

## On Embezzlement and Entropy: Capturing the Lives of a Generation in Photographs, Evgeny Kashirin (1949-2007)

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Говорят, что фотографы, окончив свой земной путь, уходят в страну серебряных теней, которую они создают всю свою жизнь. Вот и ушел в свою серебряную страну выдающийся русский фотохудожник Евгений Каширин, ушел наш Женя.<sup>1</sup>

Gabriel Santoro, the hero of Juan Gabriel Vásquez's novel *The Informers*, reflects on the "strange satisfaction" that comes with "giving shape to other people's lives, stealing what's happened to them, which is always disordered and confused, and putting it in order on paper."<sup>2</sup> The purpose of my paper is to reflect on such a "theft," or – to use Santoro's words again – the "problematic embezzlement of other people's lives,"<sup>3</sup> that of a Russian photographer who spent his life capturing the world that surrounded him, followed by some other "embezzlements," including the film that we made about him.

When I first met Evgeny Kashirin during the summer of 2002 in his studio of the Riazan Municipal Youth Center for Technical Arts (Gorodskaya stantsiya iunych tekhnikov) on Polonskii Street, it was in the hope to find some visual documents related to my

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<sup>1</sup> "People say, when photographers reach the end of their earthly path, they leave for the country of silvery shadows, which they create during all their life. Evgeny Kashirin has left for the country of silvery shadows, our Zhenia left us." Sergei Romanov, "Evgenii Kashirin": <http://www.photounion.ru/gallery/kashirin/index.html> (accessed 24 October 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Juan Gabriel Vásquez, *The Informers*. Translated from the Spanish by Anne McLean (London-Berlin-New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 264.

research. Kashirin had, I was told, an extensive archive of historical photos relative to the city and province of Riazan. This was not an overstatement. In addition of being an “artist photographer” (*fotokhudozhnik*) from the age of fourteen, he was also a “local” or “regional” historian (*kraeved*) who had assembled, among other things, an enormous amount of negatives and photographs that he gathered during his life time, and that people brought to him. Born in 1949 as the grandson of a Kasimov priest who was shot in 1937, Kashirin graduated in 1969 from the Moscow Middle Art School of the Surikov Art Institute, studied history at the Riazan Pedagogical Institute, and, for twenty years, directed the Children’s Photo Studio of the Municipal Youth Center for Technical Arts.

With his untimely death on 29 June 2007, “Riazan had lost its soul,” to quote his colleagues, friends, students, and simple acquaintances. One of them summed up Kashirin’s multiple incarnations: he was not only a *fotokhudozhnik*, but also a “historian, pedagogue, archivist, enlightener, master storyteller, and TV personality (*televedushchii*).”<sup>4</sup> A year before he passed away, he was awarded the title of “honorific citizen of Riazan” (*Pochetnyi grazhdanin g. Riazani*), a distinction that clashed somehow with the closure of the Youth Center for Technical Arts. Kashirin had struggled for years against it. His studio had become a home for generations of children, students, friends, some homeless people, and of course himself and his archive. What is left is a commemorative plaque of the “honorific citizen” on the façade of No. 1, Polonskii Street. The ultimate reordering of Kashirin’s life and work was achieved by death: a grave on the Alley of the Honorable Dead of the Skorbiashchenskoe cemetery, two albums published by his colleagues of the Union of the Riazan Photographers, a forthcoming collection of essays, a “Kashirin prize” for young talents, and a number of commemorative webpages, where you will search in vain for one of the most specific attributes of Kashirin’s physical appearance – his hippie headband. As to the fate of his archive – let us first attempt to describe it.

One of the first chronicles Kashirin showed us was an album devoted to his “grandmothers,” Klava and Frosia, and their life in the village of Zatishe, not far from the city of Riazan. Klava was the wife of Kashirin’s grandfather, the priest shot in 1937. Frosia was an

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<sup>4</sup> Sergei Romanov, “Evgenii Kashirin,” op. cit.

abandoned orphan. They lived, worked, and survived together for fifty years. Eternal, peasant Russia? Later we learned that when the two old women reluctantly accepted a television, pressed on them by their grandson; and it is the May Day parade they liked best. The album contains approximately 100 photographs, showing the daily life of the two old women, including Frosia's death and funeral. The photos are accompanied by Kashirin's hand-written comments.

We sat for hours in Kashirin's studio looking at photo after photo, and before our eyes the recent and not so recent past of Riazan city and province unfolded. The photos and negatives were painstakingly organized in albums, folders, envelopes, or other forms of compilations, organized by themes and subthemes, the detail of which made our heads spin. "City of Riazan," for example, was divided into "Architectural monuments, old houses," "Wooden architecture"; "General views"; "Urban and architectural projects," each of them again subdivided by streets, districts, "urban projects," with a special folder devoted to the "Architects of Riazan" and another to "The life of Riazan's architects." A series of folders, each one containing dozens of envelopes filled by photos and negatives, was dedicated to "The inside of Riazan's flats of the 1980s," subdivided in 145 sections. Here are a few examples: "The Inside of a teacher's flat, Chernovitskaia Street (2 negatives)"; "A. Bekhtin at home under a lamp. Cupboard with things (20 negatives)"; "A. Bekhtin at home. Drawings on the kitchen wall (12 negatives)"; "A. Bekhtin at home. Close-up of his face (15 negatives)"; "Inside of the flat of the Egorov. The grandfather works at the plant of artificial fiber, and the grand-daughters have been left to be raised by his daughter, who left for Mali, in Africa (6 negatives)"; "Inside of the Kashirin flat before the rearrangement of furniture. Lidia. Mitia (4 negatives)"; "Inside of the flat of war veteran and sniper A. L. Podlazova, with her whole family, Tsiolkovskii Street (5 negatives). Kashirin remembered how Sniper Podlazova had recounted to him some of her Great Patriotic War experiences. She often told him that she always noticed how the German soldiers were so young and so clean, with shiny boots. And "then," she said, "I shot them."

Let us return to Riazan's flats: "Inside of a single mother's apartment, she was left on her own by her parents (2 negatives)"; "Inside of the Riazan pianist S. A. Martynov (he will die soon) (11 negatives)." Other files and envelopes follow: "Inside of organizations," subdivided again: "The Foyer of the Executive Committee"; "The State archive"; "The Radio

building”; Newspaper editorial offices (I pass the internal subdivisions); “Museums” (same note); “Schools” (“School Nr 2,” “School Nr 14,” “PTU Nr 11,” etc.); “Musical institutions”; “Plants”; “Hospitals” (with a subfolder devoted to the “Psychiatric Hospital,” its doctors, photos about the “process of healing,” etc.). Then we have “Restaurants and hotels”; “Stores”; “Kindergardens”; “Police” (this folder contained most interesting subfolders, such as “From the history of the Cheka”; “The prosecutor Tsygankov N.”; “The Riazan Higher MVD School”; “From the Life of Colonel Kurnev A. S.”, etc.). A special folder is devoted to the “Riazan people in Afghanistan,” that is, soldiers who fought in Afghanistan, families of those who died there, and a small Afghan war museum. There is a folder “Germans in Riazan,” basically about World War 2 prisoners, and another “German” folder, this time entitled “Visitors from the Federal Republic.” A number of thick folders are devoted to personalities of the city and the region (political, cultural, and other); clubs; “The fashion store Volshebnitsa” and its fashion shows of 1982 and 1983; the Riazan Philharmony and “Riazan musicians” (each having his or her own folder). Other boxes, folders and envelopes contained seasons, and moments of life: “Riazan in the winter”; “Riazan in the rain”; “Couples in love”; “People on a suburban train” (Liudi v elektrichke); then there are folders devoted to people’s hands, or to things that people were holding in their hands while walking on the street; and photos showing children, many children. Folders pertaining to Riazan’s province, its cities; villages, personalities, contemporary and historical, are equally detailed, but not as numerous. Kashirin was, above all, the chronicler of one city.

Realizing that we were in presence of an archive that was unique in quality and quantity, we thought about how to use and secure it. There were reasons to be worried. Kashirin’s photo archive was threatened by external factors: the ever-menacing perspective of the Stantsiia iunykhn tekhnikov being taken over by developers, a rather unsupportive family, local disputes and greed, etc. And then there were centrifugal forces. Overwhelmed by the variety and dispersion of the archive, in other words, its “entropic” quality, we came up with our own idea of organization: we wrote to IDC, a Leiden-based publisher of archival sources, and proposed to them to digitalize Kashirin’s archive. Kashirin was thrilled, and put together a thick volume, containing even more detailed descriptions, and more lists. But neither this volume, nor our letters were able to convince

IDC, despite some initial interest, or curiosity. Kashirin's vast collection lacked the quality of the official archive. As one local *kraeved* put it, Kashirin was not a "real historian." He collected not only photos, he collected everything, and even the notes that people had put on the door of his studio when they couldn't find him. He was a "collector of collections." One head librarian at a Canadian university declared that he would only be interested in Kashirin's archive if we could think of a way to use it to create a video game for students. We decided instead to make a film.

What helped us in this endeavor was a special way by which Kashirin liked to present his work, besides showing his albums, boxes, folders, and envelopes full of photos and negatives. In one of the rooms of the Youth Center for Technical Arts he projected slides against a wall thanks to a self-designed device that allowed the files to follow each other like frames of a film. He then chose a disc from his collection of vinyl records, put it onto an old turntable, and the journey began, in music, with Kashirin's comments that often took the form of haunting blank verse. Indeed, Kashirin was not only a photographer and chronicler, he was a true storyteller, for whom – to paraphrase Benjamin – experience had not yet fallen in value, and the epic side of truth, wisdom, had not yet died out.<sup>5</sup>

From the slide shows/stories we watched and listen too, we chose three. They became the "trptych" that organized our film: "Zatishe" (Lull), the life of Kashirin's two *babushki* in the village of Zatishe; "Elektrichka" (which we decided to translate as "Movement"), people on a slow train that crawls from town to town passing the villages of Riazan along the way; and "Kamennaia baba" (The Stone Woman), the curious story of a man who traded his wife for a marble statue of Judith. In a webpage devoted to Kashirin and his work, posted when the author was still alive, we find the following question: "on what side of the objective does the author stand?" (*a po kakuiu storonu ob"ektivna nakhodistsia avtor?*)<sup>6</sup> Life itself, and death, answered, and decided about what would

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<sup>5</sup> "The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out." Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 87.

<sup>6</sup> "Evgenii Nikolaevich Kashirin, fotokhudozhnik, kraeved": [http://dostoyanie.org/object\\_aut?id=5](http://dostoyanie.org/object_aut?id=5) (accessed 24 October 2009).

frame the triptych. A first round of filming took place in the fall of 2005. In addition to recording the three “slide shows,” we went with Kashirin to Zatishe. Standing in the local church in ruins, he reflected on the fate of the Russian village. In front of Klava and Frosia’s graves, he asked his cousin Vera: “Remember when I photographed grandmother Klava? She’s so young. She still had time in her hands.” At that moment, we did not know that time was running out for him, and for us. When we arrived in Riazan the second half of June 2007, he was dying, but still insisted of hosting us, and he gave us a set of discs of his photos, digitalized in high resolution. Ten days later, he passed away. We filmed his funeral, but decided not to include it in the film. It was too much *poshlost’* and “embezzlement.” Some of the testimonies, however, recorded after his funeral, made it into the film. Most telling, and moving, were the recollections of one of Kashirin’s students about Kashirin the pedagogue, the enlightener, the “philosopher of photography.”

While editing our rushes into Kashirin’s photographs, we understood how the photographer wrestled against entropy, the disorder of the world, by creating order out of chaos, and this order was a synonym for beauty: a puddle, in shape of a heart; Frosia’s eyes, lightened up by the reflection of the light falling from the window in a glass of milk that she is drinking; the hand of a child next to the hand of an adult, both holding onto a pole in a bus, each hand being, according to Kashirin, “the second face of a human being.” Looking at his photographs taken in the train, he says: “These are very inspired, beautiful faces.” And he adds: “Maybe because you look at them from aside, but when you talk to them you are disappointed. I don’t like to be disappointed in people.” The man who lays scarlet roses at the feet of his marble statue of Judith on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March answers to Kashirin why he will not clean his clouded and dirty mirror: “What for? In the mirror, I see how I have aged, how ugly and awful I am.” Instead, he transformed his apartment of the Riazan “Shanghai” into a museum for his beloved in stone, boarding up all windows, “so that he could live in his own little world of pseudo-beauty away from the light of the banal Riazan streets.” “Kamennaia baba” is of course Kashirin’s own story, his own internal immigration, away from the ever-menacing entropy of the world, and his attempt to create his own order. One passage from our film will serve to illustrate Kashirin’s “wrestling”. The scene is filmed in the new apartment that Kashirin’s wife, Dean of the

Riazan Veterinary School, bought recently, in one of the *mikroraiony* of the city. Her husband was unhappy about the move. Kashirin stands before a wall unit, the same wall unit that the hero of “The Stone Woman” was supposed to buy in Leningrad. Instead he returned with his Judith. . .

At the beginning of the 1980s, I studied at the Riazan Pedagogical Institute in the History Department. Then Scientific Communism was a required subject . . . We had to pick a theme for a test. I got theme no. 30: “The Family Under Socialism.” At first, I looked at it and thought, “What should I write? What should I write?” And then thought, “My God, I have photographed so many weddings, more than 200. I can embellish this work with photographs and write less. I started to choose photos and stick them in. I dug into the sources. And I got so carried away that it was astonishing. I showed weddings, and asked, “So what about the families? So I showed what kind of families. How many children. The problems of drunkenness and alcoholism, orphanages, youth prisons, etc. In short, I took to the Institute, instead of a thin notebook, a work that weighed some 2 kg. And of course, the teachers were not so pleased. They told me some unpleasant things. They said, “You did not do what was assigned. A tiny notebook was required and you bring this huge work. Take it back and do what was asked of you. If this work stays at our Institute, it may have unpleasant consequences. My wife screamed at me in an unbelievable way. “What kind of work is this? I am going to destroy it. Again you engage in nonsense. Other men, like real men, write dissertations and you can’t even do a simple test.” I hid it for a long time in the couch. And time has gone by and you look at it and are surprised yourself. Of course, there is something naive in this work, maybe even a bit stupid. But, the photographs are alive. . .

We don’t know when “The Family Under Socialism” reappeared from under the couch, but we know that Kashirin kept memory alive. He was one of the founding members of the Riazan chapter of Memorial, which was set up in 1989. After Kashirin’s funeral, we tried to make present Kashirin’s absence, by returning to Zatishe. The graves of Klava and Frosia were now overgrown with weeds. The autumnal scenes of Kashirin standing in the ruin of the church, remembering his grand-mothers, shot two years before, were now

replaced by the intense and almost suffocating colors of summer. The entropy of the world had increased. With our film, we tried to wrestle with it, even if we are guilty of embezzlement.

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