

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.”³¹ 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

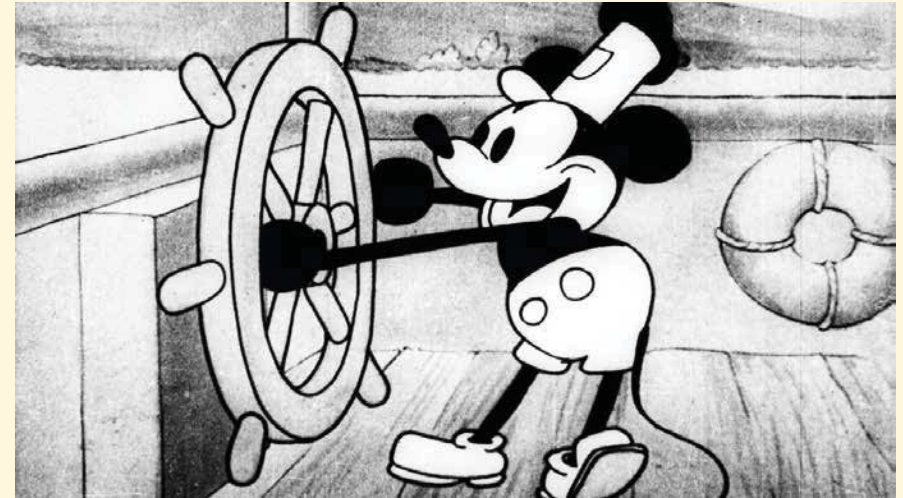
Conceived as a snapshot of socialism in its global becoming, *The Day of the World* inadvertently framed the impossibility of ever representing socialism as a fixed reality. Like the landscape outside one’s train window, socialism is always emerging and disappearing from view. For Gorky and other establishment 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 descriptions of the imaginative spaces where socialism might be felt as desire and contemplated as a possibility, as an intimate landscape through which the human observer moves, rather than a world-historical 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 curiosity, 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 space 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 Bolshevik 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 Benjamin¹ 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 faith in 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 land 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”.² 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 “digging” for power “from morning till late”.³ 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 read only as an expression of Benjamin’s deep personal despair”.⁴

The diary that Benjamin kept while in Moscow in the fall and winter of 1926–27 became the basis for his essay *Moscow*⁵ that included the extracts 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 observed.

A few years later, in 1932, he wrote a famous essay, *Experience and Poverty*⁶, where modernity and its 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 not uncommon for a dream to make up for the sadness and discouragement of the day – a dream that shows us in

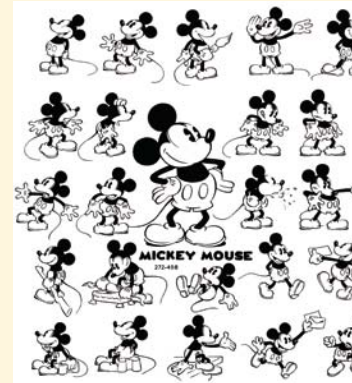
its realized form the simple but magnificent existence for which the energy is lacking in reality. The existence of Mickey Mouse is such a dream for contemporary man. His life is full of miracles – miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology but make fun of them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been improvised 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, primitiveness 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 distanced vanishing 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”.⁷

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 “dehumanized” and hyper-realistic character, may serve as an allegory that reveals the nature of 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 historiography of Soviet modernity in order to approach the discussion via the legitimacy 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 reconstruction 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 cartoons, I refer to the reflections on his image in Benjamin’s *Experience 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 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.

“Property relations in Mickey Mouse cartoons: here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one 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 model sheet by Al Taliaferro, 1930s.



Color schemes for the new residential block (*Zhilmassive*) in Leningrad, 1927.

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. In such a world, it is not worthwhile to have experiences.

Similarity to fairy tales. Not since fairy tales have the most vital events been evoked more unsymbolically and more unatmospherically. There is an immeasurable gulf between them and Maeterlinck or Mary Wigman. 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 misunderstanding. It is simply the fact that the public recognizes its own life in them.”⁸

I TAKE MICKEY MOUSE’S image to reflect on the nature and genesis of reformations and re-appropriations of living space that were taking place in Russia in order to reflect not only on Russian 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”.⁹ European modernity becomes more visible and comprehensible after experiencing the Russian capital: “More quickly than Moscow itself, one learns to see Berlin through Moscow.”¹⁰

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 experiencing 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;

likewise, there was never a reference to Russia in Mickey’s episodes until very recently.¹¹

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 continuity 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 episode to episode. The endless reformations of social, political, cultural and technological orders and norms in early Soviet Russia 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”,¹² 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 movie theaters and on TV screens around the world. Stalin personally welcomed Mickey to be widely broadcast in the Soviet Union after 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 consequences that were far less catastrophic but similarly powerful to those that the inhabitants of new world built by the dreamer in the Kremlin had to deal with for over 70 years.¹³ The most disastrous features of modernity were concentrated in the USSR, while the personage that could have survived them with no loss to his per-



Narkomfin building (Architects: M. Ginzburg, I. Miljutin) in the 1930s.



Building in Zamoskvorechye district, Moscow.

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".²⁴

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 deformation 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 *zhilmassivs* – 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 procedures, a special new type of building was developed – a factory kitchen and a collective *banya* (bathhouse) respectively. The difference between those 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 kitchens and bathrooms. 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 Soviet 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 *obschezhitii* (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 nail on the wall.

The idea behind the displacement of intimate living practices from private houses 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 enacting those reformations 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 new living space had to change not only the way

their everyday living practices were organized, but to break with all their previous traditions and experiences of living that they inherited from their ancestors. They had to be reborn into the newly produced living space.

Huge efforts were made by the new regime to return conquered imperial land to the state of natural space, speaking in Lefebvre's terms, and to prepare it for the new appropriation.¹⁵ The old urban habitat was cleaned and purified from references to the defeated era by various means, such as the demolition of imperial monuments, the nationalization of private property and the destruction and reformation of pre-revolutionary infrastructure – from factories and communications to public cultural and educational institutions. The 1920s were the period of the re-appropriation of space. Once the land was "natural" again, the new barbarians of modernity that headed the state started developing "absolutisation" that led in a different direction from what was proposed by the constructivists. Liberating the living practices of the new state's inhabitants from the exhausting routines of the past as proposed by the constructivists was replaced with the establishment of total control and surveillance over their lives by the state. Even though the new government and the avant-garde ideologists had started together from the liberating potential of the Revolution in the name of progress, the state had already dismissed the avant-garde by the mid-1930s.

Mickey Mouse and the Soviet people

The dehumanization and humiliation of living space in Soviet Russia turned citizens into dwellers whose daily task was to survive through constant adjustment to the changing conditions initiated by the processes of nationalization of private property and the program of *uplotneniye* (tightening)¹⁶ that made forms of collective living in communal apartments and revived barracks the most typical in the Soviet State up to the 1960s. People were deprived of their former homes, relocated and moved through the programs of collectivization and industrialization. They had to part with their families when sent to work at a plant at the other end of the country and to learn new professions. The Mickey Mouse films in which the public "recognizes its own life"¹⁷ draw simplified pictures of reality where the future is deprived of any predictability and is subject to constant reformation. Mickey Mouse's most attractive feature is 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 world of Mickey Mouse is an everchanging 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 adjust and respond to the changes in the absurdist reality. Reality in turn is constantly changing, while the very existence of Mickey Mouse is limited and framed by each episode – he does not live his life, he performs his living only here and now when an episode is being aired. His existence is fully controlled by his creators; it is not his possession, and though Mickey identifies himself with his body, he knows that any of its parts can be taken away and replaced. That suggests the very new "property relations in Mickey cartoons" – 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".¹⁸ 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 repressions, over the displacement 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 that is assured by the ability to replace any stolen joint with immediate growth of a new one. Any wound that looks

“SOVIET INHABITANTS DID NOT POSSESS THEIR LIVING SPACE; THEIR OWN BODIES AND LIVES WERE AS EASILY SUBSTITUTED BY THE STATE AS MICKEY MOUSE’S JOINTS COULD BE REPLACED BY HIS DESIGNERS.”

incompatible with life heals immediately leaving no scar. Such immortality and adjustability were often necessary to survive in the interwar Soviet state, and since most people lacked them, many failed to make it through that episode of history.

Mickey Mouse's body is not subject to aging because it is disconnected 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 speculations on his own existence. His body is an experimental material for the production of miracles that fill his life: "miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them".¹⁹ The Soviet population had become the body for improvisations by the state. While staying in Moscow, Benjamin notices that "each thought, each day, each life lies here as on a laboratory table".²⁰ 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"²¹ 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.

Soviet inhabitants did not possess their living space; their own bodies and lives were as easily substituted by the state as Mickey Mouse's joints could be replaced by his designers. The image of Mickey Mouse could be allegorized as a collective image of the Soviet population, where each stolen joint consisted of numerous lives of individual humans. When those humans are assembled to that collective image through the dehumanization of their own existence, they lose their human-like face and become the creatures of no particular species. They become the cogs in the state machine.

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 cannot 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 rationalized formula of the twentieth century's most functional personage.

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 little TV watchers solve simple tasks with the assistance of

so-called "Mousestruments". Each time the show begins, Mickey's whole living space grows from scratch. Mickey appears on the road coming 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 immediate appropriation 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 time 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 to children all over 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, which according to Jaeho Kang, author of *Walter Benjamin and the Media* (2014),²² "coincides with Benjamin's particular understanding of history as a fragmented image. It illuminates the theoretical ground of fragmentary individuality, existing as a work of art free from the whole system of judgement."²³

It is remarkable that the construction elements of the club that function both as Mickey's house and his friends' playground represent his own disjointed body; the main body of the house is in the shape of Mickey's famous red pants, and his head with the round ears appears as an upper section and a roof. The entrance to the house is arranged through one of his feet, while another is placed to one side and serves as a guest house or a shed. His white-gloved hand stands separately, serving as a station for the hot-air balloon. All these parts are assembled around the lawn and appear together with inhabitants: Goofy, Minnie, Donald Duck, etc. At the end of each episode, Mickey says "Goodbye" to the kids and all elements of his living space disappear together with him and his buddies, leaving no trace of their presence. In the next episode, it all starts again from scratch. The episodes are not connected with each other and can be played in any order, since the cartoon characters do not improve their skills and do not learn from previous experience. Every time they divorce themselves from their past; when the club disappears to nowhere, they disappear together with it. Each time a new episode begins, they are pure barbarians again.

In *Experience and Poverty* Benjamin refers to the houses where Scheerbart's people live:²⁴ those "movable glass-covered dwellings of the kind since built by Loos and Le Corbusier".²⁵ 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 bringing 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.

That barbarian willingness to start from scratch, to come from the point of nowhere, was intensified by the constructivists in their experiments with early Soviet Russian space. The revolution sought to clean the space of Soviet cities from the traces of



The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse.

the past, to leave empty ground for the new space that was to be constructed. The inhabitant required by the new reality was the "naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present".²⁶ A man should return to the very beginning of his existence – to the state of a newborn babe, just as the architecture should return to the null of its form. The return to basics permitted the normalization and naturalization of the new reality and ideology. When young children, who are still barbaric and poor in lived experience, watch Mickey losing his arm and getting another right away, they take it as a norm, they see no contradiction to reality due to their lack of knowledge and experience of possible consequences. They perceive what they see from a standpoint where everything is possible, and the poverty of their experience normalizes whatever they see. Every object is equal to itself, to its meaning and shape, and any way it acts and functions is acceptable.

In his cartoon life, Mickey Mouse hardly ever judges anybody. He is not a moralizing character and neither is his audience. He does not try to improve reality, he only adjusts to it. He is as much the hallmark and role model of the contemporary age as of the interwar period, which was described by Benjamin as possessing "a total absence of illusion" about itself "and at the same time an unlimited commitment to it".²⁷

When Benjamin stayed in Moscow, he found it full of barbaric sense. One feature of the new barbarism was the fullness of the Moscow streets that he compared to the "princely solitude, princely desolation" that "hang over the streets of Berlin".²⁸ After Moscow, Berlin is a deserted city.²⁹ Barbarians, just like children, are hostile to solitude; they fear it. The old, experienced and noble need solitude, while the young, strong and inexperienced are looking for abundance and fullness of living.

Benjamin sees that "in Moscow goods burst everywhere from the houses"³⁰; 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 propagandist 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.

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 squeezed 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".³¹ He described the objects of childhood sold on the streets, such as toys and fruit, fascinated by the naive colorfulness of the flea markets. The city was returning to its pre-urban "childhood state": "the instant you arrive, the childhood stage begins".³² One should learn to walk anew to proceed through the streets, to learn to see Moscow in order to comprehend its colors that "converge prismatically here, at the center of Russian power".³³ One has to come without the aim of deciding on the basis of facts because there is no basis in facts.³⁴ 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 creation of communal space was neither the main goal of constructivist architecture, nor the final model of the ideal world; 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. It was clear for the constructivists that they 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 Modernity*, she defines the main features of the new living space that replaced the "security and seclusion" of traditional homes as "openness and transparency".³⁵ Benjamin sees the dwelling space as reduced "for the living by hotel rooms, for the dead by crematoria".³⁶ The living space shrank compared to the bourgeois era, giving the inhabitants no possibility of leaving traces of their presence in their homes. Time and experience cannot be imprinted 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".³⁷

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".³⁸ Dwellers were turned into migrants as their homes lost sustainability and were transformed into camps through continuous housing reforms. Living was replaced by camping. The temporariness of living conditions in rehabilitated barracks, newly-built *dom-kommunas* and



Mickey Mouse in "Dancevidaniya".

"*obschezhitii*" (communal houses and dormitories), along with the tense feeling of waiting, forced people to adopt the unique abilities of Mickey Mouse's constitution that allowed for endless transformations of their bodies in order to adjust to the ever-changing reality.

After the revolution, hundreds of thousands of people were driven from villages to the cities to be turned to an army of mickey mouses. Their bodies were the building material for the reformation and transformation of society. Individual human lives were reformed into masses, and the main powers that provided for their transformation into mickey mouses were mobilization and mobility.

The experimental avant-garde space in Russia was to be inhabited necessarily with migrants. The majority of the new population of the towns where constructivists were realizing their projects were people who had been previously displaced from their original living spaces. They could have been brought from far away or migrated within the same region, city or even apartment, which became a communal flat through the program of *uplotnenie*, but either way they had already parted with their previous lives.

The new environment forced them to move constantly and in all dimensions. Living was montaged like cartoon episodes where homes and living activities disappeared at the end of an episode. For instance, a person was moved from a village to a town; his profession was changed from a farmer to a worker; his working space of a farmer's field was replaced with a plant; his living space of a hut was replaced with a room in a *kommunalka* (a communal apartment); his family was substituted with random neighbors. He realized that any break in the series of transformations of his life was temporary and that it could continue at any moment with anything from imprisonment to the career of a communist leader.³⁹

This mobility and mobilization were outlined by Benjamin during his stay in the young Soviet state as the major features of the post-revolutionary Moscow:

"The country is mobilized day and night, most of all, of course, the party. Indeed, what distinguishes the Bolshevik, the Russian Communist, from his Western com-

rade is this unconditional readiness for mobilization. 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."⁴⁰

Constructivists captured and reinterpreted the temporariness and fragmentation of this new type of living. Most of the building types that they developed resembled the features of the period: mobility and transition. *Dom-kommuna, obschezhitie* – these housing types were based on the transitional character of a barracks. People were constantly moving in and out of these constructions, possessing a high level of mobilization and mobility that was noticed by Benjamin during his visit to Moscow.

The impoverishment of experience was achieved by the process of constant movement, the loss of traditional living space, connections and practices, the necessity of adapting and beginning anew "and with few resources"⁴¹ as well as by the will to adjust to a reality where everything was different – from a sleeping place to a job.

No experience is gained in constant moving; rather it is lost. A peasant, moved from the hut in his village to the third floor of the plant dormitory, permanently detached from the land, realized that his whole life experience of farming was useless in his new existence. The only skill that could be improved through transitional living was Mickey Mouse's ability to adjust and to survive under constantly changing circumstances by using the full potential of his body and brain. The new experiences gained by many people were so unique that even if their life stories were passed on to the next generation, they could not be sustainable and comprehensible enough to be guidelines for their descendants on how or how not to live. Benjamin begins his *Experience and Poverty* by declaring the end of storytelling and the devaluation of experience that resulted from the disastrous events of the first quarter of the century – World War I. Life experiences could not be "handed down in short forms to sons and grandsons, with the authority of age, in proverbs"⁴², as in previous ages. The absurdity, uniqueness and untranslatability of the mostly catastrophic life stories produced by the Soviet state secured the end of storytelling in Russia and helped to grow muted generations of Soviet people who knew nothing about their ancestors. What Benjamin claims in regard to the WWI generation is also valid for the revolutionary and post-revolutionary generations of interwar Russia:

"...experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world. Perhaps this is less remarkable than it appears. Wasn't it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer but poorer in communicable experience? And what poured out of the flood of war books ten years later was anything but the experience that passes from mouth to ear. No, there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience

has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body."⁴³

The reality through which that skill developed was so miraculously absurd that it could not be repeated in the same way. The generation of the 1920s and 1930s was experimental material on the laboratory table of the new state construction. It had divorced itself not only from its past, but also from its future. Unprecedented mobility was the only way to survive. Anyone who stayed still was swept right away by wind of history blowing into his face.

Migration is Mickey Mouse's lifestyle; he is ready to migrate and fit into any moment of history, which, according to Benjamin's concept, "contains everything, both the entire past and the virtual realization of the utopian final goal of history".⁴⁴ Considering the historical period referred to in this article, the relaxation and relief that could compensate for the loss of experience was hardly ever felt by the possessors of the new poverty.

The Disney Mickey Mouse is a more fortunate character, since unlike his Soviet and European prototypes, he lives through episodes with no fixed location that are aired outside particular politics, times and spaces, while the 1920s and 1930s in Soviet Russia remain one of the most dramatic and unfortunate periods of experimentation on humans in Europe.

Conclusion

In his *Moscow* essay, Benjamin outlined the major features of the new reality emerging from the destruction and reformation of the old city's urban space and of the construction of the new one, produced by the masters of avant-garde. Benjamin was not sensitive to the architectural experiments by constructivists during his stay; he did not see them. Though there were many construction sites and even more discussions and avant-garde project presentations in the mass media at the time when Benjamin lived in Moscow (in the fall and winter of 1926–27), they did not affect the visual body of the Soviet capital sufficiently to change its appearance significantly.

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 sphere, and the principles of collectivism, functionalism and rationalism were declared to be key concepts that formed the foundation for reorganizing existing living space. Yet the façades Benjamin encountered in Moscow were far from those that constructivists were arguing for. Even though Benjamin was charmed by Moscow in winter, he left an essay where the very tactile picture of the city was deprived of the illusions of the age

that many of its inhabitants had been committed to indefinitely.

Avant-garde aesthetics were in the air, compatible with the state policies of post-revolutionary reforms. Their intensity was outlined by Benjamin as "experimentation to the point of exhaustion"⁴⁵ and could be comprehended in the term of the *remonte*: "This astonishing experimentation – it is here called *remonte* – affects not only Moscow, it is Russian. In this ruling passion, there is as much naïve desire for improvement as there is boundless curiosity and playfulness. Few things are shaping Russia more powerfully today".⁴⁶

The major features of the transformations that Benjamin witnessed: the radicalism of reforms, the abolition of privacy and the penetration of the collective into all spheres, the mobility and mobilization of all resources, the substitution of living by camping, the life filled with high expectations for the future that substituted reflection on the immediate present, the striving for power, the high mobility of the population, the enormous intensity of living and at the same time the childhood state of the society of the successful revolution – all those features combined into a magnifying glass through which the future of modernity could be grasped. Moscow's urban environment that Benjamin explored required enormous efforts and energy from its inhabitants in order to adjust to it and turn it into a comprehensible living space. Moscow's space that Benjamin explored was the space of modernity that revealed to the thinker one of its ends and that soon required its inhabitants to develop the features that Walt Disney gave to one of the most popular heroes of the 20th century just a year later.

The experimental living space produced by constructivists demanded from its inhabitants a radical divorce from experience and the past. The successful citizen was to be a naked man committed to nothing but the present, a man with no illusions, very poor at communicating his background and with few demands for existence. He was to be a mickey mouse who could recognize nothing but the clouds in the sky over his head, who learned to rise again every time after he was betrayed and learned to see with eyes that never looked back.

The image of Mickey Mouse is used here as a metaphor for and allegory of the collective portrait of humans who were turned into the masses and underwent all possible challenges that modernity had to offer. The generations that reformed the state and were reformed by the state in interwar Soviet Russia had divorced their past and had hardly ever reached their future. They remained a fragment of the catastrophic history that still travels from episode to episode of Russia's contemporary history that once again divorced its past in 1991, and has not yet shaped its future.

Being a global nomad with no fixed home or origins, Mickey has traveled the world in all sorts of meanings. But it was only in 2015 that he "visited" Russia on his global Grand Tour in the cartoon series designed in traditional style. The episode is called *Mickey Mouse in "Dancevidaniya"*, which sounds like the name of a country or dance and at the same time like the Russian word for good-bye – *Do Svidaniya*. As always, Mickey arrived with his girlfriend Minnie from nowhere to visit the Bolshoy Theatre in

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. ✕

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- Walter Benjamin, "Mickey Mouse", in *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2. 1927–1940 (Harvard University Press, 1999), 545.
- Benjamin, W., "Moscow", 22.
- 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.
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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.
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- 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.
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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