In the restrained and tightly structured documentary *Pipeline*, director Vitalii Manskii travels along the Urengoy-Pomary-Uzhgorod pipeline and films the daily lives of communities living in the vicinity of the gas pipeline, which transports natural gas from Siberia to Western Europe. Given the Russian economy’s dependency on oil and gas exports, the film could have been a polemical pamphlet, but it intentionally avoids any direct political or social commentary. Instead, the film aims at an anthropological study of the communities the filmmakers visit: expertly using montage, the film suggests similarities but also emphasizes differences between societies. Ultimately *Pipeline* raises the perennial question of Russia’s relationship to Europe, without offering any straightforward answer.

The gas pipeline, then, is more of an emblem rather than the subject of the film. The documentary consists of about a dozen episodes unrelated to the gas industry that are stitched together by footage of a gas processing plant; the pipeline itself is invisible, yet always present. In the opening sequence a local woman talks about the history of the gas industry in the Siberian town of Urengoy and tries to find an explanation for a local monument honoring the first pipeline workers: two monstrous golden figures towering over gas pipes stand in the middle of a vast, snowy landscape. Perhaps, the woman suggests, the golden figures represent the wealth of the industry, its big contribution to the country’s economy. The rest of the film contradicts the woman’s naïve perception of the gas industry’s input on the lives of ordinary Russians. These gigantic gilded statues appear to be symbols of inappropriate opulence: the gas pipeline runs through half of the country but brings little to the people who live on its side. To prove the point, Manskii and his crew film a group of local Nenets people fishing near the gas field. Living mainly off reindeer herding, this ethnic minority preserved its traditional lifestyle, and one of a few markers of modernity that we see in a house of a Nenets family is a mobile phone hanging on a nail in the wall.
for communal use.

Moving westward along the 2,500-mile-long pipeline, the film makes several stops in Russia before going to Ukraine, Belarus, the Czech Republic, and finally Germany. Several episodes filmed in Russia show people living in provincial towns and villages. Some episodes hint at specific locales (the film rarely names them); others show unusual and, at times, odd scenes of daily life: a “railway car church,” which travels to remote villages without a church; people digging a grave in the frozen soil in a Siberian village; an excruciating veterinary examination of a pregnant cow; pensioners gathering in a town square to celebrate Lenin’s birthday. Most episodes exude a sense of weariness and exhaustion, familiar from other cinematic accounts of provincial life in Russia. Some characters nevertheless express content with their lives: this includes a touching interview with a woman working in a steel mill. Tellingly, none of the episodes set in Russia shows people actually using gas; on the contrary, one vignette purposely features a town, which has no gas supply despite being situated near this major pipeline. As the film crosses borders into Ukraine and Belarus, the presence of natural gas and its everyday use becomes more prominent, but the general mood of the film does not change significantly. The sense of hopelessness reaches its peak in a sequence filmed in Uzhgorod in Ukraine, where the filmmakers visit a gypsy commune. The elderly couple articulate their concerns about the future of their community: without education and work, people’s prospects look dreary. From Ukraine the film crew moves to the Czech Republic and visits the family of a crematorium worker. His peculiar occupation lends itself to a morbidly fascinating sequence. More important though, this is the first extensive episode involving the use of natural gas. In the final vignette filmed in Germany, the daily use of gas is at its core: the filmmakers follow a day of a worker for Rheingas delivering cylinders of gas across Cologne, while also capturing scenes of the city’s carnival. The film ends abruptly, without offering any obvious conclusion.

Gas and oil pipelines, of course, play a crucial role in Russia’s economy, and the word truba is itself central in the country’s political discourse. The opposition leader Alexei Navalny, for instance, created a meme zhaba na trube (“toad on the pipeline”), criticizing the country’s dependence on oil and gas exports. Beyond the economic and political meanings of the actual gas and oil pipelines, the word truba has various meanings in Russian idioms: for instance, delo—truba means a hopeless situation, or proiti ogon’, vodu, i mednye truby (“to go through fire, water and copper pipes”) refers to an experience of living through bad and good times. By choosing this word as a title for the film, Manskii invites us to contemplate various readings of the film and analyze the inherent ambiguity of his cinematic project that can be seen as both a geopolitical commentary and an existential observation.

The film’s trajectory from East to West frames the most obvious of possible readings: the natural gas runs through the pipeline from the economically distressed Russia to the more comfortable Western Europe. The contrast is indeed striking if one looks at the scenes filmed at the two ends of the pipeline: Nenets people of Urengoy fishing through an ice-hole and catching dead fish, and Germans in Cologne dressed up for the carnival. Such a divide is in a way simplistic, but at the same time it starts a discussion on one of the
irresolvable questions in the Russian public discourse, “Does Russia have its own way?” Avoiding any mention of the fact that the money made from the export of natural resources form the basis of the Russian economy, and the distribution of profits gained from the trade is slanted by ubiquitous corruption of those in charge, the film attempts to find the answer not in the political situation but in mentality. Here, inevitably, the film encounters the chicken and egg problem: is Russian mentality shaped by the way of life, or is the way of life shaped by mentality? To illustrate the point, the film juxtaposes two sequences about funerals. One takes place in Siberia, where gravediggers work for hours to dig a grave in the frozen ground; the other is at a Czech crematorium, where the filmmakers talk to one of the workers. In an interview, Manski pointed out that the two sequences are central in highlighting the differences between Europe and Russia, “I think that people, who have to wake up at 5 am in order to dig a grave for a relative for ten hours, and people, who come for a funeral ceremony for ten minutes and listen to some Bach, cannot be similar.” However, while stating the differences between Russia and Europe somewhat bluntly, the filmmakers still manage not to jump at any simplistic conclusions.

A more nuanced reading of the film arises with a careful consideration of the filmmakers’ choice of the subjects and the film style. Manski chose throughout the film characters from a more or less comparable socio-economic background, what he thought would represent a “middle class” for any given location. This way the filmmakers show people who are more or less happy in their lives, who do not feel particularly marginalized within their society. For instance, the female steel mill worker in Russia expresses satisfaction with her life, noting that, although she has a very tough job, she has achieved everything she dreamt of. Moreover, the transition from Russia to Eastern Europe and Germany is not of a striking contrast: naturally, the urban landscape is remarkably different but people’s daily routines are not dissimilar. What’s more, the film still maintains its distinctly contemplative mood.

This general mood is created by a minimalist yet eccentric style, carefully constructed by HD cinematography of Aleksandra Ivanova and editing of Pavel Mendel-Ponamarev. Ivanova’s widescreen digital camerawork, consisting mainly of long and medium shots and slow left-to-right pans creates a distance between the filmed subjects and the viewers, producing a somewhat detached atmosphere. In this context, rare close-ups intercut into the montage are used to a maximally unexpected and emotionally heightened effect as, for instance, in the first funeral sequence filmed in Siberia: first, we see gravediggers, who strenuously work their way through the frozen soil; as they hammer away with the pick, breaking up the ground, the shots are intercut with close-ups of elderly women sitting at a Women’s Day celebration. This glum juxtaposition of images and sounds produces a ghastly result. Indeed, while looking like an observational documentary, Pipeline is in fact a montage film, indebted to the rich tradition of Soviet montage theory. The above-mentioned sequence is more of a collision of Eisensteinian montage, while overall the film draws on Artavazd Peleshian’s “distance montage,” a technique that develops montage ideas of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. Distance montage, Peleshian claimed, creates a “magnetic field” around the film so that the film’s meaning becomes apparent only in the wholeness of the image, not in its parts. Thus Peleshian rejected Eisenteinian montage, based on the collision of shots, and promoted distance montage based on the totality of sequences.
Therefore, if considered as a whole, the film becomes increasingly ambiguous about its conclusions on Russia and the Russian character. The spatial movement from East to West becomes less pertinent, and the film’s themes and leitmotifs take center stage. The film is interested in celebrations and rituals: footage of a wedding, two funerals, a carnival, and several street celebrations form the backbone of the film. Looking at these public and personal gatherings allowed the filmmakers to create collective portraits of communities they filmed, but also to argue for the importance of the ritual, its unifying and perhaps universal value—regardless of national borders. Another underlying motif are people’s relationships with domestic animals: one episode even features a conversation with a veterinarian doctor, who wonders what animal Russian people resemble most. To an extent, one can argue that the film is as much about animals as it is about people.

Finally, the pipeline itself becomes an abstraction, an intangible symbol holding the story together. Partly, the film argues that the pipeline is a non-entity, having no real impact on the lives of average Russians. Here, Pipeline can be seen as a curious counterpart, maybe even a contemporary response, to Dziga Vertov’s A Sixth Part of the World (1926), which considered the impact of international trade on Soviet society. The two films, however, present opposite points of view: if Vertov’s film emphasized everybody’s contribution to foreign trade, which, in turn, would help to build socialism, Manski’s film highlights the insignificance of the gas trade for the lives of the country’s citizens. While such a conclusion might be erroneous from the point of view of macroeconomics, there is some truth in it from the point of view of the public perception of the pipeline and, by extension, of the government that owns it. So, if A Sixth Part of the World emphasized the synergy of the people and the state, Manski’s film shows the disconnection and estrangement of citizens and their government.

Interestingly, most of the themes were present in the film’s script. This approach—working from a literary script—emphasized the extent to which Pipeline was a conceptual project with a pre-conceived narrative structure rather than an observational documentary (which usually finds its structure during the filming). In an interview the director also mentioned that most of his initial ideas made it into the film, and reality only gave his script some factual material (faktura, in his own words). In this regard, Manski’s film is not unlike some other recent documentaries on the topic of economic and cultural connections between countries in a globalized world. More specifically, Pipeline echoes the film of another prominent Russian documentarian Viktor Kosakovskii’s ¡Vivan las Antipodas! (2011), which looks at the daily lives of people in locations situated on the globe diametrically opposite each other. While Kossakovskii’s film is a much more ambitious project, Pipeline shares certain affinities with ¡Vivan las Antipodas!, particularly the interest in the mundane, the montage aesthetics, and a fascination with domestic animals. In its attempts to conceptualize the complex and frequently uneven economic relations between countries, Manski’s film resonates also with...
Michael Glawogger's epic *Workingman’s Death* (2005), which explores the topic of manual labor in Ukraine, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, China, and Germany thus contemplating the skewed relations of industrial and post-industrial societies. All of these films present the emerging genre of documentary films that try to make sense of globalization by looking at individual communities and recognizing both positive and negative aspect of the process.

*Pipeline* premiered at the 2013 Kinotavr Film Festival, where it was awarded the prize of the Guild of Film Critics and Film Scholars. The film also received the Best Documentary prize at Karlovy Vary. *Pipeline* continues its run on the international film festival circuit, and still awaits its theatrical release in Russia.

Raisa Sidenova
Yale University

Comment on this article on Facebook

*Pipeline*, Russia, Czech Republic, Germany
Color, 116 minutes
Director and Scriptwriter: Vitalii Manskii
Director of Photography: Aleksandra Ivanova
Producers: Vitalii Manskii, Natalia Manskaia, Simone Baumann, Filip Remunda, Vit Klusak, Tereza Horska.
Production: Vertov—Real Cinema, Czech Television, Hypermarket Film and Saxonia Entertainment

Vitalii Manskii: *Pipeline* (*Truba*, 2013)
reviewed by Raisa Sidenova © 2013

Updated: