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Andriy Bondarenko

Snuff Films

Translated by John Freedman with Natalia Bratus

Sometimes I watch videos in which grenades are dropped from drones into Russian trenches. I watch Russian soldiers die from the explosions. When everything quiets down, they turn their dead faces to me and they talk to me. I talk to them. I explain everything. I tell them everything.

An institutional building. It's cold and scary.

I pace from wall to wall. A draft blows in from the window. Someone in the corridor screams.

“What am I doing here? Let me out.”

“May I go? May I go? May I go?”

I'm sitting in a schoolroom among old furniture and dust-colored walls. I need to go out. I raise my hand. No one notices me. I need to go to the toilet.

Misha Gryzlov stands near the blackboard. He recites a poem:

A youth with intelligent eyes

And a forehead clear and high.

We love this admired figure,

And this face that is so familiar.

Misha is a very tall guy with an imposing gaze. But now he's trying to look solemn and exalted. It's not happening. I can't understand why the hooligan Misha was assigned to recite a poem about Lenin, of all people.

“Well done,” says the teacher. “Well done. I must say, you were prepared.”

Now Misha will recite this poem at the graduation ceremony.

Children, look at this portrait,

Swear an oath with a pure heart,

To live, as Lenin taught us to do.

To create, as Lenin taught us to do.

My head is in a whirl. Why would the shameless Misha Gryzlov, the same Misha Gryzlov who beats up first-graders at every recess, exhort us to live our lives like Lenin? And, what, then, does it mean to live your life like Lenin?

I raise my hand. I need to go out.

I sit in a dirty train station. I'm waiting for the train. I want to leave. The station is cold, and it stinks of urine.

I pace from wall to wall. I hear howling. People are shouting, there are many of them. They scream right in your ears. Cold saliva spews from their mouths.

In the sixth grade, I flew from Ukraine to visit relatives in Kazakhstan. We saw all kinds of people there. An uncle came up to me one evening as we sat at a festive, holiday table.

“Listen, “ my uncle said. “Why are you speaking in Ukrainian? You're one of us. You're from here, from Kazakhstan. You're one of us. You are Russian.”

I raise my hand. I want out. I don't understand a thing. I am not Russian. We are not even in Russia. We are in Kazakhstan. This uncle is not my real relative. My relatives have Ukrainian names. Why is this uncle saying this to me? Why does he say I am one of theirs? Why is he surprised by the way I talk? I am afraid.

“May I go? May I go? May I go?”

Where is the train? I want out. The school bell frees only the teacher. I pace from wall to wall. It seems like midgets are sitting on me. I throw them off. I'm all tangled up in threads. I fall. Giant fingers pick me up and put me back in place.

“Hey, bro, hey bro, hey, bro!”

“Y'hear, buddy? Y'hear? Y'hear?”

“Come here! Come here. Come here!”

In the 11th grade, the whole class got drunk. On vodka. In the evening everyone went home. Three of us were left. We came across a drunk lying in the snow. Mishka Gryzlov went up to the

drunk and slipped his money out of his pocket.

“Don't do that, Misha. Don't do that,” I said.

“Play it low, bro,” Misha said.

We bought rum and colas with that money. Then vomited. Bro, bro, bro.

I read all of Dostoyevsky when I was 17. In the winter of my first year at the university, I wore my uncle's old coat. I sewed a loop underneath the sleeve so it wouldn't be so embarrassing to wear such an old coat.

“This is for an axe,” I explained to everyone. “Like Raskolnikov's.”

“Cool,” everyone said.

I was very cold in that coat. The loop provided very little warmth. But with a loop for an ax under my sleeve, I could not give a shit about anything. Come here, come here, come here. Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off.

These memories are cloudy and gloomy, like a bad home movie.

A government building. Shouts. Right in people's ears whose lobes are ripped open. Pacing from wall to wall.

There is a Russian film, *Khrustalyov, My Car!* It's a good movie. About the death of Stalin. At the end, a general is arrested and put in a car with a bunch of hoodlums. The thugs take a mop, knock out his teeth, shove the mop up his anus, then rape him in his mouth and his ass.

I watched my first snuff film in 2008. On YouTube. It was a video from a VHS camera from the Chechen war. A Chechen family is standing on the road. Dad, mom and son. Russian soldiers say something to them, then shoot them with a Kalashnikov. Dad, mom and son fall in the mud by the road. They wheeze and die. It's all right there on film. Very scary.

I couldn't sleep for several days. I would stop breathing from time to time. Even during the day.

It's possible that my very first snuff film was the 1988 Soviet film *To Kill the Dragon*, directed by Mark Zakharov. In it, a dragon summons his faithful henchman, orders him to take off his pants and sticks a fork between his legs. His flunky squirms and wheezes, but he takes everything that is

meted out. At the end of the film, the dragon is killed. Good wins out. Then, in 2014, director Mark Zakharov pronounced his full support for Vladimir Putin regarding the invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea.

My second near-snuff film was a feature about the Kengir Uprising – that was a rebellion of political prisoners in a prison camp in the steppes of Kazakhstan. They were shot, squashed by tanks, sliced up, and burnt. In the end, one captured prisoner is stripped naked and placed in front of a Soviet general. The general cuts off the prisoner's genitals and throws them to a dog. Then he says, “You're free, you can go.” The prisoner wheezes, rushes at the general, but is killed with a barrage of bullets from a Kalashnikov. The prisoner wheezes and falls into the roadside mud.

A video from Chechnya was my fourth snuff film. A documentary. The scariest one of all. But why, then, did I sew a loop for an ax in my coat? Just to keep warm?

“Bro,” a dead Russian soldier tells me from a trench. “You're one of us. You are Russian.”

I am sitting in a train station. There are rows of seats in front of me. Dead Russian soldiers are sitting in them. We are waiting for the train. I raise my hand. I want out. Shouts. Groans. Barking dogs.

I am in the second year at the university. It's midnight, we're sitting in an apartment, drinking, and singing songs. Russian rock. A knock on the door. A man and a woman enter. The man walks in silently, and turns off the tape recorder.

“Enough, bros,” says the man.

“You idiots,” says the woman. “What's the noise about? I've lived here my whole life. My father is a KGB colonel.”

“What KGB,” says Roma. “This is Ukraine now.”

“Well, it's midnight,” the man says. “And you're too noisy. You....”

The man hits Roma in the face. Roma falls. The woman takes the guitar and throws it out the window. They leave. We are in shock. We are afraid.

Come here, come here, come here. What the hell, what the hell, what the hell. What the hell is going on?

A murky film of bad memories.

This one's no video. It's real. I go to Maidan. I stand in St. Michael's Church and look at the bodies of murdered people on the church floor. Blood-stained woolen blankets barely cover the dead faces. I go out on Khreshchatyk Street. People are singing the song, "The Swimming Duck." The crowd parts – people are carrying coffins with the dead. My breath stops. My heart is pounding. My hands are shaking.

There, under the old Lviv castle, an old oak tree stood.

There, under the old Lviv castle, an old oak tree stood.

And a partisan lay there under that log.

There, under the old Lviv castle, an old oak tree stood.

And a partisan lay there under that log.

He lies there, not breathing. Seems to be sleeping.

He lies there, not breathing. Seems to be sleeping.

The wind rustles his golden curls.

He lies there, not breathing. Seems to be sleeping.

The wind rustles his golden curls.

They say protesters are being kidnapped one by one and taken out of the city. Out there they are stripped naked, beaten, doused with water, cut with knives, shot, hanged, and beheaded. Fortunately, I saw only one such video.

Kharkiv, spring of 2014. I am in a Ukrainian bookstore with friends. Someone calls and says a crowd of pro-Russian thugs has destroyed a state administrative building and is on a rampage destroying everything Ukrainian. They come to the store. We rummage through drawers, looking for knives or something. We find plastic forks. We hold them in our hands, look at each other, and laugh.

My breath stops. My heart is pounding. My hands are shaking.

In a few hours I'm sitting on the train to Lviv. The train sets out, and stones and bottles fly at the car windows.

My heart is pounding. My hands are shaking.

A few hours earlier, the Ukrainian poet Serhiy Zhadan had been forced to run the gauntlet, and was brutally beaten in front of the Regional State Administration building. An hour before, I had been there eating soup and drinking tea with friends. My heart is pounding.

The cold spring of 2014. Dozens of snuff videos.

A pro-Ukrainian rally in Donetsk. People are pelted with stones, beaten with sticks, kicked in the head, the ribs, and everywhere else. People huddle in a group. Many bodies just lie there on the asphalt.

A woman with a Ukrainian flag is tied to a pole. The crowd spits at her, hits her with their hands, feet, and sticks.

“Bros, bros, bros,” the attackers say to one another. They don't bother talking to us anymore.

Snuff films. Dozens of snuff videos.

I can't fall sleep.

Now there's war. Snuff snuff snuff. We are the snuff country. The top supplier of snuff films.

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SUPER SNUFF

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