

Moscow. It is unclear whether it is an old Imperial Moscow, a Soviet capital or a contemporary city. The wild folk dancing on the stage where only high Russian ballet is performed captures Minnie and Mickey in the world of which Mickey could be a perfect tenant, and which he had been avoiding for 87 years of his absurdist existence. x

Irina Seits, PhD candidate in aesthetics at Södertörn University.

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- Ibid.*
- Here I mean the episode *Mickey Mouse in the Dancedaniya* that was introduced in February 2015, which I will discuss further in this article.
- Benjamin, W., "Mickey Mouse", 545.
- H. Wells called Lenin a "dreamer in the Kremlin" after his meeting with the Communist leader in Moscow in 1920.
- Benjamin, W., "Mickey Mouse", 545.
- Here I apply Henri Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space and "spatialisation". His concept greatly influenced modern urban theory and drew attention from the space itself to the social mechanisms and relations that participate in its production and formation, as well as in the perception (Lefebvre, 1974/1991) of the city. "Natural" space in this case is the initial space that the new state inherited from the Russian Empire, and can be compared to the space of nature that explorers enter when discovering a new land and beginning its development. Since the new state broke any ties to previous eras, it began the process of re-appropriating that space by destroying the sites of immediate reference to the space that it had divorced itself from in order to make that space "appropriate" for the construction of the new state and implementation of the new ideology. The Bolshevik state commissioned the production of a living environment that could raise newly formed citizens and fit them into the ideological communist political and social framework. Thus Russian architects of the first decade after the Revolution could not simply remain artists and constructors but were involved in the process of producing the new "appropriate space", as Lefebvre names it (Lefebvre, 1974/1991: 59), which was required by Soviet ideology and without which the ideas of social reformation "completely lose their meaning" (Lefebvre, 1974/1991: 59). After the process of appropriation was over and the social production of the new state, the space was complete, the space became
- "absolute", meaning that it could fully resemble the state and translate its ideology through its spatial organization and architecture.
- The program that was started in 1918 with the goal of providing the population with housing under the initial rule "1 room – 1 adult". Later, a minimum of 9 m² for an adult was established. The program was realized by confiscating the excess rooms and square meters from the previous owners and transferring them to the new tenants, mostly workers, resulting in the mass formation of communal apartments.
- Benjamin, W., "Mickey Mouse", 545.
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- Paul Scheerbarth (1863–1915) was a German thinker, poet and writer of fantastic novels, and the author of the cult book *Glasarchitektur* (1914), a treatise on the glass architecture inspired by the works by Bruno Taut.
- Benjamin, W., "Experience and Poverty", 733.
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- Heynen, H. *Architecture and Modernity* (MIT Press, 1999), 114.
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- Heynen, H. *Architecture and Modernity*, 119.
- Benjamin, W., "Moscow", 31.
- In the Moscow essay Benjamin wonders: "Where else is it conceivable that a distinguished military leader could one day be made a director of a great state theater?" – referring to a story of a general appointed to the position of director of the Theater of Revolution, as the Moscow Academic Theater named after Vladimir Mayakovski, the former theater of Meyerhold, was then called (Benjamin, 1999: 29).
- Benjamin, W., "Moscow", 29.
- Benjamin, W., "Experience and Poverty", 735.
- Ibid.*, 731.
- Ibid.*, 732.
- Citation in Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*, 101.
- Benjamin, W., "Moscow", 28.
- Ibid.*, 29.



The inverted myth

Viktor Pelevin's *Buddha's little finger*

by Tora Lane

abstract

In his contribution to the volume *Russian Literature* since 1991 entitled "The Postmodernist Novel", Mark Lipovetsky makes the now rather widespread claim that the Russian postmodernist post-Soviet novel represents a break with the totalizing tendencies of the socialist realist novel and opens for new ways of experiencing and conceptualizing the world. In this paper I critically examine this claim on the basis of a reading of Viktor Pelevin's *Chapaev i Pustota* (transl. as *Buddha's Little Finger* or *Clay Machine Gun*) against the backdrop of contemporary debates about realism and simulacra. The basic narrative of the novel is set in the civil war in post-revolutionary Russia and told through the first person perspective of Petr Pustota. Yet, by adding words, concepts from a post-Soviet era and postmodernist narrative style, Pelevin allegedly undermines the hegemony of the totalizing Soviet narrative. Although Pelevin is able to perforate the Soviet narrative, the question remains if he indeed really is able to open up for a non-totalizing narrative about Russian political history. On the contrary, the Soviet myth of Chapaev lends itself to the totality of the private myth.

KEYWORDS: postmodernism, Soviet myth, post-Soviet, Viktor Pelevin.

There is a structural similarity between Viktor Pelevin's 1996 *Buddha's Little Finger* [US title; UK title: *The Clay Machine Gun*] and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*.¹ In both novels, two stories run parallel, one contemporary to the respective writer and the other historical, separated by time and space, but meeting at certain points of intersection on the level of theme and imagery. In *The Master and Margarita*, the story of Moscow in the late 1920s is paralleled by the historical time of Christ, and in *Buddha's Little Finger* one story is set in the 1990s post-Soviet Moscow, and the other in the Soviet Russia of the early 1920s, or at least in the author's imaginative rendering of that time. In both novels, the parallel structure serves to form a contrastive dynamic that puts the question of reality, and in particular, Soviet reality into play in different ways. This question can be framed with the help of Bulgakov's novel, where we are presented with an early satiric image of how Soviet culture with its myths and demagogy of a realist dialectic materialism was at the same time negating a transcendental sphere and "de-realizing"² the reality that it aimed to form.³ In *Buddha's Little Finger* we meet instead an image of the afterlife and legacy of a myth of Soviet history, where the satirical imagined historical past is correlated by a shattered, mythologizing and insane

contemporary post-Soviet world. I will not further compare these two works, because this already has been done by other scholars.⁴ The question that I will pose in this article is what the contrastive dynamics of the two stories in *Buddha's Little Finger* tells us about the legacy of Soviet historical myth in contemporary Russian culture and literature. In relation to the notion that Soviet society de-realized the experience of that very society, it is often argued that it was an important task for post-Soviet culture to deal with its past by deconstructing those myths of reality.⁵ However, through the thoroughly ironic treatment of the Soviet historical myth and anecdotes about Chapaev and his commander Petka in the novel, here presented as Chapaev and Peter Voyd, Pelevin distorts the myth of Chapaev as historical reality by expanding and exaggerating the unreal aspects in a demonstrative refusal to oppose myths to reality. On the basis of Buddhist philosophy, proclaiming the world of imagination, and propounded in the novel by Chapaev as a sort of Buddhist master for Petka, Pelevin lets his hero come to the insight that he must overcome all distinctions between past and present, myth and reality, in order to attain himself as what he truly is – a void.⁶

Pelevin's treatment of the Soviet legacy in the novel is thoroughly ironic. It can be understood in terms of "inverted stëb",⁷ which Rosalind Marsh characterizes as a dominant literary style of the mid- and late 1990s.⁸ "Inverted stëb" as she writes: "involves an over-identification with ideological symbols subject to popular derision, such as Lenin, in such a way that it is impossible to tell if the symbols are being endorsed or ironically subverted."⁹ And indeed in *Buddha's Little Finger*, the figures of Chapaev and Petka, as heroic symbols from Soviet history, literature and film, and as comical figures from the anecdotes, are both endorsed and ironically subverted. The basic story of the novel is not unambiguous, but there is a strong case for arguing that it is about a man who calls himself Petr Pustota, translated as Petr Voyd, because *pustota* means void. He lives in contemporary Moscow, where he is held in a psychiatric clinic for believing that he is *Petr* or *Petka*, a commissar of the civil war and close friend of Vasilii Chapaev, the legendary red commander. While Pelevin treats the story of Chapaev and Pustota with ironic distance, interspersing it with incredible details in a way that recalls modern pulp fiction rather than socialist realism, he simultaneously turns the story into a post-modern personal historical myth about a Bolshevik and Buddhist intellectual super-hero.

If Marsh argues that "inverted stëb" is related to a nostalgic return to Soviet values, I will argue that what is at stake in Pelevin's treatment of the Soviet historical myth is not so much Soviet legacy *per se*, but rather the way that it is and can be appropriated in contemporary post-Soviet Russia. In no way is the reader instructed in Soviet values and led to believe that this is a myth of reality, and yet the myth is explored for its qualities to produce a contemporary post-modern historical ironic novel. The play with the symbols, myths and anecdotes expresses an

ambiguity vis-à-vis the distinction between the contemporary and historical worlds in the novel in terms of myth and reality. The writer engages in a rather typical post-modernist play with simulacra in order to resist realism's dictum that art must be a truthful representation of reality, which was seminal for socialist realism's claim to be a representation of revolutionary reality. In other words, he does not in any way endorse the truth claim of socialist realism. However, in his play with representation in the form of phantasmagoric imagination, Pelevin also discloses how the contemporary world, which ought to free the hero from perceiving the mythologizing bonds to reality as real, in fact immerses the characters in flows of myths, clichés and images. In the chapters that take place in 1990s Moscow, there

is an inherent opposition between on the one hand, the stern reality of science (the doctor and medicine), and on the other, insane phantasmagorical and private appropriations or consummations of cultural artifacts or simulacra. In other words, Pelevin seems to suggest that although the play with simulacra may offer some kind of cognitive escape from the Soviet myths or symbols in their claim to reality, the myths not only remain as such, but

they enter a different and no less problematic economy of distinctions between reality and representation in contemporary culture. Ultimately, the question raised is whether there is not a different totality to the world of simulacra because it can only be experienced as total immanence in the private imagination, when the distinction between myth and reality is sublated.

Simulacra and the void

The notion of simulacra has been defining for our understanding of post-Soviet literature and its relation to Soviet culture. Ironic, absurd, grotesque, critical or endorsing accounts of Soviet myths, symbols, historical narratives in a play with representation are undoubtedly characteristic of late socialist and post-soviet art. Mikhail Epstein argued that post-modernism offered but a "new developmental stage" of the simulacrum mentality generated by socialist realism and that there even is a "simulative character" of Russian culture as such.¹⁰ By contrast, Mark Lipovetsky replied that the postmodern world differs in its more complex forms of cognition and narrating because it is aware of the simulacrum nature of culture as opposed to Soviet culture, where the notion of simulacra makes no sense.¹¹ His argument is precisely that in its play with the Soviet myths, post-Soviet literature opens itself to new ways of conceptualizing them because it opens itself to an understanding of the extent to which the Soviet myth was not reality, as it was purported to be. If Pelevin underlines the simulacrum character of the Soviet myth in a way that would endorse Epstein's argument, he nevertheless also seems to make a qualitative distinction between the Soviet myth and its continuation in contemporary society. The myth of Chapaev aimed to form an image of reality in Soviet culture, but in the post-modern world myths, symbols and pop-

ular images comprise a private phantasmagoric game. In other words, although Pelevin ironically approaches the Chapaev myth in the form of a play with reality as but empty representations or simulacra, one cannot say that he entirely endorses the idea that the culture of simulacra leads to new forms of cognition. The culture of simulacra appears as a problem. The target of his inverted irony is both the Soviet myth of Chapaev and the idea that Soviet culture has been overcome by a contemporary reality that is able to see through the simulacrum nature of Soviet historical reality.

The term simulacra is in itself not unambiguous. In the 1980s and 1990s, as the Soviet Union was foundering and the critique of Soviet culture was reaching its momentum, the term simulacra was à la mode. The redefinition of simulacra was at this point vested with the hope of the destruction of the metaphysical dualism of Western philosophy, of finally realizing the Nietzschean desire to "overthrow Plato".¹² If the word for simulacra in the Platonic dialogue, the Sophist, is related to the world of likeness in which we live as opposed to the world of ideas, Gilles Deleuze redefined simulacra as a destruction of the distinction between the idea and the semblance, the model and the copy, the real and unreal. He argued that the simulacrum is the good mode of destruction, the good nihilism and the good creative chaos that Nietzsche called for in *The Will to Power*.¹³ Simulacra became the object of cultural studies of both modern and postmodern American and Soviet Russian culture.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard was much more critical of the contemporary world, which he characterized by his descriptions of the disastrous consequences of a world of popular culture where simulacra substitute the real. He showed that although the culture of simulacra seems to deny the possibility of a representation of reality, it still has a truth claim, and he begins by quoting Ecclesiastes as follows: "The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true".¹⁴ He shows that this truth claim also in the end implies an ontological claim to the real, and that simulacra inscribes itself as the more real in terms of the "hyperreal". Throughout the book, Baudrillard consistently follows the substitution of the real for the hyperreal, and the substitution of questions of mimesis in terms of imitation, representation and reflection for practices of substitution as such. He defines the culture of simulacra in the following:

"Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us – a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double strategy of deterrence."¹⁵

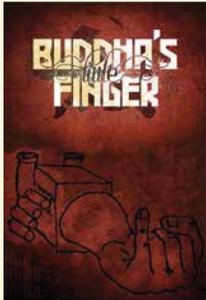
The culture of simulacra appears as a form of destruction, a nihilism that leads to the "desert of the real", where the real becomes an object of anxiety, consumption and production in an even more contingent relation between art and reality than in the case of realism. Simulacra is the place of the non-place, the

stage of the non-stage, the narrative of the non-narrative, the real of the non-real, as an object of strategies of deterrence. Nowhere can the real be found, and nowhere can it be avoided. It is everywhere in a "produced" form and therefore destructible; but there is also nothing but this production, no art and no aesthetic experience that is somehow other to the experience of produced reality. Further, there is no way that experience breaks in its projection of the world as myth and reality at the same time. And Baudrillard's doom is quite fateful in the final chapter entitled "Nihilism". He asserts that the world of simulacrum is the "circuit short-circuited by a monstrous finality".¹⁶

Although Deleuze and Baudrillard debated the notion of simulacra from different angles, both can nevertheless be situated in a discussion about the question of representation in popular culture, and in particular in virtual reality, where the real and the imaginary fuse. To begin with, Deleuze presents a certain apologia for popular culture in arguing that "the factitious", in other words, what is set on the real, "must be pushed to the point where it changes its nature and turns into a simulacrum (the moment of Pop Art)".¹⁷ Baudrillard, furthermore, as mentioned, is fundamentally critical of the consequences of popular culture while arguing for an understanding of the way that the simulacrum becomes a kind of fetishization of the real.¹⁸ These two standpoints are highly interesting in relation to Russian postmodernism as well as to Pelevin's attempt to understand the promises and failures of the post-Soviet world. On the one hand, post-Soviet culture offers itself as a break with a culture bound by a totalizing authoritative realist narrative based on a theory of truthful representation, and therefore as the beginning of a free "paralogical" play of phantasms.¹⁹ On the other hand, post-Soviet "reality" appears on the one hand as that world of medical science, and on the other, as merely a world of capitalist simulacra, an even more total and contingent "desert of the real", where the fetish "memory" of the Soviet past is but more virtually real and consumed as a private phantasy in the contemporary flux of empty signs, goods, desires, phantasms and fight for money. In his play with these phantasms, Pelevin in an ambiguous way uncovers how the world as simulacra only can work within a totality of simulation and myth, where the question of reality has been cancelled.

Buddha's Little Finger: a short description

The writer himself asserts that he posed himself the task of reconciling the irreconcilable, which largely means fusing incompatible cultural stereotypes. His work with the Chapaev myth in *Buddha's Little Finger* is not to be read as deconstruction, but rather as a form of ironic reconstruction of the myth. The novel presents a form of contemporary adaptation of the myth for the post-Soviet popular literary scene, where the heroic qualities of the anecdotal heroes are spiced with narcotic hallucinations and instructive dialogues on Buddhist forms of sublation of the conflicts of a world. Through the irony of the novel, it would seem that the problem with the Soviet myth was not that it was a myth, but that it was a myth of reality, which always had the form of a



Film poster from 2015. The author Viktor Pelevin.

narrative historical reality in accordance with official Soviet history. These myths were cumbersome, tiresome and static, and always told as a quasi-realistic story about the hero-people of the Soviet Union. Pelevin therefore departs from that myth in order to form an ironic contemporary popular representation of a historical super-hero story.

The main character of the novel is, as mentioned, called Pyotr Voyd in the English translation. Whether this Pyotr is something or just a void, filled and ridden by the flight of his phantasms, which in their turn are nurtured by narcotics, is ultimately difficult to say. As already mentioned, Pyotr Voyd is entirely convinced that he is a hero of the civil war, but the story he tells is utterly unrealistic and parodic. The reference to Chapaev owes as much to history, to Furmanov's novel or even to the 1934 film *Chapaev* by the Vasilev brothers, where the figure Petka appears, and to the endless jokes about Chapaev in Soviet culture,²⁰ but these references are at the most the skeleton on which the historical part is built. According to the Soviet myth, Pyotr and Chapaev are rather simple heroes of the people, and according to the anecdotes they are narrow-minded, but in the novel they are highly intellectual super-heroes who constantly engage in Buddhist and quasi-Buddhist nihilist disputes about the world, while feeding on alcohol and drugs. Pyotr is presented as a poet and representative of the literary avant-garde in St. Petersburg on the eve of the Revolution, and Chapaev a kind of natural genius and Buddhist master. We follow Pyotr's flight from Moscow to the provinces as he accompanies Chapaev in the civil war, but most of the significant events bear the mark of something unreal, since they either take place under the influence of narcotics, are told to him as forgotten due to an amnesia after a concussion, or bear the marks of surreal phantasms.

The world as reality and the distinctions between different myths and realities is constantly called into question in the philosophical discussions as well as in the narrative form. The play with reality as imagination is anchored in the first-person perspective, so that we constantly read the world as narrated through Petka's imagination. The movement between the worlds

is affected through certain "signs of the real", as Baudrillard defines simulacra. The torso of Aristotle in the clinic with which the fourth chapter ends appears in Chapaev's dream on awakening from unconsciousness after a battle, at the beginning of the fifth chapter. The fifth chapter ends with the cry: "Open the dynamo," and the sixth takes place close to the metro station Dynamo in contemporary Moscow. In a certain sense, the narrative of the historical myth is juxtaposed to the "reality" of the clinic and to the contemporary phantasms of some of the other patients interned at the hospital, where the main doctor Timur Timurovich attempts to cure them. Yet whereas Pyotr's phantasms present a relatively contingent pop version of Chapaev and Petka, the hallucinations of the other patients fuse reality with contemporary myths of super-heroes in American films and in Japanese culture. We therefore only really follow the process of recovery, or rather, the failed recovery of Pyotr. In the clinic, he is characterized as someone who refuses to acknowledge the new times, and therefore clings on to the old socialist realist narrative. According to the doctor, he belongs "to the very generation that was programmed for life in one socio-cultural paradigm, but has found itself living in a quite different one." (32) In other words, he seems to be a typical sovok, that is, a typical reminder of the Soviet period in the shape of someone who does not want to let go of the socialist past. However, as mentioned, as the novel proceeds, the refusal to let go of the mythical past begins to look like rather normal behavior. The other patients teach him that he must confess to, or at least pay lip service to, a belief in reality in order to get out of the hospital, although no one really does. The transgender patient Maria says:

"No," he said, peering through half-closed eyes at the bust of Aristotle, "if you want to get out of here some time, you have to read the newspapers and experience real feelings while you're doing it. And not start doubting the reality of the world. Under Soviet power we were surrounded by illusions. But now the world has become real and knowable. Understand?" (109)

None of the characters in the contemporary part of the novel, except perhaps for the doctor, experience "real feelings", and, as mentioned, the catharsis of the novel is based on the simultaneous recognition of the irreality of reality and of the reality of the unreal in terms of the total nothingness of the world as a void of and in imagination. What is more, Pelevin entertains an unresolved ambiguity in the way that the relation between Timur and Petka is portrayed. First, Timur wishes to cure Petka by an injection that will lead him to recognize himself in contemporary post-Soviet Russia, but the doctor eventually realizes the vanity of this attempt, and instead chooses to help the patient to intensify the experience of the past in order to reach a recognition of himself in the form of a psychological "catharsis". In the penultimate chapter, the doctor sends him back to the past, again with the help of drugs, and Pyotr indeed reaches this catharsis. He does so after a conversation with Chapaev, during which he realizes that "any form is a void" and that "the void is any form"

as an ecstatic and quasi-sublime fusion with the universe in the ironical form of the Ural river as the river of love at the end of the penultimate chapter. The mark of the success of this catharsis is that the two parallel story lines meet. Finally Timur is able to reach through Petka's dreams and appear to him in his imagination. In the conviction that he is cured by this catharsis, he sets him free, but when Pyotr leaves the hospital and enters the Moscow of the 1990s, he merely returns in his imagination to the beginning of the novel and repeats the same acts. The novel ends with the place and date "Kafka-Iurt, 1923–1925".

The fact that Pyotr preserves his belief is represented as an escape from the contemporary world, as a victory over Timur's limited idea of reality and as a mental illness. On the one hand, it seems that the writer seeks to instruct the reader into the same climax and insight as Petka, namely that there is no reality and therefore also no distinction between historical realities. On the other, the writer merely shows an ambiguity and a double feature of the "truth" of simulacra as a freedom in the void. Although Petka ascribes to himself a "peculiar flight of free thought" (103), he is caught in his own private phantasies.

Pustota, self and transcendence

Lipovetsky aptly characterized the novel as a "paradoxical *Bildungsroman*",²¹ which captures the greater part of the ambiguous structure of the novel, but I would like to expand further on the nature of this paradox because it is related to the problem of reality in the contemporary world. As mentioned, in the historical chapters, where Pyotr follows Chapaev to the Russian provinces in his fight in the civil war after having gone through Chapaev's lessons, and in his transcendent meeting with Baron Ungern, another figure on the borders between myth and reality, he reaches an insight into the world and the self, as well as into the self in the world, or into the world in the self, according to the scheme of *Bildungsroman*. In other words, the central catharsis and climax of the novel takes place in his phantasy of the 1920s and not in the alleged "reality" of the 1990s. This introduces an ambiguity to the catharsis and to the insight that he reaches. The issue at stake in the catharsis is related to the question of the reality of the self as established in the epigraph of the novel and the quote from Genghis Khan:

"Gazing at the faces of the horses and the people, at this boundless stream of life raised up by the power of my will and now hurtling into nowhere across the sunset-crimson steppe, I often think: where am I in this flux?" (VIII)

Throughout the novel, Pyotr continuously poses the question, "Where am I?" The answer that he must reach is given by his name. What Pyotr realizes, however, is that the "I" then only represents an empty entity, and it does not really matter what

or where this "I" is. In the final conversation that leads up to the final recognition, Chapaev and Pyotr discuss precisely the question of the self:

"Tell me, Chapaev, who are you in reality?"
 'Better tell yourself, Petka, who you are in reality. Then you'll understand all about me. But you just keep on repeating 'me, me, me', like that gangster in your nightmare. What does that mean – 'me'? What is it? Try taking a look for yourself' (157) [...]
 'How fascinating/ I whispered quietly, so am I/
 Then who is this?' he asked, pointing at me. 'Voyd/ I replied.'" (158)

In a play with words, Pelevin lets his main hero look for himself as a search for the void, and he constantly searches as much for the meaning of the void of the real as for the reality of the void in the world and in the self. What Pyotr recognizes in the moment of catharsis is himself or his self as a void, that is, as a non-entity and non-existence. This insight is the kind of Buddhist wisdom that Chapaev seeks to bestow on him, and, as a confirmation of this insight, Chapaev tells him a parable about "a clay machine-gun", a fable in which Buddha pointed with his finger so that the true nature of things was "instantly revealed" – they disappeared. In the recognition of himself and the world as void/void, Pyotr is finally able to enter the kitschy and ironic "Undefined River of Absolute Love" of the river Ural, which refers to one of the most famous and productive anecdotes about Chapaev and Petka. There he transcends the historical boundaries of the

world so that he suddenly appears able to embrace himself in his two different hypostases in the narrative. Thus, the all and the nothing seem to come together – the world is nothing, a void, and as a void, it can enhance and be all in that "boundless stream of life".

Interestingly enough, although Pelevin adheres to the *Bildungsroman* in the structure leading to this final insight, the fact that it ultimately leads to no "real" change in the narrative of the

mind of contemporary Pyotr is yet another way of making the reader wary as to whether the hero really has reached a qualitative insight or change that is the *sine qua non* of the modern formation novel. This novel aimed to portray how the awareness of the modern subject is formed in relation to historical and social reality. There, literary catharsis often took the form of "disillusionment" after the recognition of the delimitations of the individual, realizing that he was unable to construe an intelligible relation to a world of meaning, as Lukacs showed in in his pre-Marxist work *Theory of the Novel*.²² What takes place in *Buddha's Little Finger* is a kind of fusion of a literary and a psychological catharsis as Freud defined it in terms of the process of recalling a complex to conscious awareness. The catharsis means a personal liberation, staged by Timur Timurovich, but it ultimately

"WHAT TAKES PLACE IN BUDDHA'S LITTLE FINGER IS A KIND OF FUSION OF A LITERARY AND A PSYCHOLOGICAL CATHARSIS."

leads merely to an insight into the pointlessness of establishing an intelligible relation to the world.

In spite of all the irony, the question of whether this insight really can be qualified as an insight in the self and in the world still seems to be of certain importance. Like the style of Nabokov, to whom the characters in the novel refer several times, Pelevin leaves the question open as to whether the escape from the world as reality is a defeat or a victory. Pyotr flees from reality to the imaginary because he has realized the ultimate sublation or *Aufhebung* of the opposition between reality and imaginary, of the self and the world.²³ Yet at the same time as he overcomes the oppositions of time, place, the world and being, in realizing himself as being nothing, or being the void, he transcends, or rather escapes to a beyond where he is unable to recognize the features of the contemporary world. There is no self, and everything is the self, the novel suggests to us. The novel ends with the image of a Pyotr completely encapsulated in his own imaginary past and without any recognition of the contemporary world, which, on the other hand, is a reality to which no phantasms seem to give any access.

The world as a void, and the void of the post-Soviet world

Since the ambiguous escape from the contemporary world is an escape into the historical past, Pelevin seems indeed to conform to the double nature of the “inverted stëb”. On the one hand, Pelevin makes complete fun of the Chapaev myth in its socialist realist version and aligns the Soviet myth with the popular narratives of the contemporary world, which are equally absurd, private and filled with kitschy clichés, as for instance in the case of the transgender character Maria who dreams about Arnold Schwarzenegger. Yet, at the same time, he enhances the myth and seems to advocate a return to the imaginary or to the paradoxical past illusion of the past. It is indeed in the Soviet past that Pyotr can find the transcendent stage and refuge of his imagination, and consequently also the stage of his experience of transcendence. The joke, or inverted joke, is in other words less an expression of his relation to the symbol itself than to his relation to the contemporary world where the symbol lives on beyond recognition.

Thus, through his postmodernist poetics of simulacra, Pelevin poses in an ambiguous and paradoxical way the question of how the postmodern world can feed on totalizing myths that it allegedly has freed itself from. The question thus arises to what extent the imaginary, which is the realm where the world of simulacra can have its free flight, is conditioned by being an image or an imitation of a “reality” that it has ceased to communicate with. Thereby Pelevin without any direct or indirect reference confirms the problem that Baudrillard identified in the relation between cinema and reality, namely that it (cinema) “is fascinated by itself as a lost object as much as it (and we) are fascinated by the real as a lost referent”.²⁴ In the postmodern aesthetics of Pelevin, the myth of the revolutionary hero as historical reality reappears in an aesthetics that negates that history as reality. What is more, in the way that the novel dwells on the ad-

aptation of the Soviet myth, contemporary Moscow appears as a “desert of the real” from which only flights of (narcotic) imagination can be made. The real of the contemporary world becomes the destitute place of man’s private fantasies. The style of “the inverted stëb” is thus sustained by the fact that the distinction between real and imaginary, inner and outer, is paradoxically both maintained and eradicated. Thus the conflict of man’s being in the world, which was crucial for the modern formation novel, remains not only unresolved, but also deterred, because it does not matter what is real and unreal. In the end, at the same time as the novel was to be the “final cure for what is known as ‘the inner life’”, it tells nothing but the story of inner life, taking place, as Pelevin asserts in “the monasteries of Inner Mongolia”. In other words, in the contemporary world Pyotr resigns from generalizing about himself and his inner life can be redeemed only through the free flight into private phantasms, but this matters to no one but himself.

Conclusion

The question of the Soviet legacy in *Buddha’s Little Finger* is not treated as a question of engagement with history or the narrative of history in the form of confirmation or deconstruction of the Soviet myth. The myth is explored simply for the sake of its potential to be retold in the mode of a historical and intelligent super-hero narrative of the 1990s. In the midst of the phantasmagoric play with imaginations of reality conveyed through *mise-en-abyme* devices, discussions and demonstrations of Buddhist philosophy, references to popular culture and anecdotes, Pelevin shows how the main character at the same time maintains and abandons the Soviet legacy in the idea that his myth of the world is the world, and that reality is a non-entity. In this way he illustrates to us how the Soviet myths continue to live on in the form of attractive grand narratives in a post-Soviet divide between real phantasmagorical nightmares and what appears as an unattainable “reality” of facts. ■

Tora Lane, PhD in Russian literature and associate professor in Comparative Literature and acting Research Leader at CBEES, Södertörn University.

references

- In this article, in accordance with the guidelines of the journal, I refer primarily to the English text, and I have chosen the American version of the English translation: Victor Pelevin, *Buddha’s Little Finger* transl. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Penguin Books, 1999). Henceforth I will refer to page number only.
- Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 14.
- With the narrative distinction between the biblical time of Christ, rendered through the serious and cumbersome reflections of Pontius Pilate, and the grotesque reality of the Soviet times rendered in a satiric and phantasmagoric absurd style in the novel, the religious world appears as the more real historically in the novel. The convergence of these (r)realities on a transcendent level in the realm of Woland and Christ only seems to confirm the initial impression that time in the Soviet Union of the 1920s was helplessly out of joint and beginning to behave in accordance to the utterly unreal principles of dialectic materialism, claiming to be realistic.
- Olga Bogdanova et al. *Literaturnyye Strategii Viktora Pelevina* (St. Petersburg: Petropolis, 2008), 134–160.
- In *The Total Art of Stalinism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), Boris Groys quotes the symbolist poet Andrey Bely, who asserted that “the victory of materialism in Russia resulted in the disappearance of all matter” (20) when arguing that the myths of the avant-garde resulted in the “aesthetic dictatorship” of Stalinism.
- For a discussion of the Buddhist theme, Meghan Vicks “Victor Pelevin’s Void and the Post-Soviet Condition” in *Narratives of Nothing in 20th-Century Literature*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015) 161.
- The notion of “inverted stëb” is a development of the notion of ‘stëb’, a slang term for an ironic form of making fun at something, with which Yurchak defined the “aesthetics of the absurd” of the culture of late socialism. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 250.
- Rosalind Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia*, 1991–2006, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).
- Ibid, 300.
- The distinction between a modernist culture, where the real was at stake, and a postmodernist culture of simulacra, seems to be most apparent in relation to Soviet and post-Soviet culture. Evidently, socialist realism generated myths or narratives about the force of the people and its heroes in relation to history, and as these myths were denounced what was left was their representation in popular culture and an ironical disbelief. Yet several scholars argue for the contingency between Soviet culture and post-Soviet culture in terms of seeing socialist realism as a “production of reality” just like postmodern aesthetics. As mentioned, according to Mikhail Epstein, socialist realism was a kind of postmodernist aesthetics of simulation avant la lettre, and there were two postmodernisms in Russian history – one that arose in the 1930s with the establishment of socialist realism, and the other in the 1960s with the reaction towards the outmoded official discourse of Soviet culture in, for instance, Moscow conceptualism. The difference between them is allegedly that the first postmodernism is heroic and the second ironic. The first has a truth claim and tells the mythical narrative of the socialist’s engagement in reality, whereas the second paradoxically abandons any claim to reference reality, and yet in this seems to preserve a certain truthful relation to the dynamics of reality and imagination. Mikhail Epstein, “The Origins and Meaning of Russian Post-Modernism” in *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) 188–210.
- Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernism: Dialogue with Chaos*, ed. Eliot Borenstein (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 12.
- Gilles Deleuze, “Plato and the Simulacrum” in *October*, vol. 27, (Winter, 1983), 45–56. An excerpt from *Logique du Sens* translated by Rosalind Krauss, 45.
- Ibid.
- Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor, (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.
- Ibid, 7.
- Ibid, 161.
- Gilles Deleuze, “Plato and the Simulacrum”, 56.
- In a way, as has been argued, Deleuze’s defense of simulacra and pop art can be read as a token of him being the “ideologist of late capitalism” as Zizek asserted in *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 84, whereas Baudrillard attempts to understand to what extent capitalism preserves and fetishizes production and the real at the same time as it extinguishes the difference between production and the real.
- Mark Lipovetsky, *Paralogii. Transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v kulture 1920–2000-x godov* (Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008) XXV.
- Gerald McCausland, “Viktor Pelevin and the End of Sots-Art” in *Endquotes. Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, eds. Marina Balina et al., Evanston, Ill (Northwestern University Press, 2000), 231.
- Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernism: Dialogue with Chaos*, 197.
- George Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel*, transl. by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971).
- Aleksandr Genis, “Borders and Metamorphoses: Viktor Pelevin in the Context of Post-Soviet Literature” in *Russian Postmodernism. New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, ed. and transl. by Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover (New York – Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 215.
- Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 48.