

Anywhere I Lay My Head:
Politics and Poetics of Private Space in Early Soviet Literature and Film

Slaven Svetinovic

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Reading Committee:

Galya Diment, Chair

Gordana Crnkovic

Barbara Henry

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Slaven Svetinovic

University of Washington

Abstract

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Slaven Svetinovic

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Galya Diment

Slavic Languages and Literatures

In an article about his visit to Moscow in the winter of 1926-27, Walter Benjamin claimed that “Bolshevism has abolished private life.” Benjamin’s frequently quoted statement highlights a key feature of Soviet society in the post-revolutionary period: the attempt to politicize and “make public” almost all aspects of everyday life. As part of the campaign to create a “new way of life,” Soviet ideology and government policies sought to accomplish a dramatic transformation of basic features of private life and the supposed “bourgeois” values of privacy, family, and marriage. One of the most drastic changes was the policy of *uplotnenie* (alternatively translated as “consolidation,” “condensation,” or “tightening”), which reconfigured living space by dividing apartments and other dwellings, ultimately leading to the creation of one of the most potent symbols of the Soviet experience: the *kommunalka*, or the communal apartment. From its

inception and through the Soviet period (and beyond), the communal apartment would play a central role in Soviet life. This dissertation examines how popular literature and cinema of the 1920s, the period of the so-called New Economic Policy (NEP), addressed this transformation of everyday life, and of living space in particular. Two broad questions frame my project: How is private space constituted and circumscribed in popular literature and film of the early Soviet period, given the intrusion of the state in most aspects of everyday life? What do some of the key literary and cinematic works of the NEP era tell us about the notions of the public and the private during this period of Soviet history? The “battle” for space – and more specifically, *private space* -- is a major trope in some of the most well-known works of literature and cinema from the first decade following the revolution. By focusing on the works of two writers of fiction, Yuri Olesha and Mikhail Zoshchenko, and one filmmaker, Boris Barnet, this dissertation examines the tension between the public and the private in the context of NEP and the ways private space functions as a site of negotiation between opposing ideologies and explores the role of literature and film as means of resisting and mitigating – through laughter, play, and parody – the shocks of such traumatic policies as *uplotnenie*.

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INTRODUCTION¹

In an article about his visit to Moscow in the winter of 1926-27, Walter Benjamin claimed that “Bolshevism has abolished private life.”² Benjamin’s frequently quoted statement highlights a key feature of Soviet society in the post-revolutionary period: the attempt to politicize and “make public” almost all aspects of everyday life. As part of the campaign to create a “new way of life,” Soviet ideology and government policies sought to accomplish a dramatic transformation of basic features of private life and the supposed “bourgeois” values of privacy, family, and marriage. One of the most drastic changes was the policy of *uplotnenie* (alternatively translated as “consolidation,” “condensation,” or “tightening”), which reconfigured living space by dividing apartments and other dwellings, leading to the creation of one of the most potent symbols of the Soviet experience: the *kommunalka*, or the communal apartment. From its inception and through the Soviet period (and beyond), the communal apartment would play a central role in Soviet life, providing a microcosm of Soviet society and serving as a kind of a social experiment for the Soviet vision of the domestic sphere.

This dissertation examines how popular literature and cinema of the 1920s, the period of the so-called New Economic Policy (NEP), addressed this transformation of everyday life, and of living space in particular. Two broad questions frame my project: How is private space constituted and circumscribed in popular literature and film of the early Soviet period, given the intrusion of the state in most aspects of everyday life? What do some key literary and cinematic works of the NEP era tell us about the notions of the public and the private during this period of Soviet history? The “battle” for space – and more specifically, *private space* – is a major trope in

¹ All translations in this dissertation, unless otherwise indicated, are mine. Special thanks to Dr. Barbara Henry and Dr. Galya Diment for their help with certain translations.

² Walter Benjamin, “Moscow,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 108.

some of the most well-known works of literature and cinema from the first decade following the revolution. Whether in the stories and novels of Mikhail Bulgakov, Yuri Olesha, and Mikhail Zoshchenko, or the films of Abram Room and Boris Barnet, the domestic interior, with its beds, sofas, and pillows, serves as the main setting for the drama and often provides the main catalyst of narrative conflict.

Michel de Certeau refers to “private space” as the “*protected place* at one's disposal where the pressure of the social body on the individual does not prevail, where the plurality of stimuli is filtered, or, in any case, ideally ought to be.”³ De Certeau's description thus consists of two major components: the lack of intrusion of the social (or public) into the individual sphere, and the ability to contain or filter outside stimuli on the senses. Both of these aspects are crucial in the Soviet context, where implementation of communal living not only meant state regulation of individual space, but also drastically impacted one's sensory experience and the ability to filter stimuli. By focusing on the works of two writers of fiction, Yuri Olesha and Mikhail Zoshchenko, and one filmmaker, Boris Barnet, this dissertation examines the tension between the public and the private in the context of NEP and the ways private space functions as a site of negotiation between opposing ideologies and explores the role of literature and film as means of resisting and mitigating – through laughter, play, and parody – the shocks of such traumatic policies as *uplotnenie*.

SCOPE

I have limited the scope of the dissertation to period of NEP, defined as roughly between 1921 and 1929. Conceived as a temporary measure to stabilize the economy following the civil

³ Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2, Living and Cooking*, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 146. Italics in the original.

war, the New Economic Policy introduced economic liberalization and private enterprise, reforms which during the 1920s not only ushered in a period of modernization, but also created numerous contradictions due to the clash of two incompatible policies and ideologies - communist central planning and limited free enterprise.⁴ A major contradiction was in the sphere of everyday life: the liberalization of NEP led to the emergence of a new, vibrant consumer culture, which directly challenged Soviet ideology and its attempt to, as Benjamin puts it, "abolish private life" through the policy of *uplotnenie* and transformation of the domestic sphere. As a result, anxiety about private spaces (rooms, beds, sofas, pillows) permeates a number of literary and cinematic works of this time. Moreover, film and literature of this period reflect a new ambivalent and transitory type of subjectivity, one uprooted from its environment and caught between the old and the new. Soviet society and the role of art in it drastically changed with the end of NEP and I think that the depiction of the domestic sphere and communal living in film and literature during this period requires a separate examination and attention.

As to the works that I am examining in this dissertation, I have chosen them for a few different reasons. For one, these works provide examples from different genres, including films, novels, and non-fictional material, as is the case with the chapter on Mikhail Zoshchenko, while at the same time staying within the realm of popular literature, and more specifically, satirical and comedic works. While I try to complicate these categories, I hope that the discussion of the separate texts, whether Barnet's films or Olesha's novel, also paints a broader picture of the debates about the role of comedy and parody during NEP. Secondly, as I discuss in each chapter separately, I chose the particular texts because I felt that certain works or certain aspects of the

⁴ At the Eleventh Party Congress in May 1922, Lenin described NEP as a temporary, pragmatic measure, reasoning that "the responsible communist...does not know how to carry on trade, because he is not a businessman" And the new entrepreneurs -- the so-called "NEPmen" -- would be the ones to teach him. Alan M. Ball. *Russia's Last Capitalists: The Nepmen, 1921-1929*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 19.

works have not been given enough scholarly attention. Finally, an important aim of my project is to foreground the formal qualities of literary and cinematic works addressing the reconfiguration of living space in order to outline, along with the impact of governmental policies and ideology (the “politics” of the title), a kind of *poetics* that inform the representation of communal living in film and literature. The authors and the texts that I examine grapple with and seek to find new and original forms for responding to the turbulence of NEP and the transformation of everyday life.

ON THE PRIVATE/PUBLIC DICHOTOMY

In his essay “The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction,” social theorist Jeff Weintraub examines the binary distinction between “public” and “private,” referring to this distinction as one of the “grand dichotomies” of Western thought, in a phrase he borrows from philosopher Norberto Bobbio.⁵ Weintraub’s essay aims to examine how this distinction is used in different discourses and contexts, pointing out that such a binary conceptualization “often generates as much confusion as illumination.” “The public/private distinction,” claims Weintraub, “is not unitary, but protean. It comprises, not a single paired opposition, but a complex family of them, neither mutually reducible nor wholly unrelated.”⁶ Given its persistence throughout history and in “theoretical vocabularies,” Weintraub concludes that while this distinction cannot be “conveniently simplified nor usefully avoided,” its “variability, ambiguity, and difficulty need to be recognized and confronted.”⁷ In other words, while this distinction continues, it should constantly be questioned and interrogated. Michel Foucault makes a similar

⁵ Jeff Weintraub, “The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction,” in *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*, eds. Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

point in his essay “Of Other Spaces” when he writes that “perhaps our life is still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable, that our institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down. These are oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for example, between private space and public space.”⁸

In my discussion in this dissertation of the “private” and “public” dimensions, and in applying the distinction more generally, I aim to pay attention to the “protean” nature of the public/private binary distinction, seeking to examine the tension between the “private” and the “public” in each particular context, rather than attempting to rigidly define these categories beforehand. Indeed, in the Russian and Soviet context, notions of “private life” or “private space” do not have clear equivalents. The closest terms for “private life” are *частная жизнь* and *личная жизнь*, the first of which translates literally to “partial life,” *часть* meaning part. Other terms and binary oppositions, such as complicate the conceptualization and definition of the public/private binary in Russian culture, including, as scholar Oleg Kharkhodrin puts it, the “very complicated entanglement of obshchii/obshchestvennyi/gosudarstvennyi/chastnyi/individual’nyi (these are often translated into English as either “public” or “private,” though they originally mean, respectively: common/social/state/personal/partial/individual).”⁹ Furthermore, there are other, culture-specific boundaries. For example, Svetlana Boym argues that notions of privacy in Russian culture are closely linked to different philosophical and spiritual notions, including the idea of the “Russian

⁸ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 22–27.

⁹ Oleg Kharkhodrin, “Reveal and Dissimulate: A Genealogy of Private Life in Soviet Russia,” in *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*, eds. Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 344. In Russian, another word for “privacy” is “приватность,” stemming from English.

soul,” while other dichotomies such as the one between different “kinds” of “being”— *быт* and *бытие*, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 3—also play a significant role.¹⁰

In the Soviet context, the ideas of “private life” and “private spaces” were central in the debates about the transformation of society in the post-revolutionary period. As I discuss in more detail in the first chapter, the intrusion into domestic space was part of a larger project of transforming everyday life, which for many of the Bolshevik leaders, was one of the ultimate goals of the revolution. Thus, the conceptualization of “private life” [often referred to as “частная жизнь” or “личная жизнь”] and “the everyday” [“быт” or sometimes also using the term “повседневная жизнь”] (as opposed to the social and the public) centers around this intrusion into the private sphere by state instruments and policies. In her work *Everyday Stalinism*, historian Sheila Fitzpatrick draws a similar distinction between the individual and the social in delineating private and public space in everyday life, defining the everyday as “everyday interactions that in some way involved the state,” adding that “[i]n the Soviet context, such a definition largely excludes topics like friendship, love, and some aspects of leisure and private sociability.”¹¹ This conception of the difference between the “public” and the “private” echoes Michel De Certeau’s discussion of private space as a space that is outside of the realm of the social. As is the case with other boundaries I touch on in this dissertation, such as the dichotomy between “popular” and “modernist” in the context of cinema, for example, this boundary between “public” and “private” spaces is not easy to delineate. And one of the main

¹⁰ See Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 73-88, for an in-depth discussion of the connections between ideas of “private life” and “Russian Soul.” Boym brings many of the same points brought up earlier about the difficulty of translating the term “private life” and defining it in the Russian context, stating that “a history of Russian private life remains unwritten” (Boym, 73).

¹¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

interventions I hope to accomplish in this dissertation is to complicate such boundaries in the context of the 1920s and the period of NEP, which was a period of transition and ambiguity.

ORGANIZATION

This dissertation is divided into six chapters, including the introduction and the conclusion.

Chapter 1 provides a general introduction of the policy of *uplotnenie* and the transformation of everyday life in the Soviet Union during the 1920s more generally. I trace the roots of the policy and examine how the reconfiguration of living space relates to other political and ideological projects during the first decade after the revolution, most notably the campaign for creating a “new way of life.” I examine the role of the arts in this process and the responses by both “politicians” and “poets” to the new reality.

Chapter 2 examines the treatment of space in what scholar Denise Youngblood has called the “forgotten” Soviet cinema: popular films of the 1920s, primarily comedies, inspired by Hollywood. Following on Youngblood’s work, I aim to bring more attention to this strain of Soviet cinema which has frequently been relegated to the realm of “entertainment.” Using the work of Boris Barnet as a case study, and in particular his films *Girl with a Hatbox* (1927) and *House on the Trubnaya* (1928), I make the following interventions. First, I argue these works challenge the dominant theoretical approach for which the NEP period is known in Soviet cinema: montage theory. Montage theory, as conceived by Eisenstein and other theorists and filmmakers, sees editing as having a primary role in cinema, emphasizing its ability to influence the spectator through juxtaposition and conflict of images. On the other hand, Barnet’s films, like many other works of “popular” cinema,” favor *mise-en-scène* over montage because such a formal approach was better suited to examining and capturing the reconfiguration of everyday

life and space during NEP. Emphasis on *mise-en-scène*, I argue, provided greater freedom – of improvisation and movement – and allowed for a kind of resistance within a rigidly circumscribed and fast-disappearing private space. Secondly, drawing on the theory of “vernacular modernism” by film scholar Miriam Hansen, I interrogate the rigid distinction between “popular” and “avant-garde” films, seeking to highlight not only the subversive potential of the so-called “entertainment” cinema, but also its role in creating new publics and what Hansen calls “a new sensorium.”

Chapter 3 focuses on the work of Yuri Olesha, and in particular his best-known novel, *Envy* (1927). I draw on the concept of *быт* in Russia and Soviet culture as a way to conceptualize how personal space is constructed and narrated. *Быт* has often been opposed to *бытие* and I trace this opposition as a parallel for the tension between the private and the public. I argue that the novel attempts to carve out a more “neutral” space between these two poles, which could be described by the term *бытность*. Rather than expressing one’s inherent characteristics or “being,” *бытность* is ephemeral and changing, a kind of an “in-between” sphere between *быт* and *бытие*. This kind of ephemeral and temporary existence is a key aspect of the experience of the novel’s protagonist, Nikolai Kavalerov, of the ordinary: much like NEP, a transitional period in Russian history, *Envy*’s protagonist constantly finds himself in the middle, in a liminal state -- between the old and the new, between his imagination and the world of practical things, between his desire to express himself as an individual and the need to belong to the collective. In addition, I also argue that the novel’s conception of “being” is closer to the Western European rather than the Russian tradition, highlighting the phenomenological experience of the ordinary world rather than focusing on the distinction between the everyday realm (*быт*) and a higher world beyond (*бытие*), which also explains the numerous allusions in

Envy to Western European literature and philosophy and the narrator's frequent spatial delineation between "over there" (in Western Europe) and "over here" (in the Soviet Union).

Chapter 4 examines Mikhail Zoshchenko's book *Letters to a Writer* (1929) and the circumstances around its conception and publication, placing the text in the context of Zoshchenko's oeuvre and Soviet literature at the end of NEP era. I argue that this text, though considered relatively minor in Zoshchenko's career, is crucial in understanding Zoshchenko's attitude towards his work and his conception of the writer's role, and the role of literature more generally, in the Soviet Union during the 1920s. Zoshchenko saw himself as a writer deeply connected to the times in which he lived, as a kind of "chronicler of the everyday" writing in a language taken from living speech, the "language of the street," as he called it. This ambition – to depict the ordinary reality of NEP, a reality marked by contingency and transition – in an original and authentic manner, brought him the popularity and admiration of a wide swath of the reading public, something many letters in *Letters to a Writer* attest to. But it also caused misunderstandings and criticism, contributing to Zoshchenko's doubt about the role of his writing and the need to defend himself before the literary establishment. This tension between the public dimension of his work and Zoshchenko's private ambivalence about its usefulness stands at the center of the dialogue between him and his readers which constitutes *Letters to a Writer*. It also permeates his most popular stories, including those dealing with communal spaces, such as *The Bathhouse* and *The Crisis*.

CHAPTER 1: “The Question of Consolidation”

“After the October Revolution of 1917, the war on ‘petit-bourgeois everyday life’ enters a new phase with the dream of New Быт created by poets and the politicians...”¹²

Мы, управление дома, — с ненавистью заговорил Швондер, — пришли к вам после общего собрания жильцов нашего дома, на котором стоял вопрос об уплотнении квартир дома...
— Кто на ком стоял? — крикнул Филипп Филиппович. — Потрудитесь излагать ваши мысли яснее.
— Вопрос стоял об уплотнении...¹³

In Mikhail Bulgakov’s 1927 novella *Heart of a Dog*, professor and surgeon Phillip Philipovich Preobrazhensky receives a visit in his apartment from representatives of the housing management committee. They inform him that the committee has looked into the “question of consolidation” and has decided that the professor “occupies excessive space” and needs to give up his dining room to a new tenant. “No one in Moscow has a dining room,” the head of the committee points out, to which one of his companions quickly adds, “not even Isadora Duncan!”¹⁴ While Preobrazhensky may not be as famous as Isadora Duncan, he has enough influence that he can refuse to comply: all he needs to do is make a phone call to what Gogol might call “a very important person,” who also happens to be one of his patients. The scene ends with the representatives of the housing committee leaving in anger, though living space remains a fraught topic throughout the rest of the novella.

This episode depicts the Soviet policy of *uplotnenie* – the drastic transformation of living space in the post-revolutionary period that divided apartments and other dwellings, leading to the

¹² Воум, *Common Places*, 32.

¹³ Михаил Булгаков, *Собачье Сердце*, in *Собранные Сочинений в десяти томах*, том третий, ed. Виктор Пелетин (Москва: Голос, 1995), 63.

¹⁴ Mikhail Bulgakov, *Heart of a Dog*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 25.

creation of one of the most potent symbols of the Soviet experience: the “kommunalka,” or the communal apartment. *Uplotnenie* is a difficult term to translate. As can be seen above, Mira Ginsburg, the translator of Bulgakov’s novella, opts for the term “consolidation.” The word could also be translated as “tightening” or “making more dense.”¹⁵ Another good translation in this context is “cohabitation,” as the term *uplotnenie* refers to the process by which different people, the majority of whom were strangers to each other, came to live together and share a common space. Instead of using any of these translations, as will be the case with a few other terms, I will use the original Russian word throughout this dissertation in order to retain the nuances and untranslatable aspects that the term carries, as well as to emphasize the unique nature of the concept and its inextricability from the Soviet context. Indeed, the word is a good example of Soviet officialese, entering the everyday vocabulary by way of official decrees and documents.

The roots of the policy go back to immediate aftermath of the revolution. In early November 1917, two weeks after the taking of the Winter Palace, in an addendum to a declaration “On the Requisition of Warm Things for the Soldiers on the Front [О реквизиции теплых вещей для солдат на фронте] Lenin defined what he termed the “rich apartment” [богатая квартира]:

A rich apartment is considered to be...every apartment in which the number of rooms is equal to or exceeds the number of occupants living permanently in that apartment.

Богатой квартирой считается... всякая квартира, в которой число комнат равняется или превышает число душ населения, постоянно живущего в этой квартире.”¹⁶

¹⁵ The root of the word is “-plot-/-плот-: close, dense, firm, tight, compact” See Charles E Gribble. *Russian Root List: With a Sketch of Word Formation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 1981), 51.

¹⁶ Quoted in Наталия Лебина, *Советская Повседневность : Нормы и Аномалии от Военного Коммунизма к Большому Стилю*. (Москва: Новое Литературное Обозрение, 2015), 90. See also Марк Меерович. *Наказание*

This formulation would prove to be crucial in the shaping of housing policy in the 1920s, providing a general measuring stick for determining the amount of space per person decreed by the government, an amount that would fluctuate throughout the decade depending on the place of residence and the severity of the housing shortage. Moreover, the labeling of an apartment as “rich” reflected the Bolshevik attitude toward private property more generally, and as scholar Mark Meerovich points out, the confiscation and division of apartments went hand in hand with the abolishment of private property. Shortly after Lenin’s proclamation, Bolsheviks moved quickly towards the nationalization of all property, including land and real estate, issuing a number of decrees severely restricting and/or abolishing the right of private ownership. The VCIK [Всероссийский Центральный Исполнительный Комитет; All-Russian Central Executive Committee] decree “Regarding Land” [О земле] from November 1917 abolished the right to own land, which was formally recognized by the constitution in July 1918. In August 1918 another VCIK decree “Regarding the Abolishment of the Right to Private Ownership of Real Estate in Cities” [Об отмене права частной собственности на недвижимости в городах] abolished the right of private ownership of buildings in cities.¹⁷

Having decisively destroyed the possibility of lawful private ownership of living spaces, further government policies would introduce tighter regulations aimed at dividing housing space, primarily in large apartments. It is during this stage that the term *uplotnenie* first emerges. While Lenin’s “formula” of $K=N-1$ (where K stands for the number of rooms and “ N ” for the number of occupants) would serve as a general guide for the division of space, it would prove to be impractical since many apartments featured large rooms, ostensibly “too big” for one person.

жителием: жилищная политика в СССР как средство управления людьми: 1917-1937 (Москва: Росспен, 2008), 11.

¹⁷ Meerovich. *Наказание жилищем*, 13.

Instead, the Bolshevik government moved toward the implementation of norms that would regulate the amount of living space allotted to each individual. In 1919, by a directive of Narkomzdrav (Наркомздрав; People’s Committee for Healthcare), this was 8.5 square meters; about 102 square feet per adult individual.¹⁸

In addition to specifying the amount of space, however, the Narkomzdrav directive and other declarations focused on the specific terms of what would become known as *uplotnenie*. The СНК (Совет Народных Комиссаров or Council of People’s Commissars) decree from May of 1920 titled “О мерах правильного распределения жилищ среди трудящегося населения [Regarding the Proper Distribution of Residences Among the Working Population], is one of the first documents to employ the term. The decree reads in part:

In order to correctly allocate the living space in cities and townships housing and land departments, jointly with housing sanitary inspection, take the measures of rationally but strictly carried out *uplotnenie* of dwellings and institutes, not taking into account military establishments, and the freeing up of living premises, rented for non-residential needs.

Для правильного распределения жилой площади в городах и поселках жилищно-земельные отделы совместно с жилищно-санитарной инспекцией принимают меры к рационально да твердо проведенному *уплотнению* жилищ и учреждений, не исключая и учреждений Военного ведомства, и освобождению жилых помещений, занятых под нежилые надобности.¹⁹

The same decree would make the distinction between “*self-uplotnenie* [*самоуплотнение*]” which referred to the two-week period that the tenants were given to find their own neighbors,

¹⁸ Меерович, *Наказание жилищем*, 18. This norm would vary depending on the city and the particular period. For example, in Moscow in 1924 it would decrease to 16 arshin (8 square meters) (Ibid).

¹⁹ “О мерах правильного распределения жилищ среди трудящегося населения [Regarding the Proper Distribution of Residences Among the Working Population]” 1920, available at *Исторические Материалы* (<http://istmat.info/node/41798>)

and “forced *uplotnenie* [принудительное уплотнение],” or simply “*uplotnenie*.” These terms would be defined officially elsewhere in detail. Mark Meerovich writes:

The meaning of terms “*uplotnenie*” and “self-*uplotnenie*” is explained in the Practical commentary to the Instruction of the Housing Department MKX about the rules of *uplotnenie* of living spaces: “*Uplotnenie* is the term for increasing of the population of a given living space or the deprivation of residents of a part of living space. *Uplotnenie* can be forced or voluntary. Forced *uplotnenie*, called simply ‘*uplotnenie*’ is carried out independently of the agreement of “those who are consolidated” [уплотняемых], and voluntary *uplotnenie*, called “self-*uplotnenie*,” lies in the provisioning of a part of a living space to the new tenants who have moved into the living space with the agreement of those who are being consolidated [уплотняющихся].

Значение терминов “уплотнение” и “самоуплотнение” разъясняется в Практическом комментарии к Инструкции Жилищного отдела МКХ о порядке уплотнения жилищ: “Уплотнением называется увеличение населения данной жилой площади или лишение жильцов части жилой площади. Уплотнение бывает принудительное или добровольное. Принудительное уплотнение, называемое просто “уплотнением,” производится независимо от согласия на него уплотняемых, а добровольное уплотнение, называемое “самоуплотнением,” заключается в предоставлении части жилой площади новым жильцам, вселившимся в жилое помещение с согласия уплотняющихся.”²⁰

In addition to administrative decrees and brute force, Bolsheviks sought to provide ideological justification for the new housing policy. The reorganization of space, as Orlando Figes points out, was promoted as being in line with the basic tenet of communism – the primacy of the collective over the individual. As Figes put it:

The policy [of *uplotnenie*] had a strong ideological appeal, not just as a war on privilege, which is how it was presented in the propaganda of the new regime (‘War Against the Palaces!’), but also as a part of a crusade to engineer a more collective way of life. By forcing people to share communal apartments, the Bolsheviks believed that they could make them more communistic in their basic thinking and behavior. Private space and property would disappear, the individual (‘bourgeois’) family would be replaced by communistic

²⁰ Meerovich. *Наказание жилищем*, 19, quoting Жилищное товарищество (Журнал по Жилищным Вопросам) 1922. No. 6, с. 31.

fraternity and organization, and the life of the individual would become immersed in the community.²¹

In her study of everyday life in the early Soviet period, historian Natalia Lebina makes a similar point about the ideological push to create a more “collective body,” writing,

The Soviet past, especially the 1920s until the beginning of 1950s is the time of experimenting with the creation of “communal bodies,” in the process of which it is impossible to negate the importance of spatial factors, defining the norms of one’s existence (habitation)...Not by accident does the Russian philosopher V.A. Podoroga note: “Your room is the continuation of your bodily image and inseparable from it.”

Советское прошлое, в особенности 1920х -- начала 1950х годов, -- это время эксперимента по формированию «коммунальных тел», в процессе которого невозможно отрицать важность пространственных факторов, определяющих нормы существования (проживания) человека...Не случайно российский философ В.А. Подорога отмечает: «Ваша комната -- продолжение вашего телесного образа и от него неотделима».²²

Lebina draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of *habitus* and *habitat* to emphasize the importance of living space in shaping subjectivity and the transformation of what may have been considered an “anomaly” into a “norm.” As Lebina puts it, “*habitus* (the tendency to act in a particular way in a particular situation) is formed via the structure of the *habitat* (in this case, of living space) [*habitus* (стремление действовать определенным образом в определенной ситуации) формируется через структуру *habitat* (в данном случае жилища)].”²³ New living space was thus to play a crucial role in forming new “habits” and “new norms,” as it in many ways can be seen as an “extension” of the individual.²⁴ Changing the environment and surrounding space thus changes one’s subjectivity. Architectural scholar Milka Bliznakov makes

²¹ Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*. (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 9.

²² Лебина, *Советская Повседневность*, 68-69.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin makes the same point in “Moscow” when he describes Soviet society in the 1920s as “the new environment for which nothing counts except the function of the producer in the collective,” adding “the new Russians call milieu the only reliable educator.” (Benjamin, “Moscow,” 109-110)

a similar point in her article about Soviet housing between 1918 and 1933, writing that the new “communal arrangement, though a necessary condition at the time, was expected to induce collective behavioral patterns corresponding to a new socialist political system.”²⁵ For this reason, Bliznakov claims, many of the early communal apartments and other dwellings, such as worker clubs, were renamed house-communes (*dom-kommuna*). Bliznakov writes that “in Moscow alone, 865 such house-communes were registered by the end of 1921.”²⁶

It is important to note that while ideology played an important role in the division of apartments, much of the development of housing policy (and its justification) was pragmatic, driven partly by housing shortages, partly by other developments. In particular, the implementation of New Economic Policy gave considerable leeway in the management of housing, and in many instances allowed private ownership and renting to continue.²⁷ Housing shortages were primarily driven by a large influx of people from rural areas to the city in search of work.²⁸ And, in fact, this move to the city is a recurrent motif in films of the 1920s, including the Barnet films that I discuss in the next chapter.

In addition, while the policy of *uplotnenie* went hand in hand with Bolshevik ideas about private property and redistribution of wealth, it did not resemble the utopian ideal for communal housing during the first decade of the revolution. As Lebina points out, Bolsheviks’ early utopian

²⁵ Milka Bliznakov, “Soviet Housing during the Experimental Years, 1918 to 1933,” in *Russian Housing in the Modern Age : Design and Social History*, eds. William Craft Brunfield and Blair A. Ruble, (Washington, D.C. & Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1993), 86.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For more on the housing policy during NEP and also its differences based on gender lines, see Attwood, Lynne. *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

²⁸ Bliznakov gives an example of the drastic changes in the Moscow population in the first decade after the revolution. She writes: “By the end of 1920 Moscow’s population was reduced to a little over one million from the 1917 count of 1,854,000 people. The rehabilitative effects of the New Economic Policy (1921 – 1928) drew large numbers of people to Moscow and by the 1926 census there were 2,026,000 inhabitants. With continuous population inflow thereafter (3,663,000 in 1933 and 4,137,000 in 1939) the housing situation worsened. (Bliznakov, *Soviet Housing*, 143, footnote 41).

visions of communal living were largely driven by the idea of “the commune,” and in particular the 19th century version of the commune called the “phalanstère” or “phalanstery” (“фаланстер” in Russian) formulated by utopian Socialist Charles Fourier.²⁹ A few such communes were developed in the days after the Revolution, and Leбина counts even the Smolny institute and Dom Sovetov – residences of the elite Bolsheviki among them, along with other communes formed by different youth groups and the above-mentioned housing collectives (dom-kommuna). Due to both the inability of the communes to sustain themselves, as well as to other broader developments, such as the turn to NEP, such housing arrangements were short-lived. It is nonetheless important to emphasize that such attempts at utopian and communal living were closer to “theoretical postulates of socialism about collective living,” than was the policy of *uplotnenie*. As Leбина puts it, “утопия входила в противоречие с социальными реалиями.”³⁰ It is important not to ignore this tension, and keep in mind the role of pragmatism and contingency in the formulation of housing policy during the 1920s.

Toward a “New Way of Life”

While Bulgakov’s portrayal of the process of *uplotnenie* in *Heart of a Dog* is humorous and satirical³¹, in reality the process of dividing and consolidating apartments was, as one may imagine, traumatic and cruel. In his diary from the early years of the revolution, later published

²⁹ Popularity of these communes in the 19th century was also influenced by its appearance in Nikolay Chernushevsky’s influential book *What is to Be Done* from 1863.

³⁰ Лебина, *Советская Повседневность*, 94.

³¹ Though satirical, Bulgakov’s depiction of the attempts at consolidation of the professor’s apartment has some basis in truth. For example, Professor Preobrazhensky is exempt from the process of *uplotnenie* thanks to a special decree/document. This is very similar to the decree “Regarding the Conditions, Ensuring the Scientific Work of the Academic I.P Pavlov and his Colleagues [Об условиях, обеспечивающих научную работу академика И. П. Павлова и его сотрудников]” given to scientist Ivan Pavlov in 1921, exempting his apartment from the housing policy. (Лебина, *Советская Повседневность*, 93) Bulgakov must have been aware of this, given other parallels between Preobrazhensky and the scientist behind the famous “dog.”

under the title *Cursed Days*, Ivan Bunin describes a similar scene to the one above from *Heart of a Dog*, albeit in a much different tone. In the entry for April 25, 1919, Bunin writes:

Late yesterday evening some people, together with the ‘commissar’ of our home, came to measure the width, length, and height of all our rooms in order ‘to consolidate the proletariat.’ These damn monkeys are measuring all the rooms in the city... I didn’t say a word. I silently lay on the couch while they measured all around me, but I got so upset from this new insult that my heart started to flutter, and my veins pulsated in a sickly way on my forehead. No, this will not be good for my heart.³²

Вчера поздно вечером, вместе с «комиссаром» нашего дома, явились измерять в длину, ширину и высоту все наши комнаты «на предмет уплотнения пролетариатом». Все комнаты всего города измеряют, проклятые обезьяны... Я не проронил ни слова, молча лежал на диване, пока мерили у меня, но так взволновался от этого нового издевательства, что сердце стучало с перерывами и больно пульсировала жила на лбу. Да, это даром для сердца не пройдет.³³

Bunin’s testimony captures the anxiety and trauma that accompanied the process of *uplotnenie* and illustrates the extent of bureaucratic intrusion into the private sphere in the early years following the revolution.

Indeed, the policy of *uplotnenie* went hand in hand with a larger ideological project known as “Новый Быт [новый быт]” which could be translated roughly as “a new way of life”, the attempt to transform almost all aspects of everyday life, including notions of privacy, family, and marriage.³⁴ In a pamphlet titled “Он Быт [О Быте]” based on a 1926 lecture, Anatoly Lunacharsky, one of the leading Bolsheviks and the Commissar of Enlightenment, writes that “true goal of the revolution is precisely the complete transformation of “everyday

³² Ivan Bunin, *Cursed Days: A Diary of Revolution*, trans. by Thomas Gaiton Marullo (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 128. Bunin would emigrate shortly after and settle in Paris. In 1933 he would be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

³³ Иван Бунин, *Жизнь Арсеньева; Темные Аллеи Окаянные Дни* (Самара, Самарское книжное издательство, 1991), 567.

³⁴ Like *uplotnenie*, *быт* is also one of those untranslatable words, and I will have a lot more to say about the term and its definitions later in this dissertation and chapter 3 in particular. For more on transformation of everyday life in the early Soviet period, see Kiaer, Christina., and Eric Naiman (eds.). *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia : Taking the Revolution Inside*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

life”[*быт*]”[..настоящая цель революции есть именно полное пересоздание быта.]

Furthermore, Lunacharsky specifies that it is the very idea of “private life” that had to be transformed, claiming:

What until now was called “private life” [частная жизнь] cannot slip away from us. Precisely in the transfer onto the bright tracks of reason of what is called “private life” – “*жизнь–бытие*” as Leonid Andreyev used to say – lies the last goal of the revolution, its basic and highest accomplishment.

То, что до сих пор называлось частной жизнью, не может от нас ускользнуть. Именно в переводе на светлые разумные рельсы того, что называется частной жизнью — *жизнь–бытие*, как выражался Леонид Андреев — в этом и заключается последняя цель революции, ее основное, самое высокое достижение.³⁵

Lunacharsky’s statements about private life echo arguments made by Leon Trotsky in a series of articles on “everyday life” in which Trotsky argued that “not by politics alone,” to use a title from one of the articles, will Soviet society and culture be transformed. Instead, Trotsky called for the reorganization of daily life in all spheres, including the family, habits, customs, and gender relations.³⁶ In his pamphlet, Lunacharsky, like Trotsky, outlines areas of everyday life that need to be changed and transformed, including the education of youth, family and gender relations, and sexual mores.

³⁵ Anatoly Lunacharsky, “О Быте [О Быте]” 1926, accessible at <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/articles/о-быте/>

³⁶ For example, In an article titled “Attention to Trifles!,” Trotsky underscored that even “cigarette butts on the stairs” showed a lack of respect for others and communal living. Moreover, individual behavior, even when it comes to “trifles,” would have to be monitored and corrected by the collective. As Trotsky puts it:

We must wage a tireless and relentless struggle against such slovenliness and lack of culture—by word and deed, by propaganda, and higher standards, by exhortation, and by calling individuals to account for their behavior. Those who tacitly overlook such things as spitting on the stairs or leaving a yard or house looking like a pigsty are poor citizens and unworthy builders of the new society (Leon Trotsky, “On Trifles,” in *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science* (New York: Monad Press: 1973), 75)

Significantly, Lunacharsky ends his lecture with a discussion of the special role art was to play in transforming *быт*, emphasizing its potential as an ideological tool. “Art has a double role,” Lunacharsky writes,

On the one hand, it creates joyful things around us...Besides that, art has an ideological objective. It should organize our senses in such a way to help us feel our objectives.

С одной стороны, оно создает радостные вещи вокруг нас...Кроме того, искусство имеет идеологическую задачу. Оно должно организовывать наши чувства таким образом, чтобы помогать нам чувствовать наши задачи.³⁷

As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, Lunacharsky was a prominent figure not only in theorizing the role of art, but also in helping produce art works himself, writing scenarios and ensuring financial support for many films during the 1920s.

Along with governmental policies and ideology, the arts were thus to play an important role in the transformation of everyday life. Indeed, as Svetlana Boym puts it, the battle for *Novy Byt* was fought by both “poets and politicians.” The “poets” came from all sides from the political and literary spectrum. In “О Быте,” Lunacharsky quotes a poem by Demyan Bedny, one of the models for the character of Ivan Bezdomny in Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, on the topic of marriage and need for new divorce law. Bedny, like Bezdomny, was a “proletarian” poet whose poems were in line with Lunacharsky’s conception of the role of art as an ideological weapon. However, “быт” was also a frequent topic and target of attack for the avant-garde artists who also sought to transform everyday experience through new forms and new ways of seeing, considering the “old быт” as drudgery, kitsch, or the domain of the petty bourgeois or “meshchanstvo.”³⁸ Svetlana Boym quotes a poem by Nikolay Zabolotsky, a poet associated with

³⁷ Lunacharsky, “О Быте.”

³⁸ “Meschanstvo” [мещанство] is another word that could be added to the lexicon of words that are hard to translate. One translation is “philistinism,” but there is a class component intrinsic to the term, as мещанин means a “tradesman.”

the avant-garde group OBERIU, titled “Novy Быт,” with the lines “The New Быт is at the door./the baby is big and well-groomed/he sits in the cradle like a Sultan.” Boym points out the religious symbolism of the poem, where “new быт” is likened to a “kind of a miracle baby, whose iconography reminds us of an atheistic baby Christ.”³⁹ Perhaps the most famous invocation of the stultifying effect of everyday life was Mayakovsky’s line “love boat has crashed against the быт” [Любовная лодка разбилась о быт] from his suicide note. For Futurist theoretician Sergei Tretyakov, in the words of scholar Aleksandar Flaker, *быт* represented “stale taste...so that the attack of futurism on the aesthetic taste was only a detail of a general emerging attack on *быт* [устойчивый вкус...так что удар футуризма по эстетическому вкусу был лишь деталью общего намечавшегося удара по быту].”⁴⁰

While the iconography of “Novy Быт” permeated poetry, visual arts, and literary theory, a singular role in transforming habits and everyday life was given, particularly by Bolshevik officials and other Soviet ideologues, to cinema. Lenin’s purported statement that “for us cinema is the most important art”⁴¹ is only one of many proclamations by Bolshevik leaders about the potential of cinema as an ideological and pedagogical tool. In the article titled “On Vodka, The Church, and Cinema,” Trotsky elevates the importance of cinema due to its ability to “amuse” and generate feeling, in addition to its ability to educate.

The longing for amusement, distraction, sight-seeing, and laughter is the most legitimate desire of human nature. We are able, and indeed obliged, to give the satisfaction of this desire a higher artistic quality, at the same time making amusement a weapon of collective education, freed from the guardianship of the pedagogue and the tiresome habit of moralizing. The most important weapon in this respect, a weapon excelling any other,

³⁹ Boym, *Common Places*, 33.

⁴⁰ Aleksandar Flaker. “Быт,” (Russian Literature 19, no. 1 (1986): 1-13), 2.

⁴¹ In the original Russian: “Из всех искусств для нас важнейшим является кино.” The frequently quoted statement comes from the reminiscences of Lunacharsky in the article “Conversation with V.I. Lenin about cinema [Беседа с В. И. Лениным о кино] published in 1925. Anatoly Lunacharsky, “Beseda s V.I. Leninim o Kino [Беседа с В.И. Лениным о Кино в 1922 г.]” in Болтянский Г. Ленин и кино. М.—Л., 1925, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/o-kino/beseda-s-v-i-leninym-o-kino/>

is at present the cinema. This amazing spectacular innovation has cut into human life with a successful rapidity never experienced in the past.⁴²

There is a clear parallel in this statement to the claim by Lunacharsky from “Он Был” quoted earlier about the role of art to “help us feel our objectives.” Trotsky, like Lunacharsky, underscores the importance of the senses and the sensual realm to film and its ability to impact the audience. This discussion between what became known as the debate between “entertainment” and “enlightenment” in the role of cinema is one of the main topics of the next chapter. For now, in order to show just how intertwined cinema was with the ideological push toward transformation of everyday life private space, I would like to take a short detour to discuss what is considered the first film made in the Soviet Union and one very much relevant to the topic of this dissertation: *Uplotnenie*[Уплотнение], from 1918, with none other than Anatoly Lunacharsky himself as one of the screenwriters and producers.

Uplotnenie – The Film (1918)

Uplotnenie was made in 1918 in Saint Petersburg by the newly formed Petrograd cinema-committee (Петроградский кинокомитет).⁴³ The circumstances in which the film was made were not ideal, and as film historian and critic Pyotr Bagrov puts it, the people who worked on the film did so almost by happenstance. Anatoly Lunacharsky, who has a cameo at the beginning of the film, co-wrote the script, while the direction of the film was taken up by three people, all former actors of the Alexandrinsky Theater: Alexander Pantelev, Anatoliy Dolinov, and Donat Pashkovsky. While Pantelev had some experience making films, the other two co-directors had

⁴² Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life*, 32.

⁴³ The Petrograd committee was formed following the nationalization of the Skobelevsky Committee, formed in 1904, and would eventually turn into Lenfilm. See А. Н Поздников., “Ленфильм История Киностудия, 1914,” Last accessed June 16, 2022, <https://www.lenfilm.ru/studio/history/>

worked primarily in theater or theater administration.⁴⁴ The film was shot in the offices of the Petersburg-cinema committee in only a couple of days, with old equipment, reflecting the state of Soviet cinema at this period.

Uplotnenie was one of the three films produced and released at the same time -- the other two were *Восстание* [Uprising] and *Сказ о попе Панкрате, тетке Домне и явленной иконе в Коломне* [Tale of priest Pankrat]. All three films belong to the genre of *agitki* [агитки], propagandistic films that began to be produced during the Civil War and continued in the years immediately after the revolution.⁴⁵ *Agitki* developed under the influence of short “chronicles” that reflected the immediate issues of the day and combined different kinds of genres. The main goal of such films was propaganda, as they usually sought to illustrate and promote a slogan or a political position. As the authors of the *History of Soviet Cinema* describe it:

Short in running time and politically relevant in their content, the titles of *agitki* proclaimed this or that slogan, and illustrated it with a series of scenes performed by actors. These scenes were united by a kind of a “plot-proof.”

Небольшие по метражу, политические актуальные по содержанию агитки, провозгласив в названии тот или иной лозунг, иллюстрировали его рядом сцен, разыгранных актерами. Эти сцены объединились неким ‘сюжетом-доказательством.’⁴⁶

In an *agitka* the plot was secondary, serving as a mere illustration of a particular message. As a result, many of these films often lapsed into (or drew from) melodrama in order to get across their message. “Melodrama imbued the plot of an agitfilm to a great degree [Мелодраматизм в значительной мере окрашивал действие агитфильма],” write the authors of the *History of Soviet Cinema*, pointing out that soon after the production of *Uplotnenie*, at the

⁴⁴ Vagrov, Pytr. “Фильм Уплотнение,” Арзамас, Last accessed 12, 2022, <https://arzamas.academy/materials/562>. See also X. Абул Касымова et al. *История Советского Кино, 1917-1969*, Том 1 (Москва: Искусство, 1969), 69-71.

⁴⁶ *История Советского Кино*, 69.

initiative of Maxim Gorky, *Narkompros* announced a contest for melodramas, explaining their social and political usefulness:

Since melodrama is built on psychological primitivism – on the simplification of emotions and relationships between the actors – it is desirable that authors distinctly and clearly underline their sympathies or antipathies toward this or that hero.

[...] так как мелодрама строится на психологическом примитивизме - на упрощении чувств и взаимоотношений действующих лиц -- желательно, чтобы авторы определенно и ясно подчеркивали свои симпатии или антипатии к тому или иному герою.

The authors of the history conclude: “Particularities of melodrama allowed for the arrangement of social forces to be revealed ‘distinctly and clearly’ on the scene and the screen [Особенности мелодрамы позволяли ‘определенно и ясно’ выявить расстановку социальных сил на сцене и экране].”⁴⁷

Uplotnenie reflects this approach, concocting a melodramatic story about the supposed advantages of the new housing policy. The plot centers around an older chemistry professor who, due to *uplotnenie*, is forced to take into his large apartment a metal worker and his daughter who live in poverty in the basement of the building. The professor and his younger son accept the newcomers wholeheartedly, while the professor’s wife and the older son (described as a “yunker” [“юнкер”], suggesting tsarist sympathies and potential counter-revolutionary alliances, as yunker was a military rank in the tsarist army) resent the changes, with the older son actively plotting against the new order. Ultimately, this plot is thwarted, and the story ends with the arrest of the older son while everyone else lives happily ever after, with the professor lecturing in the workers’ hall and the younger son marrying the metal worker’s daughter. Each character is meant to be defined “distinctly and clearly [определенно и ясно]” and the average viewer of the

⁴⁷ Ibid. 71.

film should not have any doubts about the benefits of *uplotnenie*. The film’s poster reflects this interpretation, featuring a drawing of the professor and the worker in a friendly embrace, with the slogan “Workers of the World, Unite!” (Figure 1)



Figure 1: The poster for the film *Uplotnenie* (1918)

While this description of the plot adequately sums up the main storyline, watching the film today, it is not so easy to discern the narrative, and often what stands out is the formal approach of the film. This is partly the case because the film has not been preserved in its entirety. Of the original 57 minutes only 30 remain; the extant copy is also in negative format, which means that it lacks intertitles.⁴⁸ However, the scenes that remain provide a good indication of both the subject matter and the formal composition, and in the following pages I would like to point out a few notable aspects that are important for Soviet cinema of the 1920s, especially comedies that I discuss later in the dissertation.

⁴⁸ Вагров, “Фильм Уплотнение.”

The first is that the melodramatic approach to *agiki* as seen in *Uplotnenie* reflects in an early form what would be known as the “entertainment” position in the so-called “entertainment-enlightenment” debate of the 1920s, namely the view that propagandistic films should be accessible to the masses and rely on simple narratives. One of the main proponents of this view was Lunacharsky himself, whose screenplays and writings on cinema tried to steer Soviet film production in this direction. What is interesting in *Uplotnenie* is that the film often fails to utilize all the elements of melodrama for maximum effect. This is understandable due to the limited resources and know-how and is particularly apparent in the shot composition and editing. The film consists primarily of medium to medium-wide shots, shot with a static camera, with almost no use of close-ups or change of camera position, even in dialogue scenes where reaction scenes are important. On the other hand, one effect of such wide shots is that each space is clearly legible, and, in addition to the costumes and outward appearance, becomes the main means of defining the difference between the social positions of the two main characters, the professor and the worker. From the beginning of the film, the spaces occupied by the professor are lavish and open (Figures 2 and 3), while the spaces associated with the worker and his daughter are cramped and small (Figure 4).



Figure 2: Professor at dinner with his family



Figure 3: The bedroom in Professor's apartment



Figure 4: The worker in his room in the basement.

In their analysis of the film, sociologists Anna Novikova and Oksana Timofeeva emphasize this role of space as a means of characterization, writing:

Rooms with big ceilings...full of items of everyday life of the educated class – writing desk in the office, books, papers, dining table in the dining room, at which the wife and adult children gather, table cloths, utensils, dishes, palms in tubs – this is a whole world which strange people walk into – the worker and his daughter, moved from the basement.

Комнаты с высокими потолками...наполненные предметами быта образованного сословия – письменный стол в кабинете, книги, бумаги, обеденный стол в столовой, за которым собираются жена и взрослые сыновья, салфетки, приборы, посуда, пальмы в кадках...-- это целый мир в который входят чужие люди -- рабочий и его дочь, переселенные из подвала.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Анна Новикова и Оксана Тимофеева, “Экранные герои в контексте литературной традиции: от кино к видеограм,” in *Литература в зеркале медиа, часть 2*, (ГИИ, 2016), 42.

Another important aspect *Uplotnienie* shares with both popular and avant-garde films of the 1920s is the documentary quality of many of the scenes, which is common to early cinema and its focus on “actualities.” While the majority of scenes in *Uplotnienie* take place in theatrically staged interiors, a small minority was shot on location, on the streets of Moscow or Petrograd, giving the films a naturalistic, documentary feel and a kind of authenticity, despite the heavy-handed subject matter and melodramatic execution. These documentary flourishes would be influential for the cinema of the 1920s, both for the avant-garde and experimental productions that defined this period, as well as for the popular comedy films, often featuring city scenes shot on location.

The first such moment is the beginning of the film. The film opens with a shot of Anatoly Lunacharsky as himself, sitting at a desk, looking at and signing what are ostensibly government documents, before self-consciously turning and smiling at the camera. The intent of this cameo by Lunacharsky is not clear, though one can interpret Lunacharsky’s appearance as a means of providing a stamp of official authority to the film, much like the stamp on the film poster (Figure 5).

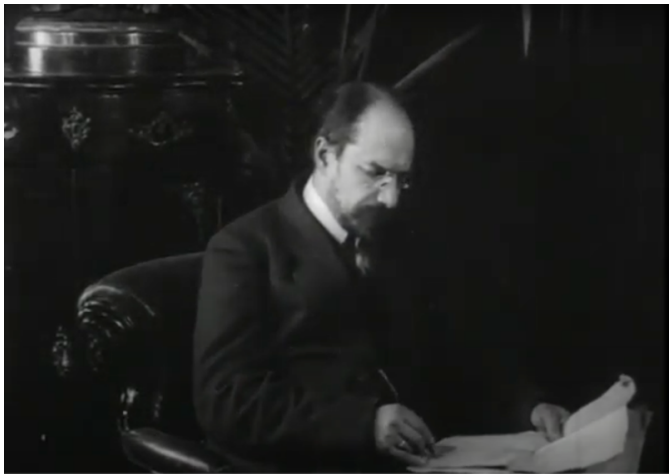


Figure 5: Lunacharsky at work in the first few frames of the film

The circumstances under which the film was made provide insight into the early days of Soviet cinema and the attitudes of the film's creators toward the policy of *uplotnenie*. Though he would later move to a large apartment, at the time the film was produced Lunacharsky lived in cramped quarters, in "a squalid little flat off a nauseating staircase in the Army and Navy House opposite Muruzi House," as the writer Kornei Chukovsky put it in his diary.⁵⁰ In addition, as Chukovsky notes, despite offices at both the Winter Palace and the Commissariat of Education, people often came by to see Lunacharsky at home with various petitions, clearly ignoring the sign on the door proclaiming "I receive no one here," to the "horror of [Lunacharsky's] irascible servant, who rages each time the bell rings: "Can't you read?" "It's all so chaotic, good-natured, and naïve that it seems a comedy-act,"⁵¹ concludes Chukovsky in his diary.

Thus, at least during this period, it would appear that Lunacharsky practiced what he preached in his scenario for *Uplotnenie*, with certain scenes in the film -- such as the professor advising and receiving workers at home, or the housekeeper complaining about the visits -- seemingly drawn from real life, at least as described by Chukovsky. In the same entry Chukovsky also points out Lunacharsky's excessive readiness to help. "There is nothing he likes more than to do somebody a favor," writes Chukovsky, adding that "he pictures himself an omnipotent, benevolent being, dispensing bliss to all: Be so good, be so kind as to... He writes letters of recommendation for everyone signing each, with a flourish, Lunacharsky. He dearly loves his signature..."⁵² The character of Professor Khrustin, played by Dmitriy Leshchenko (an actual chemistry professor, photographer, and the future head of the State Committee for

⁵⁰ Kornei Chukovsky. *Diary, 1901-1969* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 37.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 36.

Cinematography),⁵³ has similar qualities of generosity and willingness to help. In drawing this ideal version of “conversion” to the new Soviet reality, Lunacharsky may have taken many of his own attitudes and his personality. Such an eagerness to help and be a benefactor to all also may help explain the cameo at the beginning of the film in which Lunacharsky appears center stage, and in a depiction that Chukovsky would find amusing, again signing documents, “with a flourish.” Thus, while the film’s simplistic narrative about *uplotnenie* and its purported benefits draw on the conventions of the *agitki*, this simplicity and naivete that characterizes the story may also reflect Lunacharsky’s own attitude and personality during this early period of Soviet history. Such simplicity seemed to have been short-lived, as only a few years later, Lunacharsky’s lifestyle, like the lifestyle of many Bolshevik dignitaries, would be characterized by luxury, especially with respect to living space. In 1924 he moved to a larger apartment where Lunacharsky and his wife held a salon for writers and artists.⁵⁴

⁵³ One of Leshchenko’s most notable “assignments” in early Soviet history is as Lenin’s photographer during the Bolshevik leader’s period of hiding in a “shalash” (tent) following the February Revolution. Leshchenko took Lenin’s photograph and created a fake passport, experience which he described in a 1927 article in *Ogonyok* titled “Как я снимал Ленина в подполье.” *Огонек*, н. 44, 1927, Last accessed June 15, 2022, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/bio/kak-a-snimal-lenina-v-podpole/>

⁵⁴ Vadim Erlihman, “Красный Говорун,” *Родина*, Oct. 6, 2015. Last accessed June 16, 2022, <https://rg.ru/2015/10/06/rodina-govorun.html>

CHAPTER 2: Beyond Montage: Boris Barnet and the Spaces of Early Soviet Comedy

Introduction

Although the NEP period in Soviet cinema is known primarily for the influential contributions of such avant-garde visionaries as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, the most watched and widely debated films of the time were light-hearted, “entertainment” films, largely comedies, inspired by Hollywood productions. As Denise Youngblood points out in her study *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s*, it was this popular and “forgotten” cinema, along with foreign films – and not the experimental cinema of Eisenstein, Vertov and Pudovkin – that made up the majority of films shown in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, effectively keeping the nascent film industry alive. As Youngblood concisely puts it: “Soviet audiences did not go to movies for art and education, but for entertainment.”⁵⁵ The widespread popularity of what, for many state officials and filmmakers, were considered to be trivial works of entertainment and a “corrupting” influence of the capitalist West, generated a heated debate about the role of cinema in Soviet society following the revolution. The crux of the debate, argues Youngblood, was the following question: Should cinema be a tool of “enlightenment” or “entertainment”? For much of the 1920s, answers to this question oscillated between two general views: that of the “enlighteners,” including avant-garde filmmakers such as Eisenstein, as well as supporters of “proletarian” art, who held that cinema should serve as a tool of ideological propaganda and education of the masses; and the “entertainers,” who counted among their ranks Ilya Tranin and Anatoly Lunacharsky, whose position was that films should, first and foremost, be accessible to large audiences in order to be able to communicate an

⁵⁵ Denise J. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses : Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5.

educational or ideological message. While all arts entered a period of reassessment in the 1920s, cinema occupied a privileged place as a mass medium and a potential weapon of propaganda. Lenin had purportedly proclaimed that "the cinema is for us the most important art," yet as late as 1927 the "enlightenment-entertainment" debate continued even among the staunchest supporters of the regime, highest party officials, and filmmakers, all the while popular films, the majority of them foreign productions, dominated the box office. The "enlightenment-entertainment" debate would end with the Party Conference on Cinema Affairs in March of 1928, which heralded the cultural revolution in the cinema industry and the implementation of what would become known as "Socialist Realism" in 1934⁵⁶. The result was the birth of a new kind of popular cinema that could be described as "traditional in form, ideological in content," exemplified by such films as Grigory Alexandrov's *Volga, Volga* and *Circus*. These films, unlike the popular cinema of the 1920s, eschewed formal experimentation and critique of Soviet reality, instead drawing on spectacle and exploitation of tried and accessible Hollywood techniques. This new type of popular film would eclipse the experiments that defined the popular cinema of the NEP period, a cinema that strove to find new "organic" forms to address and engage with the transformative and turbulent era of NEP.

This chapter reexamines this "forgotten" strand of early Soviet cinema, using two films by Boris Barnet (1902 - 1965), *Girl with a Hatbox* [Девушка с коробкой] and *House on the Trubnaya* [Дом на трубной], as case studies. Although often labeled by critics as entertainment and imitations of Hollywood, on the contrary, Barnet's films exemplify a different and unrecognized attempt to find a new means of representing and commenting on the transitional and transformative nature of the NEP period, in particular the reconfiguration of living space

⁵⁶ Youngblood, 48. The guidelines of Socialist Realism as the main doctrine in the arts were formally laid out by Zhdanov at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers.

following the implementation of the policy of *uplotnenie*. The key characteristic of Barnet's films is that, in contrast to the dominant theories of Soviet cinema of the period, they prioritize mise-en-scène over montage in order to address the dramatic changes during this period in the relationship between an individual and his or her physical space. Space in Barnet's films serves as a site of play, of sensory and affective release, resembling what Walter Benjamin in his writings on early cinema and slapstick has called *Spielraum*, or "room-for-play." Through such an approach, Barnet's films provide an opportunity to address the trauma and upheaval of *uplotnenie*, while also leaving "room" for improvisation and chance that the control and rigidity of montage (as well as the ruling ideology) does not allow.

In addition, through my analysis of Barnet's two comedies, I aim to provide a new perspective on the NEP period in Soviet cinema, and in particular the ambiguous and unstable attitude on the part of both filmmakers and the state about what a "Soviet comedy" should look like or could have been, had its development not been curtailed by the implementation of Socialist Realism. In order to do this, I briefly revisit the "enlightenment-entertainment" debate with the intent of showing that categorizing early Soviet comedies along a simple binary of "popular" and "avant-garde," is simplistic and unproductive. Barnet belongs to the same generation as the avant-garde filmmakers – born in 1902, he was only four years younger than Eisenstein – and like them, he searched for a new cinematic form to address the drastic changes of the NEP years. But because Barnet worked in popular, "low" genres, such as comedy and melodrama, which were associated in the post-revolutionary period almost exclusively with Hollywood and often dismissed by critics on that basis, he has failed to receive the full recognition of his contribution to Soviet cinema of the 1920s. In my analysis, I draw on the work of Miriam Hansen to examine the influence of Hollywood and American films in early Soviet

cinema, an influence that was transformative for not only popular genre films but also for the theories and practice of the Soviet avant-garde. In fact, it is the interaction and the constant tension between what would become known as the classical Hollywood style of continuity editing and new theories of Soviet montage that defines early Soviet comedy in its search to find a new, “organic” way of addressing the multifaceted and uncertain nature of the NEP era.

The Entertainers and the Enlighteners: A Reassessment

In *Movies for the Masses*, Denise Youngblood provides a good overview of the debate between “the enlighteners” and “the entertainers,” and in this section, as I did in the introduction, I draw largely on her account and conceptualization of the two sides of the debate before attempting to provide a more nuanced reading which attempts to move away from simple binaries of “entertainment” vs. “enlightenment,” or “popular” and “avant-garde.”⁵⁷

While the two sides of the debate, as Youngblood points out, were not coherent ideological camps, the two broad views had their most vocal supporters and ideological leaders. The “enlightenment” faction consisted of avant-garde artists and critics such as Eisenstein and Vertov as well as the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros)’s Main Committee on Political Education (Glavpolitprosvet) and the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP). Although these groups had differing views on many aesthetic and political issues, they shared the same negative attitude toward the so-called “entertainment film”: Glavpolitprosvet activists saw “entertainment films as incompatible with the aims of a socialist society,” while the avant-garde believed that their films should “raise the artistic consciousness of the masses and

⁵⁷ For more on the “enlightenment – enlightenment” debate see also Gérin, *Devastation and Laughter: Satire, Power, and Culture in the Early Soviet State, 1920s-1930s*, (Toronto ; Buffalo (N.Y.): University of Toronto Press, 2018), 102-104.

deplored the continued ‘narcotic’ influence of the pre-revolutionary and Western taste cultures on film audiences.”⁵⁸

The “entertainers,” on the other hand, were led by two prominent figures. The first, Iliia Tranin, held two high posts in the cinema industry: the administrator of the state film trust, Sovkino, and the chair of the Main Committee on Repertory (Glavrepertkom), which was responsible for film censorship. Consequently, “in these two positions...[Tranin] was uniquely placed to influence the direction of Soviet cinema.”⁵⁹ In an interesting twist, the second important “entertainer,” was none other than the Commissar for Enlightenment himself, Anatoly Lunacharsky. As discussed in the introductory chapter, Lunacharsky had a keen interest in film and other arts, which, Youngblood claims, was partly encouraged by his marriage to actress Natalia Rozenel, but which also stemmed from Lunacharsky’s own cinematic and literary aspirations.⁶⁰ In addition to writing for the theater, Lunacharsky also wrote screenplays. Indeed, a number of films in the twenties, including the previously discussed *Uplotnenie*, were based on his plays or screenplays. Furthermore, driven by economic as well as ideological concerns, Tranin and Lunacharsky played an important role in the revival of the “Russian” entertainment film amidst the struggling domestic film industry. As Youngblood puts it, the idea for “setting the industry right was straightforward: give the people what they want. Since audiences loved foreign films, if Soviet cinema were to survive Soviet directors would have to replicate the Western style.”⁶¹ Furthermore, Tranin saw the problem with agit-prop “enlightenment” films in

⁵⁸ Youngblood, 38-39

⁵⁹ Ibid, 42.

⁶⁰ Lunacharsky had a keen interest in cinema and his collection of articles about film was published as a book titled “About Cinema [О кино].” Луначарский, Анатолий. *Луначарский о кино: статьи, высказывания, сценарии, документы*. Москва: Издательство Искусство, 1965.

⁶¹ Ibid.

their “crude ideology and ‘incomprehensible form’ which was inaccessible to the general audience. Although this was not a new complaint, the fact that Tranin and Lunacharsky held such important positions in the Soviet hierarchy meant that they could exert a strong influence in film production.

As a result, under the aegis of Sovkino and led largely by Tranin, the Soviet film industry transformed between 1925 and early 1928. In the words of Youngblood, “the new Soviet film culture was directed toward the middle classes in the major urban centers and concentrated on foreign films and domestic hits. Film-lovers could choose among dozens of lively films which showed them the world and entertained them at the same time.”⁶² The number of “entertainment” films increased dramatically between 1925 and 1928. This “victory” for the “entertainers” would not go unchallenged, however, reflecting the broader debate at the time about the purpose of NEP and the degree to which it had deviated from the initial aims of the revolution. The outcry against Sovkino and Tranin would come from many different sides: the Glavprolitprosvet and other proletarian factions who demanded educational and “practical” films that would be shown to workers and peasants rather than “bourgeois” audiences in cities, and, of course, the avant-garde. After being fired by Sovkino for going over budget on his film *One-Sixth of the World*, Dziga Vertov complained that he was “at the mercy of ‘specialists in the lace on Mary Pickford’s pantaloons.’”⁶³ The debate would end conclusively in March 1928 and the Party Conference on Cinema Affairs and the implementation of the doctrine of Socialist Realism, which harnessed cinema in support of the Five Year Plan and greater goals of “class struggle.”⁶⁴ Sovkino,

⁶² Youngblood, 43.

⁶³ Quoted in Youngblood, 46.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

responsible for many of the entertainment productions, was abolished in 1930 and replaced with Soiuzkino, with Boris Shumatzky at the helm. Although, as Youngblood points out, this was something of a pyrrhic victory for the "enlighteners," as the innovation and experimentation that characterized the avant-garde faction led by Eisenstein and Vertov, would be banned as "formalist."

While Youngblood's narrative provides a good overview of the ideological debates in Soviet film production during the 1920s before the implementation of Socialist Realism, it nonetheless relies on a simple binary distinction between "popular" and "avant-garde" (or "entertainment" and "enlightenment") which belies the multifaceted and intensely innovative environment that characterized the NEP period in Soviet cinema. This period was a complex and collaborative "factory," to use the metaphor employed by Viktor Shklovsky, in which modernist and staunchly "formalist" writers, actors, and visual artists worked side by side, collaborating on all aspects of film production, from scenarios to set design, on both "popular" and "avant-garde" films.⁶⁵ The result of this collaboration was that the most "popular" films, often dismissed as mere imitations of Hollywood, experimented with the latest formal innovations and attempted to apply the newest theoretical principles of montage.⁶⁶ Moreover, as I will soon address in greater detail, rather than having its own parallel "popular" history, Hollywood films played a transformative role in the development of the avant-garde itself. Indeed, it was primarily through studying and engaging with not only the formal components of Hollywood films, particularly

⁶⁵ An example of such collaboration is Protazanov's film *Aelita*, which features Constructivist set designs and costumes by Aleksandra Ekster.

⁶⁶ In her book "Fourth Rome", scholar Katerina Clark makes a similar argument, pointing out that the USSR and its cultural institutions were in close dialogue with the western art forms. See Clark, Katerina. *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011.

continuity editing, but also their “popular” features and “low-art” genres, like the detective serial and slapstick, that theoreticians of the Soviet avant-garde, such as Lev Kuleshov, developed their influential theories of montage. This influence is easily detected in Kuleshov’s early writings on film theory and editing and would also be displayed in practice in his first film, *The Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, which draws from Hollywood genres and themes of the detective serial and slapstick comedy, both employing and upturning the formal techniques pioneered by such films.

Given this influence and close relationship between popular Hollywood films and the major theories and practice of the Soviet avant-garde, I argue that it is crucial to move away from binary distinctions based on broad categories. Indeed, a key aspect missing from Youngblood’s overview is the relationship between modernism and popular media, especially cinema. As scholar Miriam Hansen argues in her work on early cinema and modernity, the history of modernism and avant-garde does not exclude popular forms. On the contrary, cinema in its early years was seen as synonymous with modernity; it was a new technological advance capable of representing and reflecting the modern experience in all its complexity. It did so not only by depicting the shocks in perception and fragmentation that characterized the new age of industrialization and modernization, but also by forging new sensory and affective horizons and creating new subjects that, for Hansen, came to constitute a new public sphere. This “vernacular” kind of modernism was a key feature of Hollywood, enabling it to become a global phenomenon which transcends borders and subsumes national differences. This second aspect of Hollywood’s

influence and popularity, one based not on formal or genre conventions, but on reception and affect, is crucial in understanding the development of popular cinema during NEP.⁶⁷

Thus, in order to examine and understand Barnet's two films and early Soviet "popular" cinema more generally, it is important to consider them in light of this view of "vernacular" modernism and the role of Hollywood in the development of Soviet cinema. Such a reorientation provides an opportunity to rescue these works from the critiques of being merely frivolous entertainment, especially in contrast with the avant-garde works that came to define this era of Soviet film history. Moreover, through a closer analysis of the relationship between Hollywood and Soviet cinema of the 1920s, especially popular comedies, one can attempt to parse out the organically "Soviet," "non-Hollywood" features of these films, the most important of which, I argue, is the engagement with and critique of the new social reality, and in particular, the reconfiguration of the private sphere through the policy of *uplotnenie*.

The Cure for "Americinitis": Hollywood, Soviet Cinema, and Vernacular Modernism

The impact of foreign films, especially Hollywood productions, on Soviet cinema and the movie-going public during the 1920s was considerable. Denise Youngblood writes that during this period a "cult of foreign films" took over Soviet cinemas, a cult perceived as a threat due not only to its financial impact on the development of domestic film production, but also to the supposedly corrupt capitalist and bourgeois values that many Soviet officials and filmmakers from the "enlightenment" camp saw in these films. This "invasion from the West" became known by the pejorative term *inostranshchina*, or, in reference to the popularity of American

⁶⁷ Hansen, Miriam. "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism." *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999).

films, *americanshchina*. Although it is understandable why foreign films, especially American ones, would be perceived as a dangerous influence on the public by the state officials, what proved puzzling was their widespread popularity among Soviet audiences. Why did domestic Soviet audiences, the majority of them supposedly good workers and communists, prefer foreign capitalist films to those made by Soviet studios? In particular, as Youngblood puts it, “[w]hy was it that of all foreign films, American films in particular enjoyed such broad appeal, effortlessly cutting across cultural and class boundaries?”⁶⁸ These questions troubled not only party demagogues and state officials, but also filmmakers and critics involved in the production and development of Soviet films that tried to compete with Hollywood.

One attempt at providing an answer is Lev Kuleshov's 1922 article from Constructivist journal *Kino-Fot* titled “Американщина” or “Americanitis.” Kuleshov begins his short piece by acknowledging the widespread popularity of American films among Soviet audiences, yet denies the charge of many Soviet critics and officials that this phenomenon is merely the result of “decadence” or “poor tastes of the youth and the public of the third balcony” [...объясняют успех подобных картин необычайной развращенностью и плохими <вкусами> молодежи и публики третьих мест”].⁶⁹ Instead, Kuleshov argues that the popularity of American films, and detective genre in particular, stems from their construction, in which he discerns two main features. The first concerns the plot. “The fundamental element of the plot...[of a Hollywood film] is an intensity in the development of action [основным в сюжете является интенсивность в нарастании действия],” writes Kuleshov, which is characterized by the

⁶⁸ Youngblood, 55.

⁶⁹ L.V. Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film: Writings*, trans. by Ronald Levaco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 127. L.V. Kuleshov, “Американщина,” *Кино-фот*, n. 1, 1922, p. 14, available at <http://www.togdazine.ru/article/942>

maximum economy in the creation of each individual shot, leading to “the greatest number of scenes and the greatest impression with the least expenditure of film stock.”⁷⁰ In other words, every individual shot is constructed in such a way as to eliminate any movement or gesture extraneous to the plot. This, of course, is not a new idea, at least not in the context of dramatic form, yet in the cinema’s early history this principle of narrative construction was still in its infancy.

Kuleshov’s second point relates to the sequencing and juxtaposition of individual shots, and here Kuleshov discerns the beginnings of what would become known as classical Hollywood continuity editing. Thus, in addition to the maximum economy applied to the construction of individual shots, it is how these shots are then gathered together that matters the most -- they are juxtaposed and edited sequentially in such a way as to maximize the impact of each component part as it follows the previous one. This type of editing, conceived as the building of the film "brick by brick" toward a desired emotional impact, is the main technique, according to Kuleshov, that propels the plot in American films and captures and holds the audience's attention. As a result of this type of editing “[t]he public especially ‘feels’ American films [в особенности публика чувствует американские картины],” adding that “[w]hen there is a clever maneuver by the hero, a desperate pursuit, a bold struggle, there is such excited whistling, howling, whooping, and intensity that interested figures leap from their seats [при удачном маневре героя, при отчаянной погоне, при смелой борьбе подымается в третьих местах такой восторженный свист, вой, гиканье и напряженные, заинтересованные фигуры вскакивают со своих мест].”⁷¹ Consequently, Kuleshov claims, speaking now about the lessons that Soviet filmmakers could draw from these films, “[w]e must seek the organization of

⁷⁰ Ibid, 128, original 14.

⁷¹ Ibid, 127, original 14.

cinematography not in the limitations of the exposed shot, but in the alternation of these shots [организующее начало кинематографа надо искать не в пределах заснятого куска, а в смене этих кусков].”⁷² This sentence succinctly expresses the main tenet of Kuleshov's theory of film -- that montage is the essence of cinema -- which he would “prove” in his famous experiment, and which, though with variations, would define early Soviet film theory. The development of Kuleshov’s theory thus owes much to his study of Hollywood films; indeed, he was one of the first to notice that American films had developed and exploited the possibilities of montage, and this, not some kind of bourgeois decadence and depravity, is primarily responsible for their successful reception among Soviet audiences.⁷³

Kuleshov’s article raises a crucial point about the impact of American cinema on the development of Soviet film production: the educational and formative influence of Hollywood on major Soviet filmmakers and theorists. Far from denigrating Hollywood films as frivolous entertainment, which was a common response by many Soviet critics and officials, Kuleshov instead considers these works "classics" that should be studied by the beginner Soviet filmmakers and theorists who have much to learn from them. In fact, he points out that the pejorative label of *americanshchina* is the result of a view of Hollywood as undeserving of being a serious object of study and attention, and instead as something “anti-artistic” and mere popular entertainment. “[O]ur opponents label research in the cinema by the word “anti-artistic,”

⁷² Ibid. 129, original 14.

⁷³ Denise Youngblood misses the point somewhat when she writes that for Kuleshov the basic reason for the success of American movies was that they "depended on action to attract viewer interest" (Youngblood, 55). While the importance of action is certainly one aspect, as discussed above, the broader issue is the construction of the films and their use of montage. Youngblood is correct however, when she points out that American films were "more visually interesting and emotionally appealing than the typical Soviet film," and this emotional appeal is one component of "vernacular modernism" discussed earlier.

Kuleshov writes, "which to them means – “Americanitis” [наши враги определяют искания в кино словом «анти-художественного» для них значения – американщиной].⁷⁴ This association of Hollywood with something not artistic, not innovative, is simply wrong, Kuleshov argues; on the contrary, it was through engaging with and studying Hollywood films that major Soviet filmmakers, Kuleshov himself among them, developed their theories of film and montage. Paradoxically perhaps, this ultimately resulted in the avant-garde, modernist works of Eisenstein and others.

Kuleshov’s discussion of the role of Hollywood echoes Youngblood’s binary distinction between the so-called “popular” and “avant-garde” films, which Kuleshov attempts to dismantle. He differs from his peers, including Eisenstein, on many theoretical issues, but an important takeaway from Kuleshov’s discussion of Hollywood and Soviet cinema, or, "popular" vs. "modernist" films, is the notion that formal innovation must be divorced from being associated solely with avant-garde cinema.⁷⁵ Indeed, Kuleshov's article underscores that it was through an encounter with American “classics” and their formal innovations that Soviet film came into its own. Or, as Miriam Hansen succinctly puts it, “one might say that Russian cinema became Soviet cinema by going through a process of Americanization.”⁷⁶

Yet, does Hollywood continuity editing fully explain the enormous appeal of American films among Soviet audiences? At this juncture it is helpful to return to Hansen's work on modernism and reception, as it provides a useful means of historicizing and unpacking this

⁷⁴ Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, 129. Original 15.

⁷⁵ Kuleshov himself alludes to this division when he refers to his critics as those who consider American films to be "anti-artistic"

⁷⁶ Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," 61.

"process of Americanization," which was (and continues to be) a global phenomenon, one not exclusive to the Soviet Union. In her well-known article "Vernacular Modernism: The Mass Production of the Senses," Hansen attempts to answer the same question as Youngblood and Kuleshov: what explains the widespread popularity of Hollywood films around the world and their adaptability to diverse local contexts? Hansen uses the Soviet context as her first example, pointing out, much like Youngblood and Kuleshov, that American films were extremely popular among Soviet audiences while also playing an influential role in the development of what would become Soviet avant-garde cinema and its theories of montage. However, while Hansen acknowledges the formal influence of Hollywood films on modernist works of Soviet cinema, she goes further, breaking down the distinction between "popular" and "avant-garde" not only along the lines of form, but also reception and affect. In delineating these two aspects, Hansen draws on Yuri Tsivian's distinction between two kinds of "Americanism" in Soviet cinema: the first, "classical" kind, centers around stylistic borrowings of such formal methods as continuity editing, as discussed above in relation to Kuleshov's article, while the second is defined by a fascination with "lower genres" of Hollywood films, such as adventure serials, detective thrillers, and slapstick comedies. Thus, Hansen writes, "[i]f the former kind of Americanism aspired to formal standards of narrative efficiency, coherence, and motivation, the latter was concerned with external appearance, the sensual, material surface of American films; their use of exterior locations; their focus on action and thrills, physical stunts and attractions; their tempo, directness, and flatness; their eccentricity and excess of situations over plot."⁷⁷ Consequently, in addition to acknowledging the formal influence of American films on Soviet cinema – the first type of Americanism – one must also stress their other quality, the "sensual" impact. This, for Hansen, is

⁷⁷ Ibid.

the vernacular aspect of modernism inherent in popular cinema, including Soviet “entertainment” films, which were inspired by Hollywood productions.

Hansen argues that a major reason for the success of Hollywood films around the world and for their ability to adapt to different local contexts, including the Soviet Union, is that these films offered “something like the first global vernacular,” an “idiom” that successfully articulated the experience of modernity and offered to the viewers of these films a reflection of this experience. This type of “vernacular modernism,” as Hansen terms it, produced a “new sensorium” and opened up “a new horizon” for processing this experience. Hansen draws on the notion of “reflexivity” in the work of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Krakauer which posits cinema as a new kind of public sphere “in which the traumatic effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated.” For Hansen, this public sphere not only expanded the viewers’ social horizon of experience but provided “a discursive form in which individual experience could be articulated and find recognition by both subjects and others, including strangers.”⁷⁸ The encounter between modernity and cinema is thus as much an affective and subjective experience of modernity as it is a question of formal experimentation and innovation.

Though he focuses primarily on the first kind, a similar distinction between the two types of Americanism also appears in Kuleshov’s “Americanitis” essay. While the success of Hollywood films is largely the result of formal composition and editing, i.e., the first type of Americanism, Kuleshov also acknowledges another factor that contributes to such an

⁷⁸ Hansen, 69.

enthusiastic and affective reaction by Soviet audiences (recall Kuleshov's statement quoted earlier that "people 'feel' American films"). "The success of American motion pictures,"

Kuleshov writes,

lies in the greatest common measure of film-ness, in the presence of maximum movement and in primitive heroism, in *an organic relationship to contemporaneity*⁷⁹ (my italics)

в наибольшей кинематографичности, в наличии максимума движения, в примитивном героизме, в органической связи с современностью."

The first part of this statement reiterates the formal features of American film and the role of movement discussed earlier - as Ronald Levaco points out, "film-ness" [кинематографичность] for Kuleshov was the term he coined for the basic law of cinema, defined by montage⁸⁰ - yet the last phrase is curious: the claim that American films possess an "organic relationship to contemporaneity." American films, Kuleshov argues, are successful not only because of their formal and narrative qualities, but also because they reflect the experience of contemporaneity, and do so "organically." This statement is similar to Hansen's conception of vernacular modernism and the relationship between cinema and modernity. As Hansen puts it, this "reflexive dimension of Hollywood films in relation to modernity" is "anchored in sensory experience and sensational affect, in processes of mimetic identification that are more often than not partial and excessive in relation to narrative comprehension."⁸¹ In other words, the sensory and affective charge of American films, characterized by the films' ability to reflect and represent the complex experience of modernity and urbanism and provide new models of

⁷⁹ Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, 128.

⁸⁰ As Levaco puts it, "[Kuleshov] sought to identify the very 'material' of the cinema and reasoned that it must be the celluloid itself, not the photographic image. As music was the manipulation and ordering of sounds, and painting the application and ordering of pigments, cinema was quintessentially the ordering of strips of film. For Kuleshov that was the sine qua non - what he termed the "film-ness" of cinema" (Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, 7).

⁸¹ Hansen, "Mass Production of the Senses," 71.

identification and desire on screen, plays an equal, if not more important, role in Hollywood's success in the Soviet Union and around the world.

Thus, when discussing the role of Hollywood and its impact on Soviet cinema, especially popular films, it is important to acknowledge both aspects of Americanism: the formal and the affective. Indeed, in many cases, it is the sensory and affective quality, along with formal techniques, that many early Soviet domestic productions from Youngblood's "forgotten" cinema draw on when trying to "imitate" American films. This explains such films as *The Cigarette Girl of Mosselprom* or *The Kiss of Mary Pickford*. If many of these films seem like imitations of Hollywood productions, however, it is because they lack the "organic relationship with contemporaneity" stressed by Kuleshov. They do not engage the contemporary issues of the period, but merely rely on tropes and cheap tricks established by Hollywood, which are not endemic to the new Soviet reality. Indeed, this was the problem of comedy more generally in the Soviet Union following the revolution: how and at what should one laugh now that workers are in power? Writing about the state of Russian film in the March of 1927, Walter Benjamin brings up the same point. "Russian film can re-establish itself on firm ground only when Bolshevik society (and not just the state!) has become sufficiently stable to enable a new 'social comedy' to thrive, with new characters and typical situations,"⁸² claims Benjamin. This is what Boris Barnet attempts to accomplish by engaging the new *быт*, and in particular the housing shortage and communal living, in his two early films, *Girl with a Hat Box* and *House on the Trubnaya*.

⁸² Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 326. Originally published in *Die literarische Welt*, March 1927.

Boris Barnet and the Problem of Soviet Comedy

The films of Boris Barnet (1902 – 1965) are not widely known despite Barnet’s long career which began during the Golden Age of Soviet silent film and spanned through the sound era to the cinema of the Thaw. Even though Barnet’s most popular works, at least in the Soviet Union and Soviet film scholarship, are his early silent comedies, his sound films, in particular *У самого синего моря* (By the Bluest of Seas), *Окраина* (The Outskirts), and *Борец и Клоун* (The Wrestler and the Clown), would be cited by critics and filmmakers, including Andre Bazin and Jean-Luc Godard for their “lyrical” sequences and innovative use of mise-en-scène.⁸³ Although the focus of this chapter is Barnet’s early work, his later films, in spite of the constraints posed by Socialist Realism(which would contribute to the director’s disillusionment and eventual suicide in 1965) are worthy of closer study and critical attention.

Boris Barnet began his film career as an actor in the Kuleshov collective, debuting in the role of American cowboy Jeddy in Kuleshov’s first feature *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*. Prior to this, Barnet had worked as a boxing instructor at Glavosh (The Main Military School for the Physical Education of Workers) and it was at one of Barnet’s boxing matches that Barnet caught the attention of Lev Kuleshov and his wife, the actress Aleksandra Khokhlova, who, as Denise Youngblood puts it, was impressed by Barnet’s natural ability and “grace of movement,” and invited him to join their acting collective.⁸⁴

⁸³ For overviews of Barnet’s career see Bernard Eisenschitz, “A Fickle Man, or portrait of Boris Barnet as a Soviet Director,” in *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*. Edited by Ian Christie, et al. London ; New York: Routledge, 1994. Also, Julian Graffy, “This doubly accursed cinema,” in *A Companion to Russian Cinema*. Edited by Birgit Beumers, Chichester, West Sussex, UK ; Malden, MA, USA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

⁸⁴ Youngblood, 126-127.

Barnet's physical appearance fit Kuleshov's ideas about acting and movement, which were inspired by Meyerhold's bio-mechanics, and his boxer's physique and agility were at full display in Kuleshov's first feature, with Barnet performing most of the film's key stunts. Though Barnet would leave the Kuleshov collective shortly after their first collaboration, Kuleshov's ideas about acting would prove to be a major influence on Barnet's NEP comedies and their use of slapstick and physical comedy.⁸⁵

Barnet's first foray into directing was the 1925 detective serial *Miss Mend*, which he co-directed with Fedor Ozep. Barnet, who had written the script, was originally hired as an assistant, but proved to be more capable on set than Ozep and was quickly appointed to the position of co-director.⁸⁶ Featuring Barnet himself in one of the main roles, along with prominent actors of the period such as Vladimir Fogel and Igor Ilyinsky, the film is a three-part adventure serial featuring the titular *Miss Mend*, a typist and a union activist at an American cork company, played by Natalia Glan, and two reporters (played by Fogel and Barnet) along with a clerk at the factory where Miss Mend works (played by Ilyinsky) who foil a plot by evil "capitalists." An extremely popular film, surpassing Kuleshov's *Mr. West* at the box office, *Miss Mend* is, according to Denise Youngblood's analysis, "sheer escapist entertainment which drew heavily from the convention of German spy films and the acting style of American comedy."⁸⁷ Indeed, although the last part takes place in the Soviet Union, the three-part adventure serial relies

⁸⁵ Barnet's acting career would prove to be short-lived; he would have only a few more acting roles, appearing in two of his own films (*Miss Mend* and *the Secret Agent*) and Pudovkin's *Storm Over Asia*.

⁸⁶ Barnet, "How I Became a Director [Как я стал режисером]," Москва: Госкиноиздат, 1946, available at <https://chapaev.media/articles/5204>, also available [in French translation] in Albera, François, et al. *Boris Barnet : Écrits, Documents, Études, Filmographie*. Locarno [Switzerland]: Editions Du Festival International Du Film De Locarno, 1985, 36-40.

⁸⁷ Youngblood, 130.

heavily on tropes from popular foreign films of the time, with, to continue with Youngblood's description, its "revolving series of plots, subplots, and counterplots [that] provide ample opportunity for action - brawls, murders, car chases, body snatchings, and real 'cliff-hangers.'"⁸⁸ The influence of Hollywood, and especially the second type of Americanism -- the fascination with lower genres -- is obvious. In addition, as Marina Levitina points out, a significant aspect of the film is its positive portrayal of American citizens, especially women and in particular, Miss Mend herself. "Miss Mend's dynamism and agility," writes Levitina, "her independence and resolve, her ability to run, jump into moving cars, and lift up a wounded man" are qualities that not only make her similar to the "active female stars of American adventure serials," but also make Miss Mend "resemble the New Soviet Woman ideal of the 1920s."⁸⁹ While these qualities of Miss Mend, along with other features of "Americanism," help explain the film's reception among Soviet audiences, reflecting Miriam Hansen's argument discussed earlier, what is missing from the film is an engagement with the new Soviet reality. This is what Barnet would attempt to change with his second film and first solo-directing effort, *Girl with the Hatbox* (*Девушка с коробкой*) from 1927.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Marina L Levitina. *Russian Americans in Soviet Film : Cinematic Dialogues between the US and the USSR* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 96.



Figure 6: Poster for *Girl with a Hatbox*

Girl with the Hatbox tells the story of the title character, Natasha (played by Anna Sten), who lives with her father on the outskirts of Moscow, where she makes fashionable hats and sells them in the city at the store of Madame Irene, one of the new entrepreneurs, a “NEP woman.” The film shares many tropes with other works of cinema from this period, for example, the focus on the divide between the city and the provinces. Like Abram Room’s *Bed and Sofa*,⁹⁰ the film begins with a character leaving the provincial environment, in this case Natasha leaving her cottage in the country with her hatbox and going to Moscow on a train to drop off her hats at Madame Irene’s store. Many shots are taken from the moving train in a documentary fashion, reminiscent of many early films and their fascination with movement and attraction.⁹¹

⁹⁰ For a detailed analysis of *Bed and Sofa*, see Graffy, Julian. *Bed and Sofa : the Film Companion*. 1st ed. London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2001.

⁹¹ This early fascination with cinema as an attraction is examined in Tom Gunning’s essay “An Aesthetic of Astonishment : Early Film and the (in)credulous Spectator.” See Gunning, Tom. ““An Aesthetic of Astonishment : Early Film and the (in)credulous Spectator” in Braudy, Leo., and Marshall. Cohen. *Film Theory and Criticism : Introductory Readings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Much like *Bed and Sofa*, a key catalyst for the plot is the lack of housing space. On the train to Moscow, Natasha meets Ilya Snegurov [played by Nikolay Batalov] who, we learn, is also coming from the “deep provinces” [глухая провинция] to Moscow with the hopes of going to the “workers’ university.” [Рабфак] After an awkward “meet-cute” trying to find his way in a crowded train compartment, Ilya accidentally steps on Natasha’s hatbox. Though angry at him at first, Natasha later finds him sleeping in the train station, as he was not able to find housing in the city, and taking pity on him, tries to help. The viewer learns in the meantime in a scene at Madame Irene’s store that, seeking to keep the extra room in her apartment above the store for herself and her husband, and avoid the process of *uplotnenie*, Madame Irene has Natasha register as a tenant, even though Natasha never spends the night there. After seeing Ilya in the station without a roof over his head, Natasha decides that she should marry him formally so that he has the legal right to the room at Madame Irene’s. Understandably, this causes a conflict with Madame Irene and her husband, which comes to a head when Natasha and Ilya show up to reclaim her room, forcing Madame Irene and her husband to evacuate the room with all its furniture. A secondary plot concerns a winning lottery ticket, which Natasha is given by Madame Irene’s husband in lieu of payment for her hats, a plotline seemingly added solely to promote the government lottery, as an early intertitle of the film tells us.

In addition to employing conventional formal techniques, especially in terms of editing, the film exhibits some of the same features that made Hollywood films beloved around the world. The first is the character of *Girl with the Hatbox* herself, played by Anna Sten, who resembles a Hollywood star. In fact, Anna Sten who would be taken to Hollywood by Samuel Goldwyn in the 1930s as a potential new Greta Garbo. Natasha clearly stands apart from other

characters, both in her dress – her elegant hat and shawl, as well as her round, oversized hat box, appear out of place in almost every scene – but also in terms of casting and performance.

Natasha’s individuality is established in the opening sequences set in a little house outside of Moscow, in which she lives with her grandfather and which, though furnished as a rustic, peasant cottage, is strewn with modern, elegant hats. This incongruity between the fashionable star and the rural setting is exploited for comic effect in an early scene in which Natasha puts on one of her hats on her grandfather’s head, causing the grandfather, and presumably the audience, to laugh, before trying the hat on herself in front of a mirror.



Figure 7: Natasha (Anna Sten)'s reflection in the mirror.

The gesture of Natasha admiring herself in the mirror of the cottage with a fashionable accessory is a gesture that exemplifies the early cinema’s reflective and mimetic potential and its power over audiences, as discussed by Hansen. Not only is Sten beautiful and elegant, but a large part of this beauty and elegance comes from her clothes, and in particular the hat itself, which

appears to possess the power to transform an ordinary peasant girl into a star.⁹² Though this scene in itself is not groundbreaking, the fact that it takes place in a Soviet film, which, at least according to the “enlighteners,” is supposed to celebrate the workers rather than provide Western models of identification, points to the subversive qualities of “popular” cinema and the nature of NEP, especially when it comes to consumerism. Indeed, the film presents an ambiguous view of consumerism and of consumer products, and especially the hats sold at Madame Irene’s. Rather than indicting the consumerist drive that is often associated with the NEP period, the film instead employs new consumerist objects, such as the hat or the hat box, as signifiers of a new kind of sensibility and fascination with appearance or, conversely, as props and catalysts for laughter and play, as in the scene with the grandfather mentioned above. This new sensibility, characterized by instability and contradiction, reflects the hybrid nature of everyday life during NEP.

In an article in the journal *Soviet Screen* (Советский Экран) from March 1927, Barnet described *Girl with a Hatbox* as an attempt to create a “comedy of manners” embedded in the everyday [комедия нравов – бытовая].⁹³ A comedy of manners is usually characterized by portraying characters as representing different social types. Indeed, the issue of “typeage” was particularly fascinating to early Soviet film theorists and filmmakers such as Kuleshov and Pudovkin who considered it as the most important part of casting. Although Barnet did not agree with his teacher on this point and would move away from thinking of seeing an actor as a mere model or “натурщик,” *Girl with the Hatbox* does feature some types, and in particular, as is regrettably the case with many films from this period, the so-called NEPmen (and women).

While Natasha possesses a great degree of individuality, Madame Irene and her husband largely

⁹² This transformation also resembles a classic motif in folktales – the magical power of clothing to transform a peasant into a prince or a princess. It could potentially be seen as a way to appeal to peasant viewers.

⁹³ Boris Barnet, “Girl with the Hatbox [Девушка с коробкой], Советский экран, н. 12, 19 марта, 1927, available at <https://chapaev.media/articles/5209>

draw on the stereotype of the NEP entrepreneur: they are greedy and manipulative (cheating the system in order to keep an extra room and also not paying Natasha her proper wage), lazy, and overweight compared to the younger characters. This kind of characterization and, in general, Barnet's pronouncement that the film is a "comedy of manners," may lead one to see the delineation of types as the main form of satire; however, the social types and their positive/negative poles are not stable -- indeed, the housing inspectors are presented in much of a ridiculing light as the NEP-men, while Ilya, the closest the film comes to a proletarian hero, is a part of the fictitious marriage in order to get the room, thus, in his way also cheating the system.

While social types certainly play a role in the film, equally important is the treatment of other contemporary social issues. In the same article quoted above, Barnet emphasized the desire to find subject matter for the film that would lead to laughter *organically*, as a result of the inherent comedic elements of the situations themselves, rather than by relying on tried formulas or clichés. As Barnet puts it, "it was necessary to find comedic elements which would allow the possibility of showing whatever is funny as an organic part of what is happening."⁹⁴ [Нужно при организации материала находить комедийные элементы, которые дали бы возможность показывать смешное, как органическую часть происходящего]. This statement echoes the earlier observation by Lev Kuleshov and Walter Benjamin that the future of an authentic Soviet comedy lay in addressing the concerns and topics of the time. And indeed, the new *быт* provided Barnet, like it did other artists from the period, with a rich source of material from which to draw comedic elements. I have already discussed the role of consumerism and the social dynamics during the NEP era, but the issue at the heart of the film, and one that allows

⁹⁴ Barnet, "Girl with the Hatbox," 1927.

Barnet to develop his own style and depart from making Hollywood “imitations” is the reconfiguration of space through the policy of *uplotnenie* and its treatment through Barnet’s use of *mise-en-scène*.

Mise-en-scène remains an elusive concept in film studies. Inherited from the theater and lacking a stable definition, the term, whose literal meaning in French is “put onto the stage,” refers to all the elements in front of the camera, including actors, props, set design, and their arrangement. Adrian Martin refers to the classical definition of *mise-en-scène* as “the art of arranging, choreographing, and displaying...” or, in another formulation, as “the movement of *bodies in space* [original italics] – a space constantly defined and redefined by the camera.”⁹⁵ While the arrangement and staging of the actors on a set played an integral part in cinema from its inception, the emphasis on *mise-en-scène* as a purely cinematic quality and a crucial element of a film’s overall visual style, one not stemming from the script – and hence, not dependent on literature or theater – emerged primarily in post-World War II France with André Bazin, Alexandre Astruc, and other film critics associated with the influential journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. They advocated for a new kind of cinematic realism inspired by the Italian Neo-Realist movement and argued for a privileged place for a film’s director as the film’s primary author who – analogous to a literary writer – who employs the camera as a “pen” in Astruc’s famous formulation of the “camera-stylo” or “camera-pen.” These theorists emphasized the role of *mise-en-scène* as a key component in realizing a director’s creative vision, and as a bearer of his or her authorial style. It is through the director’s staging and organization of all the constitutive elements in front of the camera and capturing them at that particular moment that, in fact, constitutes the essence of cinema, its “magic.” As Adrian Martin puts it, the result of the

⁹⁵ Adrian Martin, *Mise En Scène and Film Style : From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 15 and 45.

director's creative use of mise-en-scène is “a chemistry of bodies and space, gestures and motions caught on film, irrefutably, not matter what was in the script before, or whatever is to happen in the editing and soundtrack rooms later.”⁹⁶ Such a view of the role of mise-en-scène aims to recuperate cinema as an autonomous art that is not indebted to literature or theater, as well as to move away from considering montage as the most important aspect of cinema.

Rather than emphasizing space and its constitutive elements, theories of montage, to return to Kuleshov's discussion of “film-ness,” focus on the juxtaposition of different shots to create a sense of filmic space, rather than relying entirely on the physical space in front of the camera. Such a view, as is clear from Kuleshov's famous “effect” as well as writings by Eisenstein, aim to “guide” the viewer toward a desired emotional or intellectual impact, either as a result of conflict or “brick-by-brick” arrangements of shots. Eisenstein's dialectical approach elongates and “stretches” both time and space, thus giving low priority to the indexical physical space in front of the camera. Even when it comes to movement, which, as discussed earlier, plays such an important role in the conception of mise-en-scène, it is created through editing rather than actual bodies moving in space in front of the camera. One can think of the rhythm of editing employed in the Odesa steps sequence, or the illusion of movement of the stone lions in *October* often cited in demonstration of Eisenstein's montage theory. The primacy of montage as an organizing principle and core of cinema is also evident in the films of Dziga Vertov, whose desire to divorce cinema from literature and theater by filming entirely with ordinary people and on the streets or real locations, nonetheless foregrounds the role of editing in his *Man with a Movie Camera*. Although emphasizing the superiority of the mechanical “kino-eye” and its ability to penetrate aspects of reality that a human eye cannot see, Vertov does not linger in one

⁹⁶ Martin, 45.

physical space for long but instead splices together on the editing table far-flung locations in different cities to create a singular and exemplary portrait of a day in the life of a collective Soviet city, not merely Moscow or Odesa.⁹⁷ This portrait, instead of seeking to merely capture a certain scene, a certain reality in front of the camera at that particular time, compares and contrasts different moments, different tempos, pinning them against each other in a playful and often provocative manner in order to draw a reaction from the audience, whether emotional or intellectual. Montage, rather than *mise-en-scène*, is what enables such an approach, largely at the expense of the viewer getting any sense of a coherent physical space. Thus, the views of Kuleshov, Eisenstein, and Vertov all emphasize editing and juxtaposition of shots (usually short and of varying types) and as such also imply control: it is undeniable that some works of Eisenstein, for example, are meant to push a particular ideological point of view onto the viewer, and this type of control is certainly one result of prioritizing editing. More generally, one could argue that there is also a lack of spontaneity as well as realism (as fraught as that term is), especially when it comes to the representation of the NEP period in cinema.

In *Girl with the Hat Box*, Barnet's takes a different approach by relying on the structure of the physical space itself and its constituent elements -- in short, on *mise-en-scène* -- which, in a film dealing with the transformation of living space, is not only a more effective technique than montage, but also allows for spontaneity, for play, for accident. In a society that is rapidly becoming regulated in all aspects of life, such an approach carries a potential for subversion or at least the lessening of control. Discussing the shooting process and the formal qualities of the

⁹⁷ The originator of this method may be Kuleshov, who describes its discovery in his "Art of Cinema" essay.

film, Barnet stresses his use of the wide shot, rather than the close-up or the insert that defines many montage experiments, writing that

We had the opportunity to film without resorting to close-ups in order single out this or that detail...Shooting in wide shots was enough – unnecessary things did not get in the way, they did not distract from what is important.⁹⁸

мы имели возможность снимать, не прибегая к первым планам, чтобы выделить ту или иную нужную деталь...Съемки общим планом было достаточно — не мешали лишние вещи, не отвлекали внимания от нужного.

Though Barnet certainly employs close-ups, the wide shot, and a greater depth of field, play an important role in the film, starting early on with the scenes in the countryside and also in the scene on the train in which Natasha and Ilya first meet. In an early scene in the cottage, Barnet employs the wide shot when filming the interior of the cottage, splitting the frame down the middle into two spaces, a formal approach that will be repeated later in the film when two rooms – that of Ilya and Natasha, and Madame Irene’s and her husband’s room – will be juxtaposed side by side, emphasizing their contrast. In the cottage scene, one part of the room is the common room where Natasha’s grandfather sits, while the other belongs to Natasha who tries her hats in the mirror, as discussed earlier. Barnet also uses the wide shot (and even extreme wide shot) when filming exteriors, which are used for slapstick and comedic effect, especially to showcase the physical acting of Vladimir Fogel who plays a lovestruck and clumsy train station ticket clerk running after Natasha.

Moreover, some of the key moments in the film features close, intimate spaces as well as the importance of physical contact within a clearly dense and restricted environment. The train

⁹⁸ Barnet, “Girl with the Hatbox,” 1927.

compartment in which Natasha and Ilya first meet is full of people, which Barnet shows with a wide shot, and then a medium shot of Natasha sitting uncomfortably in the lower bunk between two people until suddenly two large [and not very clean] boots, which turn out to be Ilya's, drop from the top bunk, right in front of Natasha's eyes, much to her annoyance. The scene is similar to the one later in the film when Natasha is waiting for the return train on an empty station bench and Ilya suddenly emerges next to her feet from underneath the bench, startling her. In the previous scene, Ilya, who had been trying to sleep on the same bench, accidentally dropped a coin, and had gone under the bench to try to find it. Ilya apologizes, explaining that the reason he is at the station is because he has nowhere to go and no place to sleep, which is when Natasha starts to feel pity for him. There are a few such moments of close contact throughout the film, emphasizing both the lack of privacy and personal space – indeed, throughout the film there are many scenes of crowds and people are seemingly always bumping into each other in a rush – which also rely on the elements of *mise-en-scène* and the set for their effect. For this reason, Barnet employs the wide shot and tries to create a sense of the environment for the viewer in which these moments can take place largely unencumbered by many cuts, focusing largely on improvisation and the existing details on the set.

The key sequence, however, that Barnet himself singled out as the definitive example for the way he employed space and *mise-en-scène*, is the one in which Natasha and Ilya “re-claim” the room from Madame Irene and her husband. This sequence begins with a party in Natasha's room in which Madame Irene and her friends are sitting around a table. Once they realize that they have to evacuate the room, they decide to take all their furniture with them to the next room, leaving the former bare and empty. This establishes a sharp contrast between the two contiguous spaces: the bare room in which Ilya now lives (Figure 8) and which Natasha often visits, and the

room next door, now occupied by Madame Irene, her husband, and all their friends, and featuring all their furniture (Figure 9).



Figure 8: Ilya exercising in the empty room



Figure 9: Madame Irene, her husband, and their friends next door.

One way to interpret this scene is to focus on the contrast between the old and the new: the old bourgeois interior on the right, and the cleared space is the new, yet-undefined Socialist future. In her study *Socialist Senses: Film, Feeling, and the Soviet Subject, 1917-1940*, which argues

that cinema helped forge a new Soviet subjectivity by focusing on sensation and materiality, Emma Widdis provides such a reading, seeing Ilya's bare room as "an unformed proto-Soviet space" and the "new socialist interior."⁹⁹ Madame Irene and her husband's room, on the other hand, is characterized by "plush excesses" that are "familiar signs of bourgeois aspiration," and such provide a clear contrast to the "inhospitable" and undecorated room in which Ilya finds himself.

This scene is more ambiguous, however. It is true that the portrayal of Ilya in his new living quarters as an aspiring student, exercising, resembles the new Soviet man of the contemporary posters of the period promoting healthy living and featuring healthy bodies; however, instead of using free weights, Ilya is lifting stacks of books, creating an irreverent attitude towards education and the touted importance of studying in the discourse of the period. The stack of books, much like Natasha's hat box, instead becomes a prop for comedy and play. Indeed, play is a crucial aspect of Barnet's style and his use of *mise-en-scène*. As a comedy, the film does not seek to realistically represent the process and trauma of the reconfiguration of space following the policy of *uplotnenie*. However, what it does offer is a kind of sensory, affective release and means of engaging with such a drastic change and it does so by focusing on the relationship between an individual and his and her space and the objects within. Barnet claims that in shooting the film "every position and activity unfolded toward maximal playing off of each other of a person and things. [Всякое положение и действие разворачивалось нами для максимального *обыгрывания* человека и вещи]."¹⁰⁰ This was particularly true,

⁹⁹ Emma Widdis, *Socialist Senses : Film, Feeling, and the Soviet Subject, 1917-1940*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), 112-113.

¹⁰⁰ Barnet, "Girl with the Hatbox," 1927.

Barnet continues, in the scene in the empty room after it has been evacuated by Madame Irene and her husband, which Barnet credits with providing him with a moment of realization about the importance of *mise-en-scène* for the development of his style. He describes the construction of the scene in the following way:

The action is happening in a completely empty room. All the furniture, all the things were taken out of it. Two actors, a windowsill, a spittoon, hatbox and two or three additional, trivial things are performing. While working, we came to a marvelous realization: it was possible to create scenes, making the impression not only through montage, but through *mise-en-scène* itself.

Действие происходит в совершенно пустой комнате. Вся мебель, все вещи из нее вынесены. Играют два актера, подоконник, плевательница, шляпная коробка и еще 2–3 мелкие вещи. Работая, мы пришли к удивительно приятному для нас факту: можно было строить сцены, впечатляя ими не только монтажно, но самой мизансценой.¹⁰¹

Barnet's biographer Mark Kushnirov points to this quote and *Girl with a Hat Box* as the definitive film in Barnet's oeuvre precisely because of this "discovery" of the possibilities of *mise-en-scène*. Kushnirov underscores the point that while "cinema of the 1920s developed 'under the sign of montage tendencies' [кинематограф двадцатых годов развивался "под знаком монтажных устремлений"]", Barnet, in opposition to the theories of his teacher Lev Kuleshov, returned to *mise-en-scène*; and "not only returned to it...but discovered its expressive potential, equal to the potential of montage."¹⁰² Kushnirov, of course speaking with the benefit of

¹⁰¹ Barnet, "Girl with the Hatbox," 1927.

¹⁰² М. Кушниров. *Жизнь и фильмы Бориса Барнета* (Москва: Искусство, 1977), 49. Kushnirov adds: "Of course, it is possible to say that the beginner director discovered something obvious – *mise-en-scène* plays a role from time immemorial. But here the situation is unusual. Barnet's teacher, L.V. Kuleshov – and he is not the only one – did everything possible to forget about this fact. And Barnet did not simply return to *mise-en-scène*. He discovered its impressive possibility, equal to the possibility of montage. This is already a new kind of intonation – in it, there is foreshadowing of the future." In the original Russian (Можно, конечно, сказать, что начинающий режиссер нашел топор под лавкой, -- мизансценный <играют роль> испокон веку. Но тут ситуация необычная. Учитель Барнета Л.В. Кулешов - да и не один - сделал все возможное, чтобы забыли про этот

hindsight, points to the importance of mise-en-scène for later cinema (indeed, it is not surprising that Barnet's films were celebrated by the French critics and filmmakers of the post-WWII era), and emphasizes the originality of this approach in Soviet cinema of the period, a feature often overlooked by contemporary film critics, but also by later scholars, such as Youngblood.



Figure 10: "maximal playing off of each other of a person and things "

Moreover, the focus on mise-en-scène and playing off the actor and the things around him or her, is the main component of slapstick, which, as has been theorized by early cinema scholar Sigfried Krakauer and emphasized by Miriam Hansen, provides a sensory “corrective” to the ordered and disciplined nature of modern society. Hansen quotes Krakauer’s description of American slapstick comedy that certainly applies to Barnet’s film: “One has to hand this to the Americans: with slapstick films they have created a form that offers a counterweight to their reality. If in that reality they subject the world to an often-unbearable discipline, the film in turn dismantles this self-imposed order quite forcefully.”¹⁰³ Hansen goes on to enumerate the

топор. И Барнет не просто вернулся к мизенсцене. Он открыл ее впечатляющую возможность, равную возможности монтажа. Это уже новая интонация - в ней предвестие будущего. (Кушниров, 59).

¹⁰³ Hansen, *Mass Production of the Senses*, 69.

manifold aspects of the “reflexive potential” of slapstick comedy, including “articulating and playing games with the violence of technological regimes, mechanization and clock time,” “deflating the terror of consumption, of a new culture of status and distinction,” and allowing for “a playful and physical expression of anxieties over changed gender roles and new forms of sexuality and intimacy.”¹⁰⁴ While the Soviet cinema developed in a different social and ideological context than national cinemas in the West, the different aspects mentioned by Hansen capture the changes and anxieties of the NEP period.

Barnet’s film, like other works from this period from the so-called “popular” cinema, harnesses this multifaceted potential of American slapstick comedy to deal with and process the complex and contradictory nature of NEP society. In addition to providing a “counterweight” to the discipline and order, slapstick (or more generally, play) reflects the ambiguous and contingent nature of a society in flux, one caught between competing values. *Mise-en-scène* serves as a site of play and negotiation of different possibilities, or what Walter Benjamin defines as “Spielraum” or “room-for-play.” The term comes from a section in the second version of Benjamin’s influential “A Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” composed in 1935, but not published until 1989 in Benjamin’s collected writings. Examining the role of cinema in mitigating the shocks of modernity and the effects of technology on human sensibility, Benjamin finds a possibility in film in providing for a space in which these shocks and disturbances could be mitigated and “rehearsed” as it were, precisely because the medium provides a kind of virtual reality in which to play out different possibilities. Benjamin writes:

On the one hand, film furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieux throughout the ingenious guidance of the camera;

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 69-70.

on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*].¹⁰⁵

Benjamin links this “field of action” with what he calls the “optical unconscious,” a realm akin to dreams, which the film camera is able to capture, revealing a “space” that before the invention of the technology would not be noticed by human consciousness. As a result, as Benjamin puts it, “a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconsciousness.” Benjamin elaborates on the ability of cinema to reveal hidden aspects of reality in what is reminiscent of Shklovsky’s discussion of literature’s ability to “ estrange” everyday experience which had become automatic and habitual. Benjamin writes:

Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the split second when a person actually takes a step. We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon but know almost nothing about what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods. This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching and compressing a sequence, enlarging and reducing an object. It is through the camera that we first uncover the optical unconscious.¹⁰⁶

Miriam Hansen further elaborates on the notions of the “optical unconscious” and “spielraum,” writing that, for Benjamin, “spielraum” connotes a “field of action, leeway, margin, room to move or maneuver” and “an intermediary zone not yet fully determined in which things oscillate among different meanings, functions, and possible directions.” In this space, Hansen writes, quoting Benjamin “[the individual] does not yet know his way around.”¹⁰⁷ As a result, Hansen continues, film “offers human beings a sensory-perceptual matrix to comprehend and reconceive their environment in the mode of play. In this mode, mistakes are not -- at least not

¹⁰⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008) 37.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 37.

¹⁰⁷ Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 192.

immediately -- fatal.¹⁰⁸ This statement is prescient and chilling when applied to the Soviet context of the late 1920s, even if one is only discussing cinema. Nonetheless, it provides a good way to describe both the role of play in Barnet's films in how they approach the chaotic and undefined reconfiguration of space, but also Soviet comedy in general: the possibility of showing and satirizing "mistakes" and commenting on social realities without fear or without the ideological content being approved in advance. Responding to a poll titled "On Comedy" from the April 1927 issue of *Kino* magazine, Barnet articulates his conception of Soviet comedy, which is closely related to the definition of "Spielraum" or "room-for-play" as a site of satire free from ideological control. Barnet writes:

Soviet comedy can and should exist. As can Soviet satire. There is neither one or the other, as comedy without satire is only vaudeville, boring and unnecessary under our conditions. The tendency to standardize beforehand, what should be considered good and what bad deprives the comedy of its right to exist.

Советская комедия может и должна быть. Так же, как советская сатира. Ни того, ни другого нет, так как комедия без сатиры есть только водевиль, скучный и ненужный в наших условиях. Тенденция заранее стандартизировать, что должно быть хорошим и что должно быть плохим, -- лишает комедию права на существование.¹⁰⁹

In the early 1930s, this type of comedy would be replaced by the spectacles produced by Alexandrov and others, which indeed are "standardized," as they are based on the precepts of Socialist Realism and approved from the above. In these films, the possibilities of spontaneous play and slapstick would be replaced by the perfectly choreographed, almost mechanical sequences, such as those in *Circus*, which do not allow any room for "mistakes," whether physical or ideological.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 193.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Kushnirov, 63.

The question of mechanization and choreography is an interesting one in the context of Soviet comedy due to the ambiguous role (and often absence) of technology in these films, unlike in those of, say, Chaplin, where the relationship to technology takes center stage. Both Krakauer and Benjamin emphasize the potential of slapstick comedy to provide a “corrective” to the processes of mechanization resulting from the rise of technology and industrialization, or to offer a virtual “room-for-play” in which the shocks and dehumanizing impact of technology could be processed by the spectators. While *Girl with a Hat Box* provides this kind of “playing room” in order to satirize and address the reconfiguration of living space due to *uplotnenie*, Barnet’s 1928 film *House on the Trubnaya* goes a step further and explicitly engages with the role of technology, both cinematic and industrial, which during this period was a subject for many filmmakers. In this film, Barnet experiments with the latest cinematic techniques of the period, while also employing *mise-en-scène* to satirize and comment on the obsession with mechanization and industrialization permeating Soviet society and art during NEP.



Figure 11: Poster for *The House on the Trubnaya*

On the surface, *House on the Trubnaya* (Дом на Трубной) (1928) features similar themes and conventions of the “everyday comedy” as *The Girl with the Hatbox*, including the transition from the old to the new and the challenges of urban housing during NEP. The main character, Paranya, a young and naive peasant girl, arrives in Moscow from the countryside. After a few comical episodes featuring her first encounters in the city and the pace of urban life, Paranya finds employment in the titular house as a housekeeper for a hairdresser, played by Vladimir Fogel. Initially exploited by the “petit-bourgeois” NEP-man and his indolent wife, Paranya becomes a member of a workers’ union, which dramatically alters her social standing in the building. While the main focus of *House on the Trubnaya* is, as Annie Gérin puts it, a satire of NEP men and the “inadequate infrastructures and the coexistence of Bolsheviks and NEP men

in a shared house” as well as the “naïveté and lack of vigilance of young provincial workers,” the film’s most innovative and experimental feature is its formal approach, especially in comparison to *Girl with a Hatbox*.¹¹⁰ This approach is characterized by Barnet’s use of mise-en-scène and slapstick, especially in the sequence featuring the famous staircase designed for the film.

However, in contrast to *Girl with a Hatbox*, this film engages in a dialogue with new avant-garde tendencies of the time by incorporates key elements of Soviet montage cinema and the so-called “city symphony” film that stress the early cinema’s fascination with the cinematic medium as a new technology. These elements include the use of freeze-frame, mounting the camera on a car speeding down city streets, unusual camera angles, and other formal experiments that would be at full display a year later in Dziga Vertov’s seminal *Man with a Movie Camera*. By fusing elements drawn from American cinema with formal innovation and experimentation of the Soviet avant-garde and global documentary, Barnet’s film thus features a more self-reflexive view of cinema that takes into account the role of technology in the new Soviet society.

From its opening scenes, *House on the Trubnaya* alludes to the avant-garde aesthetic, and in particular to the so-called “city symphony” film, exemplified by Walter Rutmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (*Sinfonie der Grosstadt*, 1927) and, in large part, Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*. Like these two films, *House on the Trubnaya* opens with verité-style sequences of a city in the morning: empty streets, with not much movement except for a few street sweepers; apartment windows with only a few lights turned on. The film’s editing reflects this gradual awakening, which, beyond merely establishing the setting, features lingering, carefully composed shots, such as the reflection of the buildings in a puddle of water, recalling Alexander Rodchenko’s street photographs from this period. Although the film soon shifts its

¹¹⁰ Annie Gérin. *Devastation and Laughter : Satire, Power, and Culture in the Early Soviet State, 1920s-1930s* (Toronto ; Buffalo (N.Y.): University of Toronto Press, 2018), 112.

focus inside, away from the street, in order to introduce the main characters and set off the plot, it does not lose its fascination with urbanity and the possibility of the filmic medium to represent and interrogate it in a similar manner as the other avant-garde films of the time. The best example of this fascination is the scene of Paranya's arrival in the city with her pet duck, which is used by Barnet for comic effect and means for slapstick when it slips out of Paranya's hands. While the scene is not crucial to the plot except as a characterization of Paranya as another "country bumpkin" in the big city, Barnet devotes a lot of time to it and does so in a way that is reminiscent of other films of this period dealing with the experience of urban modernity, most notably F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* released a year before. As in Murnau's film, the scene attempts to convey the speed, industrialization, and the chaos of urban life through the techniques available exclusively through the cinematic medium: speeding up the film, unusual camera angles (many shots again use the reflection of the water in the street), and the most self-reflexive technique of all – the freeze frame. Indeed, the freeze frame in this scene greatly resembles the same effect employed by Vertov in his *Man with a Movie Camera*. Additionally, this scene also draws on Eisenstein's montage theory: the point of view shots of the tram speeding down the street is intercut with a close-up of Paranya's face in shock. In addition to seeking to convey the tempo of modern life, such technical experiments also underscore the collaborative and multifaceted nature of Soviet cinema of this period, which cannot be easily divided into "popular" and "avant-garde." On the contrary, these experiments serve as evidence of Barnet's search for the proper form for an "organic" Soviet comedy.

Along with the formal experimentation and dialogue with the avant-garde, Barnet's film engages with technological advances in other ways, seeking to show and satirize the Soviet "cult of the machine" through innovative and irreverent use of *mise-en-scène* and slapstick. Perhaps

the most recognizable feature of *House of the Trubnaya* is the titular “house,” or rather, the set designed for the film: the iconic staircase on which a lot of the film’s action takes place.



Figure 12: The main set of the *House on the Trubnaya*

The staircase was designed by Sergei Kozlovsky, a frequent Barnet collaborator whose other credits include Pudovkin’s *Mother* and *The End of St. Petersburg*. Emma Widdis points out the importance of Kozlovsky’s partnership with Barnet on both *Girl with the Hat Box* and *House on the Trubnaya* as well as his design work on other notable films of the period, including Protazanov’s *Aelita*.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Widdis, *Socialist Senses*. In addition to his numerous credits on both silent and sound films, Kozlovsky wrote important theoretical studies on set design, including *Khudozhnik-arkhitektor v kino* [The ArtistArchitect in Cinema] from 1930.

The staircase, which film critic Greg Dolgoplov playfully compares to the Odessa steps in Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, provides not only a symbol of the social hierarchy of the NEP period, but also a setting for play and slapstick that comments on and satirizes this hierarchy.¹¹² The best example of this is the first scene on the staircase in which the house wakes up. Like that of the city, this is also a gradual awakening: first, cats saunter down the stairs, then Golykov, the hairdresser, comes out of his ground-floor apartment. The reason Golykov wakes earlier than other tenants, an intertitle tells us, is because he does not have a housekeeper and is thus forced to perform all the cleaning duties himself. After him comes the housekeeper Fenya, who is a workers' "delegate." The fact that the hairdresser is on the ground floor and does the cleaning himself and has to wake up could be read as a satire of the new social position of the NEP men, especially since the workers and workers' representatives now occupy a higher place on the "staircase." Although this contrast between Fenya and Golykov the hairdresser may prompt one to read the entire staircase sequence as a simple metaphor for the transformation in the hierarchy from the old to the new, much like the dual-room sequence in *Girl with A Hatbox* discussed earlier, the scene does not entirely support such a reading. Indeed, Fenya's appearance on the stairs is followed by a gradual increase in activity and the appearance of other residents until the scene becomes chaotic and frenetic: two men, repeatedly and in mechanical fashion, chop wood on the top of the stairs, with splinters falling down on the other floors; other tenants come out to clean and shake their carpets or, in a playful moment, dust off their taxidermy leopard. The movement of bodies and objects up and down the stairs in a disorderly fashion is accentuated by the camera, which dollies upward like an elevator or zooms in rapidly, drawing attention to itself.

¹¹² Greg Dolgoplov, "1928: The House on Trubnaya (Boris Barnet)," *Senses of Cinema*, December 2017, Last accessed June 16, 2022, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/soviet-cinema/the-house-on-trubnaya/>

Annie Guerin compares the energetic sequence on the staircase to a “hectic machine,” noting that it alludes to an influential piece of set design --- Lyubov Popova’s so-called “machine for acting,” from Meyerhold’s 1922 production of Fernand Crommelynck’s play *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.¹¹³

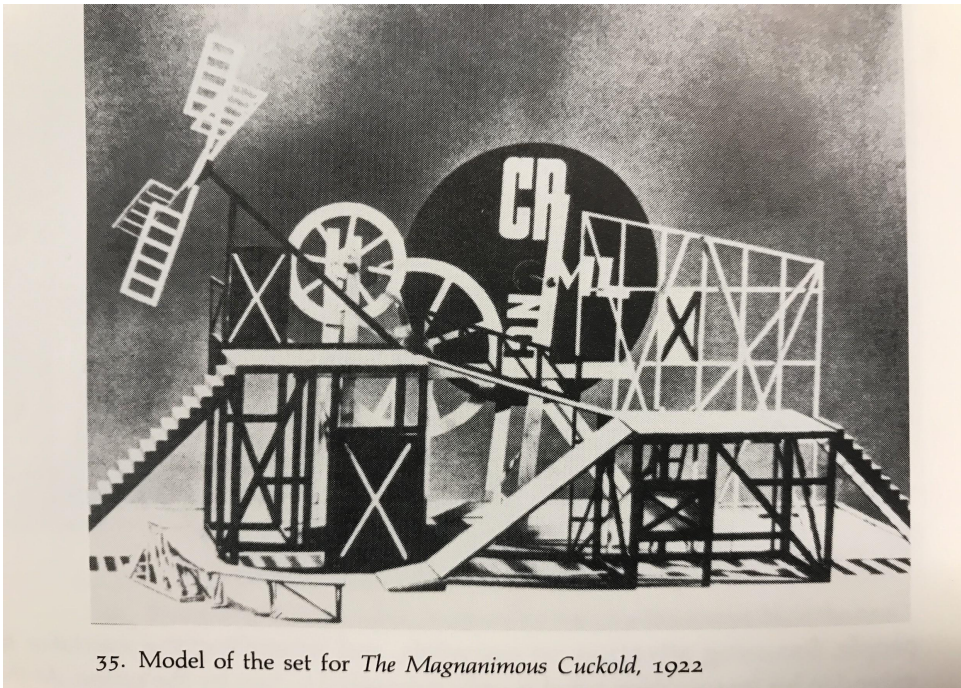


Figure 13: Model for the set of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*¹¹⁴

Popova’s work with Meyerhold on the play became known for the inventive set designs and costumes which combined the Constructivist aesthetic of “art as production” with Meyerhold’s theory of biomechanics. Such an approach is reflected in the set design in *The Magnanimous* play resembles a machine with different levers, rotors, and wheels, aiming to capture a similar sense of rhythm and tempo that one would see in a factory. According to Popova’s biographers Sarabianov and Adaskina,

¹¹³ Guérin, *Devastation and Laughter*, 112.

¹¹⁴ Photo from Leach, Robert. *Vsevolod Meyerhold*. (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 96.

The emphasis on the “production” treatment of the theatrical action and the actual eccentric, dynamic (nearly on the level of circus tricks) action of the actors led Popova toward a technical treatment of both the sets and the of the image as a stage-workplace. Although the set was quite uncomplicated in the technical sense, the construction for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* clearly bore the theme of a machine-workplace for the actors’ work, a concept that was also part of Constructivism’s aesthetic ideal”¹¹⁵

In his biography of Meyerhold, Robert Leach further emphasizes the kinetic nature of the set as a dynamic system, writing that “the wheels and propeller whirled round with increasing speed to chime with the accelerating emotional climaxes ...made it particularly dynamic and exhilarating to watch. “We will never understand [the set] correctly,” he continues, quoting E. Rakinina, “if we regard it statically. It is not a picture to be admired. Rather, it is a kind of machine which takes on a living existence in the course of the production.”¹¹⁶ Although playing a different purpose in the film, Barnet’s staircase could be described in a similar way, especially when it comes to its kinetic and dynamic nature. In fact, Popova’s original design bears a striking resemblance to the set in the *House on the Trubnaya*.

¹¹⁵ D. V. Sarabianov, D. V. and N.L. Adaskina, N. L. *Popova*, trans. by Marian Schwartz (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 253.

¹¹⁶ Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 96-97.

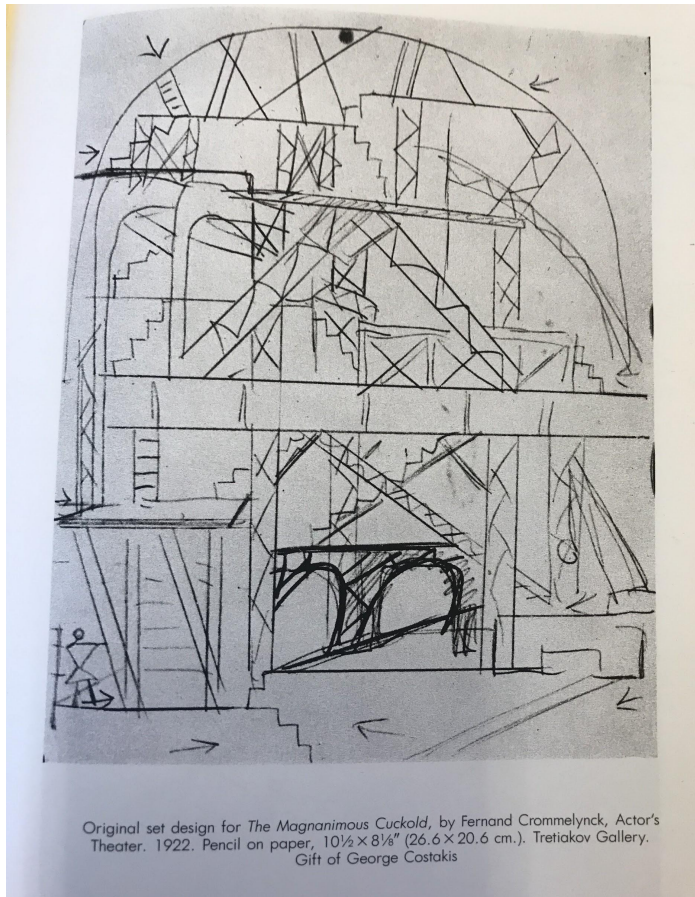


Figure 14: Original Set design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Popova.¹¹⁷

I emphasize the similarities between Popova's design and the staircase in the film in order to further highlight the links between the constructivist and avant-garde tendencies of the period and Barnet's use of *mise-en-scène*. Much like Popova's set, the staircase in *House on the Trubnaya* "is a kind of machine which takes on a living existence in the course of production," to repeat Robert Leach's description. If in the other parts of the film Barnet drew on the theories of montage in order to show the pace of life in the city and the shocks of modernity, scenes taking place on the staircase take a life of their own, frequently devolving into chaos and improvisation. Thus, if the initial inspiration for such a *mise-en-scène* was technology and "art as production" in

¹¹⁷ Reprinted in Sarabianov and Adaskina, *Popova*, 261.

the manner of Constructivists, the end result is the opposite of the carefully choreographed, ordered movements that may take place in a Hollywood musical or even the films of Chaplin, such as *Modern Times*, or the “optimistic” comedies of the 1930s.

The staircase, as I have already mentioned, also serves as an ambiguous and unstable symbol of the social hierarchy and social life during NEP. Much like the social roles and social types during this period, the positions of the characters on the staircase and their interrelationships shift throughout the film. Once Paranya thinks that she has been elected to the Moscow Soviet, an inter title tells us that her “social standing has changed.” As a result, the residents of the house line up in orderly fashion to welcome her after the election, giving a temporary order to the initial chaos on the staircase. Once it is clear that a mistake has been made, and Paranya is not actually in the Moscow Soviet, shifts again towards chaos, as the hairdresser busts into the room where the other residents are celebrating and kicks them out. The social hierarchy, much like the staircase (and Soviet comedy, to recall Benjamin’s earlier statement) is unstable and ambiguous, reflecting the nature of NEP itself.

Conclusion

In my analysis of Barnet’s two films, I have tried to outline what I see as two key features of these films and other “popular” comedies of this period. The first is their complicated engagement and entanglement with Hollywood cinema, both in terms of form but also more “sensual,” affective aspects. Rather than merely serving as an imitation of Hollywood, opposed to the innovative accomplishments of avant-garde cinema, Barnet’s comedies incorporated elements of both in order to deal with the ambiguous and transitory nature of Soviet society during the NEP period. Moreover, as I have tried to show, American cinema had just as much influence on the avant-garde films as on the more “popular” films, thus destabilizing the binary

distinction of “popular” vs. “avant-garde” or “popular” vs. “modernist.” Secondly, Barnet’s films tried to find an “organic” way of dealing with the changes in everyday life, and more specifically, changes in living space, by focusing on the possibilities of mise-en-scène and cinema’s ability to capture reality, both in a documentary sense, but also when it comes to intimate moments that come from improvisation, from chance, and through the encounter of an individual with his or her environment. Reflecting on his career in interview in 1959, Barnet said:

With a few obvious exceptions, all my films, for better or worse, deal with contemporary life and its problems. When I have had the option, I have always chosen contemporary subjects, even though it is not always easy to tackle these, adding, I am not and never was a man with theories. I always found my material in everyday life.”¹¹⁸

In what may seem to be a veiled reference to other filmmakers and theorists of his generation, such as Eisenstein and Vertov, Barnet highlights that his contribution is to be found not in grand theories of cinema, but rather in the depiction of the ordinary, of everyday life.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Bernard Eisenschitz, “A Fickle Man, or portrait of Boris Barnet as a Soviet Director,” in *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*. Edited by Ian Christie, et al. (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), 150.

CHAPTER 3: In the Gutter, But Looking at the Stars: Between *быт* and *бытие* in Olesha's *Envy*

*On the 10th of September, 1845, during a violent thunderstorm, a house in the village of Salagnac, France was struck by lightning. A large ball of fire descended the chimney, and rolled across the floor of a room in which sat a child and three women. No one was hurt. It then rolled out through the centre of the kitchen, passing close to the feet of a young peasant, and disappeared through a crevice in the wall. Its erratic course ended in the pigsty, the harmless occupant of which it despitefully slew, without setting on fire the straw on which the creature lay.*¹¹⁹

In a scene toward the end of the first part of Yuri Olesha's *Envy*, Nikolai Kavalero, the book's curmudgeonly hero, recounts a confrontation with Andrei Babichev, his host and benefactor. Having returned home after insulting Babichev at an official function, Kavalero briefly considers prostrating himself before Babichev and begging for forgiveness. Yet he carries on with his usual insolence, asking Babichev "in a sardonic tone [ехидно]:" "What on earth keeps you home from work [Отчего ж это вы не на службе]?"¹²⁰

Babichev, who up to this point in the narrative had been oblivious to Kavalero's contempt, unleashes his fury, screaming: "Get out of here [Убирайтесь отсюда вон]!" And at that moment, Kavalero realizes that his circumstances have changed for good, that Babichev means what he says. "Something unusual had happened [произошло нечто необычайное]," Kavalero notes, "It was raining. Perhaps there was lightning [Шел дождь. Возможно, была молния]."¹²¹ And searching for an apt comparison to his situation, Kavalero remembers an episode from Camille Flammarion's *Atmosphere*, a 1872 astronomy book, in which "a large,

¹¹⁹ Camille Flammarion. *The Atmosphere*, trans. James Glaisher. (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1873), 440. The better known version of the book is the 1888 edition, which includes the famous "Flammarion" engraving, which I discuss later in the chapter.

¹²⁰ Yuri Olesha. *Envy*, trans. Clarence Brown, in *The Portable Twentieth-century Russian Reader*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 304. I am using Brown's translation throughout this chapter. The original Russian is from Юрий Олеша. *Повести и Рассказы* (Москва: Художественная литература, 1965), 61. For each quotation, I provide both the English and the Russian citations, using the following format: *Envy*, E: 304, R: 61.

¹²¹ *Envy*, E: 304, R: 61.

smooth sphere rolls without a sound into a room and fills it with blinding light...[полный, гладкий шар бесшумно вкатывается в помещение, наполняя его ослепительным светом...]" KavaleroV abruptly stops telling the anecdote, deciding that "the furthest thing from my mind would be to make some vulgar comparison [я далек от намерения прибегать к пошлым сравнениям]." Instead, as befits his nature, he gets distracted by the author's lofty name: "What a celestial name! Flammarion -- that is itself a star [Какое планетное имя! Фламарион --- это сама звезда!]"

The anecdote from Flammarion's *Atmosphere* that KavaleroV cannot bring himself to recount in full is, I believe, the one that opens this chapter. To my knowledge, no other studies of *Envy* have traced this allusion.¹²² In addition to contributing to the list of sources that informed Olesha's work, I offer this reference for its symbolic potential -- the image of a ball of fire, tumbling through a house like some kind of punishment unleashed by the gods, to eviscerate a harmless, sleeping pig, sparing even the straw on which the innocent creature lays, is a potent and multivalent allegory for the book's narrative and its major themes. On the basic level, KavaleroV identifies the animal's predicament with his own, as he will soon be forcefully removed from his sofa like the pig from its straw. More broadly, the episode provides a rich allegory for the revolution and its all-encompassing, cosmic character, with reverberations on all scales, from the celestial down to the most intimate. Furthermore, the intrusion from above (literally and figuratively) into the domestic sphere, and down to one's private space -- one's sleeping area -- is a major theme in *Envy*. The "making public" of different aspects of private

¹²² In her monograph *A Graveyard of Themes: The Genesis of Three Key Works by Yuri Olesha*, Kazimiera Ingdahl discusses Olesha's use of Flammarion's name for its sonic quality but does not uncover the allusion. Ingdahl, Kazimiera Ingdahl, *A Graveyard of Themes: The Genesis of Three Key Works by Iurii Olesha*. (Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994), 61-62.

life, especially the invasion of private space through *uplotnenie*, had a shocking and often random and inexplicable character like Flammarion's freak accident. Olesha's invocation of Flammarion, a somewhat obscure French scientist and popular writer, goes hand in hand with other literary and historical references throughout the book which draw from the Western intellectual and philosophical tradition. At the same time, it is crucial to note that the comparison brought up by Kavaleroev remains hidden, unvocalized: not only does Kavaleroev consider it too vulgar to be able to express it, to make it public, but it remains the private "property" of its hero, part of his imagination and creative makeup, unavailable to the reader without further investigation.

It is this relationship between the hidden and the seen, the private and the public, that I examine in this chapter. In particular, I attempt to provide some answers to the following questions: How is the dynamic between private and public space conceptualized in *Envy*? What are the limits of the process of intrusion into the domestic sphere and the private realm, including that of the imagination, that *Envy* circumscribes? Or fails to circumscribe, given the liminal nature of many of the spaces that make up the setting of the book? How does the book engage with and challenge the concept of *бывим* which was a dominant subject of discourse during the NEP period?

Scholars have emphasized the role of doubles and duality as an important thematic and structural principle in Olesha's work, whether it is the duality between old and the new, between materialism and idealism, or individualism and collectivity.¹²³ To these I add the duality between

¹²³ Viktor Erlich, for example, sees the "confrontation between two mind-sets, those of a builder and a dreamer," at the core of *Envy*. Erlich, Victor. *Modernism and Revolution : Russian Literature in Transition*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 201. Kazimiera Ingdahl, in *A Graveyard of Themes*, emphasizes the importance of doubles. Victor Peppard discusses the carnivalesque elements of the book, which also largely rely on dualisms. See Peppard, Victor. *The Poetics of Yury Olesha*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989.

the public and the private, which, like all the binary distinctions in the book, is interrelated and often not easily delineated. Indeed, the tension between the private and the public often plays out at the intersection of other competing dualities, in an unstable and precarious space like the one Kavalеров, like the poor sleeping pig at the beginning of this chapter, often finds himself in: a private, protective cocoon invaded suddenly and mercilessly to seize and throw out its helpless resident.

The Novel and its Author

Before delving deeper into the analysis of the novel and its treatment of the public and the private dichotomy, it is helpful to provide a few details about *Envy* and its author as well as the context in which the book appeared. *Envy* [*Зависть*] was Yuri Olesha (1899-1960)'s first published novel, and as scholar Rimgaila Salys writes, one that Olesha considered to be his masterpiece.¹²⁴ Though the book was an instant success with the critics at the time of publication, at the end of NEP and the beginning of the 1930s, the critical reception would shift in the opposite direction, with, as Salys puts it, the Soviet critics being “almost unanimous in rejecting *Envy* on ideological grounds for its lack of socialist perspective.”¹²⁵ Olesha's own career would suffer a similar fate, as his success in the 1920s both as a writer of comic pieces in satirical newspapers, including *Gudok* [The Whistle] where he worked alongside Mikhail Bulgakov and Mikhail Zoshchenko, and later as the writer of *Envy*, would dramatically change with in the 1930s, with his writing not considered ideologically correct during the Stalinist period. Though he published short stories and worked on film scenarios and plays, he did not publish any major works that equaled *Envy* in their originality and artistic approach.

¹²⁴ Rimgaila Salys, *Olesha's Envy: A Critical Companion*. Northwestern/AATSEEL Critical Companions to Russian Literature (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 4.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 19.

Envy tells the story of Nikolai Kavalero, a young man in his twenties who is an outsider in the new Soviet society. He does not have a job or a permanent place of residence, and for the first half of the story, he lives on the sofa in the apartment of Andrei Babichev, a businessman and official responsible for the “The Quarter,” a communal dining hall and sausage factory. Babichev had found Kavalero without a roof over his head, and having taken pity on him, invited him to stay at his apartment. One aspect of the book’s title refers to the feelings Kavalero has toward his benefactor whom he watches and describes throughout the first part of the novel, though it is not clear how reliable this narration is, since, as Rimgaila Salys puts it, Kavalero is “an unreliable, opinionated, and eccentric narrator descended from Dostoyevsky’s *Underground Man*.”¹²⁶ Feelings of envy of Kavalero toward Babichev provide the main conflict of the novel, though other characters expand on this dichotomy, creating other dualities and doubles. The reader soon meets Andrei’s brother, Ivan Babichev, who, unlike Andrei, does not share a lot of enthusiasm for the new developments during NEP and instead serves as a kind of prophet of the old, pre-revolutionary era, which immediately links him with Kavalero in his worldview and sensibility; both are depicted as impractical dreamers from a bygone era. Conversely, Andrei is linked with Volodya Makarov, his surrogate son and a version of “the new Soviet man”, and in many ways the opposite of Kavalero, creating another conflict between them and what they represent in the novel. Both characters are also vying for the attention of Valya, a young woman who could be seen as a symbol for the country and its future. Kavalero and Ivan’s “side” ultimately loses, as the future seemingly belongs to Volodya and Andrei.

The book’s structure and style are unconventional, employing a lot of modernist devices, including, in the words of Salys, “shifting narrators, chronological displacement, and the

¹²⁶ Ibid, 19-20.

difficulty of distinguishing between reality and fantasy.”¹²⁷ *Envy* is divided into two parts, with the first part narrated from Kavalеров’s first-person perspective and subtitled “Notes [Записки], which alludes to Dostoyevsky’s famous novella. The second part of the book takes a more objective view, telling the story from an omniscient third-person point of view. Olesha has claimed that he had imbued the character of Nikolai Kavalеров with a lot of his own feelings and experiences. Speaking at the First Writers’ Congress in 1934, Olesha confirmed that, “[y]es, Kavalеров looked at the world through my eyes. Kavalеров’s tints, colors, images, comparisons, metaphors, and mental judgments belonged to me.”¹²⁸ Thus, the book has been often interpreted as a reflection of Olesha’s own sensibilities and his view of the role of the artist, which is primarily defined by individualism.

For the purposes of this dissertation, one should point out that the sociohistorical context of the NEP period plays an important role in the novel. As Rimgalia Salys points out, the book engages with some of the key topics and debates of the decade, including the idea of the “New Soviet Man” and the transformation of everyday life through the “industrialization” of *быт*: “the construction of communal kitchens and dining halls, laundries, and child-care facilities,” as a means of freeing women from what Lenin called “domestic slavery” as well as abolishing the traditional idea of the nuclear family.¹²⁹ Babichev’s work on “The Quarter” reflects this, while the book also presents an image of the family that departs from the traditional conception.¹³⁰ Although *Envy* does not directly deal with the policy of *uplotnenie*, private space, as I already mentioned earlier, is an integral aspect of the book. Throughout most of the book, Kavalеров is

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Yuri Olesha, “Speech to the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers,” 1934, trans. By David Powelstock, available at <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1934-2/writers-congress/writers-congress-texts/olesha-on-complexity/>

¹²⁹ Salys, 27.

¹³⁰ For more on how the book subverts traditional masculine and feminine roles, see Borenstein, Eliot. *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929*. Durham N.C: Duke University Press, 2000.

effectively without a permanent address: before living with Andrei, he rented a room with the widow Anichka, which is where he ends up at the end of the book. Indeed, Kavalеров might have been someone who was deprived of living space due to his lack of employment.

Envy and Everyday Life: Immersion into Быт

Envy opens with a domestic scene: as Andrei Babichev performs his morning routine, Kavalеров, lying on the sofa and pretending to be asleep, describes his every movement in detail. From the beginning the reader is submerged in *быт*, in the everyday, with Kavalеров recording ordinary and mundane actions: Babichev uses the toilet, performs calisthenics, washes himself, gargles water, gets dressed and checks himself in the mirror before putting on cologne, drinks milk. Kavalеров, however, is not an impartial observer. In addition to engaging different senses to describe each of Babichev's movements – hearing (“Mornings he sings in the toilet [он поет по утрам в клозете]”; “I hear the racket in the narrow closet...[я слышу сутолоку в кабинке уборной]” touch (“His back rubs against the inside of the door [его спина трется по внутренней стороне захлопнувшейся двери]” “Coolness pours in through the open door of the balcony [В открытую дверь балкона льется прохлада]”) and vision (“Two burning clusters of sun rays are concentrated in the metallic clips of his suspenders [В металлических пластинках подтяжек солнце концентрируется двумя жгучими пучками].”), he filters his voyeuristic portrait through the prism of his imagination, which, like his senses, is triggered by Babichev's movement through the apartment. “In the morning when he passes me (I pretending to be asleep),” says Kavalеров, “on his way to the bedroom to the door leading to the depths of the apartment, the bathroom, my imagination is wafted after him.”¹³¹ The result is that the mundane

¹³¹ *Envy*, E : 251, R : 19-20.

and insignificant world of *быт* becomes elevated and transformed into something poetic and unusual through Kavalero's sensibility and power of observation. Thus, the oval piece of glass in Babichev's toilet door becomes a "splendid opal-colored egg...hanging in the darkness of the hallway," or "the pince-nez straddles the nose like a bicycle." Such examples are numerous in Olesha's work but are especially prominent in the first half of *Envy* which is narrated from Kavalero's point of view. It is as if Kavalero is endowed with a special pair of eyes that render the ordinary unusual or bring to surface something that is invisible and unnoticed in the material world. "Did you ever notice," Kavalero asks, "that man is surrounded by little inscriptions...on forks, spoons, plates, the frame of a pince-nez, buttons, pencils? No one notices them. They have to struggle for existence."¹³² As a result, the treatment of *быт* and the physical world always has two components: the visible, perceptible to everyone and often taken for granted, and the hidden, available only to Kavalero.

Another important aspect of the first scene is the spatial configuration between the characters which defines their relationship and introduces a duality that will be important for the rest of the novel: that between horizontality and verticality. Babichev, as a man of action, is on his feet and in constant movement, while Kavalero lies immobile on the sofa in a horizontal position. "He *goes* into his bedroom....*returns* to my room," Kavalero observes, "*standing* in the middle of the room, he *lifts* both straps of his suspenders onto his shoulders as though they were some sort of burden"[emphasis mine]. While Babichev does all this, "I pretend to be sleeping," Kavalero admits. Indeed, this spatial dynamic between Babichev and Kavalero mirrors that of their first meeting: when Babichev first encounters him, Kavalero is lying face-down in the gutter. Babichev stands over him, before taking pity on him and bringing him home. This spatial

¹³² *Envy*, E : 254, R : 22.

relationship is emphasized further by the first words that KavaleroV hears upon regaining consciousness: “‘Place him so that his head will be higher,’ said my rescuer.”¹³³ KavaleroV is then transported to an “excellent sofa” on which he will stay until the fateful day when Babichev throws him out.

These two features of the first scene -- the estrangement of the everyday through KavaleroV’s imagination, and the tension between verticality and horizontality as a reflection of the relationship between Babichev and KavaleroV -- take on a particular significance precisely because of the book’s preoccupation with the everyday, with the ordinary world, with *быт*. While so far I have sidestepped defining this concept, in order to understand how *Envy* engages with this often-ambiguous term, which as I have discussed in Chapter 1 was invoked frequently during NEP, it is necessary to delve deeper into the term’s various associations and its place in Russian cultural history.

Быт: An Elaboration

Быт is a notoriously slippery and ambiguous term, carrying different connotations hard to capture in English. Catriona Kelly’s attempt at a definition comes close to teasing out the different dimensions inherent in the term:

Everyday life, daily life, quotidian existence, material culture, private life, domestic life: all of these various shades of meaning are present in the term. Sometimes, but by no means always, *быт* is defined by being opposed to *бытие*, spiritual existence: in this context, the translation of *быт* would come close to ‘earthly existence’ as well as to ‘material life.’ Additionally, *быт* is sometimes used as a value-laden term -- a circumlocution like ‘the dreariness of quotidian life’ would capture the flavour. At the same time, *быт* is often used more restrictively, to mean ‘a way of life’ -- as in ‘the way of life of the Russian peasant (krest’ianskii *быт*), for example.¹³⁴

¹³³ Olesha, *Envy*, E : 262, R : 28.

¹³⁴ Catriona Kelly, “Быт: Identity and Everyday Life,” in Franklin and Widdis, *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 149.

These different meanings and associations mean that the term is, as Kelly acknowledges, “subject to constant modulation” and “can be used positively,” or “negatively,” or it could be used “neutrally (as with the ethnographic studies of “worker быт”).¹³⁵ More often than not, however, *быт* has a binary character -- it is either positive or negative, depending on the historical context and who is invoking the term. *Быт* is, Kelly suggests, “a socially divisive term, used to claim authority on the part of the socially and intellectually advantaged, and to allow them to shape the space where the disadvantaged might realize their identities.”¹³⁶ The term’s inherent instability has thus meant that it has often been weaponized in service of a particular ideology, or to differentiate one group from another.

The history of the term bears traces of this “divisive” character, which, though in ethnographic accounts has been associated with merely describing a particular way of life, such as the peasant or aristocratic *быт*, has nonetheless often hidden an ideological component. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, *быт* was commonly invoked by conservative nationalists as the singularly “Russian” way of life: “the precious tradition of Russian household practices ...preserved in patriarchal extended family, but not in the atomized households to be found in the modern city.”¹³⁷ Such an understanding of *быт* envisioned a distinctly nationalist version of the *ideal* Russian way of life, one standing in opposition to perceived “modern” way of life stemming from the corrupting influence of the West. The term would take on other ideological associations in the subsequent periods. In the mid to late nineteenth century, for example, a certain stratum of the Russian intelligentsia saw *быт*

¹³⁵ Ibid., 155.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 152.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 153.

primarily in terms of the practical organization of daily life, which they believed should be grounded in asceticism and self-restraint, rather than extravagance and accumulation in order to show solidarity with the working class and the peasantry. This idea would extend into the twentieth century and the Soviet period, due largely to Lenin's conception of the revolutionary lifestyle and mindset. After the Revolution, the space of *быт* would become an ideological battleground, again based on a binary conception of the term: on the one end of the spectrum was the old *быт*, which stood for both the pre-revolutionary extravagance, or "petty bourgeois" dreams described by another untranslatable term: *мещанство*. On another was the new *быт*, promoted in official propaganda with such slogans as "За новый быт," which advocated the transformation of daily life based on both Communist and industrial principles. In all of these instances, *быт* was thus harnessed in service of a particular ideology, whether conservative nationalism, populism, or Bolshevism, conceptualized in binary terms -- old v. new, or us v. them.

Svetlana Boym, another prominent theorist of the term, highlights the opposition between *быт* and *бытие*, also invoked earlier by Kelly in her definition, as the key reason for the binary conception of the term. "The opposition between быт, everyday existence (everyday routine and stagnation), and бытие (spiritual being)," Boym writes, "is one of the common places of the Russian intellectual tradition. It is often understood as the opposition between everyday life and 'real' life, which is always everywhere..."¹³⁸ Boym argues that this opposition comes from the Russian Orthodox tradition, citing the work of Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky who consider it a part of a "binary quality" of Russian culture defined largely vis-à-vis the West. In their essay

¹³⁸ Boym, *Common Places*, 29.

“Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture,” Lotman and Uspensky argue that, unlike Western culture, early Russian culture was characterized by an “essential polarity, a polarity expressed in the binary nature of its structure.”¹³⁹ They give an example of a fundamental difference the way “earthly life” had come to be understood in Russian religious thought in relation to the West:

In Western Catholicism, the world beyond the grave is divided into three spaces: heaven, purgatory, and hell. Earthly life is correspondingly conceived of as admitting three types of behavior: the unconditionally sinful, the unconditionally holy, and the neutral, which permits eternal salvation after some sort of purgative trial. In the real life of the medieval West, a wide area of neutral behavior thus became possible, as did neutral societal institutions...[Conversely], the Russian medieval system was constructed on an accentuated duality...one of its attributes was the division of the other world into heaven and hell. *Intermediate neutral spheres were not envisaged.* [my italics] Behavior in earthly life could, correspondingly, be either sinful or holy.¹⁴⁰

Whether, as Boym puts it, theorists such as Lotman and Uspensky “*describe* Russian culture or *perpetuate* its cultural mythology” is an important question that strikes at the heart of the concept of быт.¹⁴¹ Whatever the case may be, Boym argues that there is, nonetheless, a “national insistence upon the uniqueness of the Russian conception of the everyday and a desire to live out what appears to be a common romantic metaphor of the battle against the ordinary.”¹⁴²

This binary conception of *быв* (the low, “sinful” realm) and *бытие* (the higher realm) without a “neutral sphere,” where, as Boym puts it, “conceptions of ‘civil society’ and private life might have originated” persisted over time, moving from the religious to the secular sphere, particularly after the revolution.¹⁴³ For instance, this binary distinction plays a major role in

¹³⁹ Lotman and Uspensky, “Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture” in Lotman, et al. *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History: Essays* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 31.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 31-32.

¹⁴¹ Boym, *Common Places*, 30, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ Boym, *Common Places*, 29-30. In *The Birth of Purgatory*, Jacques Le Goff points out that the “move from binary to tertiary schemes” as a “dividing line in the organization of social thought” was first argued by Claude Lévi-

Nikolai Berdyaev conception of the “Russian idea” with an “extra-ordinary, messianic foundation” according to which the Russian national identity has a deeply eschatological character always focused on some kind of “future perfect,” as Boym puts it, rather than the ordinary and the mundane.¹⁴⁴ A similar dichotomy was invoked by the Bolsheviks in the conception of old vs. new *быт* while borrowing much of the same religious iconography. In both cases, *быт* is something that needs to be transcended or replaced, without the possibility of finding middle or neutral ground. This either/or character is also discussed by Lotman and Uspensky, who see negation is a primary force in the development of Russian culture: “The presence of a neutral sphere in the medieval West led to the appearance of a certain subjective continuity between the negated present and the awaited future,” while in Russian culture, “Duality and the absence of a neutral axiological sphere led to a conception of the new not as a continuation, but as a total eschatological change....Under such conditions, the dynamic process of historical change has a fundamentally different character: change occurs as a radical negation of the preceding state. The new does not arise out of a structurally ‘unused’ reserve, but results from a transformation of the old, a process of turning it inside out.”¹⁴⁵

Быт-Бытность-Бытие in Envy

Returning to *Envy*, the two key motifs that characterize the first scene -- “estrangement” of the ordinary and the tension between horizontality and verticality -- come into focus when one considers how *быт* has been conceptualized, especially during the period of NEP. The tension

Strauss in “*Les organisations dualistes existent-elles?*” Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 7.

¹⁴⁴ It should be noted that this aversion to *быт* is not strictly religious and plays an important part in the early 20th century Russian art, especially the Symbolist movement. As Catriona Kelly puts it, “Russian Symbolists expressed their discontent with the ordinary material world in favour of another, higher reality, of existence on a spiritual plane of radiance and beauty. The elevation of *бытие* (a more abstract concept of being) to a favoured position and the denigration of *быт* went together.” Kelly, 151.

¹⁴⁵ Lotman and Uspensky, 32-33.

between the ordinary and the extraordinary reflects the dynamic between *быт* and *бытие* in an inversion of the original dichotomy, so that the material world (new *быт*), which is measured and prized only for its utility, like one of Babichev's sausages, is contrasted to the realm of the imagination (old *быт*). This dichotomy, like other conceptions of *быт* and *бытие*, is also expressed spatially: Babichev is often associated with something higher, while KavaleroV seeks to catch up, to ascend. The best example of this dynamic is the scene of KavaleroV's "chase" of Babichev following the debacle at the airfield. KavaleroV goes to "The Quarter" where he almost catches up with Babichev. Babichev stands above him, "the upper part of his body passed by above some sort of wooden deck...[a]nd there he was again, up above, far away [прошло его туловище над каким-то деревянным бортом...и вот опять он появляется наверху, далеко]."¹⁴⁶ KavaleroV tries to climb up the stairs, to no avail: "[Babichev] flies past over me. Yes -- he flew through the air...[h]e flew off somewhere else on an iron waffle. A latticework shadow followed his flight [[Бабичев] пролетает надо мной. Да он пронесся по воздуху...на железной вафле он перелетел в другое место. Решетчатая тень сопровождала его полет]."¹⁴⁷ The main conflict of envy is expressed through this spatial relationship: KavaleroV seeks to rise above the ordinary, toward something higher, ostensibly toward where Babichev is.

What is different, I argue, is that KavaleroV's conception of this higher realm is fundamentally different: it is inherently private and intimate, stressing individual character and talent. Whereas traditional conceptions of *бытие* in Russian culture emphasize its public, collective character, often reflecting a sense of national destiny at the expense of the individual, what KavaleroV strives for could be termed *бытность* --- a kind of "neutral" space between

¹⁴⁶ *Envy*, E: 287, R: 48.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

быт and *бытие*, if we refer to Lotman and Uspensky's formulation. Indeed, such a notion is closer to the Western European than to Russian tradition; hence the numerous allusions to European literature and philosophy as well as a clear delineation between what is over there (in Europe) and in the Soviet Union. The concept of "being" itself, which would become an important subject in 20th century Western European philosophy, is thus fundamentally different, focusing on the phenomenological experience of the ordinary rather than some kind of transcendental knowledge or the world "beyond."

V.V. Vinogradov writes that in modern Russian, the term *бытность* is often not used independently, but rather as part of the phrase "в бытность (чью-нибудь, где-нибудь)" meaning "во время пребывания, нахождения:" "during (one's) time stay or presence (somewhere)," as in for example, "during my time as a student" or "during his tenure as governor."¹⁴⁸ Vinogradov points out that this meaning of the term had become stable by the 18th and 19th century, when in dictionaries it became defined as "присутствие, пребывание где-нибудь" (сл. 1867—1868, 1, с. 191; сл. Даля 1880, 1, с. 151).¹⁴⁹ Both of these definitions "во время пребывания, нахождения" and "присутствие, пребывание где-нибудь" thus imply a state which is both temporary, such as a stage or a period in one's life, as well as spatially defined where the change in space ("где-нибудь") leads one to a different "бытность." Rather than expressing one's inherent characteristics or "being," *бытность* is thus ephemeral and changing, a kind of an "in-between" sphere between *быт* and *бы*. This kind of ephemeral and temporary existence is a key aspect of Kavalerov's experience of the ordinary and of the book as a whole: in addition to being set during NEP, a transitional period in Russian history, *Envy's*

¹⁴⁸ Виноградов, В. В. *История слов: около 1,500 слов и выражений и более 5,000 слов, с ними связанных* (Москва: Толк, 1994), 66.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 71.

protagonist constantly finds himself in the middle, in a liminal state -- between the old and the new, between his imagination and the world of practical things, between his desire to express himself as an individual and the need to belong to the collective.

In the rest of the chapter, I examine how this ephemeral, liminal state of “бытность” defines the relationship between the public and the private in *Envy*, a relationship that itself is ambiguous and not easy to delineate. In particular, I focus on the book’s treatment of three important areas at the intersection between the private and the public: Kavalero’s desire for fame and immortality; the dichotomy between what is hidden and what is seen; and, perhaps most importantly, the role and depiction of objects from the private sphere, such as beds, sofas, and other “useless things,” which was one of Olesha’s early potential titles for the book.¹⁵⁰ Each of these three areas is defined by a tension between the private and the public, between быт and бытие, which Kavalero, through his sensibility and power of imagination, transforms into something personal and intimate, opening up an in-between state of “бытность.”

A Remarkable Man! Kavalero on Fame

Kavalero’s dreams of fame resemble the fantasies of Don Quixote, fantasies which are thwarted by the Soviet reality.¹⁵¹ “In our country,” Kavalero complains, “the roads to fame are blocked by barriers [В нашей стране дороги славы заграждены шлагбаумами].”¹⁵² As a result, “a gifted man must either fade away or else make up his mind to raise all sorts of hell and lift the barriers” [одаренный человек либо должен потускнеть, либо решиться на то, чтобы с большим скандалом поднять шлагбаум].¹⁵³ Like Don Quixote railing against the windmills,

¹⁵⁰ Ingdahl, 38.

¹⁵¹ Kavalero’s name also alludes to Don Quixote, with the Russian word “кавалер” having the same root as chevalier.

¹⁵² *Envy*, E : 267, R : 32

¹⁵³ Ibid.

Kavalerov rebels against Babichev and the new order because he perceives them as enemies who stifle his individuality and his ability to, as he puts it, “demonstrate the force of his personality.” Desire for fame is thus both an expression of Kavalerov’s egoism, but also a means of characterizing the new Soviet society, which, unlike in the West, does not celebrate personal expression and “deviation” from the collective. In the West, Kavalerov writes “you can become famous as a musician, a writer, a general...those are legitimate means of becoming famous [можно прославиться, ставши музыкантом, писателем, полководцем...это законные пути для достижения славы]” in opposition to the Soviet Union “where people talk so much about purposefulness, about usefulness, where a man is expected to be sober, to have a realistic approach to things...[у нас говорят столько о целеустремленности, полезности, когда у человека требуется трезвый, реалистический подход к вещам...].”¹⁵⁴ However, in contrast to Quixote who is firmly arrested in the world of the imagination, Kavalerov’s dreams vacillate between the desire to be admired and celebrated like Napoleon, and a much more modest, “everyday” goal: to be accepted and recognized as a person, one with unique traits and talents.

This opposition between the need for immortality and a mere desire for acknowledgement of his individuality is well illustrated by Kavalerov’s memory of a visit to a wax museum with his father where he saw the scene of the assassination of the French president Carnot sculpted in wax. In the scene, the French president is depicted in his dying moments, frozen in time, and it was upon seeing this figure that Kavalerov “resolved to become famous, so that one day my own wax double, filled with the rumble of centuries, which few men are permitted to hear, would be just as elegantly poised inside a greenish cubicle [я решил стать

¹⁵⁴ Envy, E : 268, R : 33.

знаменитым, чтобы некогда мой восковой двойник, наполненный гудением веков, которое услышать дано лишь немногим, вот так же красовался в зеленоватом кубе].”¹⁵⁵ This scene could be read as a kind of parody of most famous “wax figure” in Soviet history, especially during the period when Olesha was writing the book: the embalmed Lenin. Like his other acts of rebellion against the new order, Kavalero’s description of the wax figure is thus both sacrilegious and narcissistic and could be read as merely another sign of his megalomania. However, a careful reading shows that Kavalero’s own desire to be “embalmed” for eternity is more modest: all he wants to have inscribed next to his image in wax -- an image which is not very flattering and emphasizes his quirks and unique qualities, rather than “fixing” them like many statues of famous people (“a strange man with a potato nose, a pale, kindly face, disheveled hair, boyishly plump, wearing a jacket bereft of all but the middle button) -- is his name and “nothing else.”¹⁵⁶ The desire for fame is therefore merely a desire to assert one’s individuality, which includes not only one’s talents and outstanding qualities, but also quirks and imperfections, many of which are banal and ordinary, yet are nonetheless unique to each person.

In *Envy*, fame thus functions as another concept that, like the Flammarion anecdote, ties the higher realm of immortality and eternity (or *бытие*) with the lower realm of the individual, often expressed through the ordinary and the banal, and in Kavalero’s case, the irrational, which to him often appears to be the only way to assert his individuality in the cult of rationality and purposefulness of the new Soviet regime. This dynamic between the two realms - *бытие* and *быт* - is best expressed by the image from Babichev’s dream the same night he brings Kavalero home. After putting Kavalero on the sofa in a retelling of same episode from the first part, except this time from a more “objective” perspective, Babichev dreams that “the young man had

¹⁵⁵ *Envy*, E : 271, R: 36.

¹⁵⁶ *Envy*, E : 272, R : 36.

hanged himself on a telescope [молодой человек повесился на телескопе]”¹⁵⁷ In addition to distilling Olesha’s poetic approach, particularly his use of metaphor, this image echoes one of Kavaleroﬀ’s statements on fame earlier in the book. Claiming that the most fundamental way to affirm one’s freedom and individuality may be to commit suicide, “with no motive whatsoever...as a prank” and “to show that everyone has the right to be the arbiter of his own fate” [без всякой причины...из озорства...чтобы показать, что каждый имеет право распоряжаться собой], Kavaleroﬀ offhandedly suggests that Babichev should hang himself “at the entrance to the Supreme Soviet for the National Economy on Visigoth Place, or Nogin, as it is now called.” “There is a huge arch there,” he adds, “that would make a great impression [“там громадная арка...там получится эффектно”].¹⁵⁸ Indeed, the two images work in tandem, presenting two different viewpoints: Kavaleroﬀ’s rant embodies what he understands as a kind of sacrifice of individuality and humanity in the new society to rationality and “purposefulness” symbolized by the highest economic body in the government, the Nogin. On the other hand, Babichev’s vision of Kavaleroﬀ hanging on a telescope, a symbol of stargazing and daydreams, highlights what Babichev sees as the impracticality of “living in the clouds,” the idealism of youth and the old way of thinking.

Moreover, the juxtaposition between the high and the low that characterizes both images with relation to fame provides another example of the spatial dynamics employed throughout the book to conceptualize the opposition between бытие and быт. Бытие implies immortality, eternity, something high and “beyond” -- the huge arch could also refer to the heavens while the telescope, which is referenced in a few other places in the novel, implies looking upwards to the sky, beyond the ordinary, “earthly” life, which is below, on the ground, and is characterized by

¹⁵⁷ *Envy*, E: 340, R: 91.

¹⁵⁸ *Envy*, E: 268, R: 33.

быт. The image of the hanging on the telescope, though morbid, nonetheless expresses the middle point - бытность - between the two realms (бытие and быт) occupied by Kavalеров. His vacillation between the desire to ascend to the realm of the immortals, and the desire to merely be acknowledged as a person, with unique characteristics and freedom to express himself, even if the ultimate sign of this freedom is suicide, characterizes the discourse on fame in the book. Rather than serving as a means of merely demonstrating Kavalеров's megalomania and envy, fame provides another way of demonstrating how the relationship between бытие and быт, and thus between the public and the private, has changed during this period, with Kavalеров caught in the middle, in the neutral space.

The Hidden and the Seen: *Envy* and *The Invisible Man*

Another aspect of fame that I touched on briefly, but which needs more elaboration is the dichotomy brought up by Kavalеров between "over there," meaning in the West, and "here," in the Soviet Union. Indeed, *Envy* features multiple references to European culture, including art, literature, and architecture. This has caused some critics to label Olesha as one of the most "European" or "French" Russian writers whose influences draw less from the Russian tradition than from the West. While the question of who influenced Olesha is certainly more complex -- in the "Golden Shelf" section of his memoir, for example, Olesha discusses a variety of literary influences, both from Russian and European¹⁵⁹ -- the dichotomy between European and Russian thought is a prominent theme in *Envy*, especially when it comes to the tension between individuality and collectivity, or the private and the public. Starting from his name to the references to Hamlet and Napoleon, Kavalеров follows in the line of a kind of hero that has become irrelevant in the new Soviet state. Instead, the new hero is personified by Volodya who,

¹⁵⁹ See Yuri Olesha, *No Day without a Line*, trans. by Judson Rosengrant (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 197-274.

despite his individual traits, nonetheless puts the collective first or leads it, as he does in the soccer match. Whether it is chivalry, indecision, or arrogance, these traits are marks of individuality that stand out in a collective and disrupt the sense of order and conformity.

An influence from European literature that Olesha often highlighted, perhaps perplexingly to some critics, is that of H. G. Wells, and in particular his 1897 work, *The Invisible Man*. In an interview he gave to *Literaturnyi kritik* in the 1930s, Olesha said the following about the impact of Wells's famous work on the writing of *Envy*:

My *Envy* was written under Wells's influence. More precisely, of his *Invisible Man*. Odd? However, it is indeed so. Someday I will prove it with a pencil in my hand. Of course the idea of my novel is different; the images, the very essence are different as well. And yet I know that it is so. When I read my novel carefully, behind the fabric I see the pictures that I imagined while reading *The Invisible Man*. I can visualize the summer, a summery day, greenery all around. In my childhood I dreamt about Europe. About travelling around Europe on a bicycle. About English country roads. I lived then in Odessa. It seemed to me that Odessa was more connected to Europe than to Russia. I saw the sea, a sea wave, and it was easy for me to imagine that this wave came from the ocean. The thought about Europe greatly stirred my imagination. In Europe it was the beginning of aviation and of sporting events. In Europe technology was thriving. There they had car races; there the Eiffel Tower stood. And then I came upon Wells [...] I know that the summer coloring of *Envy* is from Wells, from my dream about Europe, from pictures of aviation and sporting events which then presented themselves to my imagination...¹⁶⁰

It is interesting that, while Olesha admits that the “images” and the “essence” of *The Invisible Man* are quite different from *Envy*, he nonetheless insists on the influence of Wells, and the main reason for this insistence is that Olesha equates his reading Wells's novel with dreams of Europe and the stirring of the imagination. Indeed, these reminiscences and reveries about summers in Europe, the “country roads,” aviation and technology strongly resemble Kavalеров's thoughts and dreams about Europe. Yet reading *The Invisible Man* with the novel's influence on *Envy* in

¹⁶⁰ Galya Diment (ed.). *H.G. Wells and All Things Russian* (London ; New York, NY: Anthem Press, 2019), 202.

mind, there is not much direct evidence which would allow the critic to “prove” this influence “with a pencil in hand,” as Olesha claims. Of course, Olesha never performed a comparative analysis between the two works, and no critics have taken him up on it. I do not intend to do a comprehensive examination here either, but in addition to the sensory impressions of European countryside and the stirring of the imagination that Olesha may have experienced while reading *The Invisible Man*, the two novels share thematic similarities, despite Olesha’s claims to the contrary. As a result, I believe that a short comparison of the two works elucidates how *Envy* imagines the relationship between the individual and the collective, and the liminal nature of “бытность”, as a kind of in-between, neutral space that lies at the heart of the discussion between the public and the private.

The first and most obvious is that both of the protagonists, Kavalеров and Griffin, “the invisible man” are outcasts in their respective societies and have certain delusions of grandeur that put them at odds with the collective. Griffin is responsible for his predicament: though he has talent and intelligence, having made an enormous breakthrough in his research, he keeps it to himself, ultimately succumbing to his vanity and devolving into madness. His is an *idée fixe*, an obsession which seems to have come at least partly from his background and his father’s death. On the other hand, Kavalеров merely dreams of becoming an “Edison,” yet has very little to show for his aspirations; instead, he feels ignored and alienated by the new world, which he, like the *Invisible Man*, sees as the enemy that stands in his way and creates obstacles.

Aside from this direct connection, however, the most important aspect of Wells’s novel for *Envy* is the motif of invisibility. “The fact is, I am all here: head, hands, legs and all the rest

of it,” says the Invisible Man, “but it happens that I’m invisible.”¹⁶¹ While Kavalеров is not in the same predicament, this statement could be applied to him as well, especially in the first part of the novel narrated from his point of view in which he feels that he is ignored as if he were invisible. Sitting next to Babichev in the evening as the latter is working, Kavalеров imagines that Babichev disrespects and ignores him, even though he knows it is all in his imagination. “Nothing special about [him sitting there and working]. And yet his every act amounts to saying: You, Kavalеров, are a nobody,” Kavalеров thinks, admitting that “of course, he does not come right out and say this...but the thought is clear without words. Some third person conveys it to me. Some third person drives me into a frenzy as I sit watching him [ничего особенного. Но все его поведение говорит: ты обыватель, Кавалеров...конечно, он не заявляет этого...но это понятно без слов. Кто-то третий заявляет мне об этом. Кто-то третий заставляет меня беситься в то время, когда я слежу за ним].”¹⁶² In addition to similarities with many scenes in *The Invisible Man* where a disembodied voice interrupts a situation, as if from a “third” dimension, the motif of invisibility also opens up a new narrative space that allows for an outside perspective as a kind of commentary on the situation. As I discuss in more detail in the section of this chapter on “useless things” in connection with Olesha’s method of describing the world, and in particular objects from the private sphere, this “third” perspective is a hallmark of his artistry: the characters and their surroundings form two parts of the book’s world, yet there is a third consciousness -- that of Kavalеров (or Olesha) that is able to see beyond this duality, and describe it to the reader, as if standing outside of it. In Wells’s novel, it is the trait of invisibility that allows for this outside perspective: thanks to his transformation, Griffin is both present and

¹⁶¹ H.G. Wells, H. G. *The Invisible Man*. (London ; New York: Penguin, 2005), 39.

¹⁶² Envy, E: 257-258, R: 25.

not present; he frequently views the action from a unique angle available only to him while also being able to intervene if necessary.

Vision is, of course, one of the most important themes in *Envy*: *how* something is seen and from whose perspective, especially the imaginative way Kavaleroov sees the world. An equally important question is *what* is seen, especially in connection to private spaces, which in the period *Envy* is written become more and more “open.” And *Envy* puts this question center stage. While at first glance, the strongest similarities between the *Invisible Man* and Olesha’s work are to be found in the two main protagonists, upon further inspection one realizes that a much closer connection to Wells’s novel is Ivan Babichev, and more specifically, his own “invisible” creation, Ophelia. Ivan is an “Edison” of sorts, and his most important invention is his “weapon of vengeance” that only certain characters, Ivan and Kavaleroov primarily, are able to see.

Ophelia, though perhaps not as “grounded” in science as the *Invisible Man*, is the most direct influence of Wells. It could be seen a parody of the cult of the machine that existed in the Soviet Union where technology does not lead toward utopia, but its opposite: destruction.¹⁶³ In fact, the rhetoric around the two inventions, invisibility in Wells’s novel and Ophelia in *Envy* is similar: because their creators are ostracized by society, they see their inventions as means of revenge and getting back at a society that does not understand them. Griffin’s vanity and

¹⁶³ Kazimiera Ingdahl makes a similar point in her book *The Artist and the Creative Act : A Study of Jurij Oleša's Novel Zavist'* where she discusses how Ophelia fits within the “cult of the machine” of the 1920s. Kazimiera Ingdahl, *The Artist and the Creative Act : A Study of Jurij Oleša's Novel Zavist'*, (University of Stockholm, 1984), 100.

madness lead him to see invisibility as being good only for destruction and the establishment of a new age filled with terror. “[t]he Invisible Man...must now establish a Reign of Terror,” Griffin tells Kemp, his friend from university days; “He must take some town like your Burdock and terrify and dominate it.”¹⁶⁴ This statement is not very different from what Ivan tells Kavalero, advising him to attack Andrei, and using Ophelia as a means to accomplish this. “Kill Andrei,” Ivan tells Kavalero. “Leave behind you the honorable memory of having been the hired assassin of an age. Crush your enemy on the threshold of the two epochs... And I too am going to destroy my enemy. Let us drink, Kavalero, to Ophelia. That is the weapon of my vengeance [Убейте его. Почетно оставить о себе память как о наемном убийце века. Прищемите вашего врага на пороге двух эпох...и я тоже уничтожу своего врага. Выпьем, Кавалеро, за Офелию. Это орудие моей мести].”¹⁶⁵ The inventive, creative spirit possessed by Ivan, and to an equal extent, Kavalero, is not nurtured in the new society; as a result, it becomes a destructive force, a force that outcasts seek to turn against the society that rejects them. What happens instead is that, for Ivan and Kavalero, the ability to see the world from a creative, individual perspective becomes their downfall, a curse, much like it was the case with Griffin in the *Invisible Man*.

Ophelia is thus a metaphor for what is hidden and what is seen, and by whom, and a symbol of individuality and creativity that is not recognized in the new society. This issue of recognition and visibility is best expressed by an exchange between Andrei and Ivan after Ophelia “disrupts” Andrei’s speech. “Who are you talking about? Who is this ‘she’?,” screams Andrei, adding “I don’t see a thing!...It was only the wind that knocked a lantern against a beam and the lantern simply broke. [О ком ты говоришь? Кто это «она»? Я ничего не

¹⁶⁴ Wells, *Invisible Man*, 125.

¹⁶⁵ Envy, E: 335, R: 87.

вижу...Просто ветром толкнуло фонарь о балку, просто разбился фонарь]”¹⁶⁶ To which Ivan replies: “There! There! To the left. Do you see it? What is that sitting there on the beam? You see it?...Do you believe it?! Are you afraid?!!” Andrei is not able to see and recognize it, adding that “it’s only a shadow, brother...[вот вот, левее...Видишь? Что это сидит там, на балочке? Видишь? ..Веришь? Воишься?...Брат, это просто тень].”¹⁶⁷ Ophelia thus serves as a materialized and symbolic lack of visibility and recognition for those with the “old,” pre-revolutionary worldview or individuality that has been suppressed. Consequently, it is only the “madmen” Ivan and KavaleroV who are able to see the machine, which in KavaleroV’s case Olesha represents as his downfall.

“Useless” Things: Domestic Objects and Private Space

In her study *A Graveyard of Themes*, Kazimiera Ingdahl points out that one of the early titles for *Envy* was “Useless Things [Беспользные вещи].”¹⁶⁸ Such a title is not surprising considering Olesha’s (and KavaleroV’s) preoccupation with material things, and in particular, ordinary, everyday objects, such as beds, sofas, vases. Ingdahl points out that it is precisely such “home furnishings...from the private sphere of bedroom paraphernalia” that “activate KavaleroV’s sense perception.”¹⁶⁹ As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the reader is thrown into the everyday from the first scene, into the ordinary actions and routines, such as using the bathroom and performing calisthenics. However, this is the everyday as it is perceived by KavaleroV, as it is transformed and “estranged” by his imagination. In KavaleroV’s view of the world around him, different objects not only become associated with a particular character

¹⁶⁶ *Envy*, 354, R: 101.

¹⁶⁷ *Envy*, E: 354, R: 101-102.

¹⁶⁸ Ingdahl, *A Graveyard of Themes*, 38.

¹⁶⁹ Ingdahl, 55.

and a way of thinking (for example, Ivan Babichev with the pillow, and Andrei with the sausage), but often have personalities of their own, which Kavalero's imagination reveals and, often, animates. "Things don't like me [меня не любят вещи]," Kavalero claims early on, enumerating a few examples of this antagonism: "Furniture does its best to trip me. Once the corner of some lacquered piece or other literally bit me. The blanket and I have the most complicated relationship...[мебель норовит подставить мне ножку. Какой-то лакированный угол однажды буквально укусил меня. С одеялом у меня всегда сложные взаимоотношения]."¹⁷⁰ On the other hand, "things like [Babichev]," and this difference in the relationship of each character towards "things," and in particular household objects, defines the different attitudes toward the organization of everyday life and the tension between быт and бытие. Babichev is associated with materialism, with "earthly" existence: he produces food and has a strong appetite and a plump physique: he advocates for a new kind of configuration of everyday life, which begins with the domestic sphere and the kitchen where objects have a strictly utilitarian function. His is the world of the new *быт*.

As Svetlana Boym points out, one of the main features of the ideology of the new быт is the reconfiguration of the domestic realm, and in particular, the role of furniture and other household objects in this transformation. The "Down with Domestic Trash" campaign, named after a Mayakovsky poem in which the poet excoriates the fetishization of "cozy, domestic" objects as a sign of philistinism and *poshlost'*, turned, as Boym puts it, "a rather innocent domestic setting" into "a battleground where the ferocious struggle for Novy Быт must take place."¹⁷¹ In this battle, everyday objects, and in particular those that somehow signify

¹⁷⁰ *Еву*, E: 252, R: 20.

¹⁷¹ Boym, *Common Places*, 34.

prerevolutionary domestic comforts or “petit bourgeois” pretensions, take on special significance as potential signs of counterrevolution or, more importantly for Mayakovsky, stagnation and inertia. Household objects and their arrangement thus become important symbols of *poshlost*’ or *meshchanstvo*, but also of the old быт: in the new world, objects, rather than being expressions of personal taste or individuality, are primarily valued for their utility and functionality. In the campaign against the “domestic trash,” this meant that domestic interiors should be minimal, bare, and functional. Boym gives a few examples of this “ideal revolutionary habitat,” such as Mayakovsky’s version of interior design (“There are two of us in the room; me and Lenin -- a photograph on the wall”) or El Lissitzky’s (usually) room of the future as “the best kind of travelling suitcase,” with only a “mattress, a folding chair, a table, and a gramophone” in an otherwise empty room.¹⁷² Other furniture and unnecessary decorations were considered to be symbols of fetishization of objects and expression of a prerevolutionary kind of consciousness and the old быт. As Boym points out, such an ideological view of the domestic realm from the official perspective would change after NEP (and would indeed vary throughout the 20th century), but during the early post-revolutionary period, this kind of “bare” and “revolutionary” interior design defined the official line on what domestic and private spaces should look like.¹⁷³

And it is against this context and ideological battles about the domestic realm that the preoccupation with things, especially those “useless things,” in *Envy* needs to be examined. Because they carry such an ideological charge, certain objects from the private sphere take on an “oversized” role in the novel as weapons in an ideological battle. An excellent example is the pillow, carried by Ivan Babichev around like a standard. If Andrei Babichev stands for the new

¹⁷² Boym, 38.

¹⁷³ An excellent example of this “revolutionary” interior is Isaac Brodsky’s 1930 painting “Lenin in Smolny in 1917.”

быт, his brother Ivan is firmly embedded in the old *быт*, which for him is best symbolized by the pillow, an object associated both with dreams, but also individuality. Indeed, the “battle” between the old and the new быт is arguably the climax of the novel, with the pillow as the centerpiece: interrupting Andrei’s speech at the Quarter, Ivan Babichev gives a fiery speech about the end of the “old” world. “[Andrei] breaks into your most secluded little nooks, he darts like a rat along your shelves, crawls under your beds,” he exclaims, adding “we want to sleep each on his own pillow. Don’t you touch our pillows!” [он врывается в закоулки ваши, шмыгает, как крыса, по полкам, залазит под кровати...мы хотим спать каждый на своей подушке. Не трогай подушек наших!].¹⁷⁴ For Ivan, the pillow has something akin to an atomic property, as the most basic symbol, the simplest “unit” of individuality and privacy, as well as an object that is inseparable from life itself, accompanying a human being from birth to death. He says: “When our little heads were still bald except for some ruddy chicken down, they lay on these pillows, during our nights of love these pillows knew our kisses, we are used to dying on them.” [Наши еще не оперившиеся, куриным пухом рыжеющие головы лежали на этих подушках, наши поцелуи попадали на них в ночи любви, на них мы умирали].¹⁷⁵ In addition -- and here the “use” of a domestic object as an ideological weapon is the clearest -- “a pillow swallows up bullets. A pillow is what we’ll smother you with....” This is the moment Ivan’s speech ends “abruptly” because he had “said too much:” the pillow, as many other household objects in the novel, is thus not “innocent,” but from one perspective could be seen as a part of the “domestic trash”: indeed, in Mayakovsky’s poem it is the “icon” of Marx that comes

¹⁷⁴ *Envy*, E: 351, R: 99-100.

¹⁷⁵ *Envy*, E: 351, R: 100.

alive from the wall to fight the complacency of bourgeois life. This, then, is the clash of the old and the new *быт*.

Where is Kavalеров (and Olesha) in this battle? As it is the case with his attitude toward fame, Kavalеров has a personal and original view of the world around him, especially objects, which he transforms and animates with his imagination and power of observation. The result is that objects play an ambiguous role and often serve as a kind of “springboard” for Kavalеров’s flights of fancy: rather than being merely symbols of the old *быт*, like Ivan Babichev’s pillow, or utilitarian things with a clear practical function, objects, and especially household items like beds, sofas, and pillows. These provide a way to reflect and capture Kavalеров’s state of mind, his individuality, and importantly, his artistic sensibility and talent, which, as M. Chudakova points out, and as Olesha himself has emphasized, reflect the sensibility and talent of the book’s author. Consequently, the description of objects is inseparable from Kavalеров’s consciousness and his perception of the world, which strives against an ordinary, *пошлый* view of objects, not because they stand for symbols of bourgeois life, but because in the ordinary course of life these objects are taken for granted and perceived automatically. In this, Olesha is closer to Mayakovsky whose scorn for *быт*, despite political proclamations, stems primarily from its static, stagnating qualities that hinder the imagination and creativity, rather than ideological considerations.

In her study of Olesha’s creative approach, Elizabeth Beaujour argues that many of Olesha’s characters, including Kavalеров, perceive “the world around them as malevolent and threatening.” “They then try,” Beaujour claims, “to compensate for this actual powerlessness by

seeing the world in a distorted and idiosyncratic fashion, projecting an imaginary control over it, and thus making it theirs.”¹⁷⁶ In Beaujour’s view, Kavaleroﬀ compensates for his inferiority and the “malevolence” of the Soviet world by drawing on metaphors, and particularly, “tricks of vision,” which, Beaujour claims, always feature a change in perspective or distortion. As a result, “Kavaleroﬀ is freed from the real world; he has induced an enchantment.”¹⁷⁷ While an element of enchantment is certainly an important aspect of Kavaleroﬀ’s (and Olesha’s) approach to the describing the ordinary world, often moving towards fantasy, I disagree with Beaujour that the purpose of this approach is control. Kavaleroﬀ does not “bend reality” to fit his needs or to give him power -- one could argue that Ivan Babichev does this, especially with the “invisible” Ophelia -- but rather is the only one sensitive and perceptive enough to notice its beauty and sensuality. While Kavaleroﬀ himself may be enchanted with what he sees, the real enchantment is experienced by the reader who savors the unusual metaphors and the original vision that characterizes Kavaleroﬀ’s description of the world and its objects. Rather than desiring to control and “possess” the objects he describes, Kavaleroﬀ elevates them out of the ordinary, out of быт, and shows them to the reader in a new light, much like a magician might; perhaps a more apt analogy is an impresario in a circus, who shows and highlights different acts and visual delights.

M. Chudakova considers the world described by Olesha in *Envy* as a “зрелище,” a kind of spectacle or a performance that Kavaleroﬀ shows and unveils for the reader. As a result, Chudakova argues, the reader does not merely enter the world, but also gets the author/narrator as a guide who points out its characteristics. Chudakova writes:

¹⁷⁶ Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour. *The Invisible Land : A Study of the Artistic Imagination of Iurii Olesha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 38.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 55.

This prose is such that it does not simply depict a world, which we step into or immerse ourselves in, but rather it is as if it showcases it to us, pointing with one's finger each separate image...Between the reader and this world, in which operate Olesha's heroes, stands yet a third person, who is showing us this world.

Такова эта проза -- не просто изображающая некий мир, в который мы входим, погружаемся, а как бы демонстрирующая нам его, указывающая перстом на каждое отдельное изображение...Между читателем и тем миром, в котором действуют герои Олеси, стоит еще кто-то третий, нам этот мир показывающий. (*italics in the original*)¹⁷⁸

As a result, the objects in this world, and especially those from the private realm because they are the ones most often closely associated with one's memories or are literally the "closest" in one's surroundings, are filtered through the narrator's consciousness and sensibility, and are seen anew and from a deeply personal perspective. In order to emphasize Olesha's "personalized" and creative approach to describing things, Chudakova compares it to that of another chronicler of NEP *быт*, Mikhail Zoshchenko, whose artistic sensibility is quite different. Chudakova claims that

Zoshchenko does not pull a thing out of its habitual context, as Olesha does, in order to look at it again... On the contrary, he has given things a deliberate familiarity that frightens the reader. All these objects of "communal" *быт* are only mentioned quickly, in passing, as something understood by itself, without which it is not possible to exist. In his prose things are not moved from their customary places, not even by a centimeter; his hero-narrator cannot even imagine that somewhere (or sometime) objects necessary for a person's life could exist in a different configuration.

Зощенко не выдергивает, как Олеша, вещь из привычного обихода, чтобы рассмотреть ее заново...Напротив, вещам у него придана заведомая, пугающая читателя знакомость. Все эти предметы <<коммунального>> быта только упомянуты скороговоркой, вскользь, как нечто само собой разумеющееся, то, без чего нельзя существовать. В его прозе вещи не только ни на сантиметр не сдвинуты с привычных мест -- его герой рассказчик и помыслить не может, что где то (или когда то) необходимые человеку для жизни предметы могут существовать в другом наборе.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ М. Чудакова. *Мастерство Юрия Олеши* (Москва: Наука, 1972), 68.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 40.

In contrast to Zoshchenko's narrators, who accept their surrounding быт without any questioning and any imagination, as something that simply is and could not be otherwise,¹⁸⁰ Olesha's heroes, and KavaleroV in particular, imbue it with their own original and personal vision and sensibility. Consequently, the objects that exist in this world are elevated from the быт, lifted up as it were, and given a personal touch that allows the reader to see them anew. However, while they may be "elevated" from the ordinary course of things, they do not have special ideological significance or symbolism (бытие) ascribed to them, such as, for example, given to "bourgeois" household objects in the view of the Bolsheviks. Instead, they merely produce an ephemeral, fleeting impression -- the equivalent of "в бытность" -- captured by KavaleroV. Household objects and the "bedroom paraphernalia" serve to momentarily engage KavaleroV's imagination and lead him to a state of reverie, of suspension that often both provides a reprieve from the ordinary as well as satisfy his desire to express himself creatively, a desire that is denied to him in the world of sausage makers and party bureaucrats.

Perhaps the best example of how objects, and especially those from the private sphere, function in the book, is KavaleroV's description of the bed in Anichka's room. It is an old bed, with a lot of ornaments. "[The bed] was made of expensive wood," KavaleroV says, "covered with a dark cherry lacquer, and on the inner face of the headboard and the footboard there were inset mirrors in the shape of arcs." Looking at it from the "ideological" point of view, this would

¹⁸⁰ One example of such a view of the world is Zoshchenko's story "Poverty [Бедность]," sometimes translated as "Electrification," in which the main character decides that he would consciously rather not see the poverty of his apartment, something made possible by newly installed electricity. See Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Scenes from the Bathhouse: And Other Stories of Communist Russia*, trans. by Sidney Monas (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 28-31.

be an excellent example of those “cozy, domestic” objects that stand for petty bourgeois comforts that the post-revolutionary Soviet society does not “need.” Indeed, Kavalеров may even poke slight fun at the transformation of the domestic realm that was accompanied by registrations and excessive bureaucracy when he describes the acquisition of the bed by Anichka’s husband. Anichka’s husband won the bed as a lottery prize at a fair: “Anichka’s husband mounted a wooden platform, showed his lottery ticket, and received from the master of ceremonies a document conferring upon him the right to own the remarkable bed. [взошел на деревянный помост Анечкин муж и, предъявив лотерейный билет, получил от распорядителя квитанцию на право владения замечательной кроватью]”¹⁸¹ Along with the document that certifies possession, it is carted off with great fanfare, with the whistling of the crowd and throwing of confetti.

For Kavalеров, the bed assumes an otherworldly, fantastical quality, something that goes beyond mere material appearance or utility. The ornamental, baroque quality of the object induces Kavalеров’s reveries; in particular, it is the play of reflections due to the “inset mirrors in the shape of arcs” on the headboard and the footboard that spark his daydreams, creating a sense of distortion that we have seen with other objects, especially in terms of the motif of horizontality vs. verticality that runs through the book, especially in the context of the dynamic between the private and the public. Even though the bed is the most “horizontal” of objects, Kavalеров’s vision always turns upward, as if he refuses to be grounded even when, and especially when, he is laying down. Thus, “the blue sky was reflected in the moving arcs of the mirrors [голубое небо отражалось в движущихся зеркальных арках],” resembling eyes

¹⁸¹ Envy, E: 341, R: 91.

“opening or slowly closing [точно открывались и медленно опускались веки прекрасных глаз]”; or the bed is distorted in Kavaleroѵ’s perception, creating a surreal sense of scale: “[i]t occupied half the room, and its upper parts were lost in the murk of the ceiling [полкомнаты было занято ею].”¹⁸² The bed towers above him, like characters throughout the book do, especially Andrei, but in this case, the object is not threatening or imposing. It not only provides protection, but it allows Kavaleroѵ to express himself most freely, and most creatively, bringing him to a stage of innocence and freedom that he lacks as an adult and a dreamer in the new Soviet reality. “If I were a child...completely independent of distance, scale, time, weight, and gravity [Будь я ребенок...не подчиняясь ни расстояниям, ни масштабам, ни времени, ни весу, ни тяготению]” Kavaleroѵ muses,

how many poetical, magical fabrications would flow out of my childish imagination, gripped by the powerful aspect of such an extraordinary object!...I might have crawled along the corridors formed by the empty space between the springs and the side of the bed; I might have hidden behind those columns that now seem to me no larger than graduated cylinders; I might have set up imaginary catapults on its barricades and fired at my enemies, who were exhausting their strength by fleeing across the soft spongy earth of the blanket; I might have received foreign emissaries under the arc of a mirror, like the king in the novel I’d just read; I might have set out on fantastic journeys over the carvings, higher and higher, over the legs and backsides of the cupids, crawling over them the way one crawls over a statue of the Buddha, too large to be seen all at once; and from the topmost arch, from that dizzying heights, I might have leapt down into the terrifying abyss, the icy abyss of the pillows...”¹⁸³(341)

сколько поэтических, волшебных построений создал бы мой детский ум, отданный во власть зрелищу такой необычайной вещи! ...я ползал бы в коридорах, образовавшихся от пустоты между рамой пружинного матраца и бортами кровати; таился бы за колоннами, что теперь кажутся мне не больше мензурок; воображаемые катапульты устанавливал бы на барьерах ее и стрелял бы по врагам, теряющим силы в бегстве по мягкой, засасывающей почве одеяла; устраивал бы под зеркальной аркой приемы послов, как король только что прочитанного романа; отправлялся бы в фантастические путешествия по резьбе – все выше и выше – по ногам и ягодицам купидонов, лез бы по ним, как лезут по статуе Будды, не умея

¹⁸² *Envу*, E: 341, R: 91-92.

¹⁸³ *Envу*, E: 341-342.

охватить ее взором, и с последней дуги, с головокружительной высоты, срывался бы в страшную пропасть, в ледовитую пропасть подушек...¹⁸⁴

Like in a fairy tale, in Kavaleroﬀ’s imagination the bed transforms into a magical kingdom and a playroom for his imagination -- the opposite of a mere functional object, as furniture is supposed to be in the new utilitarian Soviet apartment. Instead, the bed is a springboard for a personal reverie and artistic expression, and a way to “elevate” himself out of his “corner,” out of the gutter. Again, then, the imagery of an “arch”, and Kavaleroﬀ’s dreams of ascending “higher and higher” towards “dizzying heights”; indeed, it is a strange image considering it is the description of a bed, but it perfectly fits with the book’s opposition between horizontality and verticality as a means of depicting the relationship between the public and the private. Household objects in *Envy*, and especially the sofa and the bed, thus resemble something akin to a flying carpet, a means of ascending from the быт and the ordinary world, yet at the same time, suspended in air in a momentary “neutral” space, which dissipates as soon as the dream is over.

Conclusion: A Return to Flammarion

To sum up the liminal nature of Kavaleroﬀ’s existence, I return to the source that began this chapter: Camille Flammarion’s *Atmosphere*. Flammarion’s book is perhaps most famous for its engraving (Figure 15) whose provenance and symbolism has been debated over the years.¹⁸⁵ My intention is not to revive this debate nor to argue for a particular interpretation of the image, but rather to point out its symbolic potential for my discussion of *Envy* in this chapter, and in

¹⁸⁴ *Envy*, R: 92.

¹⁸⁵ See the essay “An Original Fake: Closing the Debate on Flammarion’s Engraving” by Stefano Gattei in Beretta, Marco, and Conforti, Maria (eds.) *Fakes!?: Hoaxes, Counterfeits, and Deception in Early Modern Science*. (Sagamore Beach: Science History Publications/USA, 2014) for a comprehensive account of the debates about engraving’s origins and interpretation.

particular the relationship between *быт*, *бытие*, and *бытность*. Since he had Kavalеров allude to a rather obscure section of Flammarion’s *Atmosphere*, I think it is safe to assume that Olesha was aware of the book’s most famous image.

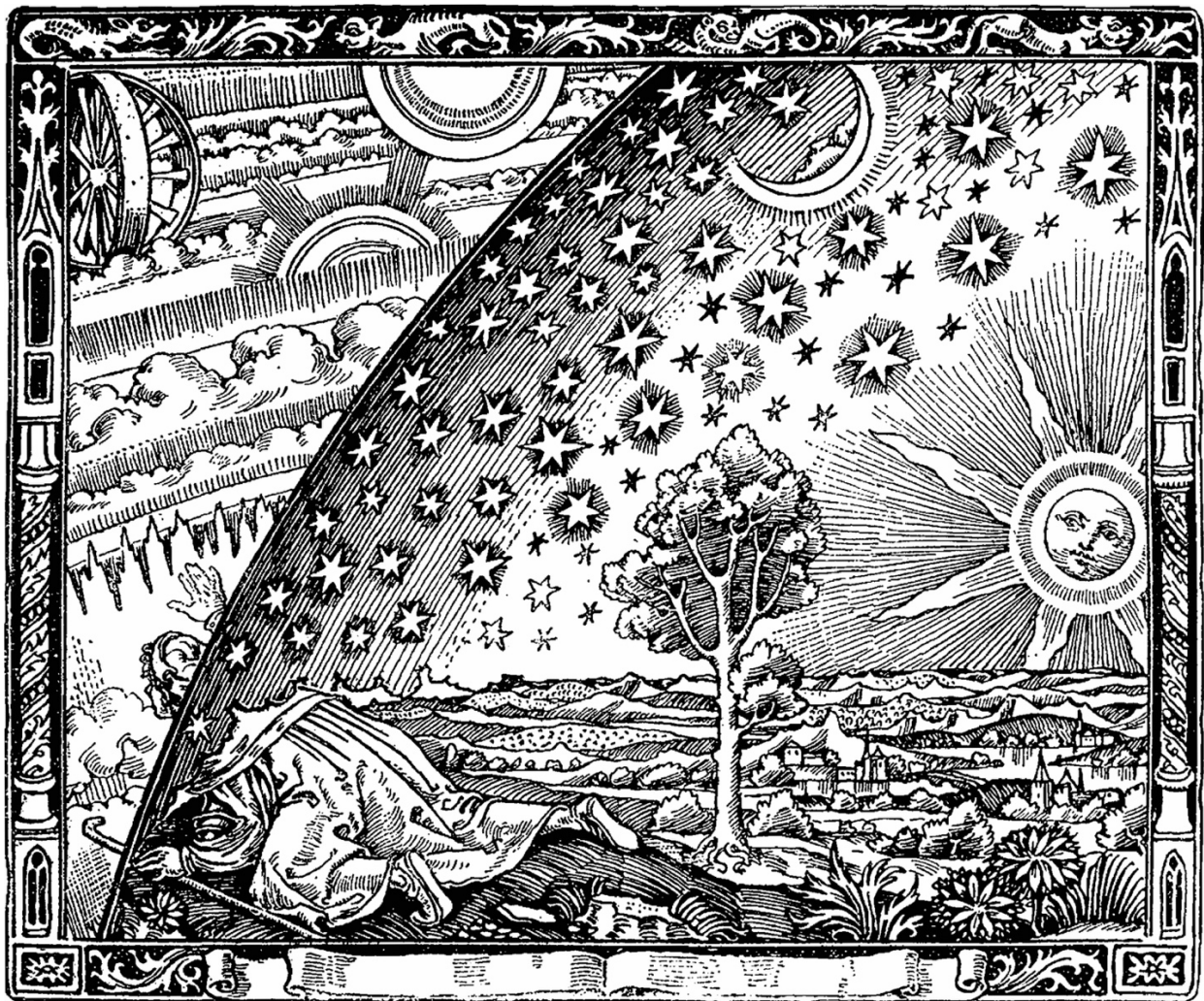


Figure 15: The “Flammarion” engraving

The image is found in the 1888 edition of *Atmosphere* with the caption “A missionary from the Middle Ages tells that he had found the point in which heaven and Earth touch each other...”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Gattei, quoting Flammarion (1888) in “An Original Fake: Closing the Debate on Flammarion’s Engraving,” 227.

The image is complex and detailed, resisting an easy reading. Scholar Stefano Gattei provides a good description of all the different elements which I think is worth quoting at length. Gattei writes:

The engraving shows the surface of the Earth as a vast, flat landscape, covered with hills and trees, scattered houses and turreted buildings. A stone bridge crosses a river, on whose surface the surrounding houses mirror...Above the horizon a flaming sun with a human face, over which is a broad vault, spangled with six-cornered stars of various sizes and brightness...In the foreground, on the left-hand side, where the starry vault of the sky and the flat surface of the Earth meet, is a stooping man, dressed with a long coat. He is seen from the back, as he breaks through the crystal heavenly vault with his head, his right hand, and the top of his walking stick...He sees circular bands surrounded by clouds, intense light, and what seems [sic] ice structures or flames; in between them, two flaming discs, possibly representing planets. In the top left corner of the picture, two large wooden wheels, one nested in the other, as we see them in sixteenth century bibles illustrating the “wheel in the middle of the wheel,” an element of the vision of God described in the Book of Ezekiel.¹⁸⁷

Gattei teases out many details and allusions in the image before providing a few different interpretations of its symbolism. One interpretation is that it represents the shift from one way of conceiving the universe to another, i.e. from the Ptolemaic system toward the heliocentric model, and the Enlightenment. This seems to be the interpretation of Flammarion himself, who in his own ekphrastic description of the image invokes Voltaire, writing that though the medieval missionary may think that he has passed under the vault of heaven, “this vault in fact does not exist!,” adding that “I have myself risen higher in a balloon than the Greek Olympus is situated, without being able to reach this vault, which recedes in proportion as one travels in pursuit of it, just like Tantalus apples.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Gattei, 227-228.

¹⁸⁸ Quoted in Gattei, 231.

Like the allusion of the ball of fire and the sleeping pig that opened this chapter, this image also offers much symbolic and allegorical potential in the context of the post-revolutionary period in the Soviet Union. In posters and propaganda, the revolution was depicted as a paradigm-shifting event, which brought “reason” and “enlightenment” to the masses, much like the French Revolution did. As one example, we can recall Anatoly Lunacharsky’s statement from Chapter 1 likening the revolution to a “transfer onto the bright tracks of reason.” The Flammarion engraving could be read in the same way, capturing the moment of the transition from the old to the new. Moreover, it could be seen as representing the dichotomy between *быт* (the earthy realm) and *бытие* (the celestial realm). In the context of *Envy* and Olesha’s use of Flammarion’s *Atmosphere*, including the allusion I discussed earlier, the engraving could symbolize Kavalero’s own position in the narrative, as reflected by the figure of the man in the image. The posture of the man, kneeling on the ground and reaching up, reflects the Kavalero’s position at the moment Flammarion is invoked in the book, as Kavalero is kicked out of Babichev apartment, before he considers “prostrating himself” and begging for forgiveness. I have discussed throughout the chapter, this dynamic between horizontality and verticality is a consistent motif in *Envy*, representing the dynamic between the two realms (быт and бытие) with Kavalero constantly caught in the middle, in a state of “бытность”, much like the figure in Flammarion’s engraving.

CHAPTER 4: Nervous People: Between the Public and the Private in Zoshchenko's *Letters to a Writer*

Although he wrote some of the funniest stories in the history of Russian literature, Mikhail Zoshchenko (1895-1956) struggled with depression during much of his life.¹⁸⁹ Certain periods were so severe that he could not leave his apartment for days at a time, unable to write or see anyone. In 1927, during one such particularly difficult bout of melancholia, Zoshchenko consoled himself by reading letters from his readers. A widely popular writer during the 1920s, Zoshchenko frequently received letters from fans across the Soviet Union on all kinds of topics. People wrote to express praise for Zoshchenko's stories, offer suggestions for plot lines, ask for feedback on their own writing; some even wrote to solicit relationship advice. "God, what ridiculous letters I receive," Zoshchenko told Kornei Chukovsky in August of that year; "it would be good to publish a collection of the longer letters, with a short commentary; a fun book would come out of it. [Боже, какие дурацкие получаю я письма... Хорошо бы напечатать собрание подлинных писем ко мне - с маленьким комментарием, очень забавная вышла бы книга.]"¹⁹⁰ During this period, as a part of his research for what would become the book *Youth Restored* –in part, a study of writers and artists struggling with depression -- Zoshchenko also read many biographies and letters, including, as scholar Maria Reykina points out, letters of Nikolai Gogol.¹⁹¹ This research would initiate a new phase in Zoshchenko's career, a phase that scholar Yuri Tomashevsky, in the introduction to the letters, calls "the Zoshchenko who did not laugh," a phase characterized by a turn away from the satirical stories that made Zoshchenko

¹⁸⁹ Zoshchenko describes his life-long struggle with depression in *Before Sunrise*, *Youth Restored*, and in many of his letters.

¹⁹⁰ Quoted in Мария Рейкина, "Письма к писателю Михаила Зощенко в контексте литературной ситуации конца 20-х - начала 30-х гг.," *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*, No. 13, Summer 2005.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

famous, toward autobiographical works stretching the boundaries of genre. In 1929, Zoshchenko followed through with the idea he expressed to Chukovsky a few years earlier, publishing a collection of readers' letters under the title *Letters to a Writer* [*Письма к писателю*]. This was followed in 1933 by *Youth Restored* [*Возвращённая молодость*], and, in 1946, by *Before Sunrise* [*Перед восходом солнца*], a genre-bending narrative which took Zoshchenko almost a decade to write and which he considered to be one of his most important works. These books were not well received by the Soviet literary establishment – *Before Sunrise* was banned before it could be serialized in full – and were largely responsible for Zoshchenko's denunciation and expulsion from the Soviet Association of Writers, effectively ending his career.

This chapter examines Zoshchenko's *Letters to a Writer* and the circumstances around its conception and publication, placing the text in the context of Zoshchenko's oeuvre and Soviet literature during this period. I argue that this text, though considered relatively minor in Zoshchenko's career, is crucial in understanding Zoshchenko's attitude towards his work and his conception of the writer's role, and the role of literature more generally, in the Soviet Union of the NEP era. Two terms commonly used in describing Zoshchenko's works are "satire" and "skaz," with his stories often read as satires of Soviet life during the NEP.

As scholar Jeremy Hicks points out, Zoshchenko's use of skaz narration is undoubtedly the most ambiguous and ambivalent – and for many scholars, often the most vexing – feature of Zoshchenko's artistry. The essential problem with *skaz* in Zoshchenko's stories, Hicks argues, is the following: "Is [Zoshchenko] adopting the mask of the skaz narrator because he sees that language and mindset as valuable in itself (stylisation), or is he adopting it in order to ridicule

it”?¹⁹² This tension between the use of *skaz* as a literary device and its employment as a “mask” that allows Zoshchenko to circumvent the Soviet censors, lies at the heart of Zoshchenko’s most famous stories, making it hard to establish Zoshchenko’s own perspective on his narrator and his readers. What the *Letters* – and, *Youth Restored* and *Before Sunrise*, the autobiographical works that came in its wake --- reveal, however, is Zoshchenko’s constant ambivalence about his writing, ambivalence stemming from his personal struggles, including chronic depression and the domestic circumstances under which he lived, and from the increasing demands of the Soviet establishment to produce more rigid, easily “understandable” and “nontrivial” writing. Zoshchenko saw himself as a writer deeply connected to the times in which he lived, as a “chronicler of the everyday,” writing in a language taken from living speech, the “language of the street,” as he called it. This ambition to depict the ordinary reality of NEP, a reality marked by contingency and transition, in an original and authentic manner, brought him the popularity and admiration of a wide swath of the reading public, something many letters in *Letters to a Writer* attest to. But it also caused misunderstandings and criticism, contributing to Zoshchenko’s doubt about the role of his writing and the need to defend himself before the literary establishment. This tension between the public dimension of his work and Zoshchenko’s private ambivalence about its usefulness stands at the center of the dialogue between him and his readers in *Letters to a Writer*. It also permeates his most popular stories, including those dealing with communal spaces, such as *The Bathhouse* and *The Crisis*.

In addition to its place as a transitional work in Zoshchenko’s career, *Letters to a Writer* also serves as a unique document of the transition in Soviet history between the NEP era and the Stalinist period, particularly when it comes to the role of art and literature. Indeed, Zoshchenko’s

¹⁹² Jeremy Hicks, *Mikhail Zoshchenko and the Poetics of Skaz*. (Nottingham, England: Astra, 2000), 62.

book can be read in multiple ways: a kind of sociological and anthropological study of this period of Soviet history, especially when it comes to readership and reading publics; as a new kind of non-fiction that resembles other avant-garde experiments of the late-1920s, especially the so-called *factography* and documentary fiction; as a formalist “baring of the device” which pits the literary against ordinary language. In examining the role of *Letters to a Writer* within the context of Zoshchenko’s oeuvre, I will thus also touch on all these issues throughout this chapter, attempting to place the work and its author within this larger context.

Dear Comrade Zoshchenko: Letter-writing and Graphomania in the 1920s and 1930s

In her article “Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s,” Sheila Fitzpatrick identifies letter-writing as a popular trend in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, with ordinary citizens writing letters to government officials, public figures, and newspapers on various topics, ranging from housing, work conditions, or fights with neighbors. In her article Fitzpatrick develops a rough taxonomy of the different kinds of letters, including confessions, denunciations, and complaints. For Fitzpatrick, this “public” letter-writing was essentially a form of individual private communication with the authorities on topics both private and public, “serving as a kind of alternate public sphere, or as she puts it, “as close to a public sphere as one is likely to get during the Stalin period.”¹⁹³ Even though the majority of letters went unanswered, they nonetheless offered one of the only avenues for ordinary people for expression or complaint.

¹⁹³ Sheila Fitzpatrick. “Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s.” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (1996), 80.

Fitzpatrick considers the popularity of letter writing closely tied to another phenomenon that flourished during the same period, and one which, as Svetlana Boym argues, has a long history in Russian cultural history, and literature in particular -- *graphomania*. "Svetlana Boym has suggested," Fitzpatrick writes, "that graphomania – the urge towards pisatel'stvo (writerliness) in those without literary talent – moved out of its nineteenth century intelligentsia home to become an 'all people's' affliction during the Soviet period. Leaving aside the red herring of literary talent or its absence, the urge to write for the sake of writing is very marked in popular letter-writing of the 1930s."¹⁹⁴ Indeed, as Boym and Fitzpatrick point out, Russian literature is full of graphomaniacs, from Pushkin's Ivan Belkin to Kozma Prutkov to Dostoyevsky's Makar Devushkin and Captain Lebyadkin; Zoshchenko himself, in addition to the often-nameless *skaz* narrator that narrates his most famous stories, contributed to the tradition of graphomania in his *Sentimental Tales*, which were credited to a certain "I.V. Kolenkorov," writing "under the direction of the writer M.M. Zoshchenko."

What is different about the outpouring of graphomania in the 1920s, however, is its public character and its spontaneity. Fitzpatrick sees it as an outpouring of "popular creativity," much like folk art or folk writing, leading her to conclude that "the line between popular letter-writing and popular writing in the literary sense is a fine one, and there are signs [in the letters] that many amateur writers refused to draw it."¹⁹⁵ There are a few reasons for this "outpouring of popular creativity" in the post-revolutionary period. One is the literacy campaign – the so-called policy of "Likbez," – made up of many different programs and approaches, including building of

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 93.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

schools and libraries and the use of pamphlets and other media as means of propaganda.¹⁹⁶

Another reason is the promotion of so-called “proletarian literature”: the idea that there should be a literature by the workers for the workers, frequently expressed in opposition to “bourgeois” literature of the pre-revolutionary period.

Although it came out in the late 1920s, Zoshchenko’s book reflects both the trends identified by Fitzpatrick as well as the effects of the literacy campaign and the promotion of “proletarian literature.” Letters received by Zoshchenko are full of questions, complaints, requests for advice, often driven by the urge to write purely for the sake of writing, “просто так”[just like that] as Zoshchenko puts it in the commentary to the first letter.¹⁹⁷ In fact, the very first letter in the collection begins with a direct expression of *graphomania*: “Have you heard of the kind of insanity,” Zoshchenko’s correspondent begins the letter, “as the mania of writing letters both to those you know and to strangers?” [Слыхали ли вы о таком виде сумасшествия, как мания писать письма и знакомым и незнакомым?]¹⁹⁸ Indeed, many of his correspondents write on the spur of the moment, driven by an often-inexplicable desire to share their stories and their experiences. For others, *graphomania* is more closely related to literary dreams, dreams often inspired by Zoshchenko’s stories and their “simple” language, which many of the letter writers believe they can learn and replicate. Thus, many letters come from aspiring writers who

¹⁹⁶ For more on the literacy campaign, see Brooks, Jeffrey. *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1985.

¹⁹⁷ Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю; Возвращенная молодость; Перед восходом солнца: повести*, edited by Юрий Томашевский (Москва: Московский рабочий, 1989), 21. Indeed, in Zoshchenko’s own view, what is typical of all the letters in the collection is precisely that they exhibit this sense of graphomania. Zoshchenko describes the first letter in the book as a “classical letter” because “it is not clear why it was written. Just like that. The author of the letter is himself surprised and confused by this situation. The author himself does not know why he set about doing this.” [Оно неизвестно для чего написано. Просто так. Автор письма и сам несколько удивлен и сконфужен этим обстоятельством. Автор письма и сам не знает, зачем он взялся за это дело.]

¹⁹⁸ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 21.

ask Zoshchenko for advice, sending him stories, and more often, poetry. Despite their obvious lack of literary quality, these poems nonetheless amuse and inspire Zoshchenko by their naivete and joy in the mere act of writing. Other letters are on more random topics, asking for personal advice, requesting Zoshchenko's photograph, offering criticism and ideas for stories, which Zoshchenko, at least on a few occasions, drew from in his creative practice. In order to provide a more complete and more "concrete" picture of the letters that Zoshchenko chose to include in the book, I outline a rough taxonomy of the different types of correspondence, along with examples of each, comparing them to the categories enumerated by Fitzpatrick and examining Zoshchenko's general approach in compiling and editing the book.

Organization and Zoshchenko's Editorial Role

Letters to a Writer consists of 65 letters from 55 correspondents and spans the period between 1927 and 1930. For a few of the correspondents, Zoshchenko included the second or third letters in the correspondence. Excepting a few letters, each letter includes Zoshchenko's commentary, usually as an introduction, but sometimes as an afterword. Zoshchenko also includes a title for each letter, often one that is both descriptive and humorous, thus serving as both a framing device and a way to structure the book, but also as another kind of commentary. The letters can be divided into five broad categories, many of which overlap. These are letters from aspiring writers, fan letters, ideas for stories, personal letters, and various miscellaneous letters.

- 1) Letters from aspiring writers asking for advice, often accompanied by short writing, usually poems.**

About a third of the letters are in this category. Many correspondents merely ask for their works to be printed, others seek literary help, asking Zoshchenko to comment on their writing and whether he thinks that they have the talent to pursue a literary career. While it is clear that Zoshchenko chose to include many of the literary works, and poems in particular, for their humorous quality – most of them are not very good – in his commentary, Zoshchenko does not ridicule them, being amused by their naivete as well as by the creative urge, which the writers often struggle to express in their letters. Here is an example of a type of poem that shows up a few times in the book, combining a fan letter with an attempt at poetry:

Простите ль Вы меня за то,
Что часто так я Вам надоедаю...
Но разрешите ль мне сказать одно,
Что день и ночь о Вас мечтаю.

[Please forgive me for the fact
That I bother you so often
But at least allow me to say only
That I dream of you day and night]

(this is a free translation, which does not rhyme)

A woman writes these lines, excusing herself for her “versification [стихоплетство]”, adding “sometimes I get into such a state that I must compose something [иногда на меня находит такое состояние, что мне обязательно надо что-нибудь сочинять].”¹⁹⁹ There are many such examples in the book, with people of all different backgrounds exhibiting the same kind of creative urge, the same kind of *graphomania*.

¹⁹⁹ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 26.

2) Fan letters and letters of praise

It is understandable that many of the letters that are included in the book come from fans of Zoshchenko's work. Many of the fan letters are included for humorous effect, providing Zoshchenko with the opportunity to be playful with his public image, and importantly, giving the reader the opportunity to get a sense of this public image in the late 1920s.²⁰⁰ In addition, Zoshchenko also seems careful to include letters from different parts of the country and from people of different backgrounds and professions. As I discuss later in the chapter, scholars have considered the inclusion of such letters of praise in the book as a way for Zoshchenko to counter attacks from the critics who attacked his books as being "trivial" or not useful to the working people.

3) Ideas for stories.

A small number of letters includes suggestions for plots and story ideas, which Zoshchenko admits he used in some of his works. It is known that Zoshchenko drew from documentary sources, such as letters to the editor when he worked in the editorial offices at the newspaper *Gudok* to craft his stories²⁰¹. What these types of letters in this book also reveal is a clear and nuanced understanding his readers have of his style, and what makes a story or a situation "Zoshchenkavian." For example, two correspondents suggest the same story idea about someone "accidentally" stealing a watch, an idea that, Zoshchenko points out, is in fact itself "stolen"

²⁰⁰ For example, in the first letter, the reader writes that "they say, you are very neurotic [очень нервный]," Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 21.

²⁰¹ Jeremy Hicks discusses this in his *Poetics of Skaz*, looking at role of readers' letters in the creation of some of the most famous stories, such as Banya.

from a Leskov story.²⁰² Other letters focus on “Zoshchenkovian” language and expressions, which provides the opportunity for Zoshchenko to discuss his attitude toward literary language and use of *skaz*.

4) Personal Letters

These include a few confessional letters from readers, many of them young people, going through a crisis or a turbulent period in their lives. Zoshchenko seems deeply affected by their struggles, recounting his own difficulties with depression, and points out that in a few instances met the correspondents in person.

5) Miscellaneous letters

Some letters cannot be readily classified. These include complaints, criticism – some of which is constructive and perceptive, as Zoshchenko notes – as well as letters recounting humorous anecdotes, such as a reader reporting a Zoshchenko impersonator travelling down the Volga (the reader writes after having seen the photograph of the “real” Zoshchenko on the cover of a book), and another offering a few stories for sale, telling Zoshchenko that Zoshchenko could publish them under his own name, as “I do not need fame or a name, only money.”²⁰³

In his introduction to the first edition, Zoshchenko discusses his approach to compiling the book, pointing out both his desire to reflect, through the letters, something like the zeitgeist of the period, thus emphasizing the public dimension of the book. According to Zoshchenko, the letters capture something akin to the “pulse” of life during this period. He writes,

Here, so to speak, is the breath of our life. The breath of those people, whom we, writers, try to depict in so-called “artistic” works. Collected here, in this book, are the most diverse letters and passions.

²⁰² Letters titled “Часы» и Еще Часы, *Письма к писателю*, 40-42.

²⁰³ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 25.

Здесь, так сказать, дыхание нашей жизни. Дыхание тех людей, которых мы, писатели, стараемся изобразить в так называемых «художественных» произведениях. Здесь, в этой книге, собраны самые различные письма и страсти.²⁰⁴

He goes on to enumerate different qualities and emotions contained in the letters:

Here, in this book, it is possible to see real tragedy, extraordinary intelligence, naive good nature, pitiful babble, stupidity, enthusiasm, “meshchanstvo,” fraud, and horrifying illiteracy.

Здесь, в этой книге, можно видеть настоящую трагедию, незаурядный ум, наивное добродушие, жалкий лепет, глупость, энтузиазм, мещанство, жульничество и ужасающую неграмотность.²⁰⁵

At the same time, along with this public, almost documentary approach that focuses on “chronicling” the life of the day, Zoshchenko points out another, more private and personal motivation for the putting together the collection, highlighting his own investment in the project to which he dedicated as much effort as to one of his other, “artistic” works. “Where is my work in all this? Really only in the fact that I jumped out of bed in the morning and opened the door to the mailman?” [В чем тут моя работа? Разве только в том, что я вскакивал по утрам с кровати и открывал почтальону двери],” he asks, humorously, adding,

Of course, if one thinks about it more deeply – some kind of work was done nonetheless. I read these letters carefully. I answered almost all correspondents. I read no fewer than a thousand individual manuscripts. And what about my nerves? What about the sleepless nights during which I ruminated about this book? What about the actual work on the book? For two years, day after day, I selected and sorted through these letters, thought about them, about their authors. And these authors lived in my brain, like all the other heroes of my works. Devil take it!

Конечно, если подумать глубже — кой-какая работишка все же была проделана. Я внимательно читал эти письма. Я отвечал почти всем корреспондентам. Одних рукописей я прочел не менее как тысячу. А мои нервы? А бессонные ночи, в которые я обдумывал эту книгу? А сама работа над книгой? Я два года изо дня в

²⁰⁴ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 17-18

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

день подбирал и перебирал эти письма, думал о них, об их авторах. И эти авторы побывали у меня в мозгу, как и все герои моих книг. Черт побери!²⁰⁶

He emphasizes that it was very difficult to choose what to include in the book, seemingly because he tried to find those letters that spoke to him but at the same time were “most typical.” As he puts it: “From a bunch of boring and dull letters I chose those which seemed to be the most characteristic. For this reason, the book contains my image, my thoughts, and my desires. The book was made like a novel. [Из груды скучных и тупых писем я отобрал те, которые показались мне наиболее характерны. По этой причине в книге имеется мое лицо, мои мысли и мои желания. Книга сделана как роман.]”

This tension between the public side of the book and its private dimension is thus at the core of the project. While deeply personal to Zoshchenko, *Letters* also engages directly with the major literary debates during NEP about the role of literature in the post-revolutionary period, especially on the subject of so-called “proletarian” literature. In addition, Zoshchenko’s book contributes to other emerging genres championed by the Futurists and other avant-garde groups, such as “factography” and other documentary approaches. Indeed, the book, with its documentary, polyphonic approach, and its reliance on authentic, factual material, appeared to be a drastic departure from Zoshchenko’s earlier works, primarily his short stories, which were carefully crafted and carried Zoshchenko’s easily recognizable authorial stamp. Though at first glance it seems to be a merely conventional collection of letters, *Letters to a Writer* is a unique book, with few similar works in Russian or global literature.²⁰⁷ It destabilizes the boundary between authorship and readership and offers a close view of a writer’s creative process and the

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 18.

²⁰⁷ Svetlana Alexievich’s oral histories come to mind.

use of documentary material in literary craft. At the same time, upon closer reading, it is clear that *Letters to a Writer* may not be so far away from Zoshchenko's well-known stories, especially from the point of view of literary voice and literary language, as many of the correspondents in the book "speak" precisely in that familiar Zoshchenkovian *skaz*, creating the impression that they come straight from one of Zoshchenko's satirical stories.

In the following section, I examine how Zoshchenko's book relates to the literary debates of its time, as this context is crucial in understanding both the reception of the book upon its publication and Zoshchenko's intention to publish it and his position in the Soviet literary milieu at this transitional stage of his career.

THE PUBLIC DIMENSION

Is Zoshchenko a modernist? Letters to a Writer in the context of Soviet literary experiments and debates about "proletarian" literature

One of the letters in the miscellaneous category, published under the title "Appropriate Criticism" [Дельная критика] comes from the workers at *М. Б.-Б. ж. д* ("Московско-Белорусско-Балтийская железная дорога"; Moscow-Belorussian-Baltic Railway). The author of the letter claims to write in the name of "simple working people (not in the sense 'we, the workers' [Вам пишут простые рабочие люди (не в смысле «мы, рабочие»])",²⁰⁸ adding that this is no "ordinary letter" from a fan.²⁰⁹ Instead, the letter offers a detailed – and, in Zoshchenko's view, quite perceptive – analysis of Zoshchenko's style. "Why is Zoshchenko's name known to everyone," asks the author, "even among those with a lower level of cultural

²⁰⁸ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 36.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. In the original Russian: "просим не смотреть на него как на обычное письмо какого-нибудь поклонника."

development, not to speak of the more developed workers and the intelligentsia? [.Почему ваше имя знакомо всем, даже в среде с низким культурным уровнем, не говоря уже про более развитых рабочих и интеллигенцию?]"²¹⁰ “The explanation for this,” the letter continues, “is the simple style and intelligibility...reading a [Zoshchenko] story, one laughs not at the story as a whole, but at one aptly chosen word or phrase [Объясняется это тем же простым стилем, общепонятностью... читая ваш рассказ, смеешься не всему рассказу в целом, а одному удачно подобранному слову или фразе].”²¹¹ In the rest of the letter, its author discusses the “injustice” of other authors trying to copy Zoshchenko’s style, before posing a question about a specific word in one of Zoshchenko’s stories that seems inappropriate in work of literature, asking Zoshchenko to explain his reasons for using it.

Zoshchenko’s comments at the end of the letter show certain pride about such close reading of his work, admitting that the letter is flattering. However, the letter also provides an opportunity for Zoshchenko to elaborate on his literary technique, and, for the literary scholar, it offers a clear formulation of Zoshchenko’s view of the role of literature in the post-revolutionary period, including the need for a form that would reflect everyday reality. In response to the question about the “inappropriate” word, Zoshchenko answers that

One should not completely banish vulgar words from literature. One should first change everyday life[быт]. One should stop swearing. And then literature itself will throw out all lamentable words. Otherwise, there will appear a strong discrepancy between literature and everyday life [быт].

нельзя абсолютно изгонять бранные слова из литературы. Надо прежде изменить быт. Надо перестать ругаться. И тогда литература сама выкинет все прискорбные слова. А иначе получится сильное несоответствие между литературой и бытом.²¹²

²¹⁰ Ibid, 37.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 39.

For Zoshchenko, ordinary reality, and especially ordinary language, the language of the street and of *быт*, provides the basis for literary language, especially in the case of writers like himself, whose subject matter is ordinary life.

In an article from 1927 titled “About Myself, Critics, and My Work [О себе, о критиках, и о своей работе],” Zoshchenko, discussing the role of parody in his work, described himself as a “proletarian” writer, a writer deeply connected to the ordinary people, even more so during NEP which was a time of transition and turbulence:

The thing is, I am a proletarian writer. More precisely, I parody with my works that imaginary, but genuine proletarian writer who would exist under current living conditions and in the current environment.

Дело в том, что я – пролетарский писатель. Вернее, я пародирую своими вещами того воображаемого, но подлинного пролетарского писателя, который существовал бы в теперешних условиях жизни и в теперешней среде.²¹³

The concepts of the “proletarian writer” and “proletarian literature” were major points of contention during the 1920s in literary debates about the role of literature in post-revolutionary Soviet society. Yet, Zoshchenko’s understanding of a “proletarian writer” as expressed in the quotation above differs from the way this phrase was often employed in the context of the 1920s literary debates, primarily by such “proletarian” factions, such as RAPP,²¹⁴ paving the way for the implementation of what would become known as Socialist Realism.²¹⁵ Zoshchenko’s language is not the supposed language of the working class – “в смысле ‘мы, рабочие’” as his

²¹³ Mikhail Zoshchenko, “О себе, о критиках, и о своей работе,” in Михаил Зощенко, Статьи и материалы, (Ленинград: Академия, 1928), 10.

²¹⁴ RAPP or Russian Association of Proletarian Writers was a “proletarian” writers’ union in the Soviet Union established in 1925. Its ideological aim was to promote the ideology and policy of the Communist Party in the creative sphere. (Russian Literary Encyclopedia)

²¹⁵ For more on the debates on the role of literature and the different factions during this period see Maguire, Robert A. *Red Virgin Soil; Soviet Literature in the 1920’s*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1968.

correspondent aptly puts it; it is the language of the street and of ordinary people, and not the abstract idea of the proletariat, as propagated by the doctrine of Socialist Realism. What's more, as Zoshchenko constantly emphasized, it is the language of *transition*, reflecting the contemporary moment in all its ambiguity. Since the revolution has transformed society in a fundamental way, Zoshchenko claims, it is literature's role to examine this new reality using new and appropriate forms, rather than impose standards and norms from the outside. This approach, then, is the opposite of Socialist Realism and what was then hailed as "proletarian" writing.

Zoshchenko's commentary to another letter in which he recognizes the language and the voice of the hero of his stories, elaborates further on this issue. "They usually think" Zoshchenko writes in his introduction, "that I distort "the beautiful Russian language"...that I write using a broken language on purpose in order to make the dear audience laugh a little. [Обычно думают, что я искажаю «прекрасный русский язык»... что я нарочно пишу ломаным языком для того, чтобы посмешить почтеннейшую публику.]" This is not the case, Zoshchenko retorts: "I do nothing of the sort. I write in that language in which the street currently speaks and thinks. [Я почти ничего не искажаю. Я пишу на том языке, на котором сейчас говорит и думает улица.]" The reason for such an approach, Zoshchenko explains, is to "fill up, if only temporarily, that colossal rupture which opened up between literature and the street. [заполнить хотя бы временно тот колоссальный разрыв, который произошел между литературой и улицей]"²¹⁶ In this way, Zoshchenko sees himself as a kind of chronicler of *быт*, which is ephemeral and temporary and constantly changing, much like NEP itself.

²¹⁶ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 49.

Along with the other writers and theorists, particularly those from the avant-garde, Zoshchenko thought that a return to a pre-revolutionary language and style of writing was impossible. New approaches and a new language had to be created in order to be able to reflect and address the new reality. In his commentary to the letter from the railway workers, he wrote:

Already one will never write and speak in that unbearable wooden language of the intelligentsia in which many still write, that is, continue to write. They keep writing in such a way, as if nothing happened in the country. They write like Leonid Andreyev. That's a writer whom it is absolutely intolerable to read now!

Уже никогда не будут писать и говорить тем невыносимым суконным интеллигентским языком, на котором многие еще пишут, вернее, дописывают. Дописывают так, как будто бы в стране ничего не случилось. Пишут так, как Леонид Андреев. Вот писатель, которого абсолютно нестерпимо сейчас читать!²¹⁷

This desire to experiment and find new ways of responding to the new reality and to modernization, while at the same time being close to ordinary life and “popular” literature put Zoshchenko’s works, and particularly *Letters to a Writer*, between two different trends during this period, both in Soviet art and literature, and in the context of modernism more generally. The first is the emergence of various documentary forms, which in Soviet literary debates during the mid-1920s was primarily associated with the literary journal *LEF*²¹⁸ (and later *Novyi LEF*) and the theories of “literature of fact” [литература факта] and *factography*.²¹⁹ These theories

²¹⁷ Ibid, 50.

²¹⁸ *LEF* or ЛЕФ was the journal of “Levi Front Iskusstv” or The Left Front of the Arts,” edited by Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osip Brik. LEF ran for 7 issues between 1923 and 1925, and was later revived as *Novyi LEF* (this time Mayakovsky’s co-editor was Sergei Tretyakov), publishing 12 additional issues between 1927 and 1929.

²¹⁹ *Literatura fakta* or “Literature of Fact” is the title of the essay collection first published in 1929 which collects all the theoretical writings from New LEF. See Чужак, Николай, et al. *Литература Факта [Literatura Fakta]. Faktographische Literatur*. München: W. Fink, 1972. As a theoretical term, it refers to the concept of “anti-imaginative” or “anti-psychological” approach to literature advocated by LEF and *Novyi LEF* writers such as Osip Brik, Nikolai Chuzhak, and Sergei Tretyakov. “Factography” is a related concept which foregrounds the use of photography, film, and other visual media in conjunction with writing to achieve the aims of “literature of fact.”

formulated a new role for post-revolutionary literature, stressing an "active," journalistic approach, and eschewing psychological realism in depicting the post-revolutionary society and in an effort to integrate the writer of literature into the process of "production." Although Zoshchenko was not associated with *LEF*, his *Letters to a Writer* reflect this "factual" strain in Soviet literature of the NEP period, especially when considered along with Zoshchenko's statements, such as the remark about Leonid Andreyev quoted above, about the need for new forms and new language in the post-revolutionary period. This view closely aligns with those of the main theorists of "literature of fact" and factography, Osip Brik and Sergei Tretyakov.

The second trend has to do with what Zoshchenko refers to as "the language of the street:" the "vernacular" form of modernist poetics which, in the context of film studies, Marriam Hansen refers to as "vernacular modernism." As Brooks E. Hefner points out in his study of the popular forms of language in American literature of the 1910s and 1920s, *The Word on The Streets: The American Language of Vernacular Modernism*, while "a term common in architecture and film studies but relatively new to the field of literary criticism," vernacular modernism "provides a model for rethinking modernist boundaries."²²⁰ For Hefner (as for Marriam Hansen), the main boundary to "rethink" is the one between "high" and "low" culture, or literary and popular language. For many modernist writers, Hefner argues, this boundary did not exist: "it was not a matter of separation from the realm of what critics have termed "mass culture"; rather, these modernist figures demonstrated respect for – and even a debt to – not just popular culture in general, but popular forms of language."²²¹ Although Hefner focuses on a

²²⁰ Brooks E Hefner. *The Word on the Streets : the American Language of Vernacular Modernism*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017). 8.

²²¹ Ibid, 4.

different context, this statement also applies to Zoshchenko's approach and his view of popular language. Yet in Zoshchenko's case, there is a key difference: the use of popular forms of language, and *skaz* in particular, goes beyond mere artistic experimentation. It also carries greater ideological weight since in the Soviet context the "language of the street" is closely associated with the language of the working people, putting a modernist writer experimenting with popular forms in a position of having to explain and defend the use of such language.

Indeed, the "street" features prominently in many of Zoshchenko's stories. The street both as a literal, physical place, with its chance encounters, dangers, and inconveniences, but also as a symbol and umbrella term for other public, urban spaces. As Cathy Popkin puts it, Zoshchenko's "little episodes typically transpired in the streetcar, the bathhouse, the communal kitchen – loci of encounter and collision on a daily basis and the source of plenty of incidents in real life."²²² No doubt the prominent role of these public urban settings in Zoshchenko's fiction comes partly from the writer's autobiography. At the time he wrote many of his most famous stories, Zoshchenko was living in Leningrad, himself navigating the crowded, often overstimulating public places, while also dealing with severe bouts of depression, which left him isolated and unable to see people, aside from a few close friends, for long periods of time, during which he would spend time wandering the streets of the city. In his diary, Kornei Chukovsky remembers Zoshchenko during these periods, especially in 1926 and 1927, complaining about suffering from "psychasthenia," yet trying to "conquer" his melancholy. "The nausea will not let me live or, what is more important, write," he tells Chukovsky. "I am supposed to be writing a new book, something different from *Sentimental Tales*, life-affirming, full of love for mankind,

²²² Cathy Popkin. *The Pragmatics of Insignificance: Chekhov, Zoshchenko, Gogol*. (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993), 64.

but before I can start, I must remake myself. I must become like a person, like other people.”²²³

This desire to “become like other people” shifted Zoshchenko’s focus from satirical stories dealing with the absurdities and inconveniences of NEP toward more personal writing that tried to be “life-affirming” and turned towards other people. Such an orientation turned Zoshchenko’s focus outward, toward the public, and the different conception of the public and public spaces, including the street, first become evident in *Letters to the Writer*.

The paradox, one certainly familiar to residents of large cities, of being “alone in a crowd,” fascinated Zoshchenko and provided the subject matter for many of his stories. The dynamic between the private and the public that unfolds in the context of everyday encounters in a large city seemed to both inspire and infuriate Zoshchenko, sometimes pushing him to leave the city altogether for days at a time to avoid crowds. In Zoshchenko’s most famous NEP stories, the street is indeed a locus of encounter and collision, as Popkin puts it, engendering the kinds of interactions that are often frustrating, inconvenient, and sometimes dangerous (they include getting your feet trampled, losing a galosh, or getting robbed) events which, though seemingly “insignificant,” provide insight into the dynamics of everyday life during NEP, giving form and shape to the “trifles” of existence (“мелочи жизни”) ignored or discouraged by the official views of literature. Popkin sees this aspect of Zoshchenko’s artistry as subversive given the official proclamations about the need to write epic narratives about grand events, and in particular, the Revolution.

²²³ Chukovsky, Kornei., *Diary, 1901-1969*, trans. by Michael Heim, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 203.

At the same time, while the street may not be a safe or pleasant place, it is rich in possibilities and sensory stimulation.²²⁴ As a result, in addition to providing numerous anecdotes chronicling the “lower” strata of society and trifling, everyday events, Zoshchenko’s “street” narratives have a strong affective component, both for the protagonists/narrators, but also for the readers, and arguably for Zoshchenko himself as well, who, at the risk of turning toward psychoanalysis, found in his work a way of dealing with depression and a kind of release from the pressures of Soviet life during the 1920s. Indeed, Zoshchenko’s narrators are often confused and bewildered by their environment, and, though maintaining a sense of naivete and even optimism in the face of challenges that come their way, they often seem to be at the mercy of the places they find themselves in, ultimately ending up resigned to their fates. This is certainly the case in *The Bathhouse* and *The Galosh*.

However, his *Letters* also provide an example of another type of encounter in which the street plays a prominent, yet different, more “life-affirming” role, signaling Zoshchenko’s turn toward more personal writing and reflecting his own struggle with depression. One of the letters he received, which he titled “Person on the Street [Человек на улице],” came from a young woman who, after arriving in the city from a village, struggled to find her way in the big city. Zoshchenko writes in his introduction: “Three years she walked the streets, staying either with acquaintances, either in some kind of institution, or simply with strangers she met. Wherever she went in search of work or shelter, they demanded the union card, a passport, identity document [3 года она проходила по улицам, ночуя то у знакомых, то в каком-нибудь учреждении, то

²²⁴ Here it may be helpful to think of Walter Benjamin once again and the figure of the *flâneur*. While Zoshchenko’s characters may not fit the figure of the flâneur perfectly, they serve as “chroniclers of the present,” to use Baudelaire’s description.

просто у случайных встречных. Повсюду, куда она приходила в поисках работы или ночлега – у нее требовали союзную книжку, паспорт, удостоверение...].”²²⁵ Not able to navigate the official channels and bureaucracy, she turned to Zoshchenko for advice in an act of desperation. In her letter, she writes: “You did not have to roam at night on black slippery stones and look into the warm spots of others’ windows, into which one wants to toss a stone [Вам не приходилось ночами бродить по черным скользким камням и заглядывать в теплые пятна чужих окон, куда хочется швырнуть камнем...].”²²⁶ The street depicted in this letter is a cruel and unforgiving place, in clear contrast to the satirical and “insignificant” world of the NEP stories that defined Zoshchenko’s early career.

The interplay between the two trends – search for a new language and the “vernacular” form of modernism – in *Letters to a Writer* and in Zoshchenko’s oeuvre more generally, speaks to the varieties of modernist practices during this period until the “popular” and “proletarian” writing would be subsumed under the umbrella of Socialist Realism. In the following pages, I examine this dynamic more closely in order to illustrate Zoshchenko’s nuanced approach to modernism and his aesthetic vis-à-vis both the literary avantgarde and the “populist” factions, such as RAPP, during the late 1920s. Looking more closely at the interplay between the “documentary” and “popular” aspects of Zoshchenko’s work brings into clearer focus the tension between the public and the private dimensions of *Letters to a Writer*.

The Facts of the Story: *Literatura fakta* and Early Soviet Literature

In his essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," Walter Benjamin argues that in the modern age of mass media the art of storytelling, and along with it

²²⁵ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 96.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, 97.

“our ability to exchange experiences,” has been replaced by a new form of communication: information.²²⁷ Information, argues Benjamin, does not need the intelligence and imagination of the storyteller, but instead “lays claim to prompt verifiability...[its] prime requirement is that it appear ‘understandable in itself.’”²²⁸ Most importantly, the difference between a story told by the storyteller and the information provided by a newspaper is the element of time: the newspaper account lacks the story’s “timelessness” and “epic quality.” As Benjamin puts it, “the value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment.”²²⁹ A story, on the other hand, lives on; it “preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.”²³⁰

Benjamin’s distinction between storytelling and information provides a helpful framework for illuminating the factual and the imaginative aspects of the debates about the role of literature between groups like LEF and the “proletarian” factions, including RAPP. In particular, Benjamin’s essay touches on an issue that was crucial in discussions of art and literature in the post-revolutionary period: a story’s or a writer’s “usefulness.” “Every real story,” claims Benjamin in “The Storyteller,” “contains, openly or covertly, something useful,” and “in every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers.”²³¹ The question, of course, is what counts as counsel and “something useful.” For Benjamin, it is the epic side of storytelling, the communication of truth and wisdom which is shared universally gets lost in favor of

²²⁷ *Illuminations*, 83

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 89.

²²⁹ *Ibid*, 90.

²³⁰ *Ibid*.

²³¹ *Ibid*, 86.

topicality and immediate demands for information, thus making the art of storytelling obsolete in the modern age, the age of information.

Debates in early Soviet years about the role of literature echo Benjamin's dichotomy between storytelling and information, and especially about the usefulness of the writer to the post-revolutionary society. Two key questions arose in this debate. The first, raised by Zoshchenko himself, was the following: How to depict the post-revolutionary reality, given the radical break with the past extending to every facet of society, including art and literature? Secondly, how to integrate the literary writer into the process of production and elicit his and her contribution to the process of social revolution? LEF, as well as other groups influenced by constructivism, stressed both the writer's need to be useful to the process of social transformation and the need for new forms given the magnitude of this transformation. As scholar Vahan Barooshian points out,

the futurists and formalists considered the writer as a craftsman whose product was not unlike the products of other workers. They wanted the writer to work for journals, newspapers, and factories, to write sketches, diaries, reports and memoirs-in short, to write a literature of fact which they believed far more directly reflected the problems and events of the day than "imaginative" literature.²³²

Going further, the LEF group considered the old forms of imaginative literature outdated, claiming that simply waiting for the appearance of a great proletarian novel à la Tolstoy, as advocated by RAPP, was futile. Citing Sergei Tretyakov's article "Red Tolstoy" from *Novyi LEF*, Barooshian points out that "for Tretyakov, the novel of Tolstoy's time could not compete with the mass circulation of the contemporary newspaper, which had supplanted the novel as an

²³² Vahan D Barooshian. "Russian Futurism in the Late 1920's: Literature of Fact." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 15.1 (1971), 38.

instructive organ.”²³³ The task, instead, was to “train the Soviet people to read the newspaper,” and “to have writers work for the newspaper and adjust their craftsmanship to its requirements.”²³⁴ For Tretyakov and the LEF/*Novy LEF* theorists, as for Benjamin, the advent of the newspaper and mass print media was a key development that disrupted the work of imaginative literature and storytelling. However, while for Benjamin in “The Storyteller,” this is largely a lamentable fact, as it leads to a different kind of communication that further alienates the individual, the LEF/*Novy LEF* group saw in the newspaper a revolutionary potential both to depict and transform society. And the writer was to play an important and “activist” force in this transformation.

Possibly the best presentation of “factual” literature and the role of the writer according to LEF/*Novy LEF* theorists is Osip Brik’s 1927 essay “Closer to the Fact” (Ближе к факту), originally published in *Novy LEF* and reprinted in the collection *Literatura Fakta*. In it, Brik analyzes the role of facts and information in literary works, placing their use into two categories, or two kinds of literary productions. The first he calls “Протокол” (record) and the second “Прокламация,” (proclamation). As he puts it,

One can only do two things with facts: either employ them in a “protocol” (or record) or in a proclamation. Protocol does not distort facts - it fixes them in all their reality. Proclamation does not fix facts, but makes use of them and distorts them in whatever direction it finds necessary.²³⁵

Можно делать с фактами только два дела: или можно их использовать в протоколе или в прокламации. Протокол не искажает факты -- он их фиксирует во всей их реальности. Прокламация не фиксирует факты, а пользуется ими и искажает их в том направлении, в каком ей это нужно.

²³³ Ibid, 41.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Чужак, et al., *Literatura Fakta*, 79

Thus, the key concept for Brik is the “distortion” of factual information in a story and to what end this is done.²³⁶ He goes on to argue that the latter works, those in the category of “proclamation,” employ facts. However, instead of “fixing” them or transferring them into their story “untouched” (though Brik does not explain how exactly one completely avoids subjective distortion) distort them for their purposes, primarily for the effect of unity of character in a story or, most commonly, to entertain their readers or elicit an emotional response. The purpose and the effect of the facts are thus vastly different - in the first case, facts satisfy the need for information, much in the same way Benjamin argues in “The Storyteller,” while in the other, they create an emotional effect, but are not important in themselves. Discussing the difference between readers of documentary prose (memoirs, reports, etc.) and those of imaginative literature (stories, novels), Brik writes,

In the first case they [readers of documentary prose] satisfy their need to know what actually happened, because what they are interested in are facts in themselves. In the second case, they [readers of imaginative literature] satisfy their need for playfulness, a desire for emotional pleasure, and in that case, it’s all the same to them what kind of facts one writes about.²³⁷

В первом случае они удовлетворяют свою потребность знать, как в действительности происходило дело, потому что их интересуют самые факты. Во втором случае они удовлетворяют свою игривую потребность, желание получить эмоциональное наслаждение, и тогда им безразлично, о каких фактах пишут.

Relying on this dualism – “facts in themselves” versus “distorted facts” -- Brik goes on to claim that the reader in the post-revolutionary environment is not the latter kind -- the passive reader

²³⁶ It is interesting to note that Brik’s language closely resembles that of Zoshchenko when he discusses accusations that he is “distorting the beautiful Russian language,” except that those accusations are coming from the “proletarian” side, rather than the avant-garde.

²³⁷ *Literatura Fakta*, 80.

with a need for “emotional pleasure” -- but rather the former: “an active man” (“активный человек”), as Brik puts it.

Brik’s distinction between an active and passive reader is echoed in Zoshchenko’s foreword to the *Letters to a Writer*. Zoshchenko writes that his correspondents,

ask me, how to live, how to write poetry and what to read... they recommend plots to me, provide criticism, approve, occasionally they scold me... These are aware citizens, who have thought deeply about life, about their fate, about money and literature...

меня запрашивают, как жить, как писать стихи и что читать. Мне предлагают сюжеты, критикуют меня, одобряют и поругивают.. Это сознательные граждане, которые задумались о жизни, о своей судьбе, о деньгах и о литературе...²³⁸

Such a conception of a reader as a “сознательный” rather than a passive consumer of popular entertainment, is similar to Brik’s “active” reader. However, the difference in Zoshchenko’s case is that his reader is interested in more than “facts themselves,” as Brik puts it, but seeks what Benjamin argues is the highest quality of every good storyteller: “counsel.” Indeed, Zoshchenko’s correspondents write to him with all kinds of problems, responding to his stories in a personal and visceral way, as if he is somehow speaking to them directly. They see themselves and their lives reflected in his stories, in his language. As a result, Zoshchenko’s *Letters to a Writer* speak to his role as both a chronicler and a storyteller: on the one hand, his stories document the Soviet reality and everyday life (which is one of the main mandates of factography and “factual” literature championed by Brik and other *LEF* theorists), while at the same time shaping and transforming the “facts” into literature.

²³⁸ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 17.

THE PRIVATE DIMENSION

In his remembrances of Zoshchenko, Kornei Chukovsky describes the development of the younger writer's style, starting with Zoshchenko's early years as a member of the "Serapion Brotherhood," the literary group for which Chukovsky served as a mentor.²³⁹ While all the Serapions were gifted and would go on to develop successful literary careers, Zoshchenko stood out to Chukovsky due to his innate talent for imitating and parodying different literary styles with ease. What also stood out, Chukovsky remembers, was Zoshchenko's personality and demeanor: Zoshchenko seemed reserved and did not engage much with the group. This is how Chukovsky describes him during this time: "Нелюдимый, хмурый, как будто надменный, садился он в самом дальнем углу, сзади всех, и с застылым, почти равнодушным лицом вслушивался в громокипящие споры, которые велись у камина. (Antisocial, sullen, seemingly arrogant, he sat in the farthest corner, behind everyone, and with a firm, almost indifferent face listened to the arguments led by the fireplace.)"²⁴⁰ Chukovsky also soon realized that, despite Zoshchenko's young age – he was twenty-four at the time -- he already had considerable life experience that set him apart from the other members of the workshop. He had

²³⁹ Chukovsky had brought together the young writers under the auspices of the "World Literature" project spearheaded by Gorky in 1918 which aimed to promote the translation of major literary works from all over the world into Russian. Chukovsky helped set up a space in St. Petersburg that would serve as a workshop and an informal school for training students to become translators. The problem arose, when, as Chukovsky puts it "among students there started to show up those who were not at all interested in the craft of translation. They did not itch to translate, but to create their own literary treasures. [среди студистов стали появляться такие, которые несколько не интересовались мастерством перевода. Не переводить они жаждали, но создавать свои собственные литературные ценности.]" Юрий Томашевский, *Воспоминания о Михаиле Зощенко*, (Санкт-Петербург: Художественная Литература, Санкт-Петербургское Отделение, 1995), 30.

²⁴⁰ *Воспоминания о Михаиле Зощенко*, 34. The same sketch also points to Zoshchenko's seeming ambivalence about the literary battles of the day, "There were frantic arguments. All the literary currents of that transitional period erupted here, in the Muruzy House, but at first it was impossible to tell which of these currents Zoshchenko sympathized with. He listened to the arguments without participating, not leaning to one or the other side. [Споры были неистовы. Все литературные течения того переломного времени врывались сюда, в дом Мурузи, но в первое время было невозможно сказать, какому из этих течений сочувствует Зощенко. Он прислушивался к спорам безучастно, не примыкая ни к той, ни к другой стороне.]" (*Воспоминания о Михаиле Зощенко*, 34-35)

served in World War I and had been wounded in a poison gas attack that would cause health problems for the rest of his life. By the time he had joined the workshop, Zoshchenko had also held a variety of jobs, including a policeman, a telegraph operator, a court secretary, and many others.²⁴¹

Zoshchenko's life experience, Chukovsky argues, deeply influenced his style: what would become known as Zoshchenko's "skaz" was different from the usual understanding of this literary technique, in Russian literature often brought up in connection with Nikolai Leskov who is seen as one of the main innovators for the way he employed the characteristics of everyday, folk speech in his stories. Zoshchenko's approach, Chukovsky argues, was different because it drew directly from ordinary life of the period, almost as if everyday life – *быт* -- were recorded and chronicled, rather than employed solely as a literary device, what Viktor Shklovsky would call "прием." [usually translated as "device", as in Shklovsky's well-known essay on estrangement"] As Chukovsky puts it:

there was a topicality in Zoshchenkovian skaz, this skaz was not created and made up, but taken by the author directly from life – from that life which bubbled around him *at that time when he was writing*. This is not a Leskovian mosaic of old-fashioned, rare, curious and ornate words – it is live, fresh, unadulterated speech, which began to sound then at the markets, in the trams, in waiting queues, at the stations, in banyas.

в зощенковском сказе была злободневность, что сказ этот не сочинен и не выдуман, а выхвачен автором прямо из жизни — из той, что кипела вокруг *в то время, когда*

²⁴¹ In *Before Sunrise*, Zoshchenko writes about this early period and his lack of direction: "I traveled to Archangel. Then to Mezen on the Arctic Ocean. Then I returned to Petrograd. I traveled to Novgorod, to Pskov. After this, to the Smolensky province, to the city of Krasny. Again I returned to Petrograd... In three years I changed twelve cities and ten professions.... I was a policeman, an accountant, a cobbler, and instructor in poultry farming, a telephone operator on the border patrol, a detective, a court secretary, a business manager... This was not a firm course through life, this was bewilderment." Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Before Sunrise: a novella*, trans. by Gary Kern (Ann Arbor, Mich: Ardis, 1974), 12).

In original Russian: "За три года я переменил двенадцать городов и десять профессий... Я уехал в Архангельск. Потом на Ледовитый океан — в Мезень. Потом вернулся в Петроград. Уехал в Новгород, во Псков. Затем в Смоленскую губернию, в город Красный. Снова вернулся в Петроград... Я был милиционером, счетоводом, сапожником, инструктором по птицеводству, телефонистом пограничной охраны, агентом уголовного розыска, секретарём суда, делопроизводителем. Это было не твёрдое шествие по жизни, это было — замешательство." (*Перед Восходом Солнца*, 290).

он писал. Это не лесковская мозаика старинных, редкостных, курьезных и вычурных слов — это живая, свежая, неподдельная речь, которая зазвучала тогда на базарах, в трамваях, в очередях, на вокзалах, в банях.²⁴²

His ability to document the language of ordinary life, of the street, truthfully, in all its complexity, Chukovsky argues, was a result of his personal experience, his direct contact with the ordinary life, or as Chukovsky puts it, him constantly being “in the thick of contemporary *быт* [в самой гуще современного быта]”:

To learn this speech so thoroughly and to so faithfully reproduce on paper its lexicon, its intonation, its syntactical form could only be done by someone who spent his life in the thick of contemporary *быт* and felt it on his own skin. Zoshchenko was exactly that kind of person, a person with considerable life experience, who had gone, so to say, through hell and high water.

Так досконально изучить эту речь и так верно воспроизвести на бумаге ее лексику, ее интонации, ее синтаксический строй мог только тот, кто провел свою жизнь в самой гуще современного быта и узнал его на своей собственной шкуре. Зоценко именно таким человеком и был, человеком большого житейского опыта, прошедшим, так сказать, сквозь огонь, и воду, и медные трубы.²⁴³

It was necessary for Zoshchenko to live through all these experiences, Chukovsky argues, in order for him to be able to write about them truthfully, with such authenticity. In this sense, Zoshchenko’s work, including his famous parodic stories, has a strong autobiographical strain, which would come to greater prominence in his later books, starting with *Letters to a Writer*. Mikhail Slonimsky, another member of the Serapion Brotherhood, in his own reminiscences of Zoshchenko, comments on the role Zoshchenko’s personal experiences played in the creation of his stories and the characters that populate them. Remembering the communal apartment that he and Zoshchenko shared in 1922, Slonimsky writes:

What did not happen here! Row after row. A policeman would show up often in that hectic apartment. Kitchen squabbles and spats on the theme of “whose brush” happened

²⁴² *Воспоминания о Михаиле Зоценко*, p. 53

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

here constantly, we lived with their screams and shrieks and with the inescapable noise of the Primus stove. Here, bitter and evil, funny and horrible traits manifested themselves in the tiniest incidents.

Чего только не случилось здесь! Скандал за скандалом. Милиционер часто появлялся в этой беспокойной квартире. Кухонные же склоки и свары на тему «чей ежик» происходили здесь постоянно, под этот крик и визг жили, как под неизбежный шум примуса. Здесь проявлялись в мельчайших происшествиях смешные и страшные, горькие и злые черты.²⁴⁴

Yet out of these often difficult and sad circumstances, Slonimsky claims, Zoshchenko was able to create original literary types, turning unfortunate circumstances into literature:

And here, in this communal apartment, Zoshchenko wrote his “Respected Citizens” and “Nervous People,” creating a type that would then get its name: “Zoshchenkovian character.” Such was the creative force of Zoshchenko’s talent, that that sad and evil life would transform itself under his pen into instructive and castigatory masterworks of artistic prose that at the same time caused irrepressible laughter.

И здесь, в этой коммунальной квартире, Зоценко писал своих «Уважаемых граждан» и «Нервных людей», создавал тип, получивший тогда же свое название — «зоценковский персонаж». Так животворна была сила зоценковского таланта, что грустная и злая жизнь превращалась под его пером в поучительные, обличительные и в то же время вызывающие неудержимый хохот шедевры художественной прозы.²⁴⁵

Chukovsky’s and Slonimsky’s sketches emphasize the dichotomy between the public, authorial persona of Zoshchenko – whose writings moved so many people through laughter – and Zoshchenko the private person, who struggled deeply with personal trauma and depression and often doubted his talent and the usefulness of his writings. This gulf between the public and the private sides seemed to widen as Zoshchenko’s fame grew, and as the room for experimentation and ambiguity in literature and art started to get smaller and smaller in the late 1920s.

²⁴⁴ *Воспоминания о Михаиле Зоценко*, 92.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 92.

Changes in personal circumstances in Zoshchenko's life, and in particular, the reconfiguration of space as a result of *uplotnenie*, also had a significant impact on Zoshchenko's writing and his transition toward a more autobiographical subject and style. During the winter of 1930-31, shortly after the publication of the first edition of *Letters to a Writer*, the Zoshchenko household would itself suffer the consequences of *uplotnenie*. The writer and his wife Vera, and their young son Valeriy (Valya), along with Zoshchenko's sister, had been renting an apartment on Tchaikovsky Street for three years, when, with the end of NEP, ownership of the apartment building went to a housing cooperative, a so-called ZHAKT (ЖАКТ - "жилищно-арендное кооперативное товарищество").²⁴⁶ As a result, the Zoshchenkos had to take in new tenants, resulting in overcrowding and considerable strain on the family. Vera Zoshchenko's recently published remembrances provide details on the changes in the housing situation and their effect on the family:

That year it was finally over with NEP. Our rented apartment building was turned over to a housing cooperative (ZHAKT)...and immediately the nuisances began. Into our apartment they moved Barayev, the husband of the late niece of our cook, who had a large family, with three little boys and second wife. For some reason, ZHAKT did not allow him to exchange rooms with Masha, who lived below, and also refused to secure one room for my friend's brother, who lived with us last year.

В тот год [1930] было окончательно покончено с нэпом. Наш арендованный дом перешел в жакт... И сразу же начались неприятности. Нам в квартиру вселили

²⁴⁶ ЖАКТы were housing cooperatives established in 1924 as a means of dealing with the reorganization of housing, giving them broad rights over the organization of living spaces and their inhabitants. As scholar Mark Meerovich puts it, starting in 1924 "ZHAKTs receive preferred rights to living and non-living space of the house and the grounds in comparison to persons who are not included in them. They have the right of "using all living space of the house and the grounds." Other residents are faced with a choice: either become a member of the ZHAKT or risk being moved (such a possibility is given to the cooperative by decree) to some other accommodation on the premises." In the original: "...ЖАКТы получают преимущественные права на жилую и нежилую площадь домовладения в сравнении с лицами, не входящим в их состав. Они имеют право «пользоваться всей жилой площадью домовладения». Прочие жильцы оказываются перед выбором – либо входить в состав членов ЖАКТа, либо рисковать быть переселенными (декретом кооперативу предоставляется такая возможность) в любое иное помещение домовладения. М.Г. Меерович, *Квадратные метры, определяющие сознание: государственная жилищная политика в СССР. 1921-1941 гг.*, (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2005), 143.

многосемейного Бараева – мужа покойной племянницы нашей кухарки, с тремя мальчиками и второй женой. Поменяться ему комнатой с Машей, жившей внизу, жакт почему-то не разрешил, а также отказывался закрепить одну комнату за братом моей подруги, который в прошлом году жил у нас.²⁴⁷

Vera describes the overall effect of these changes:

...this transformation of the apartment into a communal one eventually brought us a host of nuisances, worries, tiresome, unnecessary efforts and bitterness, even more since Barayev turned out to be a drunk and often started wild rows with his wife. And all that, of course, disturbed Mikhail's peace and prevented his working. And even damaged our relationship again.

...это превращение квартиры в коммунальную принесло нам впоследствии массу неприятностей... волнений, докучных, ненужных хлопот и огорчений, тем более что Бараев оказался пьяницей и часто устраивал дикие скандалы с женой. И все это, конечно, лишало покоя Михаила и мешало ему работать. И даже снова портило наши отношения.²⁴⁸

The drastic changes to their housing situation had prompted Zoshchenko to write to Maxim Gorky, asking him for help dealing with the ЗНАКТ, which, coincidentally, was named after Gorky.²⁴⁹ Gorky interceded on Zoshchenko's behalf and wrote the letter, which, according to Zoshchenko produced such an impression on the secretary of the housing cooperative that they promptly promised to satisfy any request by the Zoshchenko family.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Т.М Вахитова, “Зощенко В. В. о болезни и литературной работе М.М. Зощенко. Часть 2. 1930-е гг.” Ежегодник Рукописного отдела Пушкинского Дома на 2016 год. Санкт-Петербург, 2016, 639.

²⁴⁸ Quoted in Вахитова, 641.

²⁴⁹ In this letter, dated September 8, 1930, Zoshchenko asked Gorky if he would write to the housing cooperative and request that they “not move in strangers, but leave that technician whose been living in my apartment for two years [не вселяли чужих людей, а оставили бы того техника, который второй год проживает в моей квартире].” In М Горький, *Литературное Наследство. т. 70. Горький и советские писатели*. Москва: Издательство АН СССР, 1963, 160.

²⁵⁰ Zoshchenko describes the reaction to Gorky's letter in his response from September 30, 1930: “The secretary of the ЗНАКТ...ran toward me, pale and worried, and started babbling something and saying that everything will be done, and the ЗНАКТ is happy to fulfill your small request. The secretary did not even let me read your letter, saying that in it there were some flattering phrases and that I could become proud as a result. The entire house management was terribly worried.

In the original: “Секретарь ЖАКТа ...прибежал ко мне, бледный и взволнованный, и стал что-то такое лепетать и говорить, что все будет сделано и ЖАКТ рад исполнить вашу небольшую просьбу. Секретарь не дал даже мне прочесть вашего письма, сказав, что там имеются обо мне некоторые лестные фразы и что я

Yet asking Gorky for help seemed to have hurt Zoshchenko's pride, so much so that in the letter he wrote back to Gorky – the same letter in which he describes the effect Gorky's letter had on the ZHAKT leadership – Zoshchenko regretted asking for help and insisted that, despite Gorky's support, he would refuse to take advantage of Gorky's help. He even blamed Vera for his initial decision to write to Gorky. This letter gives insight into Zoshchenko's state of mind and the strain he felt during this period:

This whole month I could simply find no peace and cursed myself for writing to you. I would never have done that and would not have complicated everything with requests, but everything came together somehow outside my will. To tell the truth, it was all the same to me who would live in my room and how many people would be there. I already made peace with it and calmed down. But then my wife screamed for a few days, that accursed technician inundated me with letters how I let his room go, and the housing administration told me a bunch of things. Believe me, Aleksey Maksimovich, I did not even mention your name, nor did I boast that I know you, I did not even ask for anything, but simply in a dejected state wrote that first letter, to which you so kindly and carefully responded.

Весь этот месяц я просто не находил себе покоя и ругал себя за то, что написал вам. Я бы никогда этого не сделал и не стал бы затруднять просьбами, но все сложилось как-то помимо моей воли. По правде сказать, мне было даже все равно — кто будет жить в моей квартире и сколько человек. Я уже с этим примирился и успокоился. Но тут жена проревела несколько дней, этот злополучный техник забросал меня письмами — как это я упустил его комнату, и домоуправление наговорило мне разных вещей. Поверьте, Алексей Максимович, я не упоминал даже вашего имени и не хвалился знакомством с вами, я даже ничего не просил, но просто в удрученном состоянии написал то первое письмецо, на которое вы так любезно и внимательно откликнулись.²⁵¹

могу от этого загордиться. Все домоуправление было страшно взволновано.” Горький, *Литературное Наследство*, 160-161.

For his part, Gorky, who at the time was living in Sorrento, confessed that he did not know what the acronym stood for, writing to Zoshchenko: “Between us, what is ZHAKT? Housing association of a special kind? Just in case I write it with a capital letter. Please let me know how He treats you. [Между нами: это — что такое Жакт? Жилтоварищество особой формы? На всякий случай пишу его с большой буквы. Вы, пожалуйста, известите меня о том, как Он с вами поступит].” (Gorky's letter to Zoshchenko, September 16, 1930). Горький, *Литературное Наследство*, 159.

²⁵¹ Zoshchenko's letter to Gorky from September 30, 1930. Горький, *Литературное Наследство*, 160.

In the end, Zoshchenko was adamant that he would not take advantage of Gorky's help, writing: "I am happy to say that now, when the ZHAKT named after you received your letter and decided to accommodate me – *I did not take advantage of it* and asked that everything be left as it was, and even to leave those people that they moved into my apartment during this time. [мне приятно вам сказать, что теперь, когда ЖАКТ вашего имени получил ваше письмо и пошел мне навстречу,— *я ничем не воспользовался* [italics in original] и попросил все оставить так, как есть, и даже оставить тех людей, которых мне вселили за это время]." As a result, the housing situation would only get worse over the following year. Vera's entries from this period illustrate the hardships and challenges common to life in communal apartments and betray an acute sense of resignation about their situation:

This winter was just as turbulent and difficult as the one last year. Our "apartment" issues became even worse – for some reason, Mikhail gave up our dining room to the Baraevs (until then they lived in the hallway and in the kitchen), and he recommended that I -- in order to escape additional *uplotnenie*, except for my good friend Modest, who has been living with us since last year together with Valya – "fictitiously" register Valya's room to Modest's mother, without the right to use the room, to which she and Modest gave their complete agreement. But Alexandra Genniadevna, who put on airs because she was "Rurik," was related to Prince Rurik, turned out to be the most unscrupulous and insolent deceiver. During the summer she moved into Valya's room and this way took away the child's corner; in addition, she caused me a number of headaches with her stay.

Эта зима была такая же беспокойная и трудная, как и прошлогодняя. «Квартирные» наши дела даже ухудшились – нашу столовую Михаил зачем-то уступил Бараевым (до этого они жили в коридоре и на кухне), а в Валиной детской он посоветовал мне, во избежание дальнейших уплотнений, кроме моего хорошего друга Модеста, который жил у нас с прошлого года вместе с Валею, которого он очень любил, прописать «фиктивно» Модестову мамашу – без права пользоваться комнатой, на что и она, и Модест дали свое полное согласие. Но Александра Геннадиевна, которая так кичилась тем, что она – «Рюриковна» – ведет свой род от князя Рюрика, оказалась самой бессовестной и наглой обманщицей – летом она переехала фактически в Валину комнату и тем лишила мальчика своего угла, да к тому же причинила мне массу неприятностей своим пребыванием.²⁵²

²⁵² Вахитова, 647.

The changes in the housing situation and the mental strain Zoshchenko was under during this period had a significant impact on his attitude towards his work, and along with changes in the country stemming from the end of NEP, would contribute to his change in direction toward more documentary, autobiographical material and away from his satirical writings from the 1920s. This attitude would be one of uncertainty and resignation and would seemingly cause him to be defensive about the purpose of his writing and his inability to connect with his readers. This ambivalence about the value of his work and apparent lack of confidence is evident in his further correspondence with Gorky, which continued despite Zoshchenko's initial misgivings about "bothering" the older and revered writer about such "trivial" matters as his housing situation. A constant motif through their correspondence is Zoshchenko's lack of hope and confidence and Gorky's constant reassurance and support, including abundant praise for his stories, ideas for future works and genuine concern for his health.

When it comes to *Letters to a Writer*, Gorky expressed his support, countering Zoshchenko's ambivalence about the book. In his letter to Gorky from September 30, 1930, Zoshchenko had written that "it is now simply uncomfortable for me to hold that book in my hands, so awkwardly and insincerely do I relate to readers [эту книжку мне сейчас просто неловко взять в руки, до того я неуклюже и неискренно отнесся к читателям.]" Gorky wrote back arguing for the book's value, pointing out something that Zoshchenko himself had emphasized about his work — the importance of "trivial" things, of *быт*, and his ability to write for "the street" and to get closer to "common people." As Gorky put it,

I will argue against your evaluation of "Letters to a Writer." It is a good book, the kind that are possible only here and in our time, when the writer is becoming – as never and nowhere before – a real person close to the reader. And very often all that is a process of throwing oneself into trifles, into the rubbish of *быт*, but, in my view, it is all a most interesting process of a close coming together to the life of today.

Против вашей оценки «Писем к читателю» я — спорю. Это — хорошая книга, такие возможны только у нас и в наше время, когда писатель становится — как нигде и никогда — настоящим и близким человеком читателю. И хотя весьма часто это — процесс погружения в чепуху, в сорьё быта, но — на мой взгляд — это все же интереснейший процесс плотного сближения с жизнью сего дня.²⁵³

It is helpful to take a moment to reflect on Gorky's last phrase — his description of Zoshchenko's approach as the “process of close coming together with life of the day [процесс плотного сближения с жизнью сего дня.]” On the one hand, Gorky's emphasis on the close connection between Zoshchenko's work and everyday concerns of the time is a way to reassure the younger writer struggling with feelings of alienation from his environment and the literary milieu at the time. What is also interesting, however, is the spatial metaphor Gorky employs to describe this connection (плотное сближение), which calls to mind “уплотнение” due to the common root (*плоть*). Though Gorky probably did not intentionally allude to the housing policy, the description is striking and imbued with a bit of irony, given Zoshchenko's living circumstances and the drastic changes that he and his family were going through at the time Zoshchenko conceived and completed *Letters to a Writer*. While Zoshchenko certainly found himself “close” to his neighbors and the “life of the day,” this purported “closeness” only brought pain and trouble for the family, as his and Vera's letters and reminiscences reveal. While Zoshchenko drew on this experience in his writing, in particular stories dealing with the trauma of such policies as *uplotnenie* on a personal level, it certainly did not lead to a closer connection with others.

Instead, it seems that it was through reading the many letters he received and deciding to correspond with his readers, which eventually led to the publication of *Letters to a Writer*, that

²⁵³ Gorky's letter to Zoshchenko from October 13, 1930. Горький, *Литературное Наследство*, 163.

Zoshchenko found an outlet for his bouts of melancholia and a way to establish a closer connection with others. In an interview from 1934, Zoshchenko reflected, with his characteristic humor, on the therapeutic role that letters from readers and others played in his life over the years, especially in making him feel less “alone.” “Какая страшная вещь – иметь постоянный адрес [What a terrible thing it is to have a permanent address],” he told the interviewer, adding,

Every day — two or three letters. There are happy fellows who complain about the mail not working properly. However, between us, I would be very bitter if some letters did not reach me... Letters from readers, friends, critics, heroes of my works...I would feel lonely, if I actually did not have a permanent address.

[К]аждый день – два три письма. Есть же счастливыцы, которые жалуются на неисправность почты... Впрочем, между нами говоря, я был бы очень огорчен, если бы некоторые письма до меня не дошли... Письма читателей, друзей, критиков, героев моих произведений... Я чувствовал бы себя одиноким, если бы действительно не имел постоянного адреса.²⁵⁴

In addition to the personal importance of letters for Zoshchenko, correspondence with readers, as scholar E. Kolesnikova suggests in her article “‘Мелкий случай’ из писательской жизни (М. Зощенко и читатели)” also influenced his writing and his aesthetic approach. Reviewing the collection of letters in Zoshchenko’s archive, Kolesnikova concludes that “interaction with readers was productive for the author during his entire creative journey [общение с читателями для автора оставалось плодотворным на протяжении всего творческого пути],” adding that most likely Zoshchenko’s answers to readers found their way into his artistic works.²⁵⁵

Moreover, readers often emphasized that Zoshchenko was somehow speaking for them, documenting their lives, and in their letters often offered their own ideas for potential stories,

²⁵⁴ Письма: Беседа с Мих. Зощенко, *Литературный Ленинград*, 1934 quoted in Прокофьев, В.А. “Здесь. Писателю Зощенко (Из писем читателей 30их годов)” in Грознова, Н.А. (ed). *Михаил Зощенко. Материалы к творческой биографии*, Книга 1, 193.

²⁵⁵ Колесникова, Е. И. ‘Мелкий случай’ из писательской жизни (М. Зощенко и читатели) in Грознова, Н.А и Муромский, В. П. *Михаил Зощенко: Материалы к творческой биографии*. Книга 1. (Санкт-Петербург: Наука, 1997), 221-225.

which they hoped Zoshchenko would realize with his literary talent. Zoshchenko has a humorous, even dismissive attitude towards such suggestions, but in her article Kolesnikova examines two letters from two different readers, both of which include storylines that bear close similarity to stories eventually published by Zoshchenko, prompting the question of whether Zoshchenko consciously incorporated the letters into his work. Kolesnikova cannot find a conclusive answer, yet it is clear from the *Letters* that Zoshchenko read his readers' letters carefully and took them seriously, appreciating their unique style and language, with phrasing and unique expressions echoing in the voices of his narrators.

One letter from the collection, titled “Поэт и лошадь” [Poet and the Horse] provides insight into how Zoshchenko employed letters from readers in his stories. In the commentary to the letter, Zoshchenko notes that this letter served as the basis for the story/feuilleton of the same name. The reader of the letter wrote to complain that, after visiting Detskoe Selo [Детское село], where Pushkin once went to school, she noticed a horse grazing close to the school building which she found disrespectful to the memory of the famous poet. While the main plot of the published story remains the same, Zoshchenko stylizes it, turning the long and rambling sentences of the letter into short ones, recalling Zoshchenko's other famous stories. The voice of the story changes from the reader's perspective to that of an outsider, potentially an editor, commenting on the events and providing greater distance. What is the most striking however, is precisely what Zoshchenko mentioned earlier in his commentaries to other letters, the use of “idiomatic” phrases, which he takes directly from the letter. It is these phrases that arguably give the story its primary charge, its *skaz*, thus retaining the speech of the letter writers.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁶ Letter “Поэт и лошадь” in Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 54-56. The story with the same name is available in Zoshchenko, Mikhail. *Собранные Сочинения*, том 2. Москва: Время, 2008.

Given this close relationship with his readership and the importance of correspondence for Zoshchenko throughout his career, why then does he express such ambivalence about the value of *Letters to a Writer* to Gorky? In part his dissatisfaction seems to be another example of doubt and ambivalence about his writing which characterized his state of mind during this period. Another reason seems to be that, even though the book consisted largely of letters by others, *Letters to a Writer* was a very personal project for Zoshchenko, one that was quite different from his earlier writings. In his diary Kornei Chukovsky notes Zoshchenko's personal investment in the book. In his entry from March of 1929, Chukovsky writes:

Zoshchenko is now completely taken by his book "Letters to a Writer", he read the entire thing aloud to me. For me it does not have that charm which exists in other books by Zoshchenko, but, even though it consists entirely of someone else's material, it is wholly his, it entirely carries the stamp of his personality.

Зощенко весь захвачен теперь своей книгой «Письма к писателю», прочитал ее мне всю вслух. В ней нет для меня того обаяния, которое есть в других книгах Зощенко, но хотя вся она состоит из чужого материала, она вся — его, вся носит отпечаток его личности.²⁵⁷

This book, in contrast to his stories featuring *skaz*, was more revealing, delving into his personal life in a direct way and thus potentially opening up room for self-doubt and criticism. Moreover, while in his letter to Gorky he expressed dissatisfaction with *Letters to a Writer*, Zoshchenko's opinion of the book would change drastically only a few years later. In the commentary to *Restored Youth*, his subsequent work, Zoshchenko describes *Letters* as "my most interesting (documentary) book [я...выпустил мою самую интересную документальную книгу *Письма к писателю*]." ²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Чуковский, *Дневник: 1901-1929*. (Москва: Советский Писатель, 1991), 468.

²⁵⁸ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю; Возвращенная молодость; Перед восходом солнца: повести*, 280.

THE RECEPTION

Perhaps most importantly, however, Zoshchenko's judgment of *Letters to a Writer* was also impacted by the initial critical reception of the book which reflected the general trends and debates about art and literature in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s. In his monograph *The Politics of Reception: Critical Constructions of Mikhail Zoshchenko*, Gregory Carlton examines the types of critical responses to the book, which ran the gamut from overwhelmingly negative ("who needs this book and why was it published") to extremely laudatory ("an authentic step to a truly proletarian literature").²⁵⁹ At the core of the different critical responses, Carlton argues, was the issue of readership and its function — a fraught topic in Soviet cultural debates during this period. How to get the "average" "mass" reader to participate in the creation and appreciation of literature? Who was a better judge of a literary work: the average reader or a specialized critic? These are two key questions, Carlton argues, that drove debates about the reception of literature and the role of criticism. As he puts it,

[s]ince the October Revolution has officially brought power to the people, an equivalent change was proclaimed in the literary environment...Factors once governing production and reception of literature...were determined to have been swept away. The arbitration of artistic value now passed into the hands of the mass reader, who was canonized as the literary representative of the previously exploited proletariat and peasantry.²⁶⁰

As a result, the reception of literature switched from a "top-down" approach, with specialized critics being the main arbiters of quality, to a "bottom-up" structure where, at least in theory, "interpretations by mass readers were generally accorded more authority than those by literary

²⁵⁹ Gregory, Carleton. *The Politics of Reception: Critical Constructions of Mikhail Zoshchenko*, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 122.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 112.

critics.”²⁶¹ The “mass reader” thus came to occupy a privileged position in cultural discourse, with the result that writers themselves often had to pay lip service to the “mass reader’s” authority. Works deemed to be unintelligible or inaccessible to a wide readership were judged as “decadent” and “anti-proletarian.”

Given this context, Zoshchenko’s publication of a book consisting primarily of letters from this supposed “mass reader” understandably drew attention from the critics, especially since Zoshchenko was one of the most popular writers of the period. Zoshchenko must have been aware of the debates about literary reception, prompting the question of why he would choose to enter the fray and engage the thorny issue of readership. On this point, Carlton offers two explanations. First, Zoshchenko used his popularity and numerous letters from average readers as a weapon against his critics who attacked his work for being trivial. By appealing to the authority of the “mass reader,” Carlton argues,

Zoshchenko presented himself as one of the few who already served as an authentic bridge to the masses. On the basis of tremendous book sales and a deluge from readers, he gave full voice to the image of a close, reciprocal relationship between artist and audience. His writing was the most accessible to newly literate readers; only in his skaz could be found an accurate reflection of the post revolutionary linguistic farrago that dominated the streets; his narrators and characters were most endearing to the people; his themes spoke directly to the people.²⁶²

Indeed, Zoshchenko’s pronouncements about this audience frequently drew on the idea of this “general mass reader.” In *Youth Restored*, Zoshchenko directly invokes the “general Soviet reader,” positioning this purported reader’s authority in direct contrast to his reception by the critics. “I am writing, at any rate, I strive to write, for the general Soviet reader,” writes Zoshchenko, adding:

²⁶¹ Ibid, 115.

²⁶² Carlton, 116-117.

And the whole difficulty of my work lay primarily in learning how to write so that my works would be understandable to everyone. To achieve this I had to work a great deal on my language. My language, for which I have been reviled so much (in vain), was conventional, or rather, composite (just like the character type)...Because of this my work has not enjoyed much respect for many years. And for many years I have not even been found on lists of mediocre writers.²⁶³

Similar discourse regarding readership opens *Letters to a Writer* where he wrote that the “reader does not perceive me the same way the critics do.”²⁶⁴

Yet, who is this reader? Carlton raises this question with respect to Zoshchenko’s readers, particularly those fifty featured in the *Letters to a Writer*. Even within such a small sample of readership, Carlton argues, it is hard to discern the general characteristics of a “typical” reader. As a result, rather than offer a “unified image” of the general “mass reader”, the book instead destabilizes the concept, showing individuals with different concerns, desires, and ways of expressing themselves. In *Letters*, Zoshchenko himself recognizes that the book hardly provides the true “image” of the elusive “mass reader”, writing: “ I do not want to say that in my book it is possible to see the true face of the reader [Я не хочу сказать, что в этой моей книге можно увидеть настоящее лицо читателя]”²⁶⁵ The result, then, is a hodgepodge of letters, chosen not because of some claim toward comprehensive representation or objectivity, but rather based on Zoshchenko’s own editorial preferences.

Thus, along with providing a small, albeit hardly representative, sample of the Soviet readership, the decision to collect the letters and publish them with commentary says as much about Zoshchenko’s personality and attitude toward his work and readership as it does about the readers themselves. This “autobiographical” aspect of *Letters to a Writer* is what Carlton offers

²⁶³ Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Youth Restored*, trans. by Joel Stern (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1984), 153-154.

²⁶⁴ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 17.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

as the second reason for Zoshchenko's publication of the book. His role as an editor and commentator as well as the "author" to whose authority and talent all his correspondents appeal, whether directly or indirectly, is inextricable from the contents of the letters and their status as historical documents. For Carlton, this authorial and editorial role is characterized by "self-aggrandizement," which he sees as a crucial feature of Zoshchenko's self-image in *Letters to a Writer* as well as in other autobiographical books, such as *Youth Restored*. In addition to seeing himself as "an unadorned mouthpiece" for his readers, Carlton argues, Zoshchenko's authorial voice throughout *Letters to a Writer* is characterized by "near Promethean claims that he was the exclusive fount of information and guidance."²⁶⁶ As a result, "[In *Letters to a Writer*], in both the contents and the editorial frame, vacillation between self-effacement and self-inflation vis-a-vis his popularity was given full play."²⁶⁷

I agree with Carlton that the autobiographical component and authorial self-image in *Letters to a Writer* and Zoshchenko's work more generally are crucial in understanding his aesthetic approach and his attitude toward his work. Indeed, an autobiographical approach to studying Zoshchenko has been taken up by other scholars, most notably Alexander Zholkovsky.²⁶⁸ However, I take issue with Carlton's description of Zoshchenko's self-presentation in *Letters to a Writer* as "self-aggrandizement" or "self-inflation." Although in his works he sometimes takes up the tone of unassailable authority, especially in *Youth Restored*, Zoshchenko's commentary in *Letters to a Writer* show a genuine interest in and concern for the reader, even when, for comic effect, he takes up a sardonic tone. "У меня не было, конечно, ни

²⁶⁶ Carlton, 121.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ See Жолковский Александр. *Михаил Зощенко: поэтика недоверия*. Москва: Школа "Языки русской культуры," 1999. Zholkovsky's book offers an autobiographical reading of Zoshchenko's oeuvre, examining the correspondences between Zoshchenko's autobiographical statements in his last major work, *Before Sunrise*, and his earlier satirical stories.

малейшего желания поиздеваться над неграмотностью моих читателей,” Zoshchenko writes about his attitude toward the reader before describing his intentions for compiling the book:

I did not compile this book for the purpose of laughter. I compiled this book in order to show the genuine and unadorned life of genuine living people with their desires, taste, thoughts.

Я не ради смеха собрал эту книгу. Я эту книгу собрал для того, чтобы показать подлинную и неприкрытую жизнь, подлинных живых людей с их желаниями, вкусом, мыслями.²⁶⁹

One can, of course, question the sincerity of this statement and not take it at face value.

However, coupled with his view of correspondence with readers discussed earlier and the frequent statements of sympathy with his readers' plights in his commentary to their letters, I find it hard to doubt Zoshchenko's intentions or to describe his attitude as "self-aggrandizement" or "self-inflation," at least not in *Letters to a Writer* where his commentary is minimal and often empathetic. Moreover, the fact that readers themselves feel compelled and comfortable enough to write to Zoshchenko with their problems is evidence of intimacy, or at least perceived intimacy, they feel with the author, or rather, his authorial persona. Before the publication of documentary, "autobiographical" works like the *Letters to a Writer*, this close relationship was based solely on Zoshchenko's literary work, which, at least in the subject matter, centers around the trivial, the ordinary, the *быт*. It would be hard to argue against the claims of "self-aggrandizement" for a writer with a strong socially or politically minded self-image, say someone like Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky. In Zoshchenko's case, however, correspondence with readers, especially when considered in the context of his private life and his melancholia and alienation, seems to be a genuine attempt at connection, and publishing the *Letters* and

²⁶⁹ Zoshchenko, *Письма к писателю*, 18.

commentary to them was more revealing personally and provides a new perspective on his stories written in *skaz*.

Conclusion

This engagement with his readers goes back to the private aspect of this project and the “stamp of personality” that Chukovsky recognized in *Letters*. R. Messer, one of the reviewers of the book when it was published, also recognized this personal dimension of the book, pointing out that *Letters to a Writer* revealed a tragic side to Zoshchenko, a side that existed in his private life, but which was not associated with his public persona due to the comic nature of his stories, especially by more casual, less “specialized” readers. As Messer put it:

If the traditional Zoshchenko the humorist is received on the readerly periphery as a “happy writer,” and the qualified reader discerns behind the anecdotal shell of “Zoshchenkovian” stories some kind of general meaning, then in *Letters to a Writer* this meaning is undoubtedly tragic.

Если традиционный Зощенко юморист воспринимается на читательской периферии как ‘веселый писатель,’ а читатель квалифицированный усматривает за анекдотической оболочкой зощенковских рассказов некий обобщенный смысл, то в ‘Письмах к писателю’ этот смысл несомненно трагический.²⁷⁰

While certainly the tone of the book can often be tragic, it is clear that the correspondence featured in *Letters to a Writer* allowed Zoshchenko to establish a close and genuine connection with his readers, providing a clear contrast to often-critical public reception of his works.

²⁷⁰ Quoted in Прокофьев, В.А. “Здесь. Писателю Зощенко (Из Писем Читателей 30-х годов)” in Грознова, Н.А и Муромский, В. П. *Михаил Зощенко: Материалы к творческой биографии*. Книга 1. (Санкт-Петербург: Наука, 1997), 194.

CONCLUSION

In my examination of the depiction of private space and the transformation of everyday life in the works of Boris Barnet, Yuri Olesha, and Mikhail Zoshchenko, I have tried to highlight the diverse and innovative attempts by these artists to process and address the turbulent changes in Soviet society and culture of the 1920s. I have also attempted to interrogate the boundary between the so-called “popular” and “avant-garde” works during this period, showing that this dichotomy is not stable, and often, not very productive -- the search to find a new language and a new way of responding to the new reality spanned genres and approaches, whether through the possibilities of *mise-en-scène* or through a reworking of *skaz* narration.

My analysis of these works also highlights the “protean” nature of the dichotomy between the categories of the “public” and the “private” in the context of NEP and communal living in the Soviet Union, more generally. Though individual space was divided and rigidly regulated, works like *Girl with a Hatbox* attempt to depict and/or create spaces within their narratives where these regulations and divisions could be disrupted and resisted. Other works, such as Olesha’s *Envy*, engage with certain “common” dichotomies in Russian and Soviet culture, to use an adjective employed by Svetlana Boym, such as the dichotomy between *быт* and *бытмие*, and offer a potential third option to conceptualize individual and intimate space. Similarly, Zoshchenko’s *Letters to a Writer* addresses the boundary between the public and the private with respect to authorship and readership during the 1920s, showing the difficulty of conceptualizing the writer’s role during this transitional period.

Yet, this dissertation is only a small part of a complex and multifaceted story. Examining private space, communal living, and in particular the institution of the communal apartment, is certainly not a topic that can be covered in one dissertation or one book, or from one particular

disciplinary viewpoint. In his study *Очерки коммунального быта* (Sketches of Communal *Быт*), scholar Ilya Utekhin points out that there is a lack of ethnographic studies of the communal apartment and communal living during the Soviet period, a problem that his book attempts to remedy. At the same time, Utekhin also highlights the potential of literature to serve as another source for examining, as he puts it, “the manifestations of stereotypes of communal mentality in different spheres of life [проявления стереотипов коммунальной ментальности в различных сферах жизни].”²⁷¹ While Soviet literature often depicted the communal *быт*, Utekhin argues that in most cases these works had a satirical bent rather than attempting to depict communal living in a more realistic manner. In turn, Utekhin suggests that studying works in a realist mode would certainly add another dimension to the study of the communal apartment as a whole. And indeed communal living and its depictions in film and literature, both realistic and comedic, are numerous, and studies of other works, genres, and periods would provide productive avenues for further inquiry into the complex phenomenon of the communal apartment and private space.²⁷² This study could also be extended to the literature and film of other countries, especially those with a similar legacy of communal living and communal apartments as the Soviet Union.

While my dissertation has primarily focused on satirical literature and cinema, I have tried to show how Barnet, Olesha, and Zoshchenko employ humor as a way of dealing, in a sensory and affective way, with the shocks and traumas of such drastic changes as *uplotnenie* and the reconfiguration of space. Though on the surface their works may not be “realistic,” the harsh “reality” is always in the background, as can be seen from the chapter on Zoshchenko and

²⁷¹ Утехин, Илья, *Очерки Коммунального Быта*, (Polit.ru. Москва: ОГИ, 2001), 6.

²⁷² The “Virtual Museum of Soviet Everyday Life,” accessible at the website <https://kommunalka.colgate.edu/> features, along with many other materials, a list of literary and cinematic works set in a communal apartment.

the difficulties in his private life and his position as a writer, despite his popularity and humorous nature of his stories. What is more, often this reality surfaces in the texts themselves, reflecting the social and political context of the period in which they appeared. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a text like *Letters to a Writer* only a short time later, in the mid-1930s, when readers would most likely fear writing to a famous writer such as Zoshchenko, not knowing whether he could fall out of favor politically.

Perhaps a good way to conclude this project and look outward is to turn again to Zoshchenko's work for an example of how public and private spaces feature in different periods of Soviet history. In particular, it is helpful to look at the different depictions in his stories of a quintessentially Russian public space – the bathhouse, or *banya*. Zoshchenko wrote a whole “cycle” of stories set in the *banya*, starting with what is arguably the most famous one, titled simply “The Bathhouse [Баня]”, published in 1925. “Our bathhouses are not so bad,” claims Zoshchenko's narrator at the opening of the story, before describing a series of misadventures that end with him losing his pants and his soap. The *banya* in this story is a chaotic and unruly place, where, as Zoshchenko's narrator puts it, “you no sooner get yourself all washed up before you're dirty again.”²⁷³ In 1935 Zoshchenko followed the original “Banya” story with “*Banya and People [Баня и люди]*” and though the story is seemingly a continuation of the first one, the narration is more distant, substituting the voice of his typical *skaz* narrator with one closer to Zoshchenko's own voice in his more autobiographical material. Though this story also features a chaotic incident, the narrator is quick to point out that the conditions in the *banya* have changed for the better since the previous story. At the same time, the story ends with an arrest and, in what could be read as a veiled comment on the 1930s, “with this, our bathhouse story comes to

²⁷³ Mikhail Zoshchenko. *Scenes from the Bathhouse: And Other Stories of Communist Russia*, trans. Sidney Monas. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 24.

an end and other matters begin.”²⁷⁴ In 1956, a few years before his death, Zoshchenko published yet another story set in the *banya*, titled “In the Banya [В бане].” The *banya* of this story is a much cleaner, almost sterile place, with an attendant who cleans the seats and provides fresh towels. The narration itself is more “orderly” and the main character is an old man, who, despite having worked and saved his whole life, seems resigned and disheartened at the story’s end.

Different versions of “Banya” reflect Zoshchenko’s own development as a writer, starting with the early years that feature his quintessential style, moving to the period of the 1930s where arguably some of the most original and innovative aspects of this style are removed and many contradictions and conflicts are smoothed over. The 1956 story is the least “Zoshchenkopian” of the three; it is also much longer than the other two. At the same time, one can infer a lot about the social and political context of the period in which each story is written, especially on the topic of public and private spaces. While the “Banya” from 1925 is chaotic and unpredictable, much like the turbulent and experimental NEP period, “Banya and People” is marked by omission, leaving it to the reader to decipher many aspects of the narrative, such as, for example, the “disappearance” of male attendants. The *banya* from 1956 could potentially be read as an improvement in societal comforts during this period, yet also as the disappearance of spontaneity and possibility, especially in comparison with the 1920s.

This short analysis of the different depictions of the *banya* in Zoshchenko’s stories only hints at the potential of literature to provide a more nuanced understanding of the legacy of the transformation of everyday life and reconfiguration of space which began in the 1920s.

Examining other literary and cinematic works from other periods and genres which depict

²⁷⁴ Zoshchenko, *Scenes from the Bathhouse*, 81.

communal living and the experience of living in a communal apartment would further enrich the study of this complex and multifaced topic.

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