquisition of Perm's major refinery. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the company added to its portfolio by taking over the more lucrative oil production enterprises in the Perm region as well. As profits poured into the oil sector in the early years of Russia's oil boom, criticisms of Lukoil's role in the region intensified. One set of criticisms came from general population, for whom the oil industry exemplified the class of new Russians, ever-widening gulfs of inequality, and wealth accumulation in Moscow at the expense of provincial regions. A second set of criticisms came from the federal state apparatus that, in Vladimir Putin's first term as president, often focused on curtailing the perceived excesses of corporate oligarchs and directing a greater portion of corporate profits toward investment at home rather than personal enrichment abroad.²⁴

Lukoil-Perm commissioned the 25-minute film *Oil is Life* in just this context, as one element of a year-long, region-wide series of events celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of Permian oil and—the film's sponsors hoped—drawing attention to the company's dedication to and sponsorship of the entire Perm region. *Oil is Life* was produced by the Perm-based political and corporate marketing firm Kucher, one of the oldest such firms in the region, an experienced hand at political consulting, and a veteran of the rough and tumble regional elections of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Indeed, one of Kucher's founders, O. A. Cherkasov, was an engineer of Iurii Trutnev's rise from Komsomol leader to mayor of Perm, and then to powerful governor of the Perm region in the regional election of 2000. (Cherkasov subsequently accompanied Trutnev to his post in Moscow as Minister of Natural Resources of the Russian Federation, serving as a special advisor.) *Oil is Life*, then, was a political project in image-making from the start, executed by one of the most prestigious region-based political marketing companies in Russia at

²⁴ See also Rogers, *Depths of Russia*, pages.

the time, one with close ties to the regional political leadership. In one of the hallmarks of Russian oil documentaries—and Russian capitalism of that era—it emerged not just from a corporation, but from politically powerful networks that crossed and re-crossed the fuzzy boundaries of state agencies and corporate subsidiaries in the region.²⁵

Fittingly, then, *Oil is Life* opens with a double introduction. First, viewers see an amiable three-way meeting among Perm region governor Oleg Chirkunov (who had replaced Trutnev in 2004), Lukoil president Vagit Alekperov, and Lukoil-Perm president Andrei Kuziaev. Chirkunov speaks over the visuals: “Lukoil is the main tax-payer in the Perm region. It makes the budget of the Perm region, and so the development of the relationship between the Perm region and Lukoil is extremely meaningful.” The film’s second introduction comes from the film’s narrator Iurii Filimonov, a young and popular producer at the Perm State Television and Radio Company. Filimonov appears in front of massive Lukoil-Perm oil tanks to gloss the film’s title with a pun: “Someone once said that ‘oil is life.’ In any case, where there’s a source of oil, life abounds” (*tam gde kliuch nefti, zhizn’ b’et kliuchom*). The film then cuts to shots that make up many of the visual components of the remainder of the documentary, including a folklore group performing onstage in front of a Lukoil-Perm banner and slow, soft-focus aerial views of the rivers and forests of the northern Perm region. The rural districts of the Perm region, where much of the region’s oil was produced, struggled mightily without state agricultural subsidies in the post-Soviet period. In *Oil is Life*, though, they appear as vibrant; indeed, much of the film is devoted to showcasing Lukoil-Perm’s efforts to help keep these depressed districts both economically afloat and culturally lively. “Life” here is not so much the cars, cosmetics, and plastics of classic

²⁵ Compare Susanne Wengle, *Post-Soviet Power: State-led Development and Russia’s Marketization* (New York, 2015). On corporate sponsorship of non-documentary films, see Stephen M. Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* (Bloomington, 2012): 251-270.

commodity chain documentaries, but the very possibility for postsocialist cultural and economic life in these towns and districts—the ability to work and live happily in areas that, but for Lukoil-Perm’s presence and sponsorship, might rapidly empty out or, in common enough local parlance, die.

The film then turns to a series of segments on the history of the oil industry in the Perm region, showing that oil has always been central to the region (a contention that would have appeared as a stretch, at best, to viewers in the factory and defense focused Soviet Perm region). In each of these segments, Soviet-era film footage and photographs, always shown in sepia tones, and contemporary footage of Lukoil-Perm equipment and workers, always shown in color, alternate and bleed in and out of each other. “Whatever the changes in technology, equipment, and even in the country,” Filimonov explains, “the profession of oil worker has remained.” At a number of points, the appropriation of the Soviet past is accomplished visually as much as through narrative. Shots of Filimonov himself, for instance, might appear first in sepia and then morph into color, revealing the oil production equipment behind him to be Lukoil-Perm’s rather than Soviet-era Permneft’s. Likewise, Viktoria Shavrina’s memories about her childhood near the region’s first oil well—filmed specially for the documentary—are intercut with black-and-white photographs from the era and a video reconstruction of a young girl bounding through a field, in carefree, nostalgic slow motion.

In a variant of the familiar commodity-chain organization of oil documentaries, the film’s tour through the history of the Perm region’s Soviet oil towns and districts becomes a tour through Lukoil’s contemporary operations in the region. The discovery of oil in the area around Krasnokamsk, for instance, is accompanied by an oft-told story about the geologist Nikolai Gerasimov’s narrow escape from Stalinist repression in 1937. (Already being questioned in

Moscow about his drilling teams' failures to discover oil, he was saved by a last-minute telegram bringing word of an oil strike near Krasnokamsk.) The film immediately flashes forward to present-day Krasnokamsk, with an oil-rig monument in the center of town. A similar temporal technique features in the next segment about Polazna, to the northeast of Perm; here, shots of the first rudimentary refining operations in Polazna are sequenced with shots of contemporary Lukoil service stations.

Oil is Life thus explicitly claims the Soviet past, and its familiar oil-sector enterprises, for the post-Soviet, Lukoil-dominated present. The frequent images of Lukoil infrastructure are careful to highlight the company's brand and logo at various points along oil's life cycle, whether on pumpjacks or workers' helmets, storage tanks or corner gas stations. The film's focus on the intersection of regional and corporate histories clearly works to borrow from the authority of the past to defuse the critiques of the present. In this linkage between corporation and trajectory of economic development, *Oil is Life* echoes the corporation-as-modernizer image found in corporate oil documentaries around the world. Yet, unlike Shell and BP's early films, *Oil is Life* documents life "at home" rather than in the postcolonial periphery, and it responds to the specific configuration of post-Soviet inequality and anti-corporate critique.²⁶ These efforts included not only historical reconstruction but, as the first of the film's two introductions made explicit, drawing attention to the company's position at the forefront of the regional economy and its associated development projects, tax contributions, and collaborative relationship with regional political figures. To the extent that life the Perm region could be said to be recovering

²⁶ On these points, see Dinah Rajak, "Corporate Memory: Historical Revisionism, Legitimation, and the Invention of Tradition in a Multinational Mining Company," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 37, no. 2 (2014): 259-280 and Ekaterina Kalinina, "Beyond Nostalgia for the Soviet Past: Interpreting Documentaries on Russian Television," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 3 (2017): 285-306.

from the tumultuous and uncertain 1990s, then, the film cast Lukoil-Perm and its products as the patron of nearly every aspect of that recovery—and that life.

Oil is Life, in sum, ranges over regional history, geography, oil-infused commodity chains, and contemporary politics and economics to interpolate its viewers as particular kinds of subjects—subjects whose lives are made possible by the collaborative efforts of energy corporation and regional state apparatus. The easy movement between the “life” of a commodity and life more generally exemplifies a discursive project of shaping human lives not just through classic Foucaultian biopolitics (the management of a “population”), but through energopolitics—a politics premised on and mediated by “the concern that our precious and invisible conduits of fuel and force stay brimming and humming.”²⁷

Lukoil-Perm was not the only company to produce or commission corporate documentaries in the Perm region, but it was far and away the first, most active, and most committed—likely for at least to two reasons. First, it was the company most identified with rapidly increasing inequality and corporate takeover by Moscow-based (as opposed to region-based) business interests, and therefore had the most to gain from polishing its image. Second, its participation in Moscow-based Lukoil’s efforts to raise capital on international financial markets provided incentive to present itself in a manner similar to Western energy-sector companies, themselves veterans of the corporate documentary model. Moreover, when other corporations in the Perm region did release their own films, they tended to showcase a much narrower and less soaring set of obligations and connections, chiefly to their own workforces and economic sectors, rather than to the region or the country as a whole. Major Perm-based companies like KamKabel’ and Perm Motors, that is, could boast of their own corporate successes and the

²⁷ Dominic Boyer, “Energopower: An Introduction,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2014): 309-333.

loyalty of generations of workers—and draw on their own archive of black-and-white Soviet documentaries to do so—but a broader vocabulary that inserted these corporations into Russian life writ large was just not available to them in the same way that it was to Lukoil-Perm and to other companies in the hydrocarbon sector.²⁸

The Hydrocarbon Sector and the Documentary Imagination

Oil is Life was shown occasionally on regional television, and was likely the most widely viewed collaboration among the Perm region’s oil industry, media figures, and documentary filmmakers in the aughts. The film had a number of important afterlives. One of these was a 2008 investigative documentary entitled *Oil People (Liudi iz nefti)*, which implicitly challenged the celebratory air of Lukoil-Perm’s corporate documentaries. Shot by Robert Karapetian of Ekaterinburg for the television series “Hidden Camera,” *Oil People* exposed the devastating health consequences of a Lukoil pipeline spill in the village of Pavlovo, in the Orda district of the Perm region. Featuring interviews with residents who had been driven from their village by serious illnesses, the film is, to my knowledge, the only documentary in the Perm region shot in style of the negligence- or malfeasance-revealing exposé that is most familiar to Western audiences.²⁹ *Oil People* nevertheless accomplished its critique in good part by accepting the

²⁸ See, for instance, “KamKabel – 55 let. Itogi” Studio Lime for “PR-Proekt,” 2012, “Permskie Motory – 80 let,” Masterskaia Dobrykh Film’ov for Perm Motors, 2014, and “Odin den’ na Permskom motornom zavode,” 2013.

²⁹ Salma Monani, “Energizing Environmental Activism? Environmental Justice in *Extreme Oil: The Wilderness and Oil on Ice*,” *Environmental Communication* 2, no. 1 (2008): 119-127; Jane M. Gaines, “Political Mimesis,” in Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov, eds., *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis, 1999): 84-102; Livia Hinegardner, “Action, Organization, and Documentary Film: Beyond a Communications Model of Human Rights Videos,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 25, no. 2 (2009): 172–185; and Meg McLagan, “Introduction: Making Human Rights Claims Public,” *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 1 (2006): 191-220.

corporation's asserted links between oil and life, both in its very title and in its careful categorization of the ways oil leaked into every aspect of Pavlovo (and especially the bodies of its children), leaving the village largely empty of a human population—the opposite of the lively upbeat village scenes of *Oil is Life*. Perm regional television stations refused to air *Oil People*, keeping its circulation limited to activists and social media users.

Lukoil-Perm's *Oil is Life*, by contrast, eventually joined other specially commissioned visual exhibits in one of the company's several new museums (also designed by the political marketing firm Kucher). Lukoil-Perm deemed the production of *Oil is Life* so successful, in fact, that the film served as a model for subsequent collaborations among the corporation, the marketing firm Kucher, and the regional television, radio, and documentary industries. Lukoil-Perm soon created an internal office in charge of generating its own visual materials, supplying much of the footage to local newscasts. Other videos were sent off to Moscow, where they featured in the occasional news program "Lukoil's Regions," a corporation-produced roundup of news from Lukoil subsidiaries. *Oil is Life*, then, was not just one-time exercise in corporate image-making, but a part of Lukoil-Perm's encouragement of visual documentation in general—in and beyond the oil industry itself.³⁰

Documentary filmmakers often did contract work for Lukoil-Perm and occasionally pitched ideas for documentaries to the company. In an application written in 2006, the studio *Novyi Kurs* and the Fund for the Support and Development of Film Arts requested over 166,000 rubles to make a documentary entitled "Moving Forward with Lukoil." Based on the company's operations in the Osa district, the film would, according to the grant application, "allow the audience to feel its participation in the epochal changes in life of the region and the country."

³⁰ See, for instance, Nikolai Trukhokin, "Snimaetsia Kino" *Permskaia Neft'* 8(182), April 2006.

The proposal went on, “The conclusion that the audience should make at the end of the film is the following:

In the 1990s, the administration of the region and the leaders of the Perm oil sector chose the absolutely correct and almost the only possible path along which to save the sector and the stable development of the region: the fruitful collaboration with the major oil company Lukoil. All subsequent history has proven that the company not only pulled [the Perm region’s oil enterprises] out of crisis, but demonstrated an example of a new kind of relationship with the region...³¹

Like *Oil is Life*, the proposed film sought to use the possibilities of documentary filmmaking to cast the rapidly shifting lives of citizens of the region as well tended to by the alliance between regional state apparatus and regional oil company. “Moving Forward with Lukoil” was not, so far as I know, ever actually funded or filmed. In its efforts to frame the corporation as guiding the region through the “epochal changes in life” that were the 1990s, however, the proposal’s goals echo those of the corporate documentaries commissioned by Shell, BP, Aramco, or the Iraqi Petroleum Company in earlier decades, while also giving them a specifically post-Soviet twist.³²

Through Lukoil-Perm’s sponsorship in those same years, smaller-scale documentaries about the oil industry came into vogue across much of the Perm region as district-level culture

³¹ PermGANI f. 1206, op. 3, d. 1037.

³² Trukhokin, “Snimaetsia Kino.”

workers reclaimed and redefined their work around *kraevedenie* (regional or local studies). Beginning in 2002, Lukoil-Perm's Connections with Society division, tasked with beginning one of Russia's first experiments in corporate social responsibility, ran annual "social and cultural projects" competitions, which awarded small grants to libraries, schools, houses of culture, and other groups in competition categories ranging from local history to ecology to sports. Regardless of the category, making a short documentary film was often part of the plan for these grants (indeed, these grants often brought the first significant video equipment to these rural cultural institutions). In 2007, for instance, the company awarded a grant to the Riabkovskii Information-Service Center for a project entitled "The Young Documentary Filmmaker," in which a group of teenagers learned to make their own documentary film about the discovery of oil in the Chernushka district. No fewer than six other Lukoil-sponsored projects in the Perm region in that year also included amateur documentary film components.³³

Lukoil-Perm also fostered more general connections with Perm's growing group of professional documentary filmmakers, many of them gathered around the Film Studio Novyi Kurs, the Fund for the Support and Development of Film Arts, and the annual Perm-based Flahertiana documentary film festival, which featured documentary films made in the tradition of Robert Flaherty's famous *Nanook of the North* (1922). Lukoil-Perm served the "general partner" of the Flahertiana festival and its largest financial backer beginning in 1995, and this sponsorship allowed what began as a gathering of a few interested specialists to grow into an internationally known festival.³⁴ Corporation-sponsored documentaries and documentary film festivals were increasingly common elsewhere in Russia as well, offering yet one more domain in which

³³ *VI Konkurs Sotsial'nykh i Kulturnykh Proektov* (Perm, 2007).

³⁴ Trukhokin, "Snimaetsia Kino."

energy-sector company logos were prominently displayed. To give but one other example, a number of oil and gas company subsidiaries working in the Yamal peninsula sponsored much of the 2000s-era institutionalization of the Russian Visual Anthropology Association through its annual festival of Russian anthropological films. These companies had no special role in the content of films shown at the festival, and the vast majority were not about oil at all. But, at a time when state cultural sponsorship was difficult to come by, it was oil and gas companies that made the revival of Russian visual anthropology—and especially the visual anthropology of northern peoples—possible.

Crude oil is extracted from the subsoil in increasingly far-flung areas (in Russia and elsewhere), meaning that a vanishingly small percentage of the population is directly familiar with the infrastructure of extraction and transport. Likewise, refined oil is a notoriously invisible substance for consumers, the vast majority of whom use it every day without ever seeing it. The Russian corporate oil documentaries of the aughts—and their derivatives in television news segments and commercials—were thus one of the main ways in which Russians came to know the oil that was becoming so important to the political economy they moved through. On one level, which I called the “corporatization of everyday life,” these films sought to make visible the inextricability of oil, the corporations and state agencies that specialized in it, and the shifting conditions of life itself, burnishing the images of corporations and summoning citizens to a new kind of post-Soviet energopolitical subject position quite different from anything they had known in the Soviet period. On an even deeper and wider level, the level of the documentary imagination, the oil and gas sector’s extensive sponsorship of the documentary film industry shows these corporations’ interest not just in representing of oil and gas as commodities with life cycles enmeshed with humans’, but in fostering the conditions for filmic representation of

everyday life itself—the goal of amateur and professional realist documentaries.³⁵ These linkages between life and oil assembled in the 2000s, multiple though they were, were soon joined by another sub-genre of oil documentary and *its* representations of oil and life: the conspiracy documentary.

Crises and Conspiracies on REN-TV

Oil's many movements and transformations provide easy grist for the “everything is connected” mode of conspiracy thinking; indeed, a great deal of scholarship (and documentary filmmaking) about oil revels in uncovering unseen and unanticipated connections in a manner not at all dissimilar to conspiracy theories.³⁶ In turning to visual representations of oil in some of Russia's newly popular and widely-televised conspiracy documentaries, my aim is not—any more than it was for the corporate documentaries—to evaluate truth claims or attempt to sort fact from fiction. Rather, I show how some of the primary conventions established by the corporate oil documentaries of the aughts were adopted into and transformed by the oil conspiracy documentaries of the following decade. These transformations, in turn, form the foundations upon which another round of imaginaries of oil and Russian life have been assembled. In making these claims, I follow Eliot Bornestein's injunction to consider conspiracy thinking as involving a particular kind of subject position, one that is not necessarily stable or long-lasting and can often be self-consciously inconsistent, even playful, in its experimentation. Neither producers nor

³⁵ These relationships are ongoing. In June of 2017, Gazprom-Export announced that it was spending 1.5 million Euros to hire a German documentary filmmaker to produce a film featuring the most beautiful natural areas of Russia. See “‘Gazprom Eksport’ potratit 1.5 mln. Evro na documental'nyi fil'm o krasotakh Rossii.” *Obshchaia Gazeta* June 8, 2017.

³⁶ On the similarities of social theory and conspiracy theory, see Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold, “Conspiracy Theories and their Truth Trajectories,” *Focaal* 59 (2011): 66-80.

viewers need “believe” in a conspiracy in a strong or enduring way for the conspiratorial stance to have effects.³⁷ Indeed, there are always other theories, ways of knowing, and subject positions that lie alongside and overlap with those of conspiracy thinking; in the case I am exploring here, the somewhat older but still very present sub-genre of the corporate oil documentary remains widespread and available.

Two conspiracy documentaries form the basis of my analysis, both of them produced for the federal Russian television station REN-TV, a platform that gave them wide audiences across Russia at the time of their original airing and in periodic rebroadcasts. There was considerable investment behind both films, in keeping with the increasing prominence of conspiracy theories across a range of Russian genres in the last several years.³⁸ *The Battle for Oil* (2012) was produced by Mainstream TV Company, a contractor for a number of Russian television stations whose credits include episodes of ex-spy Anna Chapman’s *Secrets of the World*, one of REN-

³⁷ Eliot Bornestein, “Plots Against Russia” (<http://plotsagainstrussia.org/>); see especially the discussion of “Conspiracy and its Subjects” at <http://plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2016/4/4/m8qvtbm5awjjm9m3wr80tgn4hlqizh>

³⁸ The old guideline that conspiracy documentaries rarely make it big because—in contrast to corporate documentaries—they rarely have major funding behind them does not apply in recent Russia. See Bjørn Sørensen, “Digital Diffusion of Delusions: A World Wide Web of Conspiracy Documentaries,” in Kate Nash, Craig Hight, and Catherine Summerhayes, eds., *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses* (London, 2014): 201-218 for an overview of conspiracy documentaries and the claim that lack of funding has typically kept them marginal. Among relevant studies of Russian conspiracy theory, see especially Marlene Laruelle, “Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?,” *The Russian Review* 71 (2012): 565–80, which sees them as one mode of the production of “alternate histories”—an approach with which my own analysis certainly conforms; Stefanie Ortmann and John Heathershaw, “Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet Space,” *The Russian Review* 71 (2012): 551–64; Richard Sakwa, “Conspiracy Narratives as a Mode of Engagement in International Politics: The Case of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War,” *The Russian Review* 71 (2012): 581–609; Ilya Yablokov, “Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT),” *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 301-315.

TV's marquee conspiratorial series.³⁹ *Blood and Oil* (2016) was completed over the course of two weeks during the 2015-16 winter holidays and shown first on REN-TV in late January 2016—a time when oil prices and the value of the ruble were in decline, international financial instability was a leading news item, and U. S. economic sanctions imposed on Russia following the invasion of Crimea were a year and a half old. *Blood and Oil* was made for REN-TV by Gvardiia, a production studio founded in 2015 and including among its staff several members (including screenwriter Dmitri Belousov) who had previously worked on *The Battle for Oil* at Mainstream. Like Mainstream, Gvardiia churned out a steady stream of documentary special investigations that dealt in the apocalyptic, mystical, and conspiratorial. *Oil and Blood* is no exception. The film opens with the canonical admonishment of conspiracy thinking to “forget everything you used to know about oil. Real life differs from what both stock market experts and political scientists say. We conducted a special investigation and tell you today what is actually happening, and what awaits us in the near future.” From this starting premise, the films pursue multiple and divergent conspiracy theories—all the while rehearsing of a particular kind of inquiry, an epistemological stance that follows connections across multiple domains, searching for a narrative plot that makes sense of the current oil crisis, situates it in a convincing history, points to both agents and victims, and reveals for its viewers new links between oil and life.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Bitva za Neft'*, Mainstream Television Company (Moscow, 2012).

⁴⁰ Documentary film was only one of several modes in which oil appeared in various kinds of Russian conspiracy thinking and debates about conspiracy thinking in the past decade. As oil prices fell rapidly in 2014, some of the tamer versions of the conspiracies explored in these documentaries were commonly discussed in mainstream Russia media publications such as Forbes (Vladimir Mirov, “Teoria zagovora: pochemu Rossiu ne udest'sia nakazat' snizheniem tsen na neft',” Forbes 2/4/14). Moreover, many of the experts interviewed in the documentaries discussed in this article also have books, blogs, and other platforms, where they frequently offer expert opinions on all manner of topics, including but not limited to the intersections of oil, crisis, and currency that the documentaries focus on. For example, Mikhail Khazin, appearing as

Return to Crisis

Oil and Blood's visual repertoire establishes early on that the scale on which oil and life are intertwined runs far beyond the Russian companies, regions of operation, and commodity chains familiar from the corporate documentaries that began in the previous decade. Moreover, in contrast to the matter-of-fact pace of Lukoil-Perm's *Oil is Life*, both *The Battle for Oil* and, to an even greater extent, *Oil and Blood*, unfold as rapid-fire visual montages. The first fifteen minutes of *Oil and Blood* include nearly two hundred separate short clips, few lasting longer than two or three seconds. The disorientation induced by this rapid succession is accentuated by the fact that most of these clips are speeded up—notably those of bustling highways or sidewalks—while others are slowed to a crawl, lingering, for instance, on market traders' anguished faces as they contemplate downward sloping trendlines on their computer monitors. There is one exception to this temporal vertigo: the shots of oil pumpjacks—the most numerous of the clips in this segment by far—nodding along in unhurried, metronome-like fashion as people, markets, cars, and exchange rates rush frenetically on all sides. Like the circulatory system of the

an expert on oil and international currency in *Blood and Oil* (see below), has been a frequent guest on Russian television and radio stations across the political spectrum. Mikhail Deliagin, featured several times in *The Battle for Oil*, is the author of the 2012 book *The 100-Dollar Government: But What if the Price of Oil Falls?* (Moscow, Algoritm) and dozens of articles about oil and international politics. Both Khazin and Deliagin have extensive social media presences on the Aurora platform (khazin.ru and deliagin.ru). Among the less mainstream personalities appearing in these documentaries is the controversial but widely-known faith healer, mystic, and author Nikolai Levashov, who suggests in *The Battle for Oil* that NASA has covered up evidence of hydrocarbon lifeforms elsewhere in the solar system. See also Borenstein's discussion of the "Houston Project" at <http://plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2016/7/19/selling-russia-retail-or-wholesale>.

documentary's title, the oil pumps continue steadily on, heartbeats amidst a world out of kilter.⁴¹ After the ubiquitous pumpjacks, the most common images in this repertoire are drilling rigs, other infrastructure such as flare-lit refineries and rows of massive oil storage tanks, digital signs advertising currency exchange rates at streetcorner banks, anxious brokers on seething trading floors (almost entirely the New York Stock Exchange), and wartime explosions and bombed out battlefields. Digital images of stock or commodity prices—most of them stepping rapidly and ominously downward as they march left-to-right across the screen—appear relentlessly in the background. So, too, do images of currency itself. Sheets of newly printed dollars or rubles race off mint printing presses. Ben Franklin's eyes, in an extreme close-up of a U.S. one-hundred-dollar note, fade in and out of the background throughout the documentary.

Even before *Oil and Blood* gets to the narrative voiceover and expert interviews whose opinions intercut this frenetic parade of images, the overall message of the documentary is clear: the world is in the grip of an oil crisis. The film's very first words, intoned in deep, ominous, and anonymous voiceover—a sharp contrast to the friendly young face of Iurii Filimonov in his cheerful introduction to Lukoil-Perm's *Oil is Life* over a decade earlier—make this clear:

2016 began with a record fall in oil prices. Panic gripped the stock markets in the United States and Asia ... The large-scale financial crisis gripping the world is so wide that experts do not doubt its artificial origin. ... when will the crisis reach its true bottom? And how will all of this impact Russians' wallets?

⁴¹ *Battle for Oil* uses the same technique in a different way, including nodding pumpjacks as part of the graphic used to introduce and identify experts interviewed for the documentary.

This crisis is, moreover, not somewhere in the temporal middle distance. It is immanent, urgent, and precipitous.⁴² The opening segment of *Oil and Blood* goes on to set the stage for its elaboration of the nature and causes of this crisis by drawing clear links among international oil prices, the Russian federal budget, and ordinary Russians' pocketbooks, especially by intercutting its common montage of exchange points and falling market prices with grainy images of elderly, headscarved women peering into their wallets in a grocery store. With oil at \$15 a barrel, the narrator projects, it will be difficult to buy bananas—once considered by Russians to be something of luxury. But what, he continues, of staples like meat, milk, and eggs? What of oil at \$10 a barrel? The coming crisis occasioned by the collapse of oil prices will be, the film suggests, on par with the crisis that attended the end of the Soviet Union—also, it notes, caused by a drop in global oil prices. In this framing, waves of crisis, as in so many other domains of Russian life in recent decades, are measured along two intersecting axes: by comparison with the early 1990s and by the extent to which various foodstuffs are available in stores—and whether they are affordable when they are.⁴³ Here, both axes are infused with oil;

⁴² Many Western documentaries about oil forecast a coming crisis, whether ecological/environmental, the inevitable outcome of “peak oil,” or both. Indeed, Imre Szeman suggests that one of the primary categories of oil documentary is “eco-apocalyptic” (Szeman, “Crude Aesthetics.”). Many oil films, including *A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash* (Zurich, 2006), one of the films Szeman discusses, also employ the *Koyaanisqatsi*-style “life out of balance” technique favored by both *The Battle for Oil* and *Blood and Oil*. On oil temporalities, see also Limbert, *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town* (Palo Alto, 2010).

⁴³ On post-Soviet crises, see especially Shevchenko, *Crisis and the Everyday*; Rogers, *Depths of Russia*; and Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism* (Ithaca, 2002).

indeed, the crisis precipitating the end of the Soviet Union is retrofitted as an oil crisis as well, a framing few would have given it at the time.⁴⁴

Oil and Blood thus takes as its opening premise what a decade of corporate oil documentaries worked hard to accomplish: the widespread understanding of the centrality of oil-based commodity chains to all aspects of everyday life. In a structurally similar opening, Dar'ia Mintina, one of the experts interviewed in *The Battle for Oil*, observes early in the film that that, "Oil has become the equivalent of everyone and everything." Having posited this link between oil and life, and the crisis into which that life has been thrown, both films set out to account for this crisis. In doing so, they expand and refigure the fields on which the subjects of energopolitical life are envisioned as possible: from Russia and its oil regions to the world (and even the solar system), from homegrown corporations to shadowy international cabals, from oil-fueled triumph over the adversity of the 1990s to oil-greased slide back into a crisis every bit as deep. One of the most obvious indicators of these shifts is that, in contrast to the very specific branding of the corporate documentaries, the oil infrastructure shown so frequently in REN-TV's special investigations is conspicuously generic, never identifiable as operated by any particular company.

Given that the crisis of the 1990s was often acutely experienced by postsocialist citizens through disorienting and wildly fluctuating relationships to money, it is notable that the narrative

⁴⁴ Although many of the claims made in these conspiracy documentaries depart sharply from mainstream scholarly opinion, it is worth noting that the view that falling international oil prices played at least some part in the unraveling of the Soviet Union has become common both in and beyond Russia. See, for instance, Yegor Gaidar, *Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia* (Washington D.C., 2007) and Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (Oxford, 2001). Neither Gaidar nor Kotkin suggests that the oil price declines of the 1980s was part of an intentional effort to bring down the Soviet Union.

of *Oil and Blood*—like its visual montage—focuses in significant part on global financial markets: ruble-dollar and ruble-Euro exchange rates, global oil prices, and the impact of United States’ economic sanctions on everyday Russian life.⁴⁵ In its early segments, the film describes a number of dimensions of globally gyrating oil prices, among them the tankers full of crude glutting international shipping lines; the shale oil revolution in the United States and resulting increase in global supply; and rumors that Saudi Aramco would become a publicly traded-company. Recall that markets and money were largely absent from the corporate documentaries of the aughts, which usually sought to downplay the companies’ relationships to money and markets in response to criticisms of their rapid enrichment. In the more recent conspiracy documentaries, oil money, oil markets, and oil prices return with a vengeance.

So, too, does violence and loss of life. *Blood and Oil* spends several segments on United States military actions in Libya, Iraq, and Syria, which it suggests were driven by efforts to maintain US global hegemony by keeping global oil sales denominated in dollars. In the case of Libya, the film refers to diplomatic cables published by Wikileaks suggesting that, as early as 2011, the United States was preparing to confront Muammar Gaddafi’s regime because of his plan to refuse to deal in dollars when selling Libyan crude. “For the same intention,” the narrator goes on, “Saddam paid with his life.” Gaddafi, the narrator explains, had further incurred US wrath in 2009, during his term as President of the African Union by proposing a single pan-

⁴⁵ In this, they replicate in many ways an earlier set of post-Soviet imaginations of, and anxieties about, newly salient monetary exchange analyzed Katherine Verdery, “Faith, Hope, and Caritas in the Land of the Pyramids: Romania, 1990 to 1994,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 4 (1995): 625-669; Alaina Lemon, ““Your Eyes are Green like Dollars’: Counterfeit Cash, National Substance, and Currency Apartheid in 1990s Russia,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (1998): 22-55; Douglas Rogers, “Moonshine, Money, and the Politics of Liquidity in Rural Russia.” *American Ethnologist* 32, no. 1 (2005): 63-81.; and Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life*..

African currency on the model of the Euro, tied to the Libyan dinar and backed by Libyan gold reserves.

Summing up this strand of the documentary, economist Mikhail Khazin explains that the United States “controls the world through the dollar, not through some air strike group” and goes on to ask, “What will happen to the global financial system if, one day, the dollar simply ceases to exist?” Indeed, *Blood and Oil* wonders whether United States petrodollar hegemony may be coming to a close. In contrast to the situation thirty years ago, when the 1980s collapse of oil prices helped destroy the Soviet Union, “this time the American economy is also on the edge of a crash, and it isn’t clear who will collapse this time.” The film suggests that the United States has itself been contemplating this future since 1999 and has already prepared a backup currency for the dollar—the “Amer”—that, on the model of the Euro, would serve as currency for countries of North and South America. In this next possible stage of the oil crisis, the plans to escape the tight link between oil and dollars in the international system that brought down Gaddafi and Hussein rebounds, forcing the mighty United States to abandon the dollar for a regional (as opposed to global) currency and associated zone of influence. One of the major indexes of post-Soviet crisis as experienced by Russians—the collapse of a currency, wildly unanticipated fluctuations exchange rates and monetary practices, and a retreat from global superpower status—is visited back upon the United States.

Both *Battle for Oil* and *Blood and Oil* point to very specific, if also different, architects of the current crisis. One of *Battle for Oil*’s guiding questions is, “Who got the world hooked on oil?” The answer, unraveled meticulously over the course of the documentary, centers on the international Bilderberg Group. In dialogue (and occasional on-camera interviews) with conspiracy thinkers around the world, the film suggests that the Bilderberg Group does far more

than convene annual gatherings for confidential “Chatham House rules” conversations among the global elite, something it has done since the 1950s. The Bilderberg Group is, rather, the unseen hand behind everything of global significance from wars to elections, and the heavy involvement of the Rockefeller family over the years has ensured that oil interests remain atop the Group’s agenda. The victim of these self-serving plans is humanity as a whole—through wars, deprivation, inequality, and lack of democratic participation.⁴⁶ *Oil and Blood*, by contrast, makes no mention of the Bilderberg Group in its own effort to connect the dots of international conspiracy. Instead, the film, produced and first shown in the winter of 2015-16 as oil prices plummeted, unravels for its viewers a series of plots that are far less indistinct and far more closely linked to the United States government. The targets and victims these conspiracies are not humanity as a whole but Russia and Russians. Speeches by President Obama, comments in the Republican primary debates, and obscure pieces of United States policy or legislation serve here as the key pieces of evidence pointing to the artificially planned oil crisis gripping Russia. The trajectory of conspiracy thinking between the two films, that is, tracks with broader trends in the genre and in international relations viewed from a common Russian media perspective, which over the years 2012 to 2016 increasingly focused on conflicts between United States and Russia.

The recent conspiracy documentaries, in sum, have added a new set of dimensions, commodity chains, and possible energopolitical subject positions to the corporate documentaries. These shifts, however, should not be seen as replacements, for corporate documentaries

⁴⁶ The film does concede that the global elite now includes a number of Russians in the oil and gas industry, but it is careful to exclude these elites from the global conspiracies of the Bilderberg Group, noting that the only Russian participants at the Bilderberg meetings have been Anatolii Chubais and Garry Kasparov—the first deeply unpopular for his guidance of 1990s privatizations, the second an outright and vocal critic of the Russian government.

continued to be produced at a healthy clip, and it would not be at all uncommon to have examples of both sub-genres of documentary playing on different television channels on the same evening, or even at the same time. These overlapping documentary imaginations of oil and life co-exist, allowing viewers to toggle between the ways in which oil figures centrally in narratives of Russian corporate beneficence and widespread Russian victimization at the hands of a global cabal (or the United States) as easily as they change channels. Indeed, one of the net effects of this proliferation of oil-based energopolitical subject positions is not to produce contradictions (which kind of life?) but to suggest oil's deep imbrication across kinds of life.

Ingesting Oil

In diagnosing and accounting for the present oil crisis, *Oil and Blood* and *Battle for Oil* present their viewers with a quandary: with oil so central to everyday life and Russia/Russians the victims of powerful international conspiracies, what is to be done? *Oil and Blood* gives ordinary Russians some suggestions for weathering the coming crisis, noting that economists advise keeping their savings in rubles (rather than exchanging them for dollars or Euros) and buying Russian products rather than imports. In a reference to the 1990s food shortages, rationing, and dacha economies that would be missed by no one, it suggests not neglecting personal plots: "One's own fruits and vegetables help one to forget for a little while about the exchange rate of dollars and Euros." Rather than simply returning to the coping strategies of the 1990s, however, REN-TV's oil conspiracies concentrate on still other possible configurations of oil and life that may emerge from the present crisis.

In one lengthy segment, *Oil and Blood's* standard high-speed montage is replaced by black and white archival footage documenting Soviet microbiologists' efforts to join Western oil

companies in the race to synthesize food from oil.⁴⁷ The Soviet experiments were eventually successful to an extent, leading to the construction of eleven factories producing livestock fodder from oil products, although neither Soviet nor Western scientists managed to create products that were safe for large-scale human consumption. (In fact, some of the oil-based production of fodder actually proved harmful to human life in a series of high-profile pollution episodes in the 1980s.) *Oil and Blood* is nevertheless optimistic about the possibility of reviving this branch of Soviet microbiology, should the need arise. Viktor Tutelian, one of the scientists who worked on the project under the auspices of the Soviet GlavMikroBioProm, explains in a retrospective interview that he and his colleagues successfully ate lunch synthesized from petroleum products at their laboratory every day for six months. It was, Tutelian reflects, a terrific perk for a young scientist with a low salary, and he suggests that it would only take 3-5 years to bring oil-into-food microbiology back “at a new level.”

Oil and Blood thus suggests that, in a coming era of crisis and low salaries—one in which the global financial war has broken the familiar oil-into-dollars-into-food commodity chains—Russia’s oil supplies may continue to sustain everyday life in new ways: “Scientists are sure that oil is not fading,” the segment concludes, “in the near future it will have new uses.” By picking up the threads of an abandoned Soviet science, rather than relying on Western expertise as in the 1990s, Russia may be able to transform its oil reserves directly into food, bypassing dollars altogether. This is a portrait of a self-sustaining natural resource economy, independent of the circuits of international finance that are vulnerable to international conspiracy and that stand between oil and the wallets of elderly women shopping for milk. The common dream of an oil

⁴⁷ For a brief overview of this effort, see Alfred Champagnat, “Protein from Petroleum,” *Scientific American* 213, no. 4 (1965): 13-17. BP, at its Grangemouth refinery complex in Scotland, was a major Western participant in this effort.

boom—of oil transformed into unimaginable amounts of money—gives way not to an oil nightmare (as, for instance, in the Western oil documentary in its “eco-apocalyptic” incarnation), but to an *oil crisis dream*, a dream of oil transformed directly into affordable food *without* passing through U.S. dollars.⁴⁸

In its own search for new ways to think about oil and life amidst global crisis, *Battle for Oil* takes up neglected trajectories of Soviet planetary and interplanetary geology rather than biochemistry. “No one knows what oil is. No one knows where it comes from,” claims economist Said Gafurov in the early moments of the film. The narrator, in response, offers a teaser of what is to come: “scientists’ sensational report that oil is alive.” The middle segments of the film, focused on the history of oil and the Bilderberg Group, underscore the point that the interests of the global conspiracy are well served by hiding oil’s true nature as a substance—including that fact that the earth’s deposits may not be running out but only becoming bigger in size. The earth’s oil, it suggests, may be formed not through biological, organic processes (as in theories of “fossil fuels”) but, rather, through still-ongoing geological processes that have interplanetary and interstellar dimensions. The reference here is to a long and heterogeneous history of “abiogenic” theories of oil proposed by the great pre-Revolutionary Russian scientist Vladimir Vernadskyi—who argued that oil did not originate on earth—and a number of Soviet (and, to lesser extent, Western) geologists and geophysicists. In certain versions of this theory, *Battle for Oil* suggests, “oil is, in some sense, itself an organism.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ On “eco-apocalyptic” oil films, see Szeman, “Crude Aesthetics.”

⁴⁹ Add that study. There is, to my knowledge, no major study of the abiogenic oil movement in history/social studies of science. See Geoffrey P. Glasby, “Abiogenic Origin of Hydrocarbons: An Historical Overview,” *Resource Geology* 56, no. 1 (2006): 85-98.

The best recent evidence for abiogenic theory, the film goes on to suggest, comes from discoveries made by the NASA space probe Cassini on its mission to Saturn and its moon Titan. NASA itself reported the key discovery in a press release: “Titan’s Surface Organics Surpass Oil Reserves on Earth.”⁵⁰ According to *The Battle for Oil*, at least one NASA scientist, James Harris, went still further to claim that Titan’s liquid hydrocarbons constituted a methane-based form of life that differs from our own. Harris’s early death under suspicious circumstances—and subsequent NASA denials of his controversial claim—have kept this important information away from public knowledge. (According to the film, an anonymous source at the Pentagon confirmed that methane-based life was indeed found on Titan, and that the effort to bring it to earth would certainly challenge the existence of biological life as humans now know it.)⁵¹

The short version of *Battle for Oil*, with a run time of one hour and sixteen minutes, stops with this new evidence that oil might be something other than a fossil fuel—and might even be a form of life. Even as it validates Soviet science’s abiogenic theory, it leaves open the question of whether Titan’s oil might ever be brought to Earth. A longer version of the documentary takes this claim still further. It includes an additional eighteen minutes, divided into eight “REN-TV reconstructions” that dramatize key episodes from the past and future of the oil conspiracy and sketch out a final, fantastical set of connections between oil and life. One segment, for instance, portrays a violent 1855 falling out between Avery Rockefeller and John D. Rockefeller over whether the son would stay in the family timber business or seek his fortune in oil. A later segment portrays John D.’s triumphant return home in 1870 to inform his father that, “I now

⁵⁰ https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/cassini/media/cassini-20080213.html

⁵¹ For versions of NASA’s own reporting on these discoveries, see, for instance, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/space/7805069/Titan-Nasa-scientists-discover-evidence-that-alien-life-exists-on-Saturns-moon.html>

have power over the world, power given to me by oil.” He pours oil over his father’s head and, we are given to understand as the scene fades to black, lights both his father and his childhood home aflame. The age of oil has consumed the age of timber and those who made their living by it.

The long version of *Battle for Oil* takes considerable license with the documentary form, crossing fiction and non-fiction and straying closer to what Alexander Etkind calls “magical historicism” as it projects how long-running global conspiracies are adapting to incorporate cutting-edge NASA science.⁵² The first in a series of reconstructions scattered throughout the film opens with George W. Bush sitting in a five-star hotel room in Houston in 1980, drinking heavily in lonely celebration of his 40th birthday. A group of medical personnel enter, at first disguised as room service delivering champagne, followed by a man in a suit who we learn in a later reconstruction goes by the name “Colonel John.” Colonel John informs the younger Bush that his father, head of the CIA, is concerned about him and that a visit to the clinic will take care of his bad habits. He thrusts a sedative-filled needle into George W.’s neck, informing him that “you’ll thank your father when you become President of the United States.”

Not showing much age since his kidnapping of George W. Bush in 1980, Colonel John reappears in another reconstruction to negotiate a 2012 backchannel deal between the United States and Saudi Arabia to lower global oil prices to the point where the Russian ruble will be on the verge of collapse. Indeed, Colonel John’s appearances serve to hold together the film’s dramatizations of the sprawling projects of the global oil conspiracy as it handpicks world leaders, sets global oil prices, and maintains its dominance of the world. In three increasingly

⁵² Etkind, *Warped Mourning*; see also Eliot Borenstein, *Plots Against Russia*, “From Second World to Secondary World,” <http://plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2015/12/7/from-second-world-to-secondary-world>

fantastical reconstructions inserted in *Battle for Oil's* discussion of Cassini's mission to Saturn, the film contemplates what the global conspiracy will do with the news of massive oil deposits elsewhere in the solar system. In the world of the film's reconstructions, not only has oil been discovered on Titan, but a NASA scientist has come into possession of a sample of it. Testing has revealed that it is, in fact, alive. (He names it "smart oil.") As this scientist walks a nondescript hallway attempting to convince a colleague of his blockbuster findings, Colonel John appears from the shadows, thanks him on behalf of the United States government, shoots him, and confiscates the vial containing the smart oil sample.

The properties of this living, smart, alien oil, we learn, include the ability to take over the biology of human bodies. In the documentary's farthest future reconstruction, a shootout in 2031 leads to this vial being rediscovered (apparently by the CIA) after a long period during which it was hidden. When the soldier who finds it pours a drop onto his hand out of curiosity, black spidery streaks shoot up under the skin of his forearm; as he turns his face to the camera, his eyes turn jet black and ovoid, calling to mind the common portrayal of aliens in abduction narratives. Titan's smart oil has made him, quite literally and not metaphorically, into hydrocarbon man—or hydrocarbon alien. In the film's final reconstruction, we learn that Colonel John was long ago transformed into one of these alien hydrocarbon lifeforms. This segment takes place at CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia, in 2012. A general asks Colonel John whether he understands the significance of the discovery of Titan's smart oil. "Better than you do," replies the Colonel, explaining that the invasion will not stop, that the world will surely come to an end, and that it is time for the general to decide: "Who will you be in the new world—one of the occupied or one of the victors?" After a moment's reflection, the general concedes, and Colonel John summons another medical orderly who has been waiting outside the office. "The general," he says, "is

prepared for biological adaptation.” This final reconstruction concludes with the orderly injecting the general with a syringe and the general’s last comments on oil as a human: “It has already destroyed the United States, let it destroy the whole world.”

The global oil conspiracy represented by Colonel John has become an interplanetary conspiracy, linking up with an alien hydrocarbon lifeform in order to extend its dominance. This is the perhaps the ultimate overlap between oil and life—humans biologically merging with smart, living oil imported from an alien world. For all that this “biological adaptation” is a new departure for the human species, however, it is also a logical progression for the oil age: the 1870 oil that John D. Rockefeller splattered on his father’s balding head presages the oil spreading up the veins of that soldier’s arm in 2031, and the syringe to George W. Bush’s neck in 1980 presages the syringe that injects the general in 2012. Oil has moved from being the object that powerful humans use to control the world—while nevertheless remaining separate from them, on the outside of them, passing through commodity chains—to merging biologically with them. It both becomes and destroys human life.

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The imagination of alternatives to hydrocarbon-based energy systems, from solar panels to warp drives, has long been a staple of both documentary filmmaking and science fiction; Soviet science fiction, in particular, provided many models for thinking about other energy worlds.⁵³ However, neither the corporate nor conspiracy sub-genres in recent Russian oil documentaries take this “alternative energies” path. They offer their viewers a variety of

⁵³ See, especially, Anindita Banerjee, *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity* (Middletown, 2012).

energopolitical subject positions to inhabit, illustrate the infusion of oil into human life in a number of overlapping ways, and attribute the current situation to different agents, plans, and plots. They respond to different kinds of dynamics common to oil-focused political economies—the massive inequalities created by rapid upturns and the pervasive sense of crises that accompanies downturns. They revisit, celebrate, and project into the future different strands of Soviet science, including geology, microbiology, and cosmology. But neither sub-genre envisions an energy future revolving around other kinds of energies; to the contrary, no matter how often one changes the channel, oil and Russian life only appear in these documentaries as ever more entangled, ever more symbiotic, ever more deeply ingested into human life.