Here it is worth noting that something also happens when O'Farrell's "Latin tutor" becomes Zhao's Will, played by a movie star with equal billing to Buckley. Sidelining the Bard is more difficult when Paul Mescal dons his doublet—though I can think of at least one instance when Zhao might have tried harder, namely by excising that record-scratching scene of a suicidal Will soliloquizing "To be or not to be" at cliff's edge. While Shakespeare is a mist of rich meaning overlaying O'Farrell's novel, Zhao's Will is a bafflingly blank blue fog. Even though Agnes's palm-reading tells us his mind is bursting with imaginary worlds, and even though Will explains that he has little talent for speaking in everyday life, it's hard to imagine this taciturn character is on the verge of penning the English-speaking world's most immortal poetry. Perhaps Zhao recognized this problem, because the screenplay invents a scene in which, during their courtship, Will spins for Agnes the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice (Mescal's second go at this myth this year; see also *The History of Sound*). Overloaded with meaning—about art as seduction, love, loss, the folly of looking back, and even a line from *Hamlet*—it is impossible to grasp.

In *Hamnet,* both the novel and the film, it is Agnes who insists that the husband/Will leave Home and Hearth to pursue his Art, even though she is enraged with him later because "You weren't here!" Both the novel and film go out of their way to valorize Agnes's self-sacrifice, wholly uncoerced by Will, nor abused by him (see his aforementioned monk-like existence in London). Of course, it's hard to argue that William Shakespeare should have stayed home to change diapers, forgoing his literary career in the name of gender equality in the division of household duties and emotional labor, but all men are not Shakespeare. And the larger gendered implications of *Hamnet's* version of Agnes and Will—as Professor Scheil encourages us to examine—is clarified by putting it in conversation with so many other current mainstream films about men reckoning with the family lives they abandon, and damage, in order to pursue their Genius, from Joachim Trier's *Sentimental Value* to Noah Baumbach's *Jay Kelly* to Josh Safdie's *Marty Supreme*. (For the most damning spin on the Absent Father, see Mary Bronstein's *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You*.) There is something in the zeitgeist, it seems.

All that said, I am not without a heart. There are bits of *Hamnet* that moved me, including that final scene in the Globe, despite Zhao and composer Max Richter laying it on overly thick with his oft-used string piece, "On the Nature of Daylight," verily drowning the lily. Etched on my mind is Will's pained face caked in white clay saying "Adieu" as the Ghost-Father to Hamlet, the Ghost-Son, his hair caked in gold paint, with Agnes watching her husband finally saying goodbye, modeling release for her. O'Farrell's and even especially Zhao's version of the Shakespeare couple's pain does heighten my appreciation for the language and feeling of *Hamlet*, even as Zhao's choice to include not only Act One but also scenes from Acts Three and Five threatened to distract me with the play's complexity of meanings that she is contracting into a narrow band called "Grief." What would this Agnes, illiterate but uncommonly wise, make of Ophelia's guarded chastity? Gertrude's "frailty"? Polonius's ramblings?

Fortunately, my jammed-up hinges did not deter others around me from experiencing the film's intended effect. As the lights came up, I could see that Zhao's and Buckley's Agnes had, like the Player channeling Hecuba's grief in *Hamlet,* "drown[ed] the stage with tears," which I can't help but admire. The Theater is dead; long live the Theater!—**Megan Feeney**

In the front row of "groundlings" at the Globe Theatre, Agnes Shakespeare (Jessie Buckley) experiences the play *Hamlet* as an intensely personal, transcendent experience in *Hamnet*.

My Undesirable Friends:

Part I—Last Air in Moscow

Produced by Julia Loktev and Michael Taylor; directed by Julia Loktev and Anna Nemzer; cinematography by Julia Loktev; edited by Julia Loktev and Michael Taylor; music by Sami Buccella; featuring Olga Churakova, Irina Dolinina, Sonya Groysman, Elena Kostyuchenko, Alesya Marokhovskaya, Ksenia Mironova, Anna Nemzer, and Daniil Sotnikov. Color, Russian dialogue with English subtitles, 324 min., 2024. An Argot Pictures release, www.argotpictures.com.

In October 1987, a new program appeared on Soviet television that defied the conventions of that staid, censored, and stultifying medium of mass propaganda. Two years into Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* reforms, *Vzglyad* ("Outlook" or "Viewpoint") began pushing forward the boundaries of *glasnost*, the Soviet leader's campaign for openness and transparency, literally "giving voice" to issues—contemporary and historical—that the regime had suppressed in favor of conformity and control. Many *Vzglyad* team members lived in Saburovo, a southern district of Moscow, in a newly constructed "microregion" of apartment complexes for three thousand young families, employees of *Gosteleradio*, the state television and radio conglomerate. They soon built their own local cable-TV studio to broadcast programs that went beyond what was allowed even on *Vzglyad* and to serve as a backup in the event that Gorbachev's enemies sought to stifle *glasnost*. Indeed, during the August 1991 failed coup against Gorbachev, the Saburovo station continued to broadcast, while official Soviet television showed reruns of a 1983 performance of the ballet *Swan Lake* after paratroopers took control of the Ostankino TV tower.

The main subjects of Julia Loktev's extraordinary documentary, *My Undesirable Friends: Part I—Last Air in Moscow*, are the courageous independent journalists of TV Rain (*Dozhd'* in Russian). They are arguably the unknowing heirs of the *Vzglyad* pioneers. Why unknowing? For one thing, TV Rain's founders, Vera Krichevskaya and Natalya Sindeyeva, were teenagers living outside Moscow during the *perestroika* years. The oldest member of the TV Rain team, the director's friend Anna (Anya) Nemzer, was born in 1980. The investigative reporter Elena (Lena) Kostyuchenko, who made her reputation as a print journalist for *Novaya Gazeta*, was born in 1987. The rest are in their twenties. They may have heard of *glasnost*-era television, but they never saw it at the time.

Loktev's subjects are the Harry Potter generation—the references to the novels and films, with their themes of good versus evil, pervade the documentary. They grew up during the period when Vladimir Putin reversed many of the democratizing reforms

of the first post-Soviet Russian president Boris Yeltsin in order to impose a regime of electoral authoritarianism and increasing censorship. The young journalists were influenced by the brief, seemingly more liberal interregnum of Dmitry Medvedev as president, after Putin had completed his last legally permitted presidential term and switched jobs with Medvedev to become his prime minister. Protests erupted in December 2011 over fraudulent elections to the parliament that favored the governing party and when Putin declared he would run for a third six-year term in 2012. Demonstrators were inspired by foreign examples of Occupy Wall Street and Pride marches. TV Rain began as a youth-oriented channel, not intending to become a vehicle of the political opposition, but Putin's repression politicized it. Covering events such as the poisoning of anticorruption activist and Putin rival Aleksei Navalny, his emergency evacuation to a Berlin hospital, his arrest and imprisonment upon his return to Moscow, and the mass demonstrations that erupted in response inevitably brought the journalists into the regime's gunsights.

Director Loktev, who was born in 1969 in the U.S.S.R. and emigrated to the United States at age nine, was intrigued by a story she read in *The New York Times* about journalists being declared "foreign agents" (*inoagenty* for short). The regime had applied the category to nongovernmental organizations that received funds from abroad, to discredit them. Now certain individuals were required to identify themselves as *inoagenty*, provide specifically worded disclaimers, and fill out detailed accounts of their expenses (for pet food, chocolate, anything) or face stiff fines and possibly prison terms. By the time Loktev flew to Moscow in October 2021 and made contacts through Nemzer, credited as co-director, the ranks of *inoagenty* were growing.

The film is divided into five chapters, several more than an hour long: "The Lives of Foreign Agents"; "The Town Crazies"; "The Holiday Special"; "The Expected Impossible"; "Don't Say War." Even with that length, the director and her co-editor Michael Taylor faced a prodigious task of cutting many more hours of film than they could show. The film's vérité approach leaves subjects sometimes making references not immediately understood. The next scene will inevitably show someone—usually Anya driving her car—explaining the relevant context. As Loktev recalls, Moscow's terrible traffic provided the unplanned setting for the first chapter of her film and many subsequent scenes: "I picked up my phone and started shooting Anya talking since we were stuck in the car anyway." What makes the film so compelling is how it diverges from conventional documentaries. Loktev filmed with an outdated iPhone, following her subjects through their daily activities, including meals, driving the children to and from school, covering protests, preparing scripts, editing and broadcasting programs. There is no voice-over, no use of B-rolls to provide context. Loktev makes it look easy, but it certainly wasn't.

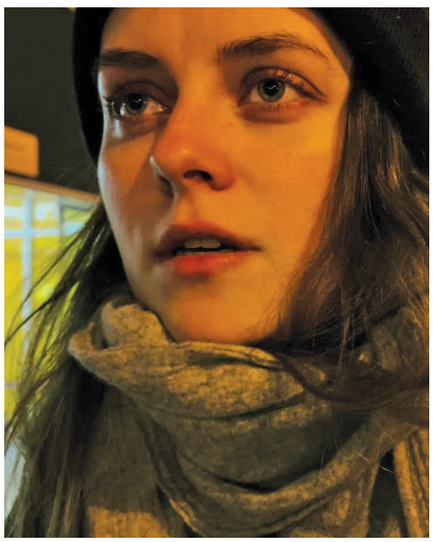
The director provides the main spoiler in a voice-over right at the outset: "The world you are about to see no longer exists." The film's chronology spans from October 2021 to March 2022, two chapters in each year, with the middle chapter dominated by the New Year's holiday. The first two chapters show the reporters' determination to defy the threatening atmosphere through black humor and playfulness. The middle chapter marks a turning point. Tipsy from toasting on air to the New Year, the TV Rain journalists recap their year of hosting regime-challenging guests and broadcast an alternative for viewers who can't bear to watch Putin's holiday speech: a collage of greetings from critical cultural figures and human-rights activists offering a mix of hope, solidarity, and foreboding for the new year.

The tone becomes increasingly dark. Preoccupied by whether they can remain and do their work or should plan to flee the country, the journalists have the decision made for them, as the last two chapters show, when Putin orders the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russian troops had been fighting there since the 2014 intervention in the Donbas, and the illegal annexation of Crimea was popular among Russians. Putin used the intervention to distract attention from mass protests and boost his sagging popularity. As he threatened a renewed attack against Ukraine in autumn 2021, TV Rain reporters expressed hope that "there won't be a war" and the reality that "we know there is already a war." As Russian troops poured across the border, carried out massive air attacks on civilian targets, and tried to seize the capital Kyiv, the journalists continued to cover the war—or "special military operation," as the regime required it be named. They travel to the border with Ukraine, interviewing soldiers, some who insist there won't be a war and others who complain that the "government is forcing us into a military conflict with our relatives." Once the invasion takes place, they broadcast split-screen triptychs of images and first-hand testimony that directly contradict the official denial that civilians are being attacked. They only stop when their arrest seems imminent.

Although the film documents the younger generation of investigative journalists, it offers some links to the past. We learn that Lena Kostyuchenko, growing up in a working-class family in a provincial city, was inspired to try her hand at journalism when, by chance, she came across an article by Anna Politkovskaya in *Novaya Gazeta* on the fate of chil-

Olga Churakova ran the independent news program called *Important Stories*.

Ksenia Mironova must decide if she wants to flee the country in order to avoid arrest.



Irina Dolinina worked with Olga Churakova on the *Important Stories* news program.

dren during Russia's wars in Chechnya. The film shows Lena in February 2022, covering the invasion from Odesa, the first Russian journalist to report from Ukraine. She knew the risks she was taking, not least because she knew Politkovskaya's story. The older journalist (born 1958), ex-wife of *Vzglyad* writer Aleksandr Politkovsky, was murdered on October 7, 2006, Putin's birthday.

During the Gorbachev era, the *Vzglyad* team introduced innovations that TV Rain embraced for the age of Putin: casual clothing; use of homegrown rock music; focus on controversial subjects. In the Eighties, these included resurrecting the memory of Joseph Stalin's terroristic crimes, exposing the quagmire of the war in Afghanistan, revealing the extent of drug and alcohol addiction, and uncovering myriad forms of corruption at the heart of the Soviet system. Today's independent journalists sport T-shirts and hoodies with ironic and politically provocative slogans (helpfully translated in the subtitles). Local musicians perform in the TV Rain studio, called "A Hard Day's Night." One powerful scene captures the solo performance by Volodya Kotlyarov of the punk band *Pornofilmy* singing their angry, hopeful anthem, "This Will Pass." The Russian media censor, *Roskomnadzor*, put the song on its banned list for "extremist content," thereby boosting its popularity.

The topics the TV journalists cover provide echoes of the past. They report on the "liquidation" of the Russian human-rights organization Memorial, founded to commemorate Stalin's victims, and the harassment of its members. They interview lawyers from the OVD-Info organization who defend activists and journalists. TV Rain covered the fate of Navalny, whose death in prison added to the growing roster of political figures murdered under circumstances that suggested official complicity. The liberal politician Galina Starovoytova was killed in 1998 in the foyer of her apartment building when Putin served as director of the Federal Security Service or FSB, the successor to the KGB. Boris Nemtsov, the leader of the democratic opposition, was murdered within sight of the Kremlin in 2015. Vladimir Kara-Murza, his second-in-command, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and director of the documentary *Nemtsov* (2016), like Navalny, survived a suspected poisoning. In 2022, he returned to Russia from exile to protest the invasion of Ukraine and was promptly jailed and handed a twenty-five-year prison sentence for treason. *My Undesirable Friends* shows TV Rain covering an anniversary demonstration on the bridge where Nemtsov was shot. One of their team, Eduard (Edik) Burmistrov, is arrested as he lays flowers at the site of the murder.

One major difference between *perestroika*-era investigative journalism and the people Loktev portrays is the role of women. After *Vzglyad* celebrated its Thirtieth

anniversary with a party, a journalist writing about it asked Kira Proshutinskaya, a founder of the program, why she wasn't there. She hadn't been invited. Women were in the minority in Soviet media and their role in promoting *glasnost* went unrecognized. In the last couple of decades, against all odds, they became the bravest and most visible figures in Russian journalism. Loktev's film briefly portrays two important male TV Rain members. One is Edik, whose friends wait for him six hours in the cold outside a police precinct after his arrest. The other is editor-in-chief Tikhon Dzyadko. He is shown on air defying the ban on the word "war," and is filmed with his baby in a pram at the studio, as the other team members are preparing a photo-shoot with a James Bond theme to satirize their status as "super agents" (they could find no foreign magazine interested in publishing it).

The stars of this film are the women: Anya Nemzer, whose program *Who's Got the Power?* interviews activists working on domestic violence, gay rights, homelessness, the rights of the disabled, and the treatment of migrants; Sonya Groysman and Olya Churakova, who invite fellow *inoagenty* to their podcast, *Hi! You're a Foreign Agent*; Alesya Marokhovskaya and Ira Dolinina, who run a small media project called *Important Stories* that investigated the Pandora Papers—the nearly twelve million documents released just before Loktev arrived in Moscow that exposed secret offshore accounts of political and economic figures, including prominent Russians; Lena Kostyuchenko, the *Novaya Gazeta* journalist who covered the wars in Ukraine and promoted gay rights (she was the first to write about the punk protest band, Pussy Riot); and Ksyusha Mironova, the twenty-three-year-old host of the program, *Women on Top*, whom Loktev films coping with the arrest of her journalist-fiancé Ivan Safronov, charged with revealing "state secrets" readily available online. In several emotional scenes she struggles over whether to leave the country and fight for him from abroad or face inevitable arrest herself. Following two years of pretrial detention, Safronov was tried for treason and condemned to a twenty-two-year prison sentence. Unfortunately he was not included in a prisoner exchange that freed Kara-Murza and others.

Toward the end of the film, in a darkened, tense studio, the remaining TV Rain members agonize over how to flee the country—flying to Bishkek or Istanbul, driving across the border with Latvia. Loktev captures the intimate details of their departure—saying goodbye to lovers and parents, deciding what books and pets to bring. Will it be a short exile, or should I pack a summer dress? The team expects TV Rain to be shut down—and then they'll show *Swan Lake*, someone quips. A phone tip that special forces are about to raid the studio sends everyone scrambling—the screen goes black as Loktev joins her friends escaping out the back, then resumes filming as they break up into small groups on the streets and try not to attract attention.

Viewers, reviewers, and the director herself find it hard not to see their own countries reflected in Russia's growing repression. Even during his first administration, Donald Trump echoed Stalin in calling journalists "enemies of the people," and he campaigned against immigrants as vicious criminals and invaders. His Pentagon, like the Russian defense ministry, welcomes only reporters who mimic official press releases. Anya Nemzer talks of "xenophobia that comes from the top down," yet is accepted by society "with great enthusiasm and joy." Yet, when Loktev alludes to the parallels, Anya gently chastises her: "You sound exactly like Putin now." One of his favorite techniques is to say, "Look what's happening in America," to normalize his own crimes.

Things have gotten still worse in Russia. A couple of months after the film's release, the OVD-Info lawyers saw the main source of their funding cut off, when Russian banks refused to process the ruble donations of its twelve thousand supporters. The Internet itself, where TV Rain moved after it was removed from cable packages, is at risk. *Roskomnadzor* has threated to block WhatsApp and FaceTime if the services refuse to share data about their users. Facing such repression with determination and humor, the journalists of *My Undesirable Friends* helped Julia Loktev produce a masterpiece. Part II of her forthcoming documentary, called *Exile*, traces the flight of the journalists who have become her friends as they relocate to some fourteen different countries and pursue their work from abroad. Viewers captivated by their wit, creativity, and perseverance will be eager to see how they fare.

—Matthew Evangelista