local factory (Lenin again was at issue), and retires to bed in frustration at the futility of writing. (She does not mention that she was, at the time, working as an informer for the Stasi, and one wonders what else went unsaid, perhaps even unthought.) On the final September 27, 2011, she observes from her hospital bed the nurses around her and the recent elections to the city parliament of a long-reunited Berlin.

In between these extreme states of empowerment and helplessness (she calls it “Kinderstatus”) lies September 27, 1989, a day when one world was ending and another seemed possible, when amid flows of refugees across newly opened borders the very dialectic of history jutted into view. The Wolfs spend the day with guests from the West. They imagine “a polity that would not proceed from an abstract rational idea, nor from general principles, and simply lead back to a bureaucracy again, but a state that establishes a working relationship between the individuals on the basis of concepts and situations, one that does not subordinate itself to any overriding principle — be it called world reason or progress — but to the well-understood needs of the individual.” What they imagine — what at this moment again failed to come to pass and what remains barely discernable through the world’s rifts and wounds — is everyday socialism.

Conclusion
Conceived as a snapshot of socialism in its global becoming, The Day of the World inadvertently framed the impossibility of ever representing socialism as a fixed reality. Like the landscape outside one’s train window, socialism is always emerging and disappearing from view. For Gorky and other establishment writers, socialism was about planning and activity. It was about publicity and standardized, instrumentalized time. But their desire for realism opened the door to contingency and negativity, for their dramaturgy was not about the project taking root in human hosts. It is this aspect of the book — the contingency celebrated by Mikhail Kol’tsov and W. E. B. Du Bois, and the intimate self-examination of Mikhail Prishvin and Christa Wolf — that makes it not only a historical curioity, but also an event still addressed to our future.

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Mickey Mouse – the perfect tenant of an early Soviet city
by Irina Seits

Abstract
The article provides a closer reading of Walter Benjamin’s essays Experience and Poverty and Moscow, by juxtaposing the records of his visit to Russia in 1926–1927 with the author’s reflections on the nature of the transformations in the urban space of an early Soviet city by using the dystopian image of Mickey Mouse as the desired inhabitant of modernity introduced by Benjamin in Experience and Poverty. Seits gives the allegorical and comparative interpretation to the substantial changes in the living spaces of Moscow that were witnessed by Walter Benjamin.

Key Words: Russian Revolution, Walter Benjamin, Avant-garde, urban space, Russian constructivism, Moscow, Mickey Mouse.

Introduction. Dystopian image of the greatest babe of modernity
The first decade after the Bolshevick Revolution marked a huge transformation of the living space of the ruined Russian Empire. The revolution opened that space for re-appropriation, to put it in Lefebvre’s terms. It became a ground for experiments, a huge laboratory table, as it was called by Walter Benjamin when he visited Moscow in the late 1920s, where major functionalist utopias were given a chance only to vanish in the bloody storm of the upcoming age of Stalinism. The 1920s became the period when most of the illusions born and cherished in the
past hundred years of technological progress were lost. Avant-garde architecture declared itself the main apologist for technological progress and set high goals to form and frame the new society, to raise new men and to shape the future. Many world-renowned architects, writers, and thinkers came to the young Soviet Russia to explore the huge construction site on which the socialist dream was being built. They brought their illusions, only to bury them in the sand where the Revolution had won, but the future was already lost.

Walter Benjamin was one of those who visited Moscow in that unique age when faith in revolution was still alive among those who perceived it from beyond the borders where it held power. For nearly two years, Benjamin himself contemplated joining the German Communist Party. Yet as G. Scholem noted in his preface to Moscow Diary, “the pros and cons of the matter would eventually lead him to decide against it.” Upon his arrival in Moscow, Benjamin discovered that the revolution was already lost, the moment of commitment to it had already passed and been replaced with the struggle or “dilogging” for power “from morning till late.” However, his disappointment was not the decisive factor that made him retreat from his earlier political projects. As Bernd Witte wrote in his biography of Benjamin, the step of joining the Communist Party “would ultimately have been as contradictory to his fundamental decision in favor of existential independence and spiritual responsibility as the professional function. The announcement of his political projects can thus be viewed only as an expression of Benjamin’s deep personal despair.”

The diary that Benjamin kept while in Moscow and the fall and winter of 1926–27 formed the basis for his essay Moscow that includes fragments devoted to his impressions of the city as a spatial and urban phenomenon. Benjamin’s living experience in the center of Soviet power became a magnifying glass through which the future of modernity could be seen.

A few years later, in 1932, he wrote a famous essay, Experience and Poverty, where modern man and his architectural space receive a profound critique and analysis through the concept of the new barbarism and the impoverishment of experience. A small episode in that text is given to the allegory of a new Disney character – Mickey Mouse, the very popular and successful child of modernity and the greatest barbarian of the time, “born” in 1928. Though only a few lines are given to Mickey Mouse in Benjamin’s texts, they deliberately outline the image of the successful inhabitant of modernity. The desire for liberation from experience and tiredness are the hallmarks of modernity, and in the sleep that comes as a remedy for tiredness the dream image of the Mickey Mouse is born:

“Tiredness is followed by sleep, and then it is uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day – a dream that shows us in its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality. The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for contemporary man. His life is full of miracles – miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology but make fun of them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been invented out of the body of Mickey Mouse, out of his supporters and persecutors, and out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from trees, clouds and the sea. Nature and technology, primitive-ness and comfort, have completely merged. And to people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanished point on an endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on the tree becomes round as quickly as a hot-air balloon. And now we need to step back and keep our distance.”

WHEN IT COMES to analyzing how living space in Soviet Russia was transformed in the first post-revolutionary decades, the image of Mickey Mouse, seen through the dystopian perspective as a “de-humanized” and hyper-realistic character, may serve as an allegory that reveals those transformations imposed upon the inhabitants of the new Soviet reality.

Due to the format and size of the present article, I cannot introduce deep analyses of the histori-ography of Soviet modernity in order to approach the discussion via the legiti-macy of strict divisions between Soviet, Western and/or American modernities in any comprehensible way. I can only note that I see the Soviet experiment as one of the inevitable manifestations of modernity. In this essay I take the visual image of Mickey Mouse that is widely known throughout the 20th century as an allegorical and metaphorical recon-struction of what the inhabitants of the early Soviet space went through under those radical transformations that followed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Without going into the genealogy and history of Mickey Mouse’s existence in the world of car-toons, I refer to the reflections on his image in Benjamin’s Experi-ence and Poverty quoted above as well as to the short fragment Mickey Mouse from Benjamin’s talk with Gustav Glück and Kurt Weill that follows below:

“Property relations in Mickey Mouse cartoons: here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one’s arm, even one’s own body stolen. The route taken by Mickey Mouse is more like that of a file in an office than that of a marathon runner.

“Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being.”

In these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization. Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being. He disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind. These films disavow experience more radically than ever before. As such a world, it is not worthwhile to have experiences. Similarity to fairy tales. Not since fairy tales have the most vital events been evolved more unsymbolically and more unatmospherically. There is an incomprehen-sible gulf between them and Maeterlinck or Mary Wig-man. All Mickey Mouse films are founded on the motif of leaving home in order to learn what fear is. So the explanation of the huge popularity of these films is not mechanization, nor their form; nor is it a misun-derstanding, it is simply the fact that the public recognizes its own life in them.”

I TAKE MICKEY MOUSE’S image to reflect on the nature and gen-esis of re-formulations and re-appropriations of living space that were taking place in Russia in order to reflect not only on Rus-sian history at the time, but on the destiny of modernity per-se. Observing the realities of life in Moscow, Benjamin refers to the “new optics as the most undoubted gain from a stay in Russia.” European modernity becomes more visible and comprehensible after experiencing the Russian capital: “More quickly than Moscow itself, one learns to see Berlin through Moscow.”

In this essay, I explain my own speculation on the image of Mickey Mouse taken as an allegorical object through which the collective image of the early Soviet citizen who was experienc-ing a radical transformation of her living space in all aspects and on all levels is reconstructed. There is no reference to Mickey Mouse in Benjamin’s texts related to his stay in the Soviet Union, yet there was never a reference to Russia in Mickey’s ep-isodes until very recently.

The crisis of the communicability of experience, one of the features of modernity that Benjamin criticized, was intensified in Soviet Russia to the level of exhaustion through the Revolution and all those transformations that followed and made Russia divorce itself from its past and the future it would otherwise have faced. The immediacy of the ever-changing present, the continu-ity of the transformations and mobilization of all the potential derived from the barbaric power of the newly established state, could be paralleled with the animated milieu of the Mickey Mouse character that undergoes a dehumanizing process from one episode to episode. The endless re-formulations of social, political, cultural and technological orders and norms in early Soviet Rus-sia required superhuman skills of adjustability from the citizens of the new country. And in this sense, Benjamin’s proposal that in the Mickey Mouse films “mankind makes preparations to survive civilization” – the episodes of Mickey’s adventures that demonstrate the endless abilities of his body to deal with reality could be suggested as the manual to survive the Revolution. Mickey Mouse was the allegory of a real animal, the perfect functional model of the living creature placed in a world that was drawn by a brilliant Hollywood dreamer and aired in the world. Stalin personally welcomed Mickey to be widely broadcast in the Soviet Union af-ter watching the “Band Concert” episode of 1935 with Mickey as a conductor. The image of the Mouse also inspired Stalin to issue a decree that became the foundation for Soyuzdetmultfilm, the state animated studio that was renamed Soyuzmultfilm in 1937 and was known to all generations of Soviet kids.

In the long run, Mickey Mouse’s dream world, his living space, had consequenc-es that were far less catastrophic but similarly powerful to those that the inhabitants of new world built by the dreamer in the Kremli had to deal with for over 70 years. The most monstrous features of modernity were concentrated in the USSR, while the personage that could have survived them with no loss to his per-

Mickey Mouse model sheet by Al Tabakino, 1930s.
Color schemes for the new residential block (2/1massive) in Leningrad, 1927.
sonality was designed and animated across the ocean. In this article, the habitat of Soviet modernity is compared to the animated habitat of Mickey’s living space, which is the space of modernity, through the critique given by Benjamin in the texts mentioned above. The inhabitant of modernity is inevitably subject to a dehumanization process because the divorce from experience and dehumanization are necessary conditions to “survive civilization”: “Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being. He disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind”.

Dehumanization of living space in the post-revolutionary decade in Russia was achieved through the constructivists’ architectural experiments with new forms of spatial organization and production of new forms of living space. The very first step taken by constructivists was to eliminate the division of living space into private and public sectors. The deconstruction of the conventional forms of living space and abolition of any reference to privacy from the state policy of nationalizing all private property from factories to homes to the negation of anything private in everyday living – intended not only to alter property relations in the young communist state, but to change the very nature of its citizens who were forced to transform from traditional farmers and workers into men of the future.

One of the first steps taken by the constructivists was the distribution of private living practices between the newly developed types of public spaces, as realized in the avant-garde concept of zhilomozes – housing estates that provided tenants with all necessary infrastructure and conditions for living within the immediate vicinity of their major employment site, e.g. a factory. For each intimate living practice that was traditionally realized in private homes, such as meals or bathing rooms, a special new type of building was developed – a factory kitchen and a collective banya (bathhouse) respectively. The difference between the new spaces and traditional Russian canteens or banyas was that the new building types were designed not to give an alternative to private meals or bathing at home, but to substitute and replace completely those spaces in conventional homes that were traditionally given to the kitchen and bathroom. The spaces of kitchens, dining rooms, bathrooms and banyas were transferred from private homes to the public sector with the aim of rationalizing the living practices of the new state citizens, liberating them from the need to provide themselves with daily meals and hygienic care of their bodies. Thus control over the most intimate spheres of life was taken away from the people and given over to the outer infrastructure designed by the constructivists and operated by the state.

In the most radical versions of the living quarters, dom-kommunas (communal houses) and obschezhities (collective houses), even the act of sleeping was turned into a collective practice as many people unrelated by family were allocated to the same sleeping space. Otherwise, the act of sleeping could preserve its intimate character, but private living space was limited to little more than a bed and a nai on the wall. The idea behind the displacement of intimate living practices from private homes to publicly operated institutions was to ease everyday routines and liberate, first of all, women from the need to run the household. War on the dirty kitchen was declared to enable women to explore their talents and social potential; it was a step towards the formation of a new human free of the ties to her kitchen and open to comprehension of the most progressive ideas that modernity had to offer. Yet the state’s aim in enforcing those reorganizations was not only to take care of everyday routines; collectivization of private space was propagated as one of the major means of social and political control over citizens.

Benjamin predicts and explains the destiny of functionalism through analyses of modernity, whose inhabitants had to sever themselves from their previous experiences in order to survive. In the Soviet case, living under constant surveillance was completely different from living under the control of a traditional large family and community, requiring destruction of the notion of the traditional family, home, community and, on a larger scale, of the whole organization of a village or a town. The inhabitants of the newly living space had to change not only the way they lived but organized their traditional and experienced lives of living that they inherited from their ancestors. They had to be reborn into the newly produced living space.

The world of Mickey Mouse is an ever-changing world where anything can happen at any moment while his body is adjustable to any circumstances. Mickey’s body does not belong to him, he is not born with it – it is drawn by the artists who let his joints to be replaced completely; so Mickey is a unit, a vessel for endless improvisations by the state. While staying in Moscow, Benjamin notes – “here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one’s own arm, even one’s own body, stolen”. The displacement and replacement in this case is reduced to the migration of organs and joints within the space of one’s own body.

Mickey Mouse’s body is not subject to it; it is not connected from time and is entirely restricted to the contemporaneity of his performance. Time and experience do not leave traces on his body; Mickey does not have to learn from experience and does not need to collect it because he receives new tools for dealing with circumstances as immediate gifts from his designers, fully dependent on their imagination. He is a unit, a vessel for endless improvisations by the state. Mickey Mouse is the most attractive feature of his body’s ability to transform constantly in order to overcome the fearful challenges that he faces from episode to episode. The prewar decades in the early Soviet state could have been the cradle prepared for the birth of Mickey Mouse – the greatest barbarian of modernity. The allegory of Mickey Mouse suggested by Benjamin is relevant not only to the description of the space of modernity, but to Soviet living space and to the collective portrait of its inhabitants as well.

The displacement and replacement in this case is reduced to the migration of organs and joints within the space of one’s own body. Mickey Mouse does not possess anything. The living environment that surrounds him, the landscape, the buildings and his friends are under the control of his creators. The deprivation continues even further; Mickey is deprived of control of his own body as its parts can be easily stolen. In Soviet Russia it was the state that took control over the living environment of its residents, and later, through the system of replacement of organs of their bodies and lives. In the case of Mickey Mouse, the deprivation of control and ownership over his own body is compensated with immortality and adjustability because the divorce from experience and poverty heals immediately leaving no scar. Such immortality and adjustability were often necessary to survive in the interwar period of history. Mickey Mouse’s body is not subject to it; it is not connected from time and is entirely restricted to the contemporaneity of his performance. Time and experience do not leave traces on his body; Mickey does not have to learn from experience and does not need to collect it because he receives new tools for dealing with circumstances as immediate gifts from his designers, fully dependent on their imagination. He is a unit, a vessel for endless improvisations by the state. While staying in Moscow, Benjamin notes that “each thought, each day, each life lies here as on a laboratory table”. If in Experience and Poverty Benjamin suggests the image of the all-mighty Mickey as a dream solution for the “endless complications of everyday living” that could bring
comfort to the life of exhausted inhabitants, then in the dystopian case of Soviet reality, Mickey’s superhuman abilities were the means of, and conditions for, survival.

Mickey does not look like a real mouse. He possesses some likeness to that animal, but all parts of his body are stylized and simplified to such a degree that they form a creature that can be immediately and definitely identified with a mouse. One of the best known “portraits” in the cartoon industry is the shadowed image of Mickey, which is simply the three black circles — the most naturalized formula of the twentieth century’s most functional personality.

The new barbarism of the old Moscow for Mickey’s home

In the latest version of the educational series The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, on air since May 2006, Mickey and his company help children to learn through the assistance of so-called “Mousements”. Each time the show begins, Mickey’s whole living space grows from scratch. Mickey appears on the scene from nowhere and points to an open empty green lawn with trees, which, if we apply Lefebvre’s theory again, serves as the natural space. Mickey encourages kids to say the words of a magic spell to make the club appear. This way the construction of the natural space begins, and all elements of the club rise from the ground. As mentioned before, Mickey’s story does not have a beginning and end. Even though his appearance changes, Mickey does not mature or develop in any way throughout his 80-year existence. He gets no family or kids, establishes no sustainable home, and we know nothing either of the times when he lives, or of his native city. We can assume that his homeland is the United States and his mother tongue is English, but at the same this does not have any influence on his personality, which is deprived of any visualization of a specific national identity, e.g., through his living environment, clothing, etc. It is obvious that Mickey is a child of the Western world, but he loses even the English language — the only definite feature of his identity — when the episodes are translated to other languages. He talks the same way to all the people in the world in their mother tongues. Thus any episode from the late 1920s up to the most recent ones can be used as an allegorical fragment applicable to any episode of the past and present centuries. The image of Mickey Mouse can be re-interpreted without necessary reference to the particular time when an episode was produced, according to jarho Kang, author of Walter Benjamin and the Media (2006). Other features of the new barbarism of the old Moscow that affected all spheres of life were mobility and transition. Life itself lost the constancy of everyday routine because there was no “everyday” anymore; each day became a unique temporal unit filled with new unprecedented changes, Mickey does not mature or develop in any way throughout his 80-year existence. He gets no family or kids, establishes no sustainable home, and we know nothing either of their past; when the club disappears to nowhere, they disappear together with their childhood stage. Each time a new episode begins, they are pure barbarians again.

Experience and Poverty Benjamin refers to the houses where Scheerbart’s people live: “When the first movable dwellings were constructed they did not have windows or doors, and the dwellers themselves had no means of entry or exit. The door was made to move with the house”. The new barbarism of the old Moscow was replaced by camping. The temporariness of living conditions in rehabilitated barracks, newly-built covered dwellings of the kind since built by Loos and Le Corbusier”. Those machines for living possessed “the greatest value” for Scheerbart and practicing architects of the time. Their greatest value was that they gave the inhabitants no chance to leave traces of their presence. The movable glass houses and their Mickey Mouse tenants were equal to each other. They did not influence each other, leaving no marks on each other’s bodies. They could disappear together all at once, and nothing would change. Every time the new reality was built up, it was to be immediately appropriated for the new movable dwellings. As the people and buildings moved on, they both disappeared from the former place of dislocation, leaving no traces of their existence. Being rootless, and leaving no memories along, they could easily be replaced. The living space, the architecture that filled it, and its inhabitants became interchangeable; humans could be replaced with numbers and records, as later happened in Stalin’s Gulag.

Benjamin sees that “in Moscow goods burst everywhere from the houses”; they are sold in the streets, carried along, lie in the snow. At the beginning, Russian constructivists supported and praised that fullness. The streets were decorated with pro-pagandist posters that covered the ads of the defeated Empire; the façades of the churches were hidden behind huge portraits of Lenin and Stalin. The old was covered with the new, giving up the traces of its princely past to the barbaric abundance of the present.

The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse.

As the snow covered the streets of Moscow, the burst of the new poverty covered the luxury of the disappearing city. Princesses passing along the streets in the fancy equipages were replaced with peasant women standing along the roads, selling toys and fruit. Sleighs had squared out coaches. The visible wealth of aristocracy was replaced with the business of poverty, cheap trade, and symbols of babbity sticking out of the windows.

Benjamin calls this Moscow that was revealing its new population’s peasant origin a “gigantic village”. He described the objects of childhood sold on the streets, such as toys and fruit, fascinated by the naïve colorfulness of the flea markets. The city was returning to its pre urban “childhood state”: “the instant you arrive, the childhood stage begins”. One should learn to walk anew to proceed through the streets, to learn to see Moscow in order to comprehend its colors that “converge primitively here, at the center of Russian power”. One has to come without the aim of deciding on the basis of facts because there is no basis in facts. If he is not a child, which is equal to being a barbarian, he has to choose his standpoint in advance or he has to divorce himself from his previous experience and learn to live, walk, see, hear, and grasp anew.

The construction of communal space was neither the main goal of constructivist architecture, nor the model of the ideal city, but it was rather the transitional state of society that was fixed in the constructivists’ works. The main question was the direction and final destination of that transition. These ideas of a new barbarism of the old Moscow that had to move forward into the future, yet in practice that could be also a movement in the opposite direction.

In the section on Benjamin in Hilde Heynen’s book Architecture and the City, they describe the new living space that replaced the “security and inclusion” of traditional homes as “openness and transparency”. “Benjamin sees the dwelling space as reduced for “living by hotel rooms, for the dead by crematoria””. The living space shrank compared to the bourgeois era, giving the inhabitants no possibility of leaving traces of their presence. Humans could not be transformed into the modernist living space made of glass. The impossibility of inscribing the fact of existence into modernist architecture and the avant-gardist striving to clear space of any randomness and any traces of time carries revolutionary potential for “public openness, transparency, and permeability as conditions of everyday life.”

Mickey Mouse, the migrant

Other features of the new living space that affected all spheres of life were mobility and transition. Life itself lost the constancy of everyday routine because there was no “everyday” anymore, each day became a unique temporal unit filled with new unpredictable experiences. Benjamin recorded that “for each citizen of Moscow the days are full to the brim.” Dwelers were turned into migrants as their homes lost sustainability and were transformed into camps through constant change. Living was being replaced by camping. The temporariness of living conditions in rehabilitated barracks, newly-built dom-kommunas and
The material basis of his existence is so slender that he is prepared, year in, year out, to decamp. He would not otherwise be a match of this life."

The absurdity, uniqueness and untranslatability of the mostly uncustomized human body was much more vividly in theoretical studies that were widely published in various forms, from academic articles and monographs to reports in mass newspapers, project presentations and manifestos. Avant-garde aesthetics dominated the artistic graphs to reports in mass newspapers, project presentations and manifestos. It was the time when the architectural avant-garde expressed itself much more vividly in theoretical studies that were widely published in various forms, from academic articles and monographs to reports in mass newspapers, project presentations and manifestos. Avant-garde aesthetics dominated the artistic graphs to reports in mass newspapers, project presentations and manifestos. It was the time when the architectural avant-garde expressed itself much more vividly in theoretical studies that were widely published in various forms, from academic articles and monographs to reports in mass newspapers, project presentations and manifestos. Avant-garde aesthetics dominated the artistic...
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. Inria Seits, PhD candidate in aesthetics at Södertörn University.

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3 Ibid., 26.
7 Ibid., 275.
9 Benjamin, W., “Moscow”, 22.
10 Ibid.
11 Here I mean the episode Mickey Mouse in the Danceadiya that was introduced in February 2015, which I will discuss further in this article.
12 Benjamin, W., “Mickey Mouse”, 545.
13 H. Wells called Lenin a “dreamer in the Kremlin” after his meeting with the Communist leader in Moscow in 1920.
14 Benjamin, W., “Mickey Mouse”, 545.
15 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 explores 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: 138), which was required by Soviet ideology and without which the ideas of social reform “completely lose their meaning” (Lefebvre, 1974/1991: 138). 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.
16 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 5 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.
17 Benjamin, W., “Mickey Mouse”, 545.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 275.
20 Benjamin, W., “Experience and Poverty”, 735.
22 Benjamin, W., “Experience and Poverty”, 735.
24 Paul Schoenherz (1865–1917) was a German thinker, poet and writer of fantastic novels, and the author of the cult book *Glasnostarchitektur* (1914), a treatise on the glass architecture inspired by the works by Bruno Taut.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 275.
28 Benjamin, W., “Moscow”, 23.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 22.
32 Ibid., 24.
33 Ibid., 22.
34 Ibid., 22.
36 Citation from “Das Passegenoekke” (1921) in *Architectuur en Moderniteit, 60*.
38 Benjamin, W., “Mickey Mouse”, 33.
39 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).
40 Benjamin, W., “Moscow”, 29.
41 Benjamin, W., “Experience and Poverty”, 735.
42 Ibid., 275.
43 Ibid., 732.
44 Citation in Heynen, Architecture and Modernity, 101.
45 Benjamin, W., “Moscow”, 28.
46 Ibid., 29.

abstract

In his contribution to the volume *Russian Literature since 1991* entitled “The Postmodernist Novel”, Mikhail 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 *Buddha’s Little Finger* (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’s able to parodie 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.

**The inverted myth**

Viktor Pelevin’s *Buddha’s Little Finger* by Tor Dlane

There is a structural similarity between Viktor Pelevin’s 1996 *Buddha’s Little Finger* ([US title: *The Clay Machine-Gun*] and Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*. 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” the reality that it aimed to form. In *Buddha’s Little Finger* we meet instead an image of the alterlife and legacy of a myth of Soviet history, where the satirical imagined historical past is correlated by a shattered, mythologizing and insane