

Liminality in Love: Reading Ritualized Institutional Practice as Civil Society in Alina Rudnitskaya's *Civil Status*

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Abstract: This paper uses Victor Turner's notion of liminal ceremonial spaces and Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice to examine Anna Rudnitskaya's documentary film *Civil Status* (2005). The 29 minute film follows the working lives of civil servants in the Saint Petersburg civil registry office, where couples "come to make their love official." How do individuals use the apparatus of civil society to enact social transformation, and what do practices of citizenship look like in post-Soviet Petersburg? How do individuals evaluate and respond to the social status of strangers through embodied practice? How does the presence of the camera serve to further ceremonialize the civil transactions captured in the film? I engage with Rudnitskaya's film as ethnographic data to address these questions.

Keywords: civil society, marriage, citizenship, habitus, ritual

Introduction

Alina Rudnitskaya's documentary film *Civil Status*, produced in Saint Petersburg, Russia in 2005, follows unfolding interactions in one of the city's civil registry bureaus, where marital status is formulated by face-to-face interactions between citizens and clerks¹. This paper unpacks the embodied practices depicted in the film, and, drawing on insights from anthropological theory, attempts not only to approach questions about marriage- and divorce-making practices in 2005 Saint Petersburg², but also to catch a glimpse of the *byt*, or daily rhythms, that comprise this arena of ritual practice in post-Soviet civil society.

Over the past twenty years, the notion of civil society has been central to understandings of the post-Soviet. It has been a fundamental component of discourses pertaining to the economic and political transition, and of conversations about the fate of democracy in Russia. Examining civil society at the civil registry – a realm where citizens interface with representatives of the state and official status is brokered – corresponds to traditional

philosophical definitions of the term, wherein civil society is *a mediating realm or interface between family and state*.

Critical scholars have cautioned that post-Soviet development programs deployed the civil society concept in a manner that risks essentializing it as an isolated marker of progress toward liberal democracy, narrowing the concept and failing to attend to realities on the ground (Kymlicka and Opalski 2001; Phillips, S. 2005b:494). Activists and scholars of feminist and queer theory have imparted near fatal blows to the assumption that there exist in sociopolitical worlds separate, distinct realms of public and private (Warner 2002; Gal 1997 and 2002; Phillips, A. 2002), an idea which has been a key component of the civil society paradigm at least since Habermas. Anthropology has problematized the application of an unmitigated notion of civil society in diverse cultural contexts where local understandings of individual persons as agentic actors – the basic unit of liberal thought – may be vastly different; likewise, in some contexts marriage and family may be the local expression of politics (Hann and Dunn 1996). Thus, I examine institutional practice in the Rudnitskaya's film as a means of getting at a reconciled, anthropological notion of civil society³. Such a reimagining conjures a civil society that unfolds as the symbolic negotiation of power and social forms in everyday practice; that resides in culture in the anthropological sense⁴.

Rudnitskaya's film received acclaim at numerous Russian and international festivals, and was hailed in the Russian film press as “an ironic take on contemporary life.”⁵ The deployment of the word “ironic” – a turn of phrase so often invoked to gloss over phenomena that are simultaneously obvious and illusive, to recognize incongruity and deftly move on – is our first hint that the film and its reception deserve unpacking. What is it, precisely, about the commonplace interactions captured by Rudnitskaya's camera that led a film writer to describe a matter-of-fact portrayal of the unfolding negotiation of marriage licenses, divorce paperwork, and death certificates as *ironic*? What is missed when we take this turn of phrase at face value?

The film description from which I draw this characterization, widely disseminated across Russian-language websites and without authorial attribution [see note 3], dwells on the incongruity between acts of marriage, divorce, and death: these “big moments” in life are alike in their magnitude of personal and social significance, but vastly differ in tone and meaning. Yet, it is not the side-by-side processing of death, marriage, and divorce that leads the reviewer to read irony in Rudnitskaya's perspective.

Rather, it is the direct and unemotional manner in which the clerks – all of whom are female, reserved, and highly professional – meet these “big moments” in the lives of an unending stream of Saint Petersburg residents, each with their own, weighty human back story. Without commentary or narrative protagonists, the film allows rituals of marital union and dissolution to run together into a stream of cursory and gross interactions. Rudnitskaya's film shows us not her perspective, but the perspective of the clerk, who, day in and day out is presented with exceptional and highly significant moments in the lives of their fellow citizens. In doing so, Rudnitskaya attends to the incongruity of Eros and bureaucracy, and, by reversing the perspective on cursory interactions with clerks and officials that postsoviets are all too familiar with, interpellates perceptions of complicity and alliance in bureaucratic power relations. Indeed, the titling at the beginning of the film reads (in a rather unfortunately punctuated translation), “Action takes place in the Marriage Palace. It's a place where people's destinies are crossed with the bureaucratic system.”

So, the ironic here resides in “the irony of fate” (to take a phrase well exercised in both Russian cultural memory and critical analysis), that incongruity of expectation and result. Where, symbolically, marriage belies Eros and a socially significant rite of passage, in practice, its enactment entails bureaucracy and commonplace institutional transaction. Where divorce, abstractly, indexes the capitulation of romantic love to mechanisms of the practical, or perhaps, to the power of erotic passion to rupture bonds of social responsibility, in Rudnitskaya's depiction, eruptions of Eros become a headache interrupting the flow of paperwork. Instead of the bond between man and woman taking center stage, here, instead, the invisible third partner, the state, looms large as the sought out arbiter of, and collective repository for, social classification, or civil status⁶.

In this sense the film itself might be read as a critical utterance (what Linda Hutcheon (1995: 12) would call an *evaluative act*), wherein Rudnitskaya re-situates marriage not only as a ceremonial confirmation of love, but as a transformative, culturally codified social ritual. Simultaneously, the film stands as a sort of ethnographic text wherein the documentarian mode captures a series of normative expectations guiding social interactions in the post-Soviet sphere (a semantic articulation). In this paper, I address each of these perspectives, first considering the civil registry as a liminal space of ritualized ontological social translation, and second, attending

to the intersubjective dialectic of presentation and expectation between strangers in perfunctory post-Soviet interaction.

Ritual, Status and the State

In anthropological iterations *marriage* is an institution that structures kinship relations, or the organization of familial bonds of social obligation; it is therefore a primary organizing principle of social, economic, and political life. A wedding is the ceremonial enterprise that marks the beginning of a new marriage, and divorce a ritual marking a marriage's dissolution.

Contemporary anthropologists have problematized the classical notion that *marriage*, as a single titular category, ought to describe (and thereby equate) an array of practices that takes so many forms across the diversity of human societies as to be virtually unrecognizable to the European observer (see, for example Borneman 1996). The intention of such a critique is not to throw out the category of marriage, but rather, to urge caution in the universal translation of words and concepts. After all, as much recent media noise has documented – from the on-going movement to erase gendered partnering from legal marriage, to the popular reality series “The Bachelorette” – the character and function of the social institution of marriage in the United States is highly contested and constantly negotiated, between individuals, among families, and in the agora.

Likewise, we must consider the institution of marriage in Saint Petersburg of 2005 to be equally manifold and dynamic. Marriage, in fact, may be romantic, practical, and financial; it is an institution influenced by echoes of Soviet social formations and by more recent transition discourses. As anthropologist Alaina Lemon has shown in her article documenting the ways that love and value are articulated and re-situated (2008), contemporary Russians are equally familiar with marrying for motivations including money, for love, for adventure or change in life circumstances, and for children. Myriad forms of functional, rather than romantic, marriage that were relevant throughout the Soviet era continue to resonate today. Revolutionary re-imaginings of gender roles in marriage that entered public discourse in the early twentieth century were quickly replaced with Stalinist disciplining of the nuclear family, and late Soviet housing shortages made divorces of convenience a commonplace occurrence. When contemporary

Russians consider marriage, Lemon argues, they draw on and adapt these nascent formulations of value and meaning. Marriage is historically and culturally situated.

As our film reviewer rightly summarized, Rudnitskaya's "twenty-nine minute film follows the working lives of civil servants in the Saint Petersburg civil registry office, where couples come to make their love official." Just how does one "make love official?" In fact, this is an intentionally ironic turn of phrase: everyone knows that emotive *love* itself is not what is being made official. So, given the motivations recounted above, what is it, precisely, that postsoviets are negotiating when they bring matters of marriage and divorce to bureaucrats at the civil registry? As Rudnitskaya's title implies, the registry is concerned not with love, but with *status*.

In Rudnitskaya's film individuals and couples frequent the civil registry in order to seek out official channels of social and civil transformation. Individuals consult with the overseers of these ritual processes, the civil servants employed by the office, for guidance in all aspects of moving through the rites of passage performed in the office; there is a rife earnestness in these inquiries, though whether it is invoked out of respect for ritual or in order to avoid bureaucratic hassle is unclear. Rigid manners of proceeding through these steps of officiation are not known or shared amongst common individuals, but are elicited through conferences with clerks. "How long in advance of a wedding ceremony may a couple seek a marriage license?" one young man asks. "Who must be present to finalize a divorce, and with what paperwork?" asks another. Throughout the film, citizens look to the officials to enable the marriage ritual that will confer a new civil status. Just as in the United States, the wedding ceremony is separate from some institutionalized practice of registering the marriage; but here, the marrying couples conduct their paperwork in the bureau office, and then proceed to a palace room in the same building for the celebratory ceremony. The film resolves with a montage of several wedding ceremonies, which are performed by one of the same bureaucrats, who has, Rudnitskaya lets us know, changed her suit and applied lipstick. Meanwhile, in the basement storage room, a closing shot announces, these civil transactions are cataloged in row upon row of stout, austere labeled file binders.

Victor Turner has described ritual as *a transformative social process* (1967: 95) of "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine," that offers codified symbolic meaning. Thus, one of the reasons that anthropologists are fascinated by ritual is its capacity to reveal references to implicit but deeply shared cultural meanings. Turner's

notion of *rites of passage* offers an elaboration of Arnold Van Gennep's model of change, wherein the *liminal* is a point of passage between two structural states; unfolding outside of or at the margins of the social sphere a ritual returns its participants to social life as bearers of a new status or identity (Turner 1967: 95, 1995: 94-95). This is an apt description of the civil registry. The seeking of marriage or divorce represents a profound departure from daily routine, a highly unusual, "once in a lifetime" event, wherein the participants leave behind their normal routines, enter an otherwise unfrequented space (the civil registry), and emerge with new social or institutional identities. While Turner himself was concerned with rituals and rites of passage practiced in small scale African societies, his framework has been broadly applied in anthropology to what we might call "complex" or "industrial" societies. Turner himself referred to these as *liminoid* processes, to designate the more electoral nature of choice and meaning in larger scale societies (Turner 1975: 15), though one might argue that in both cases, the shadow of "obligation" continues to haunt the meaning of "ritual" (as it does for Turner's Ndembu informants (Turner 1995:11)).

So, considering the civil registry office as a liminoid space for the performance of prescribed marital ritual, we must attend to the second component of Turner's definition, that is, that ritual offers a codified symbolic meaning indexing implicit cultural meanings and forces. The claim I want to make here is that civil status, as a means of attenuating an individual or couple's social role, entails a process of attributing the power to change status to some vestige of force, whether a representation of the social collectivity or some other power (supernatural, imaginary, or invisible, but referenced through symbols). In this case, that mediating power is *the state*. The citizens seek the guidance of clerks, in whom is vested a power representative of collective social contract. In a sense this argument returns the notion of civil society to its classical meaning, as a mediating associational realm between the family (or the kinship bonds that make up family) and the state (Hann and Dunn 1996; Chambers and Kymlicka 2002; Seligman 2002); at the same time, I am arguing for a departure from more recent political deployments of the term in transition narratives wherein civil society was "built" rather than self-generating (e.g. when the term is invoked as part of development rhetoric, such as in Fukuyama 2001).

In one vignette about two-thirds of the way through Rudnitskaya's film, a man is seated across the desk from one of the bureau officials, named Lena. He is seeking a finalization of a

divorce, and is told that both he and his wife must be present in the office with a court decision in order to sign documents that will finalize the divorce. No exceptions will be made. The man begins to explain that it will be impossible for he and his wife to both be present. Soon his explanation turns into an emotional litany of personal misfortune. A young daughter has terminal leukemia, he intimates, so either he or his wife must be with her in the hospital at all times. The clerk maintains her air of unaffected indifference, as the litany gives way to a tirade of disparaging remarks. On a semiotic level, our beleaguered father is addressing a complaint, that in order to achieve a social and civil transformation the prescribed ritual behavior must be carried out. He is bemoaning the power that he and his fellow citizens have vested in the state to articulate and define social status through these civil ceremonies. Eventually, however, his monologue wears down, and near tearfully, he departs. As raised eyebrows from fellow workers and other civilians shift toward Lena, she comments dryly, “He’ll be back.”⁷ Thus, the final word in civil ritual. Convenient or not, if the man and his wife wish to endeavor a socially valid divorce, they will return to the office.

This reality seems to index a broader cultural context: for post-Soviet citizens, even as economic lives become disentangled from the state, and instead installed (or perhaps it is apt to say, invested) in markets, civil status remains a realm in which citizens not only recognize, but must *seek out* ritual codification mediated by a state apparatus. Marriage and divorce, unlike commerce, remains a domain of the “official” in post-Soviet Russia. Or, perhaps, we might ask, whether or not post-Soviet citizens *do in fact* seek out official marital unions. Sergey Zakharov (2010) has shown that demographic data implies a decrease in registered marriage relative to unregistered cohabitation in Russia since the 1990s: fewer new couples are using this apparatus than ever before⁸. Zakharov’s findings raise important questions about who is seeking to “make their love official”, who is not, and why. Perhaps this is a topic for future ethnography.

Turner’s theory of ritual practice is particularly compelling in that, recognizing that symbols are multivocal and that symbolic reference offers manifold interpretations, it allows us to consider the meanings made through rituals as unfixed and thus as a realm of negotiation (Turner 1967: 20-28; Turner 1995: 41-42, 96, 177). As ritual practice is enacted, its performative and symbolic elements are negotiated and continually remade; in this manner, cultural change unfolds organically, a nexus of intersubjective interpretations and claims. If, in the post-Soviet period, fewer citizens seek out the marriage palace at the civil registry to codify marital status,

instead, for instance, seeking church weddings, or creating new institutions, then the legitimacy of the state to arbitrate this aspect of civil life may diminish, or lose its exclusive grip on conferral of status. At the same time, because citizens continue to use the ZAGs as an official apparatus, it maintains the resonance of legitimacy. Moreover, as Alexei Yurchak has pointed out, postsoviets, engaging in so-called official behavior may be simultaneously enacting the constitutive, obvious meaning, and gesturing to a subversive, ironic invocation of the same act (2006: 20-21). A performative act may both reinscribe existing forms and raise new meanings. In this view, the litany of complaint voiced by the downtrodden father is increasingly complex. Is he challenging the official paradigm? Enacting an expected ritual tone in the register of complaint? Just trying to get something done? Or all of these? Rudnitskaya's film does not tell us why it is that engaging in institutional practice in order to obtain a divorce is relevant and worth it for this man. But as the clerk's comment indicated, all complaints aside, the downtrodden father will be back, whether out of pragmatic need or some drive to complete the performative act of civil ritual.

However, the downtrodden father's supplications gesture to an important register of institutional practice, that is, complaint or contestation. Katherine Verdery has brilliantly documented the manner in which the personal time of citizens under communism was systematically colonized by a proliferation of state-instituted steps and obstacles to performing and obtaining the most basic activities of life (Verdery 1996). As Verdery explained, while the goal of a capital-driven economy is to produce growth, the goal of a centralized state economy is to accumulate means of production. Thus, in a communist system, citizens rely wholly on the apparatus of the state to obtain even the simplest of goods and services⁹. And, having accumulated these apparatuses, the state is under no pressure to produce ease of use – in fact, Verdery observed, by allowing difficulty of use to proliferate (she gives examples of breakdown of public transportation systems, food distribution systems in 1980s Romania), the state in fact further consolidates its power by reducing temporal capacity for citizen resistance. After spending all day in line waiting for food, and three hours traveling to and from work, these economic activities essential to survival, citizens are left with little time and energy to mount contestation to state legitimacy.

A restructured economic system in the post-Soviet world has changed the arena of protest as the notion of customer service has entered the popular vernacular (Krongauz 2008: 120-123).

Since the 1990s, complaint and resistance in public rituals in the commercial sphere have gained purchase. As businesses privatized and notions of customer service slowly entered Russian transactions, a display such as the one our down-trodden father exhibited has become more likely to produce a desired result; were he seeking to open a bank account, purchase furniture, or some other consumer activity the downtrodden father may have made some headway. However, as Lena's "he'll be back" comment intones, similar displays of protest to civil servants have little effect (perhaps a cross-cultural truth to which post office and DMV customers in the United States might attest!). That is, the state has maintained monopoly on the dispensation of official¹⁰ civil status – nowhere else could the man obtain legal divorce. Here, if not in the commercial sphere, soviet habits of institutional practice prevail.

Institutional Practice through *habitus*, or, relational civil society

But how might we discern the old and the new in the habits of postsoviets, or approach an understanding of the tension between agentive negotiation and prescribed behavior? How can we theorize cultural change, or the (re)making of civil society in time? How are the ritual performances staged by citizens received by clerks? And what can be gleaned by reading clerks' responses?

For the citizens and clerks in Rudnitskaya's film microdecisions about behavior, appearance, and perceived motivation bring about very different tones of interactions. In the civil registry, staff and citizens oscillate between rigid bureaucratic interactions and more personal attentions. In one moment, a clerk is gently prodding an elderly woman to use kinship ties to resolve her problem of a missing document, in the next the bickering couple is being chided for poor behavior, and shortly the aforementioned bewildered young man, dirty and clearly a laborer by trade, is inquiring about marriage licenses, and is derided by the clerk for not understanding her answers. There is a wide range in tone applied depending on the official's perception of the situation at hand and the expectations and needs of the presenting citizen.

These interactions represent what I am calling *institutionalized practice*, conceived as a ritualized relational exchange. "Rituals," wrote Monica Wilson in 1954, "reveal values at their deepest level... men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed" (Turner 1995: 6). Yurchak, subsequently, has examined the ways that ritualized acts – like speaking or voting at a

party meeting – offer moments in which soviets and postsoviets inscribe, reinscribe, and challenge meanings “neither completely known in advance nor determined by the participants’ intentions” (2006: 22). This view helps to resolve the ambivalence of postsoviets toward engaging in a bureaucratic activity that seems to indicate an allegiance to a state power that they may both rely on and resent because, as Yurchak has pointed out, it goes beyond a “mask/truth” model in which the citizen has one public, official face, and one private face of dissent. Rather, embodied behaviors are simultaneously *performative* and *constitutive* (ibid., 23).

In this vein, I am proposing an institutional practice where actions generate meaning, and power is relational rather than vested. In order to get at this tension between agency and prescribed behavior, I take up three concepts from French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu in order to further unpack institutional practice: *habitus*, *taste*, and *misrecognition*. *Taste* helps us to grasp the microdecisions that citizens in the registry make about how to treat one another; *habitus* helps us to understand where *taste* has come from and to theorize how relations of power are replicated; and *misrecognition* speaks to the curious failure of individuals to implicate themselves accurately in networks of power.

Attending to the institutionalized practice documented in Rudnitskaya’s film as it unfolds in bureaucratic interactions moves us toward a generative notion of the civil, the ritualized realm of negotiation between citizens and the state. The performative here is not performance *per se*, but embodied practice, where the citizens and clerks “have an intrinsic knowledge of these [ritualized] schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex microrelations of power” (Catherine Bell, cited in Yurchak 2006: 22).

How is ritualized institutional practice in the film tempered by the presence of Rudnitskaya’s camera? Aside from one aberrant moment in which a man makes eye contact with the camera, the so-called “fly-on-the-wall perspective”¹¹ of Rudnitskaya’s filmmaking is maintained. In 2005, just as the spectacle of reality television reached Russian living rooms, the citizens in the film appear to conduct their business without the inflated self-consciousness that characterizes that genre. As the documentary subjects conduct their business, they seem genuinely unaware of the cameras. Camera angles allude to the perspectives of visitors to and workers in the space, and edited cuts offer views of onlookers as particular conversations unfold.

Background noise infiltrates conversations. Rudnitskaya successfully lends the viewer the illusion of unmitigated participation in and observation of the unfolding scene.

Moreover, Rudnitskaya's "fly-on-the-wall perspective" invites the viewer to choose which personages to associate and identify with. By refusing to create heroes through the weaving of a beginning-middle-end narrative, Rudnitskaya has left the viewer without instructions. The viewer becomes, then, not an audience for a particular series of events, but indeed, a fly on the wall, an additional visitor to the wedding chapel. In this position, the viewer receives no clues as to with whom to identify, or how to read the relative "good" and "evil" of the various characters as they appear. Through this device, Rudnitskaya underlines the viewers' own prejudices and tendency toward social assessment. Without the instructional power of narrative to direct opinion and judgment¹², the viewer is armed only with her own tools of social assessment to make sense of the interactions, the performances of the various personas, and their meaning. In this way, viewers must deploy the subconscious but pervasive system of analysis that they might themselves use in a cafe, on New Jersey Transit, or in an official bureau to parse social classifications of surrounding figures. Gender, class, temperament – these characteristics are assessed in a glance, and then added to and revised as more information becomes available. This internalized, barely perceptible order of judgment, by which we all make microdecisions is precisely what Bourdieu calls *taste*.

The events unfolding in the civil registry cannot be said to be fully liminal in Turner's sense, in that liminal ceremony as he describes it is distinguished from the every day by the distinctive disassociation of the transitioning individuals from markers of social status and classificatory roles (Turner 1995:106). In a Turnerian liminal state, a transition is encouraged by a literal or figurative nakedness, a stripping away of the detritus of symbolic markers that cling to the person in transition. But in the civil registry markers of status, what Bourdieu identifies as vehicles of *taste* – clothing, posture, grooming habits, speech patterns that may signal hints of wealth or lack of wealth, education, and so forth – are retained. So while Turner's notion of the liminal helps us to understand the semiotic intent of communal action in the wedding chapel – the vesting of power to confer civil status in the state – his theory does not help us to grasp the motivation behind variations in tone of interpersonal interactions presented in Rudnitskaya's film.

For Bourdieu, *taste* is a classed, personal perception of value. An individual's *taste* is part of his or her *habitus*, the complex of meanings and perceptions of the world that he or she has come to hold based on specific, personal lived experiences. Bourdieu, for example, observed that teachers in France in the 1970s were far more likely than factory foremen with similar salaries to spend an above-average portion of their income on books; likewise, the teachers reported spending more of their income on food, but eating less meat than factory foremen. Bourdieu posited that these tendencies are based on differential values of *taste*.

Considering this notion of taste, and Rudnitskaya's fly-on-the-wall perspective, the viewer of the film becomes an active interlocutor, engaging his or her own taste with the semantic depictions of presented citizens. The viewer's own assessment is buffered by the consistent assessment of the bureaucrats, which hinges primarily on a question that is central to institutional practice: does this individual "know how to act?" For example, in the vignette of the bickering divorcing couple, Rudnitskaya shows us through facial expressions, side-long glances, and dialogue that based on their behavior, they are quickly assessed by the bureaucrats and surrounding citizen-observers as not knowing "how to act."¹³

Husband: I don't want the divorce. Don't do this...

Official: What do you mean? We've already printed the divorce certificate.

Wife: No, no, no... he will, he will.

Husband: She took my passport... I really don't want it... Seriously.

Wife: I'll give you back your passport outside.

Husband: No, give it to me immediately! I am 100% serious.

Official: You came here to register your divorce. I only need to stamp it!

Wife: No... he's kidding. Just look at him, he is so nervous.

Husband: We don't need any stamp at all.

Official: If you refuse to register the divorce, I can cancel the certificate.

Wife: Stop it, that's enough, I'm not up to such jokes.

Official: Well enough... Behave yourselves. After all you are adults!

Man: I need my passport. I am serious...

Wife: Go. Nobody is keeping you here...

Official: Just look at your behavior! You came to an official place, a state office! You wouldn't behave like this in the court! There, you behave yourselves.

Wife: In court he'd show the same behavior.

Official: Enough, I am printing it, so sign it and go.

Wife: He is that sort of man, you know.

Official: That is not our business.¹⁴

The husband and wife have broken the unwritten rule of the space: they have entered into a personal exchange and tried to draw in a clerk. Moreover, the husband and the wife seem to present conflicting goals: she to finalize the divorce, and he to prevent its finalization. The clerk is left to mediate. Her biting responses make it clear that she is offended and put out by the manner in which the couple has tried to draw her into their personal exchange. Where she sees her job as resolving paperwork aspects of divorce, the husband has attempted to use the official space of institutional practice to convince his wife to cancel the divorce. He tries to make a scene, hoping to cause enough of a hassle that the wife will abandon the transaction; he insinuates that his wife has stolen his passport to push through a divorce that he doesn't want. The wife, in turn attempts to appeal to the clerk, to demonstrate that she is the reasonable party who has come to take care of business, and can hardly be blamed for presenting herself for this transaction, considering her uncouth husband. The clerk, however, does not fall for this appeal. She will not come down on either side of this couple's argument, and resents that they have manipulated her into responding; as such she resorts to "crude" (Rivkin-Fish 2005: 30) tactics of demonstrating her authority to refuse to engage with the couple, using a harsh voice and admonishing them to take responsibility for themselves. The viewer, along with the clerk, must quickly assess the couple's behavior by identifying and intuiting the complex emotional relationships they are indexing, in order to process the scene.

Perhaps more than other vignettes in the film, this moment interrogates the tensions that arise between ideological boundaries of public and private. What is it that the husband has transgressed when he asserts the highly personal, emotional, human character of the unfolding transaction? In doing so, he transgresses agreements of appropriate institutional practice by articulating what is an ostensibly private component of a public interaction. This gets to the previously referenced critique of civil society's definitional assumption that public and private constitutes discrete, actual categories (Gal 1997). While personal versus private seem to represent an oppositional dichotomy, in fact, each conjecture can be further divided into additional personals and privates, nested within one another, in an ever-reducing fractal arrangement (Gal 2005:33). Susan Gal and Michael Warner (2002) have both employed an analogy of a house or home to illustrate this point. We imagine the home to be, by definition, a

private sphere, the realm of the family, and therefore, not public. Or at least, this is how it appears from the outside, say, on the street. Yet, within the home, there are additional refracting divisions of public and private: having entered the home, the entry way and the living room are public space, but the bedrooms appear private. However, having entered a bedroom, this remains an external space when compared to dresser drawers or nightstand diaries. While the metaphor is a spatial one, the ramifications have to do with behavioral registers, rather than strictly spatial divisions (Rivkin-Fish 2011:10-11).

Furthermore, Gal argues that where the North American thinker is accustomed to referencing public and private via spatial metaphors, the Russian-speaker will frequently proffer a similar distinguishing lens through a familiar distinction of pronouns – us and them, *nashi* and *oni*. If someone is *nashi*, a register of kin-relations is appropriate, while *oni* are treated with an official timbre of behavior.

This raises a distinct question for our notion of civil society: if there is no purely “public” (as Michael Warner has written, “some publics are more public than others”), where, then can we imagine the civil sphere to exist, if not cleanly between family and state? How do postsoviets negotiate between *nashi* and *oni* as relational forms? This question seems to be a component of the conflict at play in the scene with the divorcing couple. In the related scenario, a disagreement between clerk, wife, and husband about the content of the transaction emerges: each dwells in a different ritual register. The clerk is stolidly in the official realm, both in emotive motivation and tone of voice. Meanwhile the husband calls attention to the affective or personal register, as he attempts to evoke in his interlocutors a recognition of the emotional content that the transaction carries for him. And finally, the wife attempts to mediate, and, simultaneously, to assert herself as a legitimate or authoritative actor in the eyes of the official. Thus, the transaction can be strictly neither public nor private, neither official nor personal; it is both at once, and complicated by relational perspectives.

Let us tie this question back to our examination of institutional practice. How do the clerks determine how to respond in these unfolding, highly charged moments? At each turn, with each interaction – the confused pensioner, the bickering couple, the befuddled laborer, or the downtrodden father – the viewer is engaged by this question of official response. Will she come down as kind or will she maintain a cold distance? How will the interaction resolve?

To take another investigation of institutional practice, anthropologist Michele Rivkin-Fish has observed that in state-run health care settings in post-Soviet Saint Petersburg, doctors and patients alike referred to such moments of frustration in bureaucratic interaction as “our system.” She writes, the phrase “did not refer to a physical place or particular public setting.... No one ever used ‘our system’ in reference to themselves” (Rivkin-Fish 2005, 29). We can easily imagine that the players in Rudnitskaya’s film might deploy this descriptive handle to talk about the way that “our system” rendered interactions in the registry mutually frustrating. Extending Gal’s notion of us/them, in this iteration, “they” are always powerful, and “we” are always sacrificing and suffering. This is true from either the bureaucratic or service-seeking citizen’s perspective, and Rivkin-Fish relates it to Bourdieu’s notion of *misrecognition*: citizens and officials alike may recognize and bemoan a system of power, but consistently fail to situate themselves as complicit in the system.

This helps us to get at the situation with the divorce-seeking father. The man hoped that by demonstrating extreme personal need, he could persuade the official, here a representative of “our system,” to be moved to see him in a human light, and to bend the rules in order to allow him to register a divorce without his wife being present. But Lena invokes a bureaucratic strategy Rivkin-Fish has detailed called *the streetcar law*. According to this law, service providers remind one another: “if you stick your neck out, it’ll get cut off. Don’t interfere, stay in your place and everything will go smoothly” (Rivkin-Fish 2005: 147). Rather than issuing some dispensation of leniency, showing a human face and providing an exception, Lena reiterates the rules, bids the man farewell, and declares that he will be back to follow the prescribed set of actions.

It is the indeterminacy and unexpectedness of these microdecisions to treat one another as *us* or *them* that renders *our system* so weighty (Rivkin-Fish, personal communication). Adriana Petryna calls this a seeming “arbitrariness of criteria” (2002:134), which she observed in the decisions of doctors to refuse or confer the economically more beneficent category Chernobyl-induced disability in post-Soviet Ukraine. For Petryna’s interlocutors, seeking disability status becomes a labyrinth of appointments and moments of held breath, as impoverished patients wait to see whether a doctor will lean towards the *us* or the *them*, appealing to the doctor’s human sensibilities with the same graphic distress we see in Rudnitskaya’s civil registry (210-211). In the moment of the film in which the downtrodden father has mounted his request for exception but Lena has yet to answer, *taste* and judgment are suspended, and the viewer, the father, the

onlookers, and Lena herself alike await her performative response. Will she accept the father's plea to finalize a divorce without his wife present as appropriate, *tasteful* institutional practice, or will she, in that instant, refuse to stick her neck out to recognize him personally? Susan Gal has called this fleeting nature of the microdecisions that assess the us/them paradigm a "central moral dilemma of the [Soviet] system: the complicity of individuals with the state" (2005: 33-34). The authority of the state relies on these microdecisions. But Rivkin-Fish's observations remind us that on the ground, in institutional practice, no one in fact considers herself complicit with the state. Rather, she assesses her own stake in the situation at hand, her relational position, in a nearly subconscious plane, the plane of *habitus*, performatively enacting rather than reasoning her response. In this way, relations of power are performed, reinforced, and misrecognized.

Conclusion

The arena of marriage and divorce ritual has not been privatized, nor has it had any opportunity to benefit from the proposed benefits of competition. In this sense, in 2005, the civil registry retains a unique quality of sovietness, a façade that had already begun to fall away from other spheres of life, as consumer choice and global media became commonplace. In this light, another layer is added to our critic's reading of Rudnitskaya's film as ironic: in this most emotional sphere, matters of the heart and the family, "our system," the realm of Soviet life that has been most disparaged and discredited, continues to hold its grip, reproduced through microdecisions embedded in institutional practice¹⁵. "Our system" is made up of human interactions, of privates entering publics and vice versa, of citizens recognizing and misrecognizing one another face to face in a diffuse network of denied nodal relationships; this fuzzy, indiscrete concept overhauls cold and linear imaginations of some simple consolidation of power vested in "The State."

Adam Seligman (2002) has observed that the notion of civil society, as invoked in Eastern Europe, is largely divorced from its philosophical roots, and applied instead as a placeholder for more general claims about a society to transition towards. Particularly, it stands in for democracy, a word which Soviet propaganda may have already colonized and rendered overdetermined. Thus, in Eastern Europe, civil society references "the formal, legal, and institutional venues through which the individual as an autonomous moral agent can act out his or her needs

and desires in social and political spheres” (p. 28), which, in turn, implicitly implicate a system of liberal pluralism. (Meanwhile, Seligman reminds us, as deployed politically in contemporary North America, “civil society” stages a call for a return to voluntary community that renews a sphere of associational life between the family and the state.) At its root, Seligman contends, the notion of civil society has since the 17th century pointed to a key philosophical anthropological concern of how to conceptualize the role of individual interests in the social arena and the social constitution of individual interests. However, Seligman posits, the changing deployments of the term fail to provide any final resolution toward this question (p. 30). Therefore, as anthropologists, we must investigate Civil Society then not as structure acting on agency, or agency manipulating structure, but as an opportunity to examine the theoretical conundrum therein.

In this way, I find Rudnitskaya’s film to offer a salient arena in which to work out these questions of embedded personals and privates, family and state, individual and bureaucratic roles. If, as Alaina Lemon (2008:219) has argued, the linguistic construction “post-Soviet” has ceased to be a descriptive term, and become, instead, a convenient handle and empty moniker, then attending to the microdecisions that mediate personal agency and structural forms in institutional practice as depicted in Rudnitskaya’s film can help us to fill in once again what it is that we might mean when we speak of a post-Soviet civil society. Returning to a more classical invocation of the term, and leaving behind the laden “democratization” elements Seligman describes, civil society assumes that a state or social contract exists, and that human agents negotiate status via relational activities. The incongruity between the floating specter of post-Soviet authoritarianism and the banal, radically personal reality of “our system” is perhaps the ironic edge of Rudnitskaya’s film that has made it so compelling for popular audiences and scholarly consideration alike.

¹ *Otdel zapisej aktov grazhdanskovo sostoyaniya*, or, *Office of Written Acts of Civil Status*, most commonly referred to by the acronym ZAGS. The civil registry system was founded in the early Soviet period to fulfill the function of registration of civil records, which had formerly been performed by the church. The registries, on whole, keep records pertaining to births, deaths, marriages and divorces. Rudnitskaya has focused on the creation and demise of marital unions, and the registry profiled in the film includes a wedding room where marriages, unlike the other business conducted at the registry, are marked with white dresses and ceremony.

² A version of this paper was presented at an interdisciplinary graduate student conference titled “Undoing Eros: Love and Sexuality in Russian Culture” at Princeton University, October 22-23, 2010. I would like to express gratitude to conference organizers and participants, in particular Jennifer Wilson, Serguei Oushakine, and Anna Katsnelson, for the opportunity to examine the ideas herein, and for their valuable input. I would also like to acknowledge Aaron Hale-Dorrell, my colleague and intrepid reader.

³ In a recent publication, Meri Kulmala also unleashed the anthropological toolbox to build a critique of the civil society concept as applied in post-soviet development discourses (Kulmala 2011).

⁴ It is, perhaps, important to situate my own stake in this argument. As my broader research focuses on social movements for inclusive education in post-Soviet Russia, I cannot help but bump into questions and notions of civil society, as a sphere of voluntary political action in a democratic field, located between the public and the private, a hinge between family and state. As an anthropologist, I am not satisfied with a description of civil society that attends to a theoretical realm without tying it to practiced reality. I do not contend that the term ought to be dismissed as a top-down inscription, as ethnographic research demonstrates that it has come to play a very real role in the grant-making and grant-seeking activities of real life contemporary Russian activists. Thus, I see my engagement of this term as definitive, rather than polemical.

⁵ MIRAdox, a documentary film portal, described the film as follows:

Samye znachimye sobytiia zhizni liudei, takie kak svad'ba, razvod, rozhdenie detei, smert', prokhodiat cherez budni rabotnikov ZAGSa. Ironichnyi vzgliad na sovremennuiu zhizn' molodogo rezhissera. Fil'm iavliaetsia kinonabliudeniem, sochetaiushchim schastlivye momenty zhizni i prozu kantseliarskogo formalizma. Paradoksal'noe soedinenie, okrashennoe iumorom i skrytym tragizmom, pridaet fil'mu grotesknyi ottenok.

That is

The most significant events in life – marriage, divorce, the birth of children, and death – all pass over the desks of the workers in the city office for registration. A young director’s ironic take on contemporary life, the film provides a fly-on-the-wall perspective, uniting the happiest moments of life with a prose of clerical formalism. This paradoxical union colored with humor and veiled tragedy brings the film a grotesque tone. [Translation my own.]

⁶ I do not mean to imply a unique authoritarianism of the Russian State – I leave that for others— but rather to indicate, as queer theorists have noted in numerous Western contexts, that rituals of marriage are arenas of negotiation where social forms and ideologies are enforced and resisted.

⁷ Dialogue: *On vernetsia*. Subtitle: *He'll be back*. Alt. Translations: *He'll come back; He'll return*.

⁸ Sergey V. Zakharov’s (Institute of Demography, Higher School of Economics, Moscow) unpublished presentation “Changing Patterns of Union Formation and Fertility In Russia” (Duke University, February 20th, 2010) demonstrated that more and more Russian women are opting

for cohabitation as a union without seeking official marriage. This is true for first unions, wherein 40% of women cohabitated with a partner without seeking official marriage in the last measured period, 1999-2003; the previous period, 1994-1998 saw around 25% of first unions that did not lead to official marriage, and in 1989-1993, the rate was just over 10%, in 1984-1988, under 10%. Meanwhile, by the last measured period, for women entering a second union, less than 10% opted to make their union official. As such, Zakharov concludes, "Non-marital fertility has become a mass phenomenon and lost its marginal character." But, women who do not legalize their partnerships are less likely than their peers to have children with their partners; however, cohabitation is less directly related to procreation than in the past. Additionally, although Russian women continue to marry at a younger age than their European peers, a trend toward older age at first union, and lower birth rates seem to follow, if lag behind, general European trends.

⁹ Tatjana Thelen's recent critique of Verdery's argument has pointed to its reliance on the theoretical positioning of notions of economy of shortage developed by Hungarian economist Janos Kornai. Thelen points out that Kornai deploys a neo-institutional perspective, which takes for granted rational choice theory and thus would ordinarily fall under anthropological scrutiny; however, perhaps because of Kornai's position as native intellectual, his perspectives permeate Verdery's discussions. Thelen cautions readers to be aware that neo-institutionalism often goes hand in hand with an implicit position that private property is "the most efficient means of using resources and advancing the welfare of society as a whole" (Thelen 2011:46).

¹⁰ Note here the qualifier "official." We might do well to unpack the use of this term. In particular, I have in mind that *official* as commonly deployed in Russian may be either *ofitsial'nyi* or *obshchestvennyi*, that is, representing the vested agreement of the communal. See footnote 12 for further elaboration.

¹¹ This assessment of the filmmaker's style, "fly-on-the-wall perspective," is drawn from the widely-disseminated description of the film. See note 3 for the full text.

¹² Some have argued that such processes are in fact not rational judgments, but rather an embodied "know-how" (Varela 1999:3-5).

¹³ This segment is available in an online film clip at <http://vision.rambler.ru/users/lavr-debut/1/02/> beginning at time stamp 1:50

¹⁴ The Russian dialogue offers some nuance that is lost in the transcription of the subtitles alone. In fact, the Russian conversation carries meanings that the translation in the subtitles loses, in particular, the degree of dismissal that the wife shows to the husband, and the strength of his insinuation that she, in fact, stole his passport in order to process a divorce that he never agreed to. A transcription of the Russian dialogue is as follows:

Muzh (M): Ia ne budu oformliat' razvod, ne nado, ne delaite.

Rabotnitsa: Chto znachit ne budet, ia vam uzhe vse raspechatala.

Zhena (Zh): Ne, ne, ne -- budet, budet.

M: Ona zabrala u menia pasport, ia ne budu. Ia ser'ezno.

Zh: Otdam seichas, vot vyidem.
M: Net, seichas otdaesh'.
Zh: My s toboi eshche vmeste.
M: Pasport davai suda!
Rabotnitsa: Podozhdite, svidetel'stvo uzhe raspechatano, vy tol'ko chto prishli razvodit'sia.
Zh: Net, net, net. On shutit.
M: Ia ne shuchu.
Zh: Vy vidite, on ves' vzvinchennyi.
M: Ne nado shtampa nikuda stavit'!
Rabotnitsa: Vy otkazyvaetes' oformliat' razvod? Togda ia annulliruiu svidetel'stvo. Ia takikh shutok ne ponimaiu.
Zh: Tak, khvatit, vse!
Rabotnitsa: Davajte vesti sebia prilichno, vzroslye liudi!
M: Pasport suda polizhi, ia ser'ezno govoriu!
Zh: Ty mozhesh' uiti, tebia nikto ne derzhit.
Rabotnitsa: Tak, kak vy sebia vedete! Vy prishli v obshchestvennuiu organizatsiiu, gosudarstvennoe uchrezhdenie. V sude, naverno, vy by sebia tak ne veli!
M: Net.
Rabotnitsa: Tam pochemu-to vy schitaetes'
Zh: Na nego uzhe i v sud rydaiut, on uzhe vezde zafiksirovan.
Rabotnitsa: Vse. Ia raspechatyvaiu, puskai raspisyvaetsia, a potom pishet chto khochet.

¹⁵ Like narrated characters in popular, subversive Soviet fiction – for example, Natalya Baranskaia's (1989) *Just Another Week* and Mikhail Bulgakov's (1997) *The Master and Margarita* – the personas in Rudnitskaya's film encounter obstacles not in the figure of the state, but rather in amorphous, unfolding, embodied experience.

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