Towards Critical Realism: Marginality in Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian Photography (1980s–1990s)

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the unofficial photography of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in the 1980s and 1990s: an art form that is barely studied in academia and therefore remains almost completely unknown to the general public.

The dissertation offers a novel perspective of research within Eastern European art, as it reflects on the photographic practices in the context of a transitional period in these former Soviet republics: the era of stagnation during the early 1980s, the Perestroika of 1986, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the decade that followed it. Photographs which best represent the characteristics of these art movements during such a pivotal time in history for these three countries were selected and different information was collected directly from photographers and art institutions, analysed and presented in my manuscript. The formal analysis of the selected photographs uncovered the evolution of certain socio-cultural and politico-economic aspects in Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian societies and at the same time the impact of this evolution on photographic art itself.

This study proceeds along four axes. First, it examines photographic truth in the selected images and reveals that it is defined by the authenticity of the authorial approach, the abolishment

of socialist ideology, and a critical vision of reality. Secondly, it scrutinizes the notion of critical realism and its divergence from socialist realism (officially sanctioned theory and method of artistic expression, which prevailed in the Soviet Union between the 1930s and late 1980s). Thirdly, it explores various unorthodox practices the photographers used, such as work with photographic 'margins', the documentation of 'subaltern' characters, and the use of 'minor' language of photography. Finally, this work shows how Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photography under study offers a critical view of everyday life in the region. Unlike the sanctioned photography of the 1980s and the commercial photography of the 1990s, the photography studied reveals the unspoken truth about the everyday and its heroes who appear far from the role models suggested by socialist realist and capitalist methods. The work presented in this thesis also aims at laying a solid foundation for further research concerning the evolution of photography in post-Soviet countries.

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I would also like to thank all the photographers and artists whose works are reproduced in this dissertation, as well as all the museums and art institutions with whom I was in contact: the Nailya Alexander gallery, the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, the State Russian Museum, the Tretyakov gallery, the MacLaren Art Centre, and Magnum Photos. This project would not have been possible without their collaboration. I am equally grateful to Adrian Sheppard who patiently helped me deal with all copyright issues I encountered. A big thank you to Maja Staka

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Note on Transliteration

Throughout the dissertation I have employed, whenever possible, the modified Library of Congress transliteration system. Personal and place names, however, have been Romanised for ease of reading, according to the following principle: personal names of Slavic writers and artists with established reputations in the West have been kept as they are commonly used in North American scholarship. Thus, the reader will encounter Nicolas Berdyaev rather than Nikolai Berdiaev, Alexander Rodchenko rather than Aleksandr. Similarly, as for the studied photographers' names, spelling repeats the one that they use in Western exhibitions and publications. For instance, Roman Pyatkovka rather than Piatkovka.

Introduction

In her programmatic book *On Photography* (1977) Susan Sontag writes: "Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself" (5). The research on late and post-Soviet photography reveals another angle of Sontag's phrase: through photographs, each *nation* constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself.

This study titled *Towards Critical Realism: Marginality in Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian Photography (1980s-1990s)* aims primarily to reassemble all elements of the socio-cultural portrait of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian nation(s) created by local photographers during a pivotal time in history for these three countries—the 1980s and 1990s. Reflecting the key characteristics of the Soviet and post-Soviet peoples, the portrait aims to inform us about the way the photographers saw them: sometimes with a touch of sadness and anxiety, sometimes ironically and with humour, sometimes with claim to objectivity, or on the contrary, from a purely subjective perspective. Considering all its different manifestations, the photographic portrait studied here offers an overall critical vision of reality and people, being simultaneously a direct response to the existing formal and thematic conventions of socialist realism (officially sanctioned theory and method of artistic expression, which prevailed in the Soviet Union between the 1930s and late 1980s) and

a new photographic phenomenon. According to the former socialist realist doctrine, a work of art was supposed to engage into the theme of classless society and building of socialism, all the while glorifying communist values. The photographers discussed in this dissertation abandon the glorification and aestheticization of socialism, turning rather to the critical realist depiction of Soviet people.

The photographers I study are originally from Soviet Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. These three countries share similar cultures, languages and Soviet history, and they are tied by the same socio-political context.[1] Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have had a constant cultural exchange that has existed for many centuries, from the very beginning of the Kievan Rus' (ninth century) to the Soviet period, when it intensified.

Because of their shared history of cultural exchange, Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian societies are very similar and have comparable education systems and art scenes. These commonalities also instigated migrations of people between the three countries, particularly during the Soviet period. Indeed, many photographers moved to Moscow from Ukraine, Belarus and other Russian cities, because the Russian capital offered more employment opportunities thanks to its established photographic art institutions.

Thus, the majority of the photographers studied here are of Russian origin or live and work in Russia. Igor Mukhin (b. 1961, lives and works in Moscow), Nikolay Bakharev (b. 1946, lives and works in Novokuznetsk), Vladimir Kupriyanov (1954-2011, lived and worked in Moscow), Alexey Titarenko (b. 1962, lives and works in St. Petersburg), Alexander Lapin (1945-2012, lived

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[1]Other Soviet republics, like Caucasian, Baltic states, or Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, as well as other socialist republics that have not been part of the USSR (Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary) represent different cultures distinguished by their particular characteristics, be it language, faith, customs, traditions or social organization, etc.

and worked in Moscow), Alexei Shulgin (b. 1963, lives and works in Moscow), Sergey Leontiev (b. 1962, lives and works in Moscow), Evgeny Mokhorev (b. 1967, lives and works in St. Petersburg), Sergey Chilikov (b. 1953, lives and works in Yoshkar-Ola and Moscow), Lyalya Kuznetsova (b. 1946 in Kazakhstan, lives and works in Moscow), Sergey Maximishin (b. 1964, lives and works in St. Petersburg), Alexander Sliussarev (1944-2010, lived and worked in Moscow), Valery Shchekoldin (b. 1946, lives and works in Moscow), Yuri Rybchinsky (b. 1935, lives and works in Moscow), Evgeny Yufit (1961-2016, lived and worked in St. Petersburg), Viktor Shchurov (1955-2005, lived and worked in St. Petersburg), and the Triva group from Novokuznetsk.[2]

The dissertation also contains some images by Russian artists such as Vadim Zakharov (b. 1959, lives and works in Moscow and Cologne), Alexander Kosolapov (b. 1943 in Moscow, lives and works in New York), Maria Serebriakova (b. 1965 in Moscow, lives and works in Berlin), Oleg Kulik (b. 1961 in Kiev, lives and works in Moscow), Vitaly Komar (b. 1943 in Moscow, lives and works in New York) and Alexander Melamid (b. 1945 in Moscow, lives and works in New York) who are not photographers in the strict sense, but whose art was to some extent engaged in photography in the 1980s and 1990s.

The second group of photographers are of Ukrainian origin and are represented in this study exclusively by the Kharkov school of photography[3]: Boris Mikhailov (b. 1938, lives and works in Kharkov and Berlin), Evgeny Pavlov (b. 1949, lives and works in Kharkov), Roman Pyatkovka (b. 1955, lives and works in Kharkov), Sergey Bratkov (b. 1960 in Kharkov, lives and

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[2]Triva group was formed in 1980 by Vladimir Sokolaev (1952-2016), Vladimir Vorobiëv (1941-2011), and Alexander Trofimov (b. 1948).

[3]The term 'school of photography' is used here and elsewhere in the dissertation in a sense of a common conceptual, regional or personal influence shared by artists.

works in Moscow), Sergey Solonsky (b. 1957, lives and works in Kharkov).[4] Finally, Belarus is represented in this dissertation by Igor Savchenko (b. 1962, lives and works in Minsk), Galina Moskaleva (b. 1954 in Lithuania, lives and works in Minsk and Moscow), Vladimir Shakhlevich (b. 1949, lives and works in Moscow), and Sergey Kozhemyakin (b. 1956, lives and works in Minsk).

Looking at the list of photographers, it is obvious that gender inequality had a lasting impact on Soviet era photography: among more than 30 artists discussed in this dissertation, only three are women. The truth of the matter is that during the two decades I study, only men were completely free to devote their life to art. Even though the Soviet Union was an egalitarian society, women tended to choose more stable professions that allowed them to manage family duties, knowing that independent and unofficial photography work implied some serious risks, such as dismissal, KGB control, destruction or confiscation of prints, etc. For instance, Boris Mikhailov was fired from his job as an engineer in 1965, when the authorities found nude images of his wife; the photographs of Triva group were confiscated by the KGB committee in 1981 due to photographers' attempt to participate in foreign publications and Alexander Lapin's photo studio was closed after a scandalous exhibition he organised in 1987. These are just a few examples of the oppression which affected the lives of nonconforming photographers. In the early 1980s, many photographers worked underground, exhibiting in private apartments and circulating through 'samizdat' publications. Because of their clandestine nature, some of these photographs were appropriated by amateurs, smuggled abroad and later misplaced in galleries or private collections, sadly becoming

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[4]It is worth mentioning that the Kharkov school of photography became the most renowned in Ukraine (and probably in the East European countries), because of its distinct style that combined experimental techniques, critical vision of everyday life, and treatment of taboo themes.

lost to history and extremely difficult to trace.

The choice of artists, despite the panoramic character of this dissertation and my sincere desire to objectively and fairly represent various aspects of photographic practices in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, relies primarily on my personal aesthetic and thematic privileges.

The selection represents most and foremost the photographers who echo my perception of East European photographic art during the period studied here. In all photographs mentioned in this dissertation I saw the combination of three ideas that cross my present research—critical realism, margin, and everyday life. It is also important to mention that the majority of photographs reproduced in this dissertation are part of larger photographic series. The concept of serial photography emerged in the 1970s, at the time when it was more common in conventional Soviet and Western photography to express the author's idea in one single photograph. Serial photography challenged claims to objectivity by offering a subjective and critical vision, as well as unlimited possibilities of interpretation and narrative.[5] In a personal conversation, the photographer Sergey Leontiev told me that at that time (the 1980s and 1990s), a single photograph was worth nothing, because the public (including the photographers) did not take it seriously. Seriality served as a means of rendering photographs more artistic and conceptual, elevating the status of photography from amateur practice to high art.

Claiming a marginal status of photography that is evident from the aforementioned facts appears problematic, given that photography was considered evidence of Soviet Union living/cultural conditions. Independent photographers of the 1980s and 1990s sparked a radical change in the

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[5]John C. Welchman identifies serial work of late and post-Soviet photographers as "a gesture of (critical) continuity with the strategies of the earlier Soviet avant-garde, [...] an insistence on the implicit narrativity of the photographic project, and a desire to undermine any unitary, 'auratic' investment in the singular image" (Welchman 105n.14).

photographic community, both distancing themselves from communism and from thinking about photography as a kind of historical evidence. Instead, their works represent testimonies of personal experience: first, the experience of Soviet and post-Soviet photographers as artists, and secondly, the personal stories of their subjects. In the context of late and post-Soviet culture, photography depicted the everyday as a marginalised practice. Often, photographers captured events and activities that took place on the margins of the official or dominant discourse; therefore, they appear dislocated from the common rhetoric. Such images offer a critical view of everyday life, unlike the sanctioned photography of the 1980s, where the everyday constituted a sphere of pride and glory, since the socialist state was built on the everyday. The imagery studied here contrasts with the commercial photography of the 1990s, which shows the everyday as an ideal glamorised life. Critical realist photography from these two decades, with its attention to ordinary, unimportant, low, and humble, reveals the unspoken truth about the everyday and its heroes who appear far from the role models suggested by socialist realist and capitalist methods.

The photographers of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus gave voices to the oppressed and insignificant, worked with counter-hegemonic practices, offered alternative aesthetics and most importantly, wrote history 'from below.' The margin thus becomes a space of formal and thematic experiments that make their way from a totally unrecognisable form of art to one that is celebrated and highly esteemed. The necessity of the present research lies in the consideration of the photographic movement studied here through the lens of major theoretical works by East European and Western thinkers of the twentieth century that brought additional insights into the notions of photographic truth, hegemony, and realism, among others. The combination of history 'from below,'

recorded by the photographers, and academic language 'from above,' used in the works I reference, provides an optimal way to study photography as it reflects the phenomenon of the centre merging with its margins.

This dissertation does not represent an extensive study of photographers with the totality of their work. It is rather an attempt to explore an artistic form that was neglected by academia and therefore remains generally unknown to the Western public. Besides the discussion of the socio-cultural and political context of the 1980s and 1990s, my analysis of East European photography draws upon the concepts of critical realism, margin and everyday life. The images discussed in this dissertation are located at the intersection of these three themes that characterise late and post-Soviet photography as unprecedented movement. The photographers' detached point of view on reality, which manifests itself in their anti-ideological and apolitical photographic recordings for the sake of art alone, suggests a manner of picture-taking that I call critical realism. The combination of daring subjects[6] and unorthodox formal solutions[7] with the usage of minor language of expression testify to this movement's marginal character that certain critics qualify as deconstruction itself (V. Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)modernism in Russia.*). The photographers challenge existing visual codes by documenting everyday reality not from propagandistic and optimistic (hegemonic) point of view, but from the point of view of ordinary people—as the locus of alienation. Taken together, these three themes form the context that both accurately describes the photography I study and offers a new perspective of research within East European art.

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[6]The photographic movement under study treats various sensitive and taboo themes, such as poverty, disability, alcohol dependency, nude body, to name but a few.

[7]Such as hand-toning, collage, scratching and cutting of snapshots, printing the full frame including the perforation field, among others.

Despite the photographers' presence on the international art market and relative accessibility of information at the present time, it is surprising to notice the quasi absence of scholarly critical literature about their works. Besides several academic papers that generally scrutinise the lives and works of specific contemporary photographers,[8] very few articles have been published on the overall situation of photography in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, a gap my research aims to fill. The only movement studied by scholars at length was that of early Soviet photography and partially, that of Soviet photography during World War Two. Indeed, the Western reader is familiar with the work of Russian and Soviet photographer Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956) who at the beginning of the twentieth century created vanguard photographic images that shaped the further development of Soviet visual culture. Unfortunately, beyond this particular period in the 1920s and 1930s which included productive photographic experiments by Rodchenko, Boris Ignatovich (1899-1976), Arkady Shaikhet (1898-1959), Alexander Khlebnikov (1897-1979), and Vsevolod Tarasevich (1919-1998) among others, Soviet and post-Soviet photography did not receive the attention it deserves. This can be explained by a meagre cultural exchange between the Soviet countries and the Western world during the Cold War and the era of stagnation (1964-1985).

However, with the advent of Perestroika and Glasnost in the late 1980s, art critics and collectors from the United States and Europe began to organise photographic exhibitions and publish catalogues featuring recent East European photographers. The first and probably most important among them was the exhibition *Another Russia: Through the Eyes of the New Soviet Photographers* at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (1986) with its catalogue of the same name

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[8]The overwhelming majority of which are devoted to Boris Mikhailov, the most acclaimed photographer from the ex-Soviet bloc.

by Daniela Mrázková and Vladimír Remeš, as it offered a panorama of the latest photographic achievements from within the Soviet bloc. Another source of key importance was the special issue of *Aperture* magazine in the fall of 1989 titled *Photostroika: New Soviet Photography*. This publication revealed itself problematic to some photographers due to Soviet authorities believing the works featured inside to be anti-Soviet propaganda.[9] Two accompanying catalogues from 1991 are also worth mentioning: *Photo Manifesto: Contemporary Photography in the USSR* by Joseph Walker, Christopher Ursitti, and Paul Mcginniss (Museum for Contemporary Art, Baltimore) and *Changing Reality: Recent Soviet Photography* by Leah Bendavid-Val (Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington). The above-mentioned publications served as a visual bank for my dissertation and inspired the major axes of research I undertook.

These four sources clearly show the change that occurred in late Soviet photographic practices: from staged and highly ideological socialist realist photography that transmitted an affirmative and positive message, to apolitical experimental art with no clear aim from an independent authorial perspective. Art critics and historians, such as Alla Rosenfeld and Diane Neumaier to name but a few, call the adepts of this movement "nonconformist" photographers.[10] On the one hand, their art could be an act of resistance or political dissent against the backdrop of censorship, communist propaganda and the socialist realist tradition where the representation of the ideal was substituted for the representation of mimetic reality. On the other hand, their photographs could

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[9]Particularly to Antanas Sutkus, Lithuanian photographer, whose photograph *Pioneer* (1964) was featured on the magazine's cover page. Sutkus's pioneer is characterised by a sad and slightly nostalgic look, which greatly differed from the conventional representation of pioneers—always smiling and ready to contribute to the construction of socialist state.

[10]See for example, Diane Neumaier's Introduction to *Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-related Works of Art*, Rutgers UP, 2004, pp. 1–27 and Alla Rosenfeld's chapter "Photography as Art: Contemporary Russian Photography in the Yuri Traisman Collection" in *Forbidden Art: The Postwar Russian Avant-garde*, Distributed Art Publishers, 1998.

manifest a desire to portray an underrepresented alternative reality that was silenced by the regime. The depiction of that reality competed, both thematically and aesthetically, with the official imagery of the Soviet Union and was therefore perceived as marginal. In the immediate post-Soviet period this perceived marginality continued, this time against the backdrop of capitalist discourse on democracy and liberalism. This idea is also supported in the seminal book—the last among the most important sources of inspiration for my work—*Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-related Works of Art* (2004) edited by Diane Neumaier. In this collection, besides the reproduction of multiple brilliant works of art by Soviet and post-Soviet artists and photographers, the authors, who include renowned scholars, curators and art historians, such as Boris Groys, Ekaterina Degot and Valery Stigneev, approach photography as an integral part of the Eastern European cultural landscape, discussing it with political, historical and social considerations in mind. *Beyond Memory* helped to frame the second aim of my research—reflection on the photographic practices studied here in the context of a transitional period: the era of stagnation during the early 1980s, the Perestroika of 1986, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the decade that followed it.

My dissertation covers this particular time span to show the continuity of formal and aesthetic solutions that existed in the 1980s and 1990s. In this dissertation, I treat nonconformist (or simply independent) photographers as direct successors of the early twentieth century avant-garde movement that was interrupted by the establishment of the doctrine of socialist realism in 1934. They reconsidered and revitalised innovative practices of their predecessors and adopted them to create an art in parallel with, and in reaction to, official Soviet photography, mostly used

as propaganda.

From the 1960s onwards, the unofficial schools of photography which flourished across the Soviet Union were characterised by pronounced social criticism, for they cultivated the development of critical opposition to ideological life and art. Thus, the transformations within Soviet photography occurred well before the actual transformation of the country, starting from 1986. As the examples in this dissertation show, Perestroika facilitated the exchange between Soviet and Western photographers and offered more opportunities for circulation and publication, but did not affect the photographers' thematic and aesthetic choices. Moreover, the breakdown of taboos that Perestroika promoted did not happen overnight, and photographers experienced censorship and social pressure even in the early 1990s. With the dissolution of the USSR, their social critique persisted, in the form of reflection on the Soviet vestiges, a new politico-economic order and all troubles related to it in the post-Soviet society. Therefore, with the period of the 1980s and 1990s behind us, I can presently assess and analyse the photographic movements in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, both by considering the undeniable influence of Soviet and Western photographers and artists and by defining the principal elements that characterise this photography, looking at the consequences and effects this photography had on photographic art in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus after the year 2000.

Every possible medium (besides academic publications) that could provide data was helpful to accomplish the objectives of this dissertation, including art journals and catalogues, artists' monographs, their personal web-sites and interviews on the web. However, sometimes even these sources were not sufficient to uncover the fate of the photographs under discussion. Some pho-

tographs were analysed due to their proactive aspects and ability to arouse debate, which caused them to circulate, but others remained relatively unnoticed by art critics, and we can only assume the impact they produced. In some cases, the photographs' stories are mysterious to such an extent that even photographers have no clue where their works are located and whether they were published or not. To obtain tiny bits of information about such photographs, I counted on personal help of the authors discussed and/or their representatives who kindly shared these rare images and facts with me.

The following dissertation is divided into four parts that illustrate and problematise the aforementioned phenomenon. The first part, titled "Photographic truths: contextualising Eastern European photography," introduces us to the nature of photography, with its capacity to simultaneously record and interpret reality, with the goal of placing photography under study first in the context of world art and secondly along the socio-cultural and politico-economic horizon of the Soviet Union. It starts with the discussion of photographic images' truth value, drawing on leading theorists and scholars of photography, with the objective of understanding the roles of photographer, viewer and institutions in the construction of a photographic meaning. The chapter continues with the historical background of Soviet art, showing the official discourse's oscillation between truth and propaganda, and how political changes echoed in Soviet and post-Soviet photographic art. This contextualises late and post-Soviet photography, determining the reference point—official imagery, socialist realism, power discourse—with which the photographers under study often juxtaposed their works. The chapter ends with an overview of the 'new' photographic practices, developed in the 1980s and 1990s, which according to art critics, strive for truth.

The second part, "Realisms: histories, theories, functions," explores deeper the concepts of realism and the realist work of art. Looking in the beginning at the domain of visual arts, I outline the features of realist representation, and specifically of Realist painting, concluding that the principles of realism and objectivity differ from one historical period to another, and from one culture to another. Focusing on realism from a literary perspective, on the other hand, reveals a socio-economic element, as realism depicts reality 'from below,' making art accessible for everyone. Under the influence of Marxism, early Soviet leaders strove to make art accessible to everyone, which was partially incarnated through socialist realism. However, this goal proved highly didactic, with ideological and engaged objectivity. The chapter proceeds with comparison of Soviet and Western photography, the former being known as artificial, utopian, embellished and consequently untruthful, and the latter as documentary and consequently truthful. However, it turns out that both styles represent constructed imagery that similarly reflects society. Furthermore, chapter two focuses on the realism which defines late and post-Soviet photography, calling it critical, since unlike socialist realism, this photographic movement was based on an analytical and conceptual authorial vision.

The third chapter, "Framing marginality," examines unorthodox practices of late and post-Soviet photographers who engage by playing with the thematic and aesthetic limits of their images. Examples include working with the photographic margins, both inside and outside the image; recording subaltern characters (which is compared to the superfluous man in Russian literature), and the use of minor language of photography, undermining the notion of a perfect image with either bad or low quality. The chapter explores how these three strategies, used separately or

simultaneously in one single image or series, challenge the established hierarchy between the centre and its margins by dislocating the central meaning of art works. Ultimately, the chapter also shows how the photographic movement studied here, through such experiments, contributed to the recognition of photography as a self-sufficient and independent art form in Russia, if not in all the countries mentioned.

The fourth and concluding chapter, "Representing the everyday," strives to demonstrate more examples of marginality in late and post-Soviet photography, expressed in the theme of 'everyday life.' The chapter starts by theorising the everyday, revealing its marginal character in academic and artistic spheres. Photographers of the 1980s and 1990s rigorously exploited the theme of the everyday routine as it offered multiple opportunities to produce experiments both in form and content. The chapter also studies the Eastern European concepts of *byt*—tiresome everyday routine—and Homo Sovieticus—the ordinary Soviet man—that acquire a particular representation in photography. The analysis of labour and industrial imagery concludes the chapter, by demonstrating how photography reflected the change in labour conditions, as well as in the atmosphere in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus after the Soviet Union's breakdown.

Towards Critical Realism aspires to open a dialogue in academic discourse about an outstanding movement in East European photographic art which, thoroughly reflecting its time, was seemingly ahead of it as well. Nowadays, the photographers studied in this dissertation are exhibited in leading museums and galleries all around the globe. However, in the 1980s and 1990s their art was barely accepted in their home countries. This stark difference has pushed me to undertake the current research and instigate the process of recognising photographers from Russia, Ukraine,

and Belarus as genuine artists. Establishing connections between photographic truth, critical realism, margin, and everyday life of photographed subjects is the methodology that, in my mind, will help to fully uncover the significance of the photographic movement under discussion and help designate it as an ultimate manifestation of postmodern art.

Chapter 1

Photographic truths: Contextualising Eastern European photography

To write about Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photography is to tell the story of struggling between socialist realism and avant-garde, official and underground art, sanctioned subjects and nonconformist practices, politics and personal choice, and, finally, lies and truths. Soviet and post-Soviet photography from the 1980s and 1990s more than any art form encompassed all the complex historical, social and cultural circumstances that shook these countries during the twentieth century. For this reason, photography from this period must be studied by taking Soviet history and visual culture into consideration. In the Soviet Union, photographs and more generally visual culture that was influenced by the socialist realist doctrine played the role of "illustrations of official ideology" (Bakshtein 43). What makes the period of the 1980s and 1990s interesting is a fundamental change in how photographers took photos, first by distancing themselves from official ideological doctrine,

and secondly by introducing never-before-seen subjects such as marginal people and places, and thirdly by establishing photography as an independent and self-sufficient art practice. The question of truthful representation of life transmitted by the medium became one of the most important for photographers, as they could then openly document society, criticize, doubt, make art and start serving the interests of photography, and not the regime. What they sought, henceforth, was the authenticity and sincerity of the photographic snapshot without ideological burden or fictional ideas.[1]

Photographic truth is, therefore, the subject of this chapter, where I will retrace the relationship—always changing and certainly not straightforward—between images and reality, firstly by drawing on Western key thinkers of the twentieth century who, until the 1980s, questioned the idea of truthful representation inherent to the photographic image. I will then attempt to expose the relationship between truth and photography in the Soviet Union by discussing the thoughts of Soviet artists, critics and Sovietologists from around the world from the seven decades of the communist regime. By studying the role of photographic truth in the Soviet Union, I aim to find out why the photography of the 1980s and 1990s appeared so different from the previous years of photo documentation in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

Despite the mechanical process of the photographic picture-making that promises an ob-

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[1]The temporal focus of the dissertation, from the 1980s to the end of 1990s is due to the fact that during this period photographic practices in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus reached a new level of visual representation. The two decades that preceded this period were a time when changes in the conception of the photographic medium started to manifest, particularly in the work of nonconformist photographers. However, it is in the 1980s and 1990s that the complete shift to a different photographic philosophy—that of critical realism and margin—achieved its utmost popularisation. I acknowledge the fact that the decade of the 1980s is politically and culturally complex, and it might seem problematic to generalise the events that influenced visual culture and development of art; nevertheless I believe that photographic Perestroika happened much earlier—in the 1960s and 1970s—when photographers split into official and unofficial. This is the reason why the Perestroika and Glasnost of the late 1980s reflected only on the distribution of Soviet photography (offering a possibility to be published in foreign magazines), and not much on its formal and thematic solutions. This justifies my choice of the time period studied in the dissertation.

jective reflection of reality, the examples I will analyse in this chapter show that photos are not as "transparent," as understood by Kendall Walton. In 1984, the scholar argued that photographs are like mirrors, they help us to see the world: "Objects cause their photographs and the visual experiences of viewer mechanically; so we see the objects through the photographs. By contrast, objects cause paintings not mechanically but in a more 'human' way, a way involving the artist; so we don't see through paintings" (Walton 261). Although it is difficult to find objections to the argument that photographs literally enable us to see what they depict, Walton's vision of photography, as an instrument to see reality, does not consider the full impact created by the environment in which the photographs are taken. In the following chapter I will demonstrate how images are affected by the photographer's intervention, the viewer's gaze, requirements of art institutions, as well as economic and political situations in the state. Drawing on photography theorists such as Roland Barthes, Rosalind Krauss, Susan Sontag, John Tagg, Victor Burgin, Umberto Eco and Peter Wollen, among others, I will argue that the relationship between the image and the referent is never transparent. In the case of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, it will be interesting to see how going from using photos for ideological purposes to using them for personal and artistic reasons modified their truthfulness. We will discover that despite its realism and transparency, photography mirrors invisible processes happening in the depicted life, i.e. political discourse, nostalgia, and inner protest.

1.1   Problematizing photographic truth

Photographic truth is and has always been problematic. Photography, due to the automatic mechanism of the camera, which makes an exact reproduction of nature, holds a certain amount of truth, or at least a pretension of holding the truth. Since its initial stages, photography's objective lens serves to document events and provides evidence of history. Photography is associated with truth and realism because of its capacity to record reality at a specific moment: "the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* 4). Due to the chemical process[2] happening in the camera during a shoot, the image promises to come out 'true' and without distortion. Early photographic practices were often aimed at helping to discover the true nature of things, as photography minimised intervention of the author-photographer into the creation of relatively 'objective' images. This is why, from the nineteenth century onward, science made use of the photographic mechanism to produce, collect and analyse pictures of studied natural phenomena.

However, as soon as the medium was invented, there appeared an awareness that images can lie, and that the mimetic representation of nature, which is supposed to truthfully reflect reality, can be compromised by photographic manipulation. For instance, Lady Eastlake, a British author, art critic and art historian, in her 1857 article for *The London Quarterly Review*, writes about the impossibility of photography to properly reflect the variations of light and shadow and different gradations of distance and smooth surfaces due to the nature of the optical-chemical camera which is sensitive to light and humidity (Eastlake). In the 1970s and 1980s, the relationship

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[2]In analogue photography, the image on the photographic negative is the result of transformation of light sensitive emulsion triggered by the opening of the diaphragm.

between photography and truth lies at the heart of the photography theory debates that question the veracity of photographic documents, the extent to which a photograph reflects the referent, the essence of the photographic representation, and the role of the photographer in the image-making process.[3] In addition to all these considerations, it was clear that the meaning which the viewer makes out of a photographic print does not constitute a direct correlation with portrayed reality, but is "constructed by the system of representation" (Hall 21). Although most critics and scholars cited in this dissertation point out the problem of photography's seeming transparency, the notion of photographic truth cannot be clearly defined, which is why it is necessary to talk about 'photographic truths' in plural. As we will see in the following, a snapshot, or rather its meaning, is always influenced by the viewer, the photographer, and the institutional context. Looking closely at these three factors will prove that photographic truth does not exist. Instead, photography can exist through many different truths.

1.1.1 The meaning of photography and the viewer

In the nineteenth century, photography caused a revolution in art, and especially in painting, offering fast and good quality mimetic copy of reality. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936), Walter Benjamin stated that the truth-value of photography enabled a fast and flawless reproduction of the works of art, "and the reproduction as offered by illustrated magazines and newsreels differs unmistakably from the image" (Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" 16). Besides killing the aura of the work of art,

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[3]Further debates that opened up in the 1990s, were related to the development of digital imaging and associated with it manipulation of reality. They do not have a direct relevance for this research, as in the current thesis the photographers in question work substantially with traditional analogue cameras.

according to Benjamin, the reproducibility by means of the camera changed art and its perception, e.g. the cult value that was important before had been replaced by the exhibition value. Thus, Benjamin noted that photography is a medium that does not possess a unique value of an artwork, instead it creates something new—evidence.

The reason why photography initially provoked controversy was the 'mechanical aid' of the camera. The opponents of photography such as Charles Baudelaire and Lady Eastlake claimed that only artists can dare to reproduce nature, and without any technological devices. On the other hand, the camera inspired scientists and scholars to discover and study the world in detail, which offered new possibilities both in science and art. Photography, as Walter Benjamin put it, "with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret" (Little History of Photography 510).[4] For André Bazin, the mechanical reproduction of the photographic image is rather a victory over the centuries-old struggle to achieve realism in art. Bazin finds photography "objective" due to the automatic process of the image-making, where the man intervenes only to select the object of the photo and its purpose. Thus, what Benjamin saw as an assault upon the cult value of the work of art, Bazin considered a liberation of Western painting "from its obsession with realism" (Bazin 9). However, Benjamin gave photography its due as a document of history, as "evidence in the historical trial [Prozess]" (Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" 19), which is echoed in Bazin's allusion to "mummification" of ever-changing life.

The historical value of photography consists in its ability to record a fleeting moment that

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[4]In the *Screen* version of the essay translated by Stanley Mitchell the text says that photography reveals "this moment" (for instance, the act of walking). However, I prefer to quote here the version published in the collection *Selected Writings. Volume 2*, translated by Rodney Livingstone and others. Photography can reveal not only the secret of how a person walks but many other secrets.

will never be the same again, and that will immediately appear as history. The uniqueness of the recorded moment is what brings nostalgia for that ephemeral past. Photography's role as historical evidence is only possible due to the camera's ability to capture reality without bias. Nevertheless, history is subject to interpretation, and photographs, by association, are too. Roland Barthes, for example, distinguished two messages that the photograph emits simultaneously: one is without a code, which is the actual representation of reality, and the other with a code, which corresponds to the connotation or the meaning that the viewer attributes to the photograph. Barthes finds this duality paradoxical, as the photograph appears at once 'objective' and 'invested,' natural and cultural (Barthes, *A Barthes Reader; Edited, and with an introduction by Susan Sontag* 199). Therefore, the first meaning of the photograph derives from itself, whereas the second one is generated by the viewer.

What viewers make of a photograph is typically based on their awareness of the context and history surrounding the photograph in question. Photographs depend heavily on the story which lies behind them, because if they are taken out of the context, they turn into images dominated only by their form. As Victor Burgin claimed, "the photograph is a *place of work*, a structured and structuring space within which the reader deploys, and is deployed by, what codes he or she is familiar with in order to *make sense*" (Burgin 137). If we look at the photographs from the *Kids* series by Sergey Bratkov, a Muscovite photographer of Ukrainian origin, without knowing its story, we might see innocent children awkwardly trying to imitate adults (see Figure 1.1). This is the photograph's first message. But if we read Bratkov's accounts of his work, we discover that it is the parents themselves who put on their children sexy clothes and vulgar make up, in order
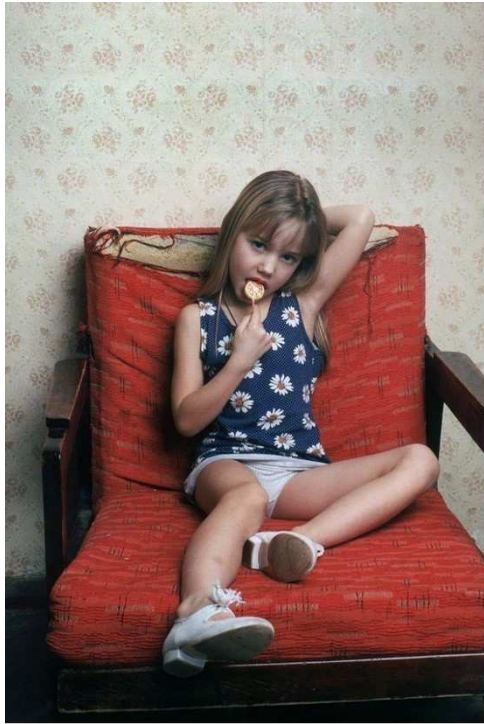
Figure 1.1: Sergey Bratkov, untitled from the series *Kids*, 2000. Colour photographs, 40 x 27 cm each. Collection of François Pinault, Venice. Copyright Sergey Bratkov, used with permission.

to get them accepted into a model studio. Thus, the questions of society's hypersexualisation of children, beauty norms and moral degradation emerge. For those already aware of this story, the portrayed children appear disturbing, as they become victims of the capitalist system, which is the second message of the photographs, or the connotation.

Seeing general elements of a photograph, such as the figures, gestures, and settings, allows viewers to get acquainted with the visual truth transmitted by the photograph. Barthes expressed his understanding of the photographic truthfulness in what he calls *studium*. It is what gives cultural and historical sense to the photograph. *Studium* tells the viewer exactly what is happening at the precise moment recorded by the camera. However, Barthes also identifies the second field that disturbs the general picture by some unusual or striking detail. This second element, *punctum*, "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* 26). Not all the photographs possess this *punctum*, but only those where the photographer, due to his/her skills or luck, manages to catch a certain sensitive point.

Even though for Barthes a photograph is inseparable from the referent and perfectly analogous to reality,[5] his ideas about *punctum* and the second cultural message (which Barthes considers as purely visual and semiotic phenomena that do not disturb the realism of the image) suggest that the photographic truth cannot be universal and unshakable. Although these two Barthes observations come from different contexts, they fundamentally disrupt the truth of a photograph, suggesting that viewers' subjective experience affects its meaning. Photographic truth, to paraphrase a famous idiom, lies in the eyes of the beholder, as people coming from diverse backgrounds see

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[5]See *A Barthes Reader*, edited, and with an introduction by Susan Sontag. Vintage, 1993, and *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Hill/Wang, 1981.

and perceive art differently. What for someone could become *punctum*, for someone else simply appears as *studium*. Accepting the idea that viewers create their own meanings for photographs implies that there might exist different, legitimate truths for every individual.

1.1.2   The photographic truth and the photographer

Questioning the mimetic reflection of reality, scholars distinguish another element in the picture-taking process which complicates the relationship between truth and its representation—the involvement of the artist-photographer. According to Susan Sontag, photographs truthfully reflect reality because the image-making process does not depend on the photographer, since it implies exclusively optical-chemical (or later electronic) action. The photographer intervenes in it exclusively to set up and guide, but this is precisely what renders photographs constructed. The "imperatives of taste and conscience" determine photographers' choice of framing, therefore "[i]n deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects. Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are" (Sontag, *On Photography* 4). With time, Sontag changed her position towards photography and the role of the photographer in it. Her previous claims that photographs reproduced reality independently of the photographer, but only thanks to the mechanical process, were substituted with the thoughts that the photographer does influence the image to a great extent: "the photographic image [...] cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, to frame is to exclude" (*Regarding the*

Pain of Others 37-38). A photograph is thus a reflection of the way the photographer sees a certain scene. The photographer directs the gaze of the viewer on particular things, and offers his point of view. This cannot deny that photographs truthfully transmit the reality, but still the truth comes out affected and modified by the photographer's eye.

Photographic truth, born in the process of automatic optico-chemical reaction, acquires its cognitive adjustment in the eyes of the photographer and viewer. Of course, a photograph is not literally modified because the photographer's or viewer's sight cannot actually distort the reflection of reality captured by the camera. Instead, choosing an angle and framing a scene, as in the case of the photographer, but also looking and making a new meaning of it, as in the case of the viewer, signifies building knowledge, or a system of knowledge about the object photographed. This system does not depend on the image itself (besides being related to the visual form and content, or what we can call the 'objective' truth that a photograph transmits), but on the personal and subjective knowledge of the photographer and viewer. The subjectivity of the human sight adds some instability in the relationship between reality and its photographic representation. According to William Jenkins, the truthfulness that photographs pretend to have, often misleads the viewer: "The issue was not that photographs are inherently untruthful, but that the relationship between a subject and a picture of that subject is extremely fragile" (Jenkins 237). The reason of this incoherence between the subject and its picture can be found in the fragmentation inherent to photography. A photograph not only represents just a part of reality chosen and framed by the photographer but also does not narrate a story alone. Instead, it isolates a fragment of life, a fraction of a second, without exposing the whole picture.[6]

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[6]This applies to the traditions of Modernist and humanist photography, where a single image is an art work in

The exclusion of some parts of reality due to framing helps to add uncertainty within an image, as it corresponds to the photographer's ideas and thoughts on the way it should reflect the captured reality. But framing is not the only way to render images discursive. Title and caption, for example, subordinate images complementing an already existing photographic truth by verbal text which establishes a higher truth. Often images are not self-sufficient and need a verbal explanation to confirm and patronize the visual text; the title and caption in this case transmit a truth that is even more difficult to deny than photographic truth, as it connects the representation with reality and immediately eliminates any possible speculations about the meaning of the image.[7] Another way to combine visual and verbal aspects is integrated within the image. Words, however visual or graphic they might be, always carry a discursive load or the potential of a narrative which disturbs the figurative mode of a photograph.[8]

1.1.3   The photograph in the framework of institutional context

If the result of the text introduced in the image in the form of a title, caption or added message is the exclusion of assumptions about the photograph, rendering it discursive, there are also discourses imposed on photography by more rigid rules. For example, Allan Sekula reveals how the emergence of photographic archives in nineteenth-century police departments defined the emergence of particular ways to take a photograph, and that the structure of the pictures was informed by "the paradigm of the archive" (Sekula, "The Body and the Archive" 58). In line with Sekula's claims,

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itself, containing all necessary elements to reflect the author's idea. Late and post-Soviet photographers opposed this tradition by switching to serial production of photographs, where the photographic message can be fully expressed and comprehended only through several (or sometimes all) snapshots of the series.

[7]Roland Barthes, in the essay "Rhetoric of the Image" published in *Image. Music. Text.*, argues that a linguistic message is always stronger than iconic.

[8]We will further discuss this case in chapter three.

Rosalind Krauss demonstrates, in her essay "Photography's Discursive Spaces," that the requirements of the catalogue or museum often dictate the themes of photography. The photographer, being himself a subject of (to) the catalogue, produces images that subscribe under a discourse, framing and excluding therefore anything that does not answer the purpose of that discourse. The images become "the functions of the catalogue" (Krauss 298), as does the truth that those images represent. This way, specific themes which enjoy popularity are encouraged to the detriment of others, leaving behind everything that appears less relevant.

Besides art institutions that form photographic practices according to catalogue and exhibition requirements, most photographic archives are constructed by politico-economic establishments. Martha Rosler writes about the objectivity and 'truth value' of photography that became biased as it was profitable for right-wing economy. According to Rosler, due to its perception of people as "fundamentally unequal" and elites as "best fitted to understand truth and to experience pleasure and beauty," the Right seized a segment of photography, securing the "primacy of authorship" and isolating the artform within the "gallery-museum-art-market nexus:"

> The result [...] has been a general movement of legitimated photography discourse *to the right*—a trajectory that involves the aestheticization (consequently, formalization) of meaning and the denial of content, the denial of the existence of the political dimension. Thus, instead of the dialectical understanding of the relation between images and the living world [...]—in particular, of the relation between images and ideology—the relation has simply been severed in thought. (Rosler, In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography) 320)

The politico-economic world, therefore, silences or formalises subjects who risk challenging the existing order where the economically dominant class dictates the discourse of truth both in visual culture and beyond. That is where the famous saying "history is written by victors" can be applied;

photography as a tool to document history, participates in the formation of discourse controlled by the victors, that is the political and intellectual elites. John Tagg argued that photography is subordinate to the state, which guarantees its authority and registers the artform as truth. In response to Barthes's claim that "every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent" (Tagg 1), Tagg draws on Michel Foucault's theory of discipline and power[9] and Louis Althussier's writings on ideology and political control, in order to demonstrate that the state establishes a new "regime of truth," where the camera serves as the mechanism that provides the evidence: "[l]ike the state, the camera is never neutral" (63). Many autocratic regimes used this knowledge for propaganda to manipulate public opinion. The neutrality of a snapshot that simply communicates a visual reproduction of life can quickly acquire a connotation which is necessary for the photographer or publisher.

Photography's ability to adapt to the needs of a discourse begs the question, "do photographs lie"? Summarising the relationship between the camera, truth and "global system of misinformation," John Berger claims that the camera cannot lie, because it prints directly. Faked photographs, as Berger states, are the result of a prior construction of "lies" before the camera. Thus, "the camera can bestow authenticity upon any set of appearances, however false. The camera does not lie even when it is used to quote a lie. And so, this makes the lie *appear* more truthful" (Berger and Mohr 96-97). The objective lens and mechanical aid of the camera help to transmit authenticity and correctness of the captured material. However, the human aid that Kendal Walton denied does in fact intervene in the image-making process. A photograph, although representing

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[9]Allan Sekula also used Foucault's writings to demonstrate the non-transparency of photography. In "The Body and the Archive" and "The Traffic in Photographs" Sekula argues that photographic meaning is subject to various discursive factors, such as the archive and catalogue, science, politics, to name but a few.

a truthful reflection of reality, becomes influenced by laws of information or misinformation, and is modified, classified, and manipulated by added text, therefore losing its power to convey an objective undeniable truth.

In the following, I will try to reveal how the notion of truth evolved during the seven decades of communist rule and the first decade after its fall. Studying the major historical events that changed Eastern European cultural policies will help make sense of how the history of photographic art in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus took an entirely different path as compared to the West. This contextualisation is necessary to explain the nature of photographic art in the Soviet Union, where the camera became a weapon to propagate communist ideology and to create a certain 'discourse of truth.'

1.2   Photographic truth at the outset of the Soviet period

The Soviet notion of truth could itself be the topic of a dissertation, as it is probably one of the most ambiguous concepts in East European culture. In Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian there are two words for truth: *pravda* and *istina*. To quote Svetlana Boym, "it is possible to tell the truth (*pravda*), but *istina*—the word that, according to Vladimir Nabokov, does not rhyme with anything—must remain unarticulated" (Boym 1). This shows an almost sacred attitude towards the 'higher' truth, *istina*, and indulgence towards the 'simple' truth, *pravda*. The history of the Soviet Union testifies to various ambiguities around the notion of truth: on one hand, an ardent quest for enlightenment, knowledge and truth (even the official newspaper of the Communist party was called *Pravda*, being at the same time primarily a propaganda tool), and on the other, a constant censorship, silencing

and taboo of problematic subjects. The same ambiguities surrounded the notion of photographic truth, as a photograph is simultaneously represented as a tool of objective documentation and a field of experiments with montage. To understand the double meaning of photographic truth in the Soviet Union, I have attempted to scrutinise the basic components of the photographic production and distribution that have affected the development of the medium, including: photomontage, factography, and role of the press, against the backdrop of political changes in the country. This will help show how the medium became the victim of its own capacity to record reality and how it was instrumentalized to serve the interests of the Party.

In the 1920s, progressive views on art and culture appeared and were promoted in society by avant-garde movements and by the development of technology. According to Mariano Prunes, the early Soviet "radical, effervescent, theoretical and practical activity in areas such as photography, cinema, literature and literary theory, painting, advertisement, design, theater or poetry (not to mention politics and economics), irreversibly affected both the art and the history of this century" (Prunes 252). Before 1917, an abstract visual language was developed in Russia, and there emerged a multitude of innovative avant-garde trends, amongst which the most renowned became Suprematism, Futurism, and Constructivism. Most avant-garde artists responded enthusiastically to the ideas of the Bolshevik Revolution (M. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937*). However, shortly after the Revolution the debate about 'art in the service of politics' was developed, dividing artists into those who supported the socio-political involvement of art, and those who advocated its autonomy.

The revolution and establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922 promoted the ideas of in-

dustrialisation and modernisation. The development and construction of mines and new factories, scientific centres, canals and pipelines, along with mechanisation of labour were the primary preoccupations of the Communist leaders. Soviet mentality can be characterised as industrial mentality, and as Andrei Treivish writes, Soviet socialism created an "industrial aesthetic" (Treivish 9). Only photography and film, as the most realist art forms, could truthfully reflect the industrialisation of the Soviet Union and thereby symbolise modernity and technological development.[10]

In the late 1910s and early 1920s, a new fascination with the mechanical apparatus emerged in artistic circles. Cases where painters abandoned the easel and gave preference to the camera became more frequent. For instance, in the early 1920s, Alexander Rodchenko was one of the Constructivist artists who shifted away from painting, moving towards three-dimensional constructions and ultimately to single-frame photography. According to Margarita Tupitsyn, "critics such as Boris Arvatov, Boris Kushner, Mikhail Tarabukin, and Osip Brik, repudiated painting for its inability to permeate everyday life and to directly influence the social environment" (M. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* 2). Another 'mechanical' art—cinema—was defined by Lenin as "the most important for Communism" (Prunes 252). In other words, the new Soviet state witnessed a general, although brief, move towards documentary and mechanical modes of art production. This documentary moment, to summarise the extensive study by Elizabeth Astrid Papazian (2009), was caused by several reasons: the tendency of the Soviet leaders to write and organise history; an 'illusion of objectivity' that the documentary mode offered; the necessity for quick production and dissemination of information; liaison between art, ideology and everyday

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[10]The correlation between industrial progress and spread of photo- and cine-laboratories can be found in various documents, see for example "Stages of development of the Soviet photoindustry" (Abramov).

life; and the development of State surveillance mechanisms (Papazian). Therefore, at the outset of the Soviet era, the documentary genres such as *ocherk* in literature, advocated by Sergey Tretiakov, photographic reportage, newsreel and chronicle films, became pertinent and popular.

Because of its documentary quality, photography became admired by the political elite who understood that the medium could serve as a tool to promote communism in the four corners of the USSR. These genres quickly became controlled by the State, with the establishment of institutions that supervised the activities of artists, photographers, and writers. As Leah Bendavid-Val states, "[p]hotography in the Soviet Union, from the very outset, was thought to be so effective a means of influencing people, so indispensable an instrument of power, that it could not exist unsupervised" (Bendavid-Val 7). Indeed, Lenin nationalised the film industry and placed it under the control of the People's Commissariat of Education (Barkhatova 47). The so-called 'photographic committees' were responsible for collection and distribution of photographic documentation reflecting the path of the country towards socialism. Considering that most of the population at the outset of the Soviet period was illiterate, photography also served to educate and inform. The early *agitki* that went out into rural regions bringing newsreels of the revolution and posters used the documentary quality of photography as visual proof of the establishment of socialism.

During the 1910s and early 1920s the influence of painting on photography was so important that photographers, in the framework of the pictorialist movement, tried by all means to mimic "high art" (Akinsha 32), that is to give a photograph the qualities of a painting. At that time photography was seen as an inferior form of art, and only around 1922-1923, when avant-garde artists discovered photomontage, was photography's capacity for documentation finally appreci-

ated within artistic circles. It is ironic that thanks to the tool of visual manipulation, which is photomontage, photographic objective or documentary quality gained recognition. In the fourth issue of *LEF* magazine (1923), Liubov Popova, an influential Russian and Soviet artist, criticizes the pictorial (or artistic) approach to photography with the following:

> Until now, professional, that is artistic, photography endeavored to imitate painting and drawing; consequently, photographic production was weak and did not reveal the potential inherent in it. Photographers presumed that the more a snapshot resembled a painting, the more artistic it was. In actual fact, the reverse was true: *the more artistic, the worse it was*. The photograph possesses its own possibilities for montage—which have nothing to do with a painting's composition. These must be revealed.[11] (L. Popova 44)

It is understandable that at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the medium of photography was yet relatively young, many photographers thought of photographs painted or drawn pictures, under the influence of painting.[12] Guided by the principles of figurative aesthetics, the early photographers did not realise the potential of photography as a genuine art form, because their objective was not to truthfully reproduce reality, but to create a pictorial art product in line with prevailing artistic traditions. This is what Liubov Popova condemned, encouraging artists to explore the unique possibilities of the camera without pictorial pursuit. In the same article, Popova gives a definition to photomontage and emphasises the effect of photographic truth on the masses:

> By photomontage we understand the usage of the photographic prints as tools of representation. The combination of photographs replaces the composition of graphic representations. The reason for this substitution resides in the fact that the photographic

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[11]Translation by John E. Bowlt in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips, p.212. The editor of the book erroneously attributes the authorship of this article to Gustav Klutsis.

[12]Pierre Taminiaux explains this in his introduction to *The Paradox of Photography* on the example of Western, specifically French, history of photography.

print is not the sketch of a visual fact, but its precise fixation. The precision and documentary character give photography an impact on the spectator that the graphic representation can never claim to achieve.[13] (41)

This quote demonstrates that in the early Soviet Union, artists and photographers positively viewed images combined by photomontage, as they could acquire the power of persuasion.[14] The recognition in one short article by Popova of two rather contrasting qualities of photography—documentation / precision, and the possibility of montage—testifies to an apparent contradiction in the Soviet approach to photography. Photography's realism and truth became the main ideological weapon of the Communist Party to inform all the people across the Soviet Union about the achievements of communism in the domains of construction, education, science, industry and production. At the same time, photomontage was widely used in advertising, commercial photography and especially propaganda, sometimes to embellish and other times to hide. It may sound counter-intuitive, but an image created by means of photomontage was not losing its objective nature, as we can judge from Popova's article. Instead, what was really perceived as unnatural and not truthful were pictorial photographs.

There existed two types of photomontage in the Soviet Union: the grotesque 'Dada' style that represented absurd reality and was used to demonise the enemy (so-called 'negative propaganda'), and an unnamed style "used to replace the reality by creating a 'refinished' version of it" (Akinsha 35) which represented a 'positive propaganda.' The iconography elaborated in the framework of photomontage consequentially formed the foundation of Stalinist totalitarian art. In

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[13]English translation by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton, p.60.

[14]The same thought is underlined by Jeremy Hicks discussing Dziga Vertov's experiments with newsreel and documentary films. See his *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film*, 2007.

the 1930s, it was borrowed by the artists, photographers and filmmakers from Germany, Italy and United States to promote respectively Nazism, Fascism and Western capitalism. Despite the belief that images modified by photomontage were trustworthy, they created a virtual reality which reinforced an impression of utopian or mythical life.

Contrary to photomontage, some professional and amateur photographers in the Soviet Union were working in purely documentarian or photojournalist styles. Thanks to the vigorous development of the printing press in the 1920s, the usage of photographic documentation greatly increased. In mainstream newspapers such as *Ogonëk*, photography offered visual evidence of society's support for socialism. On the other hand, the 'highbrow' art-focused newspapers (e.g. *LEF* or *Novyi LEF*) were publishing (along with theoretical texts about artistic tendencies of the Soviet Union) rather avant-gardist experiments within the medium, including formalistic and montaged works by Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Gustav Klutsis, among others. Both types of publications, however, aimed at a quick spread of information over the whole country. Ekaterina Degot even argues that "[t]he communist art project was oriented not toward the creation of beautiful, unique objects or even less beautiful mass-produced objects but toward the distribution of information, including images" (Degot, The Copy Is the Crime: Unofficial Art and the Appropriation of Official Photography 107). This is the reason why, according to Degot, the Soviet art can be characterised as 'projectionist' art—which can be massively reproduced, quickly distributed and widely projected. In this regard, the printing press that was publishing communist photographs and texts represented one of the best means to reach wider audience.

With the established dominance of Marxist-Leninist discourse, the new ideology started

to actively indoctrinate via the printing press, which was controlled by the Soviet leaders. As a consequence, at the outset of the Soviet era, "[t]he right of understanding and interpreting Truth was practically monopolised by the ruling Communist Party" (Chernikov 190). If photomontage flourished by creating posters (see Figure 1.2),[15] artworks, book and magazine covers, then documentary shots were used to demonstrate the progress of socialism. Photojournalism and documentary photography resulted, by the mid-1920s, in a movement called factography. Benjamin Buchloh and Margarita Tupitsyn claim that the main principle of factography lay in an objective and unbiased reflection of reality, "without interference or mediation" (Buchloh 64) of the photographer. These scholars, along with Elizabeth Papazian, trace the interdependence between USSR's rapid industrialisation and development of factographic tendencies emerged in both visual art and literature.[16] However, because of the productivist[17] approach to art and photography in the 1920s and 1930s, there appeared an equivocal assessment of the factography movement. Striving for perfect images which could reflect events from a perfect angle and under the best lighting, even documentary photographers increasingly resorted to staging and manipulation. Rosalinde Sartorti explains that according to the productivist approach, the artist "was no longer simply to portray reality but to construct it. Art was to pass from an aesthetic category into a *utilitarian* one; the concept of science was to replace the illusionary world of art" (Sartorti 127). Thus, fake and constructed doc-

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[15]Image source: http://www.raruss.ru/soviet-constructivism/3948-about-klutzis.html

[16]See Benjamin Buchloh's essay "From Faktura to Factography" in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, edited by Richard Bolton, MIT P, 1989, pp. 49–80; Papazian's book *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture*. Northern Illinois UP, 2009; and Tupitsyn's book *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937*. Yale UP, 1996.

[17]Productivism, term coined by Osip Brik, was an art movement founded by a group of Constructivist artists in the early 1920s. In his article "V proizvodstvo!" (Into Production!) (1923) Brik praises Alexander Rodchenko as the most productivist artist who adapted to rapidly changed realities of Bolshevism and switched from creation to production of art, from quality to quantity.

umentary images which compromised the photographic truth were created. Photography's niche lay somewhere between depiction and construction of reality—something that factography could not achieve.

According to proletarian culture—the product of the Communist ideology—art was supposed to merge with life. Dziga Vertov, who dreamed of the fusion of art and life, also had a productivist and utilitarian approach to film. Vertov began his career as a filmmaker during the Russian Civil War. One of Vertov's main objectives was to transmit the truth of life, which is why he preferred to work with newspapers and newsreels. He considered both efficient forms of media, because they do not distort reality, instead documenting it with precision and full objectivity. Gradually, he formulated his methods using the 'kino-eye' theory in which *kino-pravda* (cine-truth) was his main objective. Vertov's dream was to transmit the truth of life, or 'life as it is,' to the big screen and create a new man: "I create a man more perfect than Adam, I create thousands of different people in accordance with preliminary blueprints and diagrams of different kinds" (Vertov 17). More unrealistic was his desire to represent the 'film truth' by means of a constructed representation of reality using mechanical equipment which is artificial by default. Notwithstanding Vertov's documentary material and unplayed context, the reality he captured was produced and manufactured via the technological equipment that he used.

This collision of technology (artificial, constructed) and life (natural, human) makes Vertov's theoretical writings and films ambiguous, as his ideas are based on an objective camera's recording of reality and its subjective modification for the final product on the screen. The artificial aspect of cine-truth becomes even more evident when it came to montage. Vertov's experiments

Figure 1.2: Gustav Klutsis, *Raising the Qualifications of the Female Worker We Are Helping Her Become an Active and Equal Architect of a New Life* (Podnimaia kvalifikatsiiu rabotnitsy pomogaem ei stat' aktivnym i ravnopravnym stroitelem novoi zhizni) from the series *The Sixths Congress of Labour Unions*, illustration in the magazine *Herald of Labour* no.1, 1925, pp. 66-67. Russian State Library, Moscow.

with montage practices in *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), as well as in his following films, worked both to convey ideas and construct a new reality. The poster for *The Man with a Movie Camera* (see Figure 1.3)[18] transmits the spirit of the motion picture, as montage and constructivist dynamic style announce all the complex techniques that the authors use in the movie, such as slow or high-speed shots, superimposition, fragmentation, reverse motion, micro-shooting, and others. Vertov and his colleagues *Kinoki*[19] viewed these techniques "not as special effects, but as necessary means for the representation of the reality" (Beller 38). Everything that a human eye could not do suddenly became possible with a camera and montage, and their application became Vertov's goal. Montage, however, was not considered an artificial method. As John Roberts argues, "[t]here developed what might be called a 'truth' of the discontinuous and disjoined" (J. Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography, and the Everyday* 31). What the creators of newsreel believed to be true was not a reproduction of life on film made by mechanical apparatus, but the human intervention in it; not a copy of life, but a montage of life. Vertov and *Kinoki* realised that the whole principle of photographic truth was established in the early Soviet Union: not to trust impartial shots of the camera, but to edit them according to political necessity.

Besides high aspirations regarding the possibilities of montage, *Kinoki* also believed that film could be a space where filmmakers and their audiences could interact, so that the latter could influence the process of filmmaking. This thought is corroborated at the beginning of *The Man with a Movie Camera* when the audience is entering the movie theatre and taking places to watch the same film that we, the actual viewers, have been watching. This is not the only episode when the

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[18]Image source: http://www.togdazine.ru/article/637

[19]Kinoki—'kino-oki'—meaning cinema-eyes, a group of Soviet filmmakers in the 1920s. Sometimes spelled as Kinoks.

Figure 1.3: Vladimir and Georgy Stenberg, poster of Dziga Vertov's film *The Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929. Russian State Library, Moscow. Copyright Estate of Vladimir Stenberg / SODRAC (2018), used with permission.

process of filmmaking is revealed. The cameraman himself—Mikhail Kaufman (Dziga Vertov's brother)—appears consistently throughout the film and carries his camera on a tripod. The viewers also see a projectionist in the movie theatre who sets the mechanism for the screening. Furthermore, in the middle of the film Elizaveta Svilova—the film's editor and Dziga Vertov's wife—is seen working in the archives and in the montage studio. These episodes mark "the new role of cinema in society" (Beller 39)—as an industrial process, and a process of production. The film shows how reality is actually recorded, edited and constructed on film. This, according to Vertov and his colleagues, was the utmost representation of truth.

Thus, Vertov's approach to film with its combination of functionality and utopia corresponds to the notions established by the Marxist-Leninist discourse that informed the development of Soviet art. Those are: *ideinost'* (deriving from the word *ideia*, idea) which incarnated an artist's commitment to an idea or ideology; *narodnost'* (from the word *narod*, people) which was a quality of popularity and accessibility; and *partiinost'* (from the word *partiia*, party) which implied an artist's identification with the politics of the Party (Shneidman). Additionally, Lenin adhered to the Tommaso Campanella idea of a communist state in which the population is educated and edified by means of large public frescoes (Bown 25-26). Lenin laid the foundation of the monumental quality of art that later constituted one of the main characteristics of socialist realism. While monumental art and socialist realism included the idea of a truthful representation, this truth yielded its place to a more important functionality of artwork—societal usefulness, that is to educate and promote communism, etc. At the same time, according to Lenin, a work of art had to transmit a positive message, which indicates a high level of utopianism.

The combination of utopianism and functionality (or productivism, utilitarianism) reflects the revolutionary atmosphere that reigned in 1920s art circles. Soviet artists aimed to do the impossible—reproduce the existing reality while simultaneously creating a new one. Alexander Rodchenko, one of the big explorers of photomontage at its outset, was at the same time praising the truth-value of the medium. In photographs and writings such as the article "Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Monumental Snapshot," Rodchenko perfectly translates the Soviet revolutionary spirit, urging artists to renounce the traditional pictorial techniques of 'synthetic portrait' and to reproduce the new reality with the help of the objective photo lens:

> Art has no place in modern life. It will continue to exist as long as there is a mania for the romantic and so long as there are people who love beautiful lies and deception. Every cultured modern man must wage war against art, as against opium. Do not lie! Photograph and be photographed! Crystallize man not by a single "synthetic" portrait, but by a whole lot of snapshots taken at different times and in different conditions. Paint the truth. Value all that is real and contemporary. And we will be real people, not actors.(Rodchenko 16)

By '"synthetic" portrait' Rodchenko meant old-fashioned picture-taking methods, such as studio portraiture, tripod usage and others. Instead, he encouraged photographers to take multiple shots and to explore the camera's capacities by experimenting with unusual angles, lighting, and framing. For Rodchenko, this was the only way photographers could achieve photographic truth. The photograph *Pioneer with a Horn*, for instance, was taken according to Rodchenko's non-orthodox ideas: a close-up from below that partially captures the pioneer's face and musical instrument (see Figure 1.4). For the photographer, such a composition is more truthful, as it emphasises the chin and the cheeks from a surprising angle, offering an innovative representation of the pioneer that completes the viewer's seeing and understanding of the subject. Moreover, Rodchenko's 1920s aesthetic

combined the approach of observation and documentation of everyday life through "artistic experiment" (Lavrentiev 64)—with a fresh and unfamiliar way. Rodchenko was later criticized by the Russian Association of Proletarian Photo-Reporters (*ROPF* who supported the Right-wing conservative movement in art, that is narrativeness instead of fragmentation) for his excessive formalism and distortion of reality.

Photography from the 1920s reflected the enthusiasm, dynamism and optimism which prevailed in the early Soviet Union. Early supporters sincerely believed in enlightenment, knowledge and truth the camera would help bring to the farthest reaches of the new state. As Rosalinde Sartorti claims, "[t]here is no criticism of Soviet reality in these photographs. The unbelievably harsh working and living conditions of that time are not shown. Yet the optimism conveyed by these pictures has still nothing in common with the harmonious representation of reality dictated by the principles of socialist realism in later years" (Sartorti 132). Progressively, the superiority of photographic objectivity over pictorial representation was questioned. While some of the avant-garde photographers and filmmakers such as Rodchenko and Vertov continued to explore the technological apparatus of the camera until the late 1930s, the overall experimentalism of Soviet photographers gave way to more conventional photojournalism and amateur practices.

There is no consensus amongst art critics and historians over the exact period when photographic truth lost its authority and was definitively replaced by socialist realist and monumental representation in painting and sculpture. Benjamin Buchloh's date—1931—corresponds to the abandonment of factographic goals (Buchloh). Margarita Tupitsyn's date—1932 marks the completion of the first Five-Year Plan and intensification of the government's attention to cultural

Figure 1.4: Alexander Rodchenko, *Pioneer with a Horn*, 1930. Gelatin silver print, 38.5 x 29.5 cm. Centre Pompidou, Paris. Copyright Alexander Lavrentiev, used with permission.

affairs (M. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937*). For Rosalinde Sartorti, it was in 1930 that the new generation of proletarian photojournalists attacked the avant-garde techniques and opted for a "comprehensive," "narrative" and "realistic" representation (Sartorti 134). Regardless, the above-mentioned critics agree upon the statement that Soviet photographers abandoned documentation and returned to the principles of pictorialism, illustration and staging in the mid-1930s. This occurred in concert with Joseph Stalin's new program of total restructuring of life, establishing governmental institutes to supervise and 'stage' every aspect of everyday life during the same period.

1.3   Through the Stalin period

When Stalin took complete control of the party in 1929, the USSR's strategic development was outlined to focus on industrialisation, the collectivisation of agriculture and the first Five-Year Plan. These were the final steps towards the establishment of socialism in the Soviet republics. According to Stalin, the period of socialism started in 1932, bringing a "new principle of harmony, the 'unity of the peoples of the Soviet Union'" (135). Despite the famine, great purges, and day-to-day hardships, the artists were to exclusively show the glorious side of the Soviet life: heroic achievements in technology and science, the stakhanovite movement in industry and agriculture,[20] the bravery of the Red Army, happiness, security and confidence in the future of the Soviet citizens, etc. The notions of *ideinost'*, *narodnost'* and *partiinost'* of art were of the utmost importance.

Government control over artistic creation was intensified through the establishment of

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[20]"Stakhanovites were super-workers who took their name from Alexey Stakhanov, a miner who on a legendary day in 1934 apparently produced fourteen times the norm of coal" (Bown 71)

Figure 1.5: Arkady Shaikhet and Max Alpert, untitled from the series *Twenty-four Hours in the life of the Filippov family*, illustration in the magazine *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* no.38, 1931. Copyright Arkady Shaikhet Estate, Courtesy Nailya Alexander Gallery.

official organisations which dictated the accepted themes and commissioned works of art to propagate the party's plans and mobilise the country. At the same time, various groups and associations emerged which united artists sharing aesthetic styles or ideological views (e.g. *OSt*, the Society of Easel Painters; *OMKh*, the Society of Moscow Artists; *AKhRR*, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, to name but a few). These associations participated in the creation of communist propaganda, often without receiving an order from the party but out of sincere beliefs in the Bolshevik revolution.

A period of socialist realism arose in the early 1930s, which was referred to as Stalinist art (Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* 5),

characterised by monumentality, staged realism, and utopianism. Konstantin Akinsha claims that during the 1930s, photography again became a marginal form of art, as the 'objective' quality of the photo lens was not helpful enough to create utopian images of a happy Soviet life (Akinsha 38). Historians specializing in Soviet photography such as Erika Wolf and David Shneer affirm that power consolidation and Party leadership over photography obliged photographers to provide "the best, most politically informed photography to newspapers and journals" (Shneer 43). Professional and amateur photographers were encouraged to promote socialism via the techniques of 'staged' photojournalism.

One of the most interesting examples of the staged and commissioned photography of the 1930s is a picture-story titled *Twenty-four Hours in the Life of the Filippov Family*. This photo-series made by Arkady Shaikhet and Max Alpert in 1931, demonstrated the "synthetic vision of the world," which the party announced to be "the only true vision" (Sartorti 135). The combination of highly conventional shots in the tradition of pictorialism with dynamic angles and compositions testified to the staged and constructed nature of this story, despite its documentary claim. As seen in Figure 1.5,[21] the photographs portraying Soviet streets and buildings look somewhat trivial and with no artistic claims. At the same time, the images in the tram and dining room reveal photographers' experimental aspirations due to an interesting framing. These photographs naturalise the ideology of labour as the most important vocation of the Soviet citizens, for which they obtain a certain level of urban comfort—public transport, housing, sufficient food supplies, etc. The series provoked enthusiasm in the West, as it was the first official photographic document of the Communist state depicting everyday life of ordinary people, while some Muscovite critics found

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[21]Image source: http://fotofond.ria.ru/chronicles/20130709/549598798.html

it lacking in veracity (M. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* 91).[22] Nevertheless, staged picture-stories became one of the most practised genres of Stalinist photography.

Besides staging, the photographers of the Stalinist period started to retouch and restructure their photographs. The traces of smallpox that marked Stalin's face were systematically removed from the images. Even his assassinated comrades who were 'removed' due to their political concurrence or divergence of views, started to disappear from official photographs, paintings and documents. As David King asserts, falsification and altering were done not only to remove people that the state considered undesirable but also to add Stalin into places and events where he had never been, to sustain Stalin's personality cult (King). The photograph of Nikolai Antipov, Joseph Stalin, Sergei Kirov, and Nikolai Shvernik in Leningrad in 1926, is the iconic representation of Stalinist falsifications. In 1940, this photograph depicts only three comrades without Antipov. In 1949, Shvernik also enigmatically vanishes. Ultimately, in the oil painting made by Isaak Brodsky in 1929, based on the same photograph, Stalin appears alone (see Figure 1.6).[23]

Soviet leaders obliged photographers and artists to manipulate the photographic documents to frame the truth and public consciousness in line with the official policy. This raises an interesting question: if they were afraid that the public could interpret images in a wrong way, then why did they still approve the usage of the photographic prints? In the article "Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography," Leah Dickerman explains this contradictory fact, emphasising the simultaneity of opposing views about the photograph that existed in the Stalinist era:

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[22]David Shneer states that the scene in the tram was unthinkable in reality, as in the 1930s Moscow public transport was always overcrowded (Shneer 36).

[23]This image was used as cover for David King's book *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia*. Metropolitan Books, 1997.
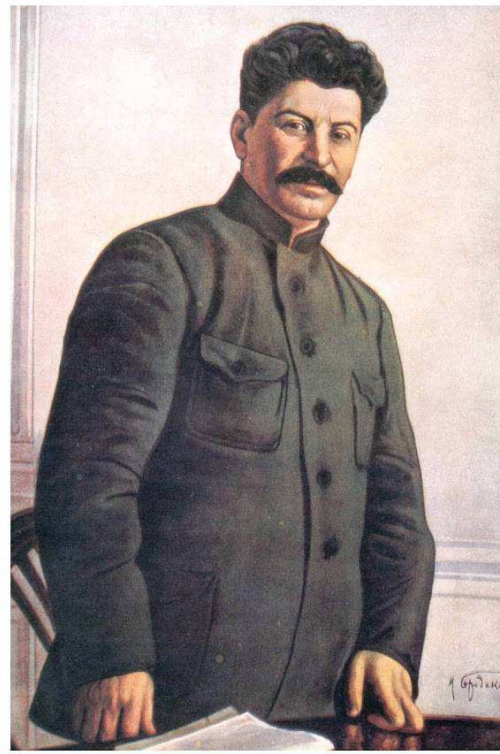
Figure 1.6: Unidentified Soviet photographer. The original picture, left to right Nikolai Antipov (formerly the People's Commissar for Posts and Telegraphs of the USSR), Joseph Stalin, Sergei Kirov, and Nikolai Shvernik. Picture shows how after time each of the Stalin's comrades from the original shot was removed as they fell out of favour. Wikimedia Commons.

On the one hand, the reworking of the document rather than its suppression testifies to the perceived need to offer visual proof of a particular (but false) historical narrative with the strength of photography's power of authentication. It grows out of the documentary demand of a photographic age, and acknowledges the testimonial force of the index, that is, an imprint of the real. On the other hand, these manipulations expose a simultaneous apprehension about the kind of evidence that the photograph provided. The photograph, valued as a permanent impress of a past moment in time, is perpetually revised to accommodate the political exigencies of the present. This desire for an ideologically "true" image is resolved into another paradox: the false document. (Dickerman 143-144)

Stalin's paranoiac attitude and ambitions caused an unprecedented number of images and documents to be manipulated, censured or even completely erased of 'dangerous individuals.' This practice showed that in the Soviet Union, and especially during Stalin's reign, truth was not only dictated by the party but also crafted, altered and shaped according to the leader's will. It is not surprising, therefore, that Stalin privileged painting (constructed representation) over photography (documentation based on mimetic copy of reality, offering evidence).

The struggle between painting and photography in the Soviet Union is the subject of multiple studies. These two mediums inspired one another and interchanged their functions. Boris Groys argues that painting fulfilled the traditional role of photography: "that of 'reflecting life' and telling stories 'out of life,' including the story of 'the building of communism'" (Groys, Russian Photography in the Textual Context 120). Painting could provide the representation of the most utopian scenario in the realist form, which suited Party leaders who wanted to create a grand illusion of the radiant Soviet state. Photography could, in turn, offer proof of all the progress that has been made, which was equally important. However much a photograph was falsified or manipulated, it remained a document that carried the association of truth (as Barthes and Berger claim). Thus, the antagonism between illusion and truth dominated the official discourse over sev-

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eral decades. The truth that was conveyed by official media sources did not necessarily correspond to the real situation, and representation of the real in photography and painting carries a great responsibility for this.

Cécile Vaissié claims that in Russia, the relationship between 'proclaimed reality' and 'existing reality,' between what is shown or said and what really exists, had been particularly complex: "ideology congeals a certain type of discourse the function of which is no longer to translate reality but to enunciate what it could or should be, what it anyway will be one sunny day, when finally the long expected and announced communism arrives..."[24] (Vaissié 89). The Soviet photographers faced therefore the dilemma how to unify documentary quality of photography showing existing reality with an ideologically correct, or proclaimed representation of reality.

This dilemma appeared in the press. For example, during the 1930s, on the pages of *Sovetskoe foto*,[25] photographers, critics, and editors argued over the question of how much liberty a photographer could take in documenting reality. David Shneer claims that "[a]ll Soviet photographers altered their images" as they were "interested in "truth," an inherently subjective category that permitted a photographer to alter an image so that it felt more truthful than what the camera had captured" (Shneer 53). However, in the course of the debate over the truthful photographic representation that lasted throughout the 1930s on the pages of the *Soviet Photo* magazine, some critics did not approve the over-exaggerated recreation and staging of facts. For example, in 1939, critic A. Portnov wrote: "Socialist realism is the creative working method of the Soviet writer, artist, and photojournalist. It does not tolerate lies. It demands truthful, bright, artistic representations of re-

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[24]My translation.
[25]*Soviet Photo*, the journal featuring the development of photography in the USSR.

ality [...] Photojournalism is a special kind of art. A photograph like other newspaper information must be absolutely precise and absolutely truthful [...] A reporter must not lie"[26] (Portnov 11-13). This call for a different kind of photographic truth testifies to the fact that the falsification of visual documents turned into such a common practice that it aroused public suspicion.[27]

The establishment of the socialist realist method as the primary artistic style of the Soviet Union in 1934 changed the attitude that photography was an inferior form of art. Despite the presence of the word 'realism' in the socialist realist tradition, the representation of the ideal was substituted for the representation of mimetic reality. According to Margarita Tupitsyn, socialist realist photography implied a staged photo-picture—a deliberately artificial style that did not respect the rules of formalism and naturalism and rendered images "overtly conventional and excessively romantic" (M. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* 156), serving rather as an illustration and used for propaganda. The characters of socialist realist photography were smiling and self-confident people wearing elegant and tidy clothes depicted in a luminous way. The subjects of such photographic works emitted happiness and enthusiasm. The mission of socialist realist photography was not to truthfully reflect reality, but to sustain the Communist project with representations of war and labour heroes,[28] Communist leaders, and progress in building of socialism.[29]

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[26]English translation by David Shneer in *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*, p. 56.

[27]Another example is Nikolai Kolli's 1938 article in which he pointed at inconsistency within one of Georgii Petrusov's photograph: the shadow from the stocks of grain fell not in the direction of the light but off to the side. Kolli argued that this kind of staging leads to falsification, and that the viewer will not forgive a "false transmission of reality" (Nikolai Kolli cited in Shneer 55).

[28]Industry and labour were indeed some of the principal subjects of Soviet (socialist realist) photography from the 1930s until the 1980s. Labour played a big role in the everyday life of Soviet citizens, and constituted one of the determinative features of Homo Sovieticus species. Labour, therefore, was a means of self-expression and self-assertion for a Soviet man. Consequentially, a genre of industrial photography acquired popularity and acknowledgement as it illustrated the grand Soviet industrial myth and labouriousness of the Soviet people.

[29]The examples of such photography are represented in Figures 1.4, 1.6, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, 3.16, 4.15, and 4.17. I will further discuss the specificity of socialist realist photography in the following chapters.

The Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War, which was its common name in the Soviet Union, opened a new page in the history of Soviet photojournalism. Critics and historians such as David Shneer and Denise Youngblood argue that it was a period of relative liberty of artistic expression. "Although photographers were told in general terms *what* to photograph, they were not necessarily told *how* to photograph" (Shneer 91). The Party was aware of the importance of photography and film for the mobilisation of the civilian population; therefore, it loosened its pressure and allowed artists to treat the required themes in their own way. However, editors, as a direct link between photographers and the Party, continuously dictated the topics that they wanted to see in their newspapers. Also, they strictly controlled the number of front reporters to regulate the information received for printing.

As David Shneer claims, two principal themes defined wartime Soviet photography: showing off Soviet heroism and depicting Nazi atrocities. The first was usually executed in socialist realist style, staging the scene and 'elevating' Soviet heroes, while the second one represented the documentary evidence of crimes. To create a negative image of the enemy, Soviet photographers sometimes used trophy photographs, added captions and compiled posters with propagandistic slogans. In newspapers and journals, the most exploited genre of photo-essay was crucial in giving visual testimony as well as making meaning out of the war. The images of liberation, when the Soviet troops started to move from east to west, according to Shneer, aroused ambiguous feelings: those of revenge, sorrow and loss, the end of the war and triumph of the Soviet army (125-130). Photographers and poster-makers found it difficult to produce ideologically 'correct' images switching from atrocities (demonising the enemy) to peace (glorifying the Soviet Union). Figure

Figure 1.7: Soviet posters. Top: Viktor Deni, *The Red Army Broom Will Completely Sweep Away the Scum*, 1943. Paper, print, 80 x 57 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Bottom: Viktor Koretsky, *Our Banner Is the Banner of Victory!*, 1945. Paper, print, 88 x 56 cm. Russian State Library, Moscow. Copyright Estate of Viktor Koretsky / SODRAC (2018), used with permission.

1.7 shows the shift in the representation of war: in the top 1943 image the enemy is depicted in the form of small and ugly creatures swept away by a strong Soviet soldier's broom; in the bottom 1945 image the victory is translated through the photographic depiction of the main representatives of the Soviet people: worker, female farmer and soldier. However, to be ideologically correct, this image was completed with the red flag and portrait of Lenin and Stalin in the background.

Although the war considerably boosted the development of documentary-like spontaneous snapshots, staging remained one of the most common practices in Soviet photography. The famous photograph *Raising the Red Flag over the Reichstag* (1945) by Evgeny Khaldei (see Figure 1.8), depicting a Russian soldier victoriously waving the Soviet flag, is known to be an example of not only staging and retouching but also subject borrowing: the same scenario repeats in the Joe Rosenthal photograph *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* taken a couple of months earlier. It is not clear whether Khaldei knew about the American photo and literally retold the story. When he arrived in Berlin, he had several flags with him, and the image which became iconic is one of multiple photographs reproducing the same plot. He asked random Soviet soldiers to assist him, and made two tapes of film photographing the city from top of the Reichstag.[30] Afterwords, the editorial team retouched the second watch on the hand of Russian soldier which could have provoked unnecessary questions.

The movement toward individual artistic expression among photographers was expedited during the Second World War by the necessity of production and faster dissemination of visual

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[30]The soldiers depicted in this photograph are not unknown. Aleksei Kovalëv, 19, is holding the flag, he was from Kiev and by that time already had three Orders of Glory, which is considered as one of the highest military awards in the Soviet Union. Leonid Gorychev from Belarus is protecting him against falling. Another soldier is not captured in this photograph but is visible in other images from the same series, captain Abdul-Khakim Ismailov from Dagestan. In 1996, Boris Yeltsin awarded him the Gold Star—the highest honour that can be presented by the Russian president to a citizen, Hero of the Russian Federation.

Figure 1.8: Evgeny Khaldei, *Raising the Red Flag over the Reichstag*, 1945. Gelatin silver print, 22.5 x 16.5 cm. Library of Congress, Washington. Copyright Anna Khaldei, used with permission.

evidence and propaganda. However, after the end of the war, the mode of conventional, socialist realist imagery resumed. Boris Groys asserts that the writers and artists were again called upon to "write the truth;" however, Stalin's notions of realism and truth in art had a particular connotation: "this refers not to an external, static truth, but to the inner truth in the artist's heart, his love for and faith in Stalin" (Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* 69). The only true image was that which reflected the transformation of life, from darkness to light, from monarchy to socialism, from the backward to the new, thanks to the great leader Joseph Stalin, the incarnation of the Soviet 'new man.'

It is in this atmosphere that Soviet artists' unions declared war against avant-garde formalism and experimentation. Many left-wing artists, such as Alexander Rodchenko, Boris Ignatovich (1899-1976) and Eleazar Langman (1895-1940), were accused of imitating decadent Western art with a "mechanical obsession with surface" which deviated from the principles of "dialectical-materialist analysis" promoted by Soviet proletarian photography (Gassner 313). Curiously, the formalist tendencies remained present to some extent in the socialist realist images; therefore, the accusations were related rather to the lack of political and social dimensions of the 'formalist' photographs. In other words, if the image was executed in the socialist realist style, its politico-social dimension overbalanced the formalist features and thus was approved by the Party.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the repression of artists and photographers resulted in countless arrests and executions. Left-wing avant-garde circles gradually broke up, and artists such as Rodchenko and Vertov were obliged to make public excuses for their earlier formalist tendencies. Dziga Vertov's utopian understanding of the camera as a 'surveying eye' reflected

the establishment of the real public surveillance system through various mechanisms such as The Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate, encouragement of denunciation, and other controlling committees (Nérard). However, Stalin's death in 1953 brought some important transformations. In the early 1950s, the policy on photography changed: the struggle between authentic and staged photographs resulted in the condemnation of the latter. Photographic unions insisted upon putting forward truthful documentaries. After more than a decade of stagnation, *Sovetskoe foto* resumed publication in 1956, praising photographers as the "fighters for spontaneity and vital truth in photo art" (Fridlyand 8) in some of its articles. "Vital truth" and "communism" were the two principal topics of Soviet photojournalism, yet photography remained "tightly regimented, fully subservient to the current tasks of the party, and subject to stringent ideological constraints" (Barkhatova 51). This situation created conditions for a new divide among the photographers: those who adhered to the requirements of the party, continuing to forge an illusion of reality, and those who became the so-called unofficial photographers, daring to represent life as it was, without embellishments and utopia.

1.4   Cultural thaw: dissidents and conceptualists of the 1960s and 1970s

After the Stalinist era, which was characterised by the monopolisation of truth and falsification of documents, the official cultural paradigm shifted again towards objectivity and documentation. As Susan Emily Reid asserts, the culture of the Thaw was concerned with "truth," which boosted

reportage and documentary genres in literature and photography: "[h]owever, it was not simply "truth" in the abstract that was sought in a work of art, but the more personal "sincerity," as opposed to the faceless, hypocritical hackwork of the Stalin period" (Reid 33). Notwithstanding the return to photographic experiments *à la* 1920s and the development of unique styles, the cultural administration reminded photographers, as Reid claims, not to fall into formalism, but instead to "increase the effectiveness of the image" and its power to convince (34). The Party still regarded the photographic medium as a tool of propaganda. However, the subject of propaganda shifted from glorification of heroism towards opposition to the enemy—the Western capitalist world headed by the USA. During this time of the Cold War, the Soviet Union positioned itself as the defender of democracy, of moral values, of equality, and the demonstration of this (as well as counter-examples from capitalist countries) was the primary goal of the propaganda.

The way the official photographers produced propaganda also shifted. According to Reid, in the 1960s, the specificity of Soviet photography was identified with the "immediacy of reportage and its documentary visual authenticity (*dostovernost'*)" (38). The Soviets, as Reid writes, distinguished the authenticity of photography as, on one hand, "an authentic *record* of the visual appearance of contemporary achievements and social processes," and on the other hand, as "an authentic *expression* of the artist's vision, mediated by his/her (Party-minded) world view" (38). What Reid claims to be the achievement of the Thaw is the emergence of this second type of authenticity—the authorial expression—that officialdom had denounced during the Stalinist era. However, the party-mindedness, or *partiinost'* of photography remained as important for official photographers as before. In fact, if a photographer wanted to be hired as a newspaper photojour-

nalist, *partiinost'* needed to be indispensably expressed in his work.

In the 1960s and 1970s the official discourse of truth started to lose its monumental authority and was more often questioned by nonconformists and dissidents. As Igor Golomshtok writes, the young artists who chose the path of Socialist Realism understood it not as a politically charged doctrine, but as the necessity for the artist to "'truthfully represent reality in its revolutionary development,' that is, to depict it in all its complex, sometimes coarse, dramatic, or tragic, collisions, and to use the forms of art, not those of rosetinted propaganda" (Golomshtok and Glezer 86). The left-wing artists who experimented with abstract forms or who simply produced apolitical and anti-ideological art were silenced and even humiliated[31] by the art establishment for distorting the Soviet reality. Meanwhile, the conservative Socialist Realist artists remained loyal to their traditions of embellishing reality and portraying Soviet leaders.

However, in the late 1950s and mid-1960s, the repression of writers and poets such as Boris Pasternak, Joseph Brodsky, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel inspired a wave of dissent. For the first time after the era of Stalinist terrors, Soviet citizens dared to oppose the government by organising protests, holding readings of forbidden poetry, signing petitions and requests, and publishing *samizdat* literature, among others. As Cécile Vaissié argues, dissidents considered their acts as essentially ethical (Vaissié 291). However, for the authorities, the dissident movement was primarily political, and as some dissidents admitted themselves, "in the USSR, every public activity is necessarily political" (290-291). This is the reason why Soviet secret services had a dossier for every dissident, closely studying his or her activities, initiatives,

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[31]One can remember the scandalous show in Manezh in 1962 where Nikita Khrushchev cursed the avant-garde artists.

and enunciations.

The dissidents' claims were directed towards the liberalisation of society: liberty of expression (including, of course, artistic and literary expression), liberty to practise religion, respect of human rights, the abolishment of concentration camps, amnesty for political prisoners, etc. Their ultimate goal was to denounce Communist party lies, whose mythological discourse about the successful establishment of the communist state never mentioned its victims (for example, those who were deported in Gulag, those who suffered from radiation poisoning and bad ecology during Soviet space program development, those who died in construction works, etc). To quote the seminal work by Václav Havel on dissidents in Eastern Europe, their entire life was an "attempt to *live within the truth*" (Havel 39). However, according to Alexei Yurchak, dissidents were viewed by ordinary, law-abiding Soviet citizens as marginal, dangerous or even "sick" people who had a "psychotic moral disposition of exposing lies" (Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* 107).

Dissidents became close to so-called nonconformist writers and artists who constituted a 'second' culture, or a subculture. Soviet nonconformist art originated in the late 1950s, and designated performances, installations and texts which constituted a critical reflection of Soviet imagery. By the 1960s, nonconformist art was rooted between two binaries: conformist and dissident movements. Nonconformism included conceptual art which was characterised by complex ideological meanings and a combination of artistic techniques. Moscow Conceptualism, the most famous nonconformist movement, included the performance group Collective Actions and artists such as Ilya Kabakov, Andrei Monastyrsky, Erik Bulatov, Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid, Alexander

Kosolapov, as well as many others.

In parallel, a relative democratisation of art stimulated the emergence of 'unofficial' photographers and independent photo clubs in Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk, Kharkov, Zaporozhye and other cities. Amateur photography boosted the exploration of the technical capacities of the camera. In the 1960s and 1970s experimental practices, such as photomontage, staging and superimpositions, became popular among the unofficial photographers, but the purpose of photographic manipulation this time was not the idealisation of the Soviet life. Instead, the camera was perceived as a "tool to implement the artist's ideas and record the execution of these ideas" (Rosenfeld 132). As Valery Stigneev asserts, "[p]hotographers in Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian photo clubs came to realise that a photograph is a definite form of the aesthetic transformation of nature and that in it one can not only represent reality but also recreate it" (Stigneev, The Force of the Medium: The Soviet Amateur Photography Movement 70-71). In these early attempts of the amateur artists and photographers to recreate reality is concealed a trend in Soviet art which later was called conceptual.

It is important to note here that the nature of amateur art in the Soviet Union consisted in its irreproducibility. Works of art and photographs created at home or as a leisure activity were encouraged by the state (arising from the idea that art should not belong to the elite or bourgeoisie but to the proletariat), and were not meant to be massively reproduced or distributed. This is the reason why Ekaterina Degot calls amateur art "unique," referring to Benjamin's idea of the aura: "without the market, as in the U.S.S.R., the unique work of art had no flair of 'high art.' It was often perceived (even by its creator!) as a lamentable, marginal object unworthy of being reproduced"

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Figure 1.9: Erik Bulatov, *Soviet Cosmos*, 1977. Oil on canvas, 260.4 x 200 cm. Private collection. Copyright Erik Bulatov, used with permission.

(Degot, The Copy Is the Crime: Unofficial Art and the Appropriation of Official Photography 115).
Amateur artists and photographers, therefore, were not those who lacked technical or aesthetic
knowledge, as opposed to professionals, but rather those who did not work for the official art
system of the Soviet Union.[32]

During the 1960s and 1970s, unofficial artists and photographers produced representations
of the 'existing' and 'proclaimed' realities on canvases and film. Party-mindedness was patently
absent from the unofficial works of art. Even when nonconformist artists used the Soviet symbols
and relics,[33] they undermined official imagery by juxtaposing these symbols with thematically and
aesthetically controversial material, such as the nude body, marginal scenes and people, taboo sub-
jects, etc, or by overtly exaggerating the Communist symbolic charge in the work, as, for example,
it is done in Erik Bulatov's painting *Soviet Cosmos* (see Figure 1.9). Here, Leonid Brezhnev's
waist-level portrait seems to be elevated above the viewer, while behind the leader's head a halo,
composed of the Soviet emblem and flags, is glowing. Bulatov's objective in this painting was to
show that the truth conveyed by ideology does not represent for him the utmost truth, or *istina*,
but is estranged and displaced by ubiquitous Soviet symbols. Such gestures, of Bulatov and other
nonconformist artists, were the reason why unofficial works of art belonged, according to art es-
tablishment, to the low-brow culture—they were doomed to be exhibited in private studios and
apartments, and to remain undistributed.

Today's critics claim that the unofficial artists and photographers of the 1960s and 1970s
were distinguished by an ironic vision and interpretation of the Soviet reality and truth (Degot,

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[32]The now renowned photographers, such as Boris Mikhailov, Sergey Chilikov, Sergey Bratkov, to name but a few,
did not receive any professional artistic training. The majority of the photographers of the 1960s and 1970s come from
the amateur circles.

[33]For example, the movement *Sots* art was entirely based on reappropriation of Soviet myths and their subversion.

"The Copy Is the Crime: Unofficial Art and the Appropriation of Official Photography"; Groys, "Russian Photography in the Textual Context"). For example, artists Komar and Melamid created a piece called *Grinding "Pravda"* (1976), which consisted of a performance, three photographs that documented the act of grinding the Communist newspaper *Pravda* through a meat grinder, and a small piece of the patty that resulted from it (see Figure 1.10).[34] Starting in the 1960s, *Pravda* was the victim of multiple ironic nonconformist works of art, such as *Still-life with Fish and Pravda* (1968) by Oscar Rabin, *Glasnost* (1987) by Dmitrii Prigov, among others. In Russian, *pravda* means truth and *izvestiia* means news, and the old joke about the Soviet press was that there's no truth in *Pravda* and no news in *Izvestiia*.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photographers were greatly influenced by the realist trend of Baltic photographers (specifically in Lithuania) who sought to capture the "raw truth" (Eerikainen, "Up from the Underground"; Bendavid-Val, Changing Reality: Recent Soviet Photography). These countries, having been annexed to the USSR at the end of World War II, experienced the influence of both Soviet and European art. As Leah Bendavid-Val states, Lithuanian photographers started to record everyday life instead of grandiose scientific, technological and agricultural achievements imposed by the Soviet government. Their goal was to "create photographic art through reportage, to select ordinary objects and events and record them aesthetically" (Bendavid-Val 20), and while their subject matter and aesthetic approach contradicted the Soviet policy on photography, the optimism transmitted through their camera lenses was deemed acceptable.

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[34]This work also includes a separate object, so-called 'meatball,' which represents the result of grinding the newspaper.

Figure 1.10: Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, *The Essence of Truth (Grinding Pravda)*, 1975. Three gelatin silver prints, and object made of compressed newspaper. Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union. 1991.0885.001-004. Copyright Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, used with permission.

Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photographers could discover the art of their Baltic comrades through exhibitions that were regularly organised by photo clubs. The new type of reportage that Lithuanians developed in the 1960s and 1970s, that of recording not masses and collectives, but "individuals who lived according to the traditions of their people" (Barkhatova 59), the new type of sincerity and authenticity that informed their photographs, was perceived in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as a breakthrough. The rural world, peasants, traditional way of life and the role of an individual in it served as a "counter image to the Soviet iconography of industrial progress and the New Man" (Pluhařová-Grigiene 214). Under the influence of their Baltic and other Western colleagues, Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photographers gradually shifted away from emphasizing the collective 'I' to highlighting individualistic identity as well.

This visual isolation of characters inside a frame which started to be evident in Soviet photography was a part of a larger transformation happening in art and culture towards the end of the twentieth century. The philosopher, scholar and art critic Victor Tupitsyn claims that in the 1970s and 1980s the mythography that dominated artistic discourse was substituted by some artists with neofactography. The neofactographers[35] photographed "manifestations of marginal practices and activities" (V. Tupitsyn, "The Sun without a Muzzle" 81). The act of this documentation signified *factography as resistance* (to differentiate from *factography as affirmation* that was produced in the 1920s and 1930s), the resistance to the Soviet "hegemony of metaphor." According to Victor Tupitsyn, neofactographers attempted to provide the answers to the questions: what is fact and what is reality, and tried to demonumentalize metaphorical constructs via the combination of in-

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[35]Victor Tupitsyn is specifically referring to a group of artists who in the 1970s and 1980s documented the events of alternative-art life in Moscow.

compatible contexts—"the 'sacred' and the profane, the connotative and the denotative," depriving the Soviet myth of its harmony (81-83). This de-harmonisation of the Soviet myth was also done by other groups of unofficial artists and photographers, for example *Sots*-artists who used the Soviet ideology and its symbols to "deride, deflate, and aestheticize" (M. Tupitsyn, *Margins of Soviet Art: Socialist Realism to the Present* 65) its signifiers; performance artists who attempted to make unusual the perception of ordinary things; and conceptual artists who denied the primary position of painting (as it was traditionally thought in the Soviet Union) and put forward instead a verbal-visual conflation. Both Erik Bulatov's painting, already mentioned above, and Boris Mikhailov's photograph from the *Red series* that will follow below, deharmonise the Soviet myth by playing with the symbolic significance of the colour red in Soviet everyday life, which does not carry a positive meaning as it usually designates sanctioned art and photography. Here, the colour strikes the eye, informing the viewer about artists' critical attitudes towards Soviet power.

To achieve this de-harmonisation, unofficial artists could not find a better medium than photography. Indeed, in the case of performance art, the usage of photography allowed for documentation and archivisation of the performances, in the case of conceptual and *Sots*-art, photography often served as a primary medium. Many conceptual artists worked with photography, as for them, "the meaning of the photograph functions as a sign or indicator of an idea rather than as a precious object to be savored for its surface appearance or expressive capacity" (Rosenfeld 137). Boris Mikhailov, born in Soviet Ukraine, is one of the few photographers who was seen as a conceptual artist in the 1970s. His series *Red* (1960s–1970s) is referred to as *Sots*-art, because of its playful interaction with Soviet regalia, and also as conceptual art, because of its own substantive

reality created by the photographer. Figure 1.11, for example, depicts a Labour Day celebration, where women wear red stripes with the signature "Veteran of Labour," and hold big artificial red flowers. The excessive use of the colour red—the symbol of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—makes this photograph look almost kitschy. *Red series* was without doubt subversive, as it made the Soviet Union's mainstream mythology look exaggerated and artificial.

Soviet conceptual art, and specifically the artists belonging to the group Moscow Conceptualism, incited amateur photographers to treat an image as a sign. For this reason, nonconformist photography of the 1970s and 1980s is often defined as conceptual. Joseph Bakshtein argues that the duality of photography (the representation of reality "true to life" but at the same time, in the light of Communist metaphysics) in the Soviet Union is what makes "all Russian photographers conceptual artists par excellence" (Bakshtein 43). Alexander Borofsky, clarifying the designation of conceptual photography in the Russian tradition, states that it includes "everything that in some way relates to 'the crisis of the Real' and consequently emphasizes individual vision. [...] They [conceptual photographs] are built into the system of multiple layers of modern art discourse" (Borofsky, "Conceptual Photography in the Russian Museum" 40-41). In the Soviet context of the 1960s and 1970s, when the didacticism of the Communist Party and socialist realism were still in vigour, the photographs that lacked the traditional *ideinost'*, *narodnost'* and *partiinost'* were likely to be labelled as dissident, anti-Soviet, conceptual or even pornographic.

The Soviet Union under Leonid Brezhnev's rule (1964-1982), which is known as the era of stagnation, remained highly conservative in terms of art and culture: dissident artists and writers were repressed, art movies cut or 'left on the shelf,' and books contradicting the socialist agenda

Figure 1.11: Boris Mikhailov, untitled from the *Red Series*, 1968–1975. Colour photograph, digital C-print on paper, 45.5 x 30.5 cm. Collection of Tate gallery, London. Copyright Boris Mikhailov, used with permission.

forbidden. However, the efforts of dissidents and nonconformists in the 1960s and 1970s were not fruitless: the diversification of art and literature genres, the liberation of self-expression, and the distancing of Soviet photographic art from sanctioned styles, among others, were realised to some extent by the 1980s.

In the 1980s, the Soviet art scene opened its doors to foreign cultural figures, and the cultural exchange between East and West intensified. It became much easier to travel abroad, and many Soviet artists began emigrating to Europe and North America. The collapse of the USSR and the Iron Curtain also entailed access to foreign cultural heritages and allowed for the spreading of Western views on societal issues. As a result, questions such as sexuality, criminal activity and corruption were no longer complete taboos, since a torrent of international books, music, shows and films rushed into the mainstream media. This gave certain artists the opportunity to treat prohibited subjects more openly, without fear of being arrested. Alternative underground culture was also flourishing in big cities like Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov, Minsk, and others. At the beginning of 1980s nonconformist art was in its advanced stage.

Alexei Yurchak claims that in the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet leaders changed their authoritative language, provoking "the production of new unanticipated meanings, relations, identities, and forms of sociality" (Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* 80). Scholars argue that Soviet society started to experience major changes in the 1980s, when a "new popular culture" emerged (Barker). Notwithstanding the remaining old-fashioned framework of the official discourse that prevailed until the mid-1980s, Soviet society started to undergo a gradual internal transformation with its culmination in 1986, with the advent

of glasnost and perestroika.

1.5 The new order of the late 1980s and 1990s

Mikhail Gorbachev's election as General Secretary of the Party in 1985 marked the beginning of a new era in the USSR. The reforms of perestroika which were supposed to restructure the cultural, political and economic systems of the USSR were accompanied by the brand-new politics of glasnost, which entailed governmental openness, transparency of power and a relative liberty of information. Gorbachev's book *Perestroika: New Thinking for our Country and the World* (1987) was written to explain the reasons and strategies behind perestroika and enthusiastically proclaimed a new direction: socialism and democracy, inspired by the revolutionary ideas of Lenin. The Party, Gorbachev promised in the book, would "take into consideration the diverse interests of people, work collectives, public bodies, and various social groups" (Gorbachev 29), and every citizen of the Soviet Union was called upon to "work an extra bit harder" so the Party and people could together change the situation in the country.

Besides mentioning the many achievements completed since the establishment of the USSR, Gorbachev enumerated all the difficulties the country was now facing such as declining growth rates and economic stagnation, a severe lack of food and materials, the erosion of ideological and moral values, and others. He went on to acknowledge some formerly exaggerated propagandistic party works, and wrote that "[t]he presentation of a 'problem-free' reality backfired: a breach had formed between word and deed, which bred public passivity and disbelief in the slogans being proclaimed. It was only natural that this situation resulted in a credibility gap:

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everything that was proclaimed from the rostrums and printed in newspapers and textbooks was put in question" (22). The language of this book—frank, direct and passionate, the language of old friends or good comrades—was chosen in order to show the equality between the higher echelons of power and ordinary people. Gorbachev wanted to convince his readers that the Soviet people could henceforth fully place their trust in the Soviet Party and the official press following the establishment of a new order of openness and truth.

Nikita Nankov argues that the discourse of truth that Gorbachev introduced with the onset of perestroika and glasnost is nothing but the representation of Plato's 'noble lie.' Like in Plato's *Republic*, where an utopian state is governed by philosophers who guide the non-enlightened population to wisdom and knowledge, the citizens of the Soviet Union were seen as rational beings and potential philosophers who would certainly understand the "economic incompetence and injustice exercised by the outdated former Communist leaders," after learning of their past mistakes, and would then help build a new Communism "with a human face" (Nankov 193). Nankov states that perestroika was based on the Platonic belief that there is only one truth, which is independent from the context: "[t]his truth is spelled out by glasnost," and it unites all the individuals in the Soviet Union and abroad in the common effort (to build a new Communism), "because they understand the logic of the truth in a single and, therefore, shared way" (194). Along with the language of truth that for Gorbachev became a weapon against anti-Soviet and anti-Communist propaganda in Western media, the official discourse also contained 'noble lies' which aimed to "strengthen order and justice" in the 'ideal' Soviet state: "[t]he dystopian retort to glasnost is that language is used not solely for speaking the truth but also for lying" (196). Lying for the sake of communist

party stability was not new; however, former leaders had never acknowledged these lies in public speeches or media.

Gorbachev started an unprecedented impulse towards the 'whole truth' that completely changed the atmosphere in the country. Firstly, the process of the democratisation of culture and the liberalisation of society started to be apparent on many levels: the publication of earlier censured books, such as *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, *We* by Evgeny Zamiatin and others; public exhibitions of nonconformist artists; the resurgence of Soviet rock bands above-ground; the emergence of TV shows with open debates about politics, Soviet past and economic reforms. In parallel, there was a process of opening Soviet archives, which generated a wave of high interest in history, literature and modern art. Various publications of the formerly forbidden material for public consultation produced a new generation of photojournalists who now could dare to reveal earlier unimaginable information. The major events of strategic political importance which mass media did not publicise in time, such as the Chernobyl disaster, civil demonstrations in the Soviet republics, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and many others, became wide spread thanks to photographers' news reports (Berezner et al. 113).

Besides the new wave of photojournalism and the opening of formerly hidden archives, the organisation of a grand exhibition held in 1989 to honour the 150th anniversary of photography marked a big step in the development of a unique photographic tradition. According to the authors of the FotoFest Biennial catalogue, this 1989 exhibition was the first of its kind to feature photographs of pre-revolutionary Russia, the works of the avant-garde artists of the 1900s-1930s,

war images and other rare photographs (Berezner et al.). Having been stored in the museums and libraries, and inaccessible even to researchers, these photographs once again demonstrated the closed nature of the Soviet Union and the desire of its leaders to hide the truth from the population. The fact that this show took place at the *Manezh*, a Muscovite major exhibition centre, signified the first step in a long movement towards the recognition of photography as an art medium.

The publications that appeared in the late 1980s describe perestroika photography as a radical movement with a persistent accent on photographers' special attitude towards the truth. The authors claim that in response to the official mission of Soviet photography which consisted of "documentation, journalism, propaganda, and illustration" (Eerikainen 56), nonconformist photographers sought to establish a new relationship between photography and truth.[36] Liberation from the dictatorship of Party-mindedness in art opened up the possibility for photographers to explore multifaceted truth and reflect social changes in the country. Leah Bendavid-Val argues that factuality becomes a passion for nonconformist photographers, clearly distinguishing the drastic difference between socialist realist and "new" photography: "The photographer of the past was a craftsperson hired to deliver a specific product. The new photographer is an artist with unique vision, and that vision must be acknowledged in the search for truth" (Bendavid-Val 27). Thus, the late 1980s marked a time of ultimate transition in photography from utilitarian tool to serious art medium which acknowledges the subjective view of the photographer in order to attain greater honesty.

The quest for truthful and authentic representation became the new goal of late and post-

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[36]See for example Eerikainen 1989, Bendavid-Val 1991, and Walker et al. 1991.

Soviet photography.[37] This situation can be explained by the gap between art and reality created and sustained by the official discourse of the Soviet Union and mainstream capitalist culture after its collapse. Collette Chattopadhyay affirms that the discrepancy between the "utopian vision of Socialist Realism and the rough-hewn reality of Russian *byt* (daily life)" represents one of the central problems of contemporary Russian art (Chattopadhyay 70). Basing her argument on the example of photographic works by nonconformist artist Afrika (whose real name is Sergei Bugaev), Chattopadhyay points out the contemporary concept of mimesis as a "fluctuating rivalry between images, perception and reality" (75). Therefore, Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photography of the 1980s and 1990s can be perceived according to this principle, whether it directly references the socialist realist tradition or not, as the medium that both undermines photographic truthfulness and, at the same time, affirms its "unparalleled relation to reality as a relic of the real" (75). Therefore, to produce a fully fledged study of the late and post-Soviet photography, it is essential to regard it through the prism of the socialist realist art that was, using Collette Chattopadhyay's wording, "too pervasive to be ignored."

The clash between two realities—a mythological one, depicted in the socialist realist manner, and a lived reality, the experienced everyday of ordinary Soviet citizens—stimulated a vivid interest in daily life in the photography world. The everyday became a major subject in Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian art of the 1980s and 1990s (Mrázková and Remeš), but contrary to the positive depiction of daily life in the socialist realist tradition, nonconformist Soviet photography revealed all its hidden negative aspects. This approach gave birth to the third reality—a photo-

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[37]Speaking specifically about Kharkov school of photography, Tatiana Pavlova formulates this as a "want of truth" that emerged during the last years of the Soviet Union (Pavlova).

graphic one—often described as conceptual reality. For example, according to Valery Stigneev, the genre of social photography that emerged among the Soviet amateur photographers in the late 1970s and 1980s, "incorporated the principle of self-expression, which was tied to a 'plastic deformation' of the photographed reality as a symbol of the individual approach and style of the photographer" (Stigneev, The Force of the Medium: The Soviet Amateur Photography Movement 71).

Stigneev writes about an "unusually realistic atmosphere" created by the work of Novokuznetsk's Triva group—Vladimir Sokolaev, Vladimir Vorobiëv, and Aleksandr Trofimov—when they depicted the daily life of a metallurgical plant and its machinery, about "new layers of reality" that the photographers help to uncover, and about a "special meaning" that these photographs are imbued with (73).[38] Such was the effect of the aestheticisation of everyday experience that the photographers sought to achieve: they transformed the routine, mundane and ordinary into an object of art. According to the leading nonconformist artist Ilya Kabakov, "the only chance Soviet art has to move out of its provincialism is to transform that very provincialism into an object of aesthetic inquiry" (Misiano 69), which is the root of conceptualism in Soviet art and photography.

The complexity and conceptuality of the photographic medium in the late and post-Soviet space is highlighted by various contemporary critics. Hannu Eerikainen states that "[t]he photograph as a document is the basis of this new concept which embraces conceptualism, magic realism, formalism, irony, and absurd[ity]" (Eerikainen 63). The publications of the 1990s and 2000s acknowledge that for unofficial Eastern European photographers of the 1960s-1990s an im-

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[38]The detailed analysis of Triva photographs as well as visual examples will follow in chapter two.

Figure 1.12: Evgeny Pavlov (Ukrainian, b. 1949), *No. 3* from the series *Violin*, 1972. Photograph. Sheet: 18.5 x 20 cm (7 5/16 x 7 7/8 in.). Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union. D10696. Copyright Evgeny Pavlov, used with permission.

age is a concept (Walker et al.).[39] By turning away from the ideological usage of photography to a search for authenticity and sincerity, they problematized the truth, thus making it into a concept to be investigated. For example, the image *Violin* from the series by the same name by Evgeny Pavlov (see Figure 1.12), due to its portraiture of the nude male body, opened up a discussion about the stereotypes of masculinity and the representation of "Homo Sovieticus" in official culture: this photograph aestheticizes sensitivity and vulnerability in men—qualities that did not usually find reflection in sanctioned art and media. According to the photographer, he created this series to counter not only the socialist realist doctrine but also Western standards of representation, where the nude body is typically feminine (Pavlov and Sanduliak). The series shocked people from an orthodox cultural milieu who were not ready yet to see such a daring theme.[40]

Images that treated delicate topics encountered resistance even during the 1990s, when, it seemed, all taboos were broken. However, there emerged a certain acceptance of such photographs by art curators and art institutions. For example, the series *Kids* by Sergey Bratkov, mentioned above, although causing outrage among conservative citizens who claimed that photographers should not document children in such a way, received great acclaim from local and international critics (I. Popova). The series was exhibited in several Western museums, at the Contemporary Art Biennial Manifesta 5 San Sebastian, and entered the collection of the François Pinault Foundation.

After a period (in the 1960s and 1970s) of experimenting with form to find their roots in

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[39]See Jacob, John P. "After Raskolnikov: Russian Photography Today"; Neumaier, Diane. *Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-related Works of Art*; and Rosenfeld, Alla. *Photography as Art: Contemporary Russian Photography in the Yuri Traisman Collection.*

[40]When Evgeny Pavlov entered the cinematographic faculty, his supervisor said he would not have accepted Pavlov at the faculty, if he had already seen the series *Violin* (Pavlov and Sanduliak).

the Russian and European avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, the documentary technique was again privileged among unofficial photographers. The objective lens of the camera was used to depict the 'raw truth'—marginal people whose lives revealed the existence of social issues in the Soviet society. Due to Stalin's paranoid policy, which resulted in purges and a general Soviet culture of *pokazukha*, or 'window-dressing,' many social groups that could compromise the exemplary image of the Soviet Union, such as invalids and people with disabilities, political and criminal prisoners, drug and alcohol addicts, were silenced as if they did not exist at all (Phillips).[41] These social types were taboo because Soviet society refused to accept that socialism could produce such 'unsuccessful' people. For nonconformist photographers, these people represented a forbidden fruit which could demonstrate the chasm between the mythological and existing realities of the Soviet Union. The emergence of portrayals of these marginal groups in Soviet photography was a ground-breaking phenomenon, as previously the 'acceptable' subjects for state photographers were shock workers and Stakhanovites, pioneers and *Komsomol*[42] members, Red army soldiers and war heroes—people of model behaviour who affirmed the glory of the USSR. Besides these 'heroic' types there were also archetypes popular in the official press: "A bearded old man: he has no social concerns; time is only his concern. A boy who has a future—he is a bit freckled but beautiful. A modest woman standing next to a birch tree—she is very gentle, not aggressive, not pushy, not even energetic. A working man, a party boss, etc." (Mikhailov and Efimova 267). Against the backdrop of these banal subjects, the depiction of marginal people in their natural environment revealed the truth about the dark side of Soviet society that was so meticulously hidden from the public eye

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[41] See also *Stalin and the Lubianka: A Documentary History of the Political Police and Security Organs in the Soviet Union, 1922-1953* (Shearer and Khaustov).

[42] Young Communist League.

by authorities. Therefore, these subjects were the domain of the unofficial photographers—their independence from official structures offered the possibility to discover topics formerly banned from the public discourse.[43]

In the period of artistic repressions, the terms 'unofficial art' and 'underground art' made perfect sense, as they meant an opposition to the official paradigm of the socialist realist doctrine, which consequently made this art literally underground. However, starting from the mid-1980s and on, with loosening of the authorities' grip of culture and art, these two designations lost their former significance. Tatiana Salzirn argues that some artists even showed a certain opposition to the category of "unofficial" art (Salzirn). Alexander Borofsky explains this process as follows:

> Terms such as 'underground' or 'unofficial' art have chronological limitations, the former, for instance, being mainly applied to the period from the late 1950s to the early 1980s: but it then lost its meaning as the authorities lost the habit of controlling artistic life with the help of the intelligence services. Furthermore, 'underground art' has always been imbued in the Russian tradition with important political implications, as being 'suppressed' or 'concealed.' 'Unofficial' too connotes an opposition to 'official' art, a distinction which has become complicated of late. The term 'non-conformist' suggests the artist's independence of Soviet ideology and of its administrative structures, but does not imply suppression or control in the same sense. (Borofsky, *Nonconformist Art in Leningrad* 204n.1)

In the post-Soviet period, referring to recent photographic tendencies, critics and scholars continuously use the term 'nonconformism,' and although it no longer expresses the artists' ideological resistance to communism and socialist realism, it signifies rather their rejection of mainstream imagery which appeared with the advent of post-socialist capitalism, free market and consumer culture. The mythological character of politics and media continued to exist, but it was no longer

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[43]This is the reason why the West have systematically praised nonconformist art—for the depiction of negative sides as a proof that the socialist regime does not work.

designated 'official.' The utopian discourse of the ideal communist state gave way to another utopian discourse—one of limitless wealth, democracy and freedom which all seemed attainable after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The radical political and economic events which took place in the early 1990s entailed major shifts in visual culture. A society in which advertisement, fashion industry, commercial photography, mass literature and other components of 'capitalist' culture were previously absent witnessed a swift development of respective infrastructures. The glamorised images of "American-style affluence, combined with European-style social welfare" (Kotkin 115) which were popularised in the late 1980s and early 1990s, provided a fruitful environment for the 'nonconformist' culture to prosper. Among these nonconformist genres a new film trend emerged in the 1990s called *chernukha*[44] which usually depicted the dark reality of a society where violence, crime and lawlessness reigned. In literature, the conventional writing styles inherited from the socialist realist doctrine were broken by new writers who used obscene language and included graphic sexual scenes in their texts.[45]

To show the discrepancy between the mythological iconography of the Westernised post-Soviet order and the existing decline of living conditions in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, photographers captured the most underprivileged and undervalued groups of people, such as orphans, homeless, the poor, problem children, prostitutes, and criminals. With fewer limitations and taboos, the representation of these social types was no longer prohibited. However, the uncom-

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[44]From the combination of *chernyi*, black, and *pornukha*, colloquial name for pornography.

[45]Critics such as Karen L. Ryan and Eliot Borenstein claim that works *It's me, Eddie* (Eto ia—Edichka) by Eduard Limonov, *Kangaroo* (Kenguru) by Yuz Aleshkovsky, *Russian Beauty* (Russkaia krasavitsa) by Victor Erofeyev and *Palisandria* by Sasha Sokolov are pornographic novels. Although this claim is questionable, it is difficult to deny that the aforementioned pieces are rich in all kinds of sexual language and curse words.

promising realism that imbued the photographs, the straightforwardness with which the subjects were depicted, the truth of misery and social decay that countered the omnipresent hype of the capitalist culture, made the images disturbing and marginal. The problematic transition from communist to capitalist regimes, which embraced all levels of society as well as the political, economic and cultural spheres, is featured in various emblematic photo-series, such as *Mysteries* (1989) by Igor Savchenko, *Case History* (1997-1998) by Boris Mikhailov, and *Kids* (1999-2000) by Sergey Bratkov. Their images expose the decadent state of social and moral values which manifested itself after the Soviet Union's dissolution.

The emergence of marginal characters and actions in late and post-Soviet painting, literature, film, and photography is a common feature uniting these art forms.[46] Owing to the 'objective' documentation of marginal subjects, artists, writers, filmmakers, and photographers questioned and undermined the mythography of the official communist and later dominant capitalist cultures. Furthermore, various critics and scholars refer to these artistic productions as being on the margins of culture.[47] In part, this categorisation comes from the marginalisation of the photographic medium that persisted to some extent even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1989, Viktor Misiano stated that "up till now in the Soviet Union, photography and the history of photography have been considered subjects unworthy of higher education" (Misiano 65); in 1994, Martha Rosler wrote that photography in Russia was still viewed as "minor art" (Rosler, "Negotiating New (His)Stories of Photography" 53). However, from the mid-1990s, photography started to enter cultural institu-

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[46]I will explore the theme of marginal in chapter three.

[47]Alexei Yurchak identifies the activities of Leningrad nonconformist groups such as *mit'ki* and necrorealists as marginal to the State (Yurchak, "Suspending the Political: Late Soviet Artistic Experiments on the Margins of the State"); Alla Efimova talks about the dangers of marginalisation referring to Boris Mikhailov's maintenance of a critical position from the periphery (Mikhailov and Efimova 276); the special issue of *Aperture* the editors treat Soviet photography as underground and forbidden (Richardson and Hagen), etc.

tions, and in 1996, the Moscow House of Photography was established, being the first museum of photography in Russia.[48]

In this chapter, I have attempted to reveal the construction of truth(s) in the Soviet Union and after its dissolution, which I consider essential for studying photographic realism. Retracing different attitudes towards 'truthfulness' (whose definition changed from decade to decade, from leader to leader, from regime to regime), helps us understand the role of photographic truths. The desire (or at least apparent desire on a political level) for truth and enlightenment at the outset of the Soviet period,[49] then the construction or illusion of truth under Stalin, and the clash between official and unofficial truths during the 1960s and 1970s, followed by the democratisation of truth during perestroika, and finally the new illusion of capitalist truth in the 1990s—this is the pattern of rhetoric which greatly affected the development of the photographic medium. The fascination with automatic realism, fake or manipulated documents, the illustration of the utopian state, followed by resistance to the utopias created by both communist and capitalist regimes—shows how the journey of photography as an artform in the former Soviet states of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus is complex and thorny. What seems undeniable is the influence of cultural policies, strict regulations and state control on photography, and the dominance of utopian ideas in mass media. These factors, also described by Martha Rosler, John Tagg, Allan Sekula, and Rosalind Krauss, caused several discourses of resistance (exposing a hidden reality, questioning the veracity of photographic image, etc.) to appear, which revealed the tendency of late and post-Soviet photography to construct

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[48] Although teaching of the history of photography in Western universities is also relatively new, the institutionalisation of photography in North America generally happened earlier than in the Eastern European countries. For example, The Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography opened in 1985, that is eleven years prior to the Russian. The US's first institution—the photography department in the MoMA—was established in 1940. To read more about the latter see Christopher Phillips's 1982 essay "The Judgement Seat of Photography" published in *October*.

[49] Despite all propaganda tools which emerged in parallel.

representations based on authenticity, genuine authorial expression, and distanced from ideological burden. This is why a major part of this chapter is dedicated to the contextualisation of photography in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and the tracing of major historical events to the development of the medium throughout the twentieth century.

In the photographic series that I will discuss in the following chapter, the methods and techniques employed suggest that the intensified curiosity (or even necessity) to explore the question of photographic truth emerged among the photographers examined here. The question of reality and its depiction in different series and throughout different periods reaches two extremes: faithful documentation and radical experimentation reminding surrealist practices. This situation can be explained by half a century of socialist realist doctrine, which privileged a class-conscious representation of reality instead of true daily life—the 'objective' image that the word documentary photograph implies. During 1930s-1980s, socialist realism with its mythological idealised imagery constituted a reference point to determine "normality" (Dobrenko). Instead, nonconformist photography brought the question of an unembellished reality into artistic discourse and thus deconstructed the notions of centre and norm. Against the backdrop of the official visual paradigm featuring positive socialist or capitalist ideals, the exploration of reality (often negative and pessimistic) in the works of the studied photographers appeared marginal and minor. The following chapter will explore the notion and characteristics of realist representation to examine the role of the real in late and post-Soviet photography.

Chapter 2

Realisms: histories, theories, functions

2.1 *Soviet Monuments*, or towards critical realism

In 1988, after meeting Boris Mikhailov and Alexander Sliussarev, Moscow photographer Igor Mukhin wanted to create a photo series connected to his childhood memories. This is how *Soviet Monuments* was born; it aimed to document the statues that were made during the Soviet era, representing an important part of the Soviet cultural heritage.[1] This series brought the photographer back to his childhood and adolescence, which were filled with imagery of Lenin, Stalin and other Communist leaders. Besides that, it corresponded with the visual erosion of Soviet street propaganda. Between 1988 and 1994, Mukhin visited 110 villages and cities to capture the falling monuments that multiplied each year, not so much because of vandalism than because of their

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[1]In each Soviet city, sculptors had to produce busts or whole body monuments of Soviet leaders, heroes and outstanding persons for display in public squares or parks, as a part of monumental propaganda. Thus, sculptors erected a countless number of these monuments—in plaster, bronze and concrete—to glorify the country in which they lived. In the Soviet Union, there existed around 15000 monuments to Lenin alone, without mentioning Stalin and other Soviet revolutionaries (Kolotilov).

Figure 2.1: Igor Mukhin, *Spartak-Dinamo Play Soccer* from the series *Soviet Monuments*, 1988-2000. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. Private collection. Copyright Igor Mukhin, used with permission.

fragility. The hastiness with which these monuments were created and their cheap materials—the evidence of a quantitative and not a qualitative approach—caused the statues to quickly lose their glamorous looks.

Mukhin's photographs are black-and-white, and usually represent a close-up of a monument's side in such a way that the viewer sees not its totality, but a tiny part. For instance, on Figure 2.1, which is a part of the monument called *Spartak-Dinamo Play Soccer* in Zheleznovodsk, the photographer portrays a ball and legs of Soviet soccer players. What strikes the eye in the photograph is the monument's peeled off paint. Monument painting was a widely-used practice in

the Soviet Union—to cover plaster monuments with paint in order to give them the appearance of marble or bronze statues (Bryzgel, "New Avant-Gardes in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1987-1999" 102). The fact that sculptors made monuments out of cheap and short-lived materials once again demonstrates that they were more interested in the mass production of symbols of Soviet glory than creating works of art. Monuments to Lenin and Stalin, for example, were executed according to a sample—usually copying a masterpiece by a famous Soviet sculptor. But no one took care of them after, and monuments gradually fell into decay.

Figure 2.2 depicts a hand pointing towards a building called *Oktiabr'* (October). *Oktiabr'* was a common title for many places and objects in the Soviet Union, including streets and squares, parks and recreation centres, houses of culture and theatres in memory of the October revolution. The monument's hand in the photograph belongs to Lenin. This pose is typical of Lenin's monuments, where he stands pointing towards a radiant communist future. In Mukhin's photograph, however, this future is already in the past. The image shows the remains of the empire, almost its ruins, as the monument's hand loses entire chunks of its paint, Lenin's coat is covered with cracks, and the October building—modest, square, and grey—seems to be in urgent need of repair. To take this photograph, Mukhin had to climb on the same plinth with Lenin, which enabled him to look with Lenin's eyes in the same direction. The photograph thus reflects the author's view of Soviet past and post-Soviet future which is born out of this perspective: Lenin's monument foreshadows changes, as new things are always built over ruins.

In this photo, as well as in other photos from the same series, Mukhin uses a close-up to show that monuments are 'physically' dying, almost from the inside, and no one cares about

Figure 2.2: Igor Mukhin, *Lenin's Monument in Pavlovskii Posad* from the series *Soviet Monuments*, 1988-2000. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. Anahita Gallery, Santa Fe. Copyright Igor Mukhin, used with permission.

preserving the country's cultural heritage. However, when Mukhin exhibited his photographs in the United States in the 1990s, the public was shocked to discover the demolished state of statues in Russia, even proposing to purchase and export them abroad to be saved. Once, during an exhibition in Riga, Mukhin's photo montage of a monument was mistaken for the dismantlement of Zhukov's statue,[2] and the visitors who happened to be there at the time included many retired military personnel who wanted to beat the photographer. However, with time, sentimental attachment to Soviet monuments has vanished, and Igor Mukhin continues to photograph falling statues today without arousing keen interest of the public, critics and publishers.

Mukhin's attitude regarding the decaying monuments is not clear—his position is rather neutral: he is like a chronicler whose only interest is to document, and his camera is the perfect tool for this; like a scientist's instrument, it captures all the tiny scratches and wounds on the static bodies, not to find beauty or ugliness of the decay, but to show its details. Close-ups offer a new perspective and the unusual angles that characterise avant-garde photography. Instead of depicting a full monument in its surroundings, which would be typical of photojournalism, Mukhin places the monument's body in the foreground so it occupies a major part of the image, in order to construct a different relation to the background. However, this framing does not distort the image, and the bond between reality and its representation is not compromised.

This technique is reminiscent of Alexander Rodchenko's photographic experiments of the 1920s and 1930s, where the artist introduced the close-up as a revolutionary tool to render reality unfamiliar. For instance, in the photograph *Pioneer with a Horn* (1930) taken by Rodchenko at a

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[2]The visitors misunderstood the word *montazh* (montage), written in caption, thinking that it meant *demontazh* (dismantlement or removal).

pioneer camp, a boy's face is the only visible part of his body, and the camera angle from below makes him appear almost inhuman (see Figure 1.4). The horn is also not shot in its totality, so viewers can guess that the boy is playing a wind instrument after seeing his squeezed lips and puffy cheeks. The value of this photograph is not in its resemblance or non-resemblance to the real boy, but in its connotative meaning—the image of the pioneer became a symbol of socialist development, supporting the idea that the young boy with his musical instrument contributes to the construction of the young country as much as workers and farmers do with their hammers and hooks. Due to the novel angle and revolutionary close-up, the image looks dynamic and futuristic. The boy's face in the photograph is so close to the viewer that it becomes tangible. According to Rodchenko's writings discussed in chapter one, this is the genre of photographs that reflect reality in the most truthful way. The 'real' appears where no one expects it—in the mere possibility of taking such a photograph with its extraordinary formal solutions. *The Pioneer with a Horn* expands our expectations of photographed reality, functioning as the witness of a game between reality and its photographic copy.

As far as Mukhin's photographs are concerned, the real seems to be unfamiliar—primarily because of their unusual perspective, which is unattainable by the majority of people[3]—yet sharp. Reality is not questioned or postponed; on the contrary, it is very present and palpable in the photographs, due to the unavoidable traces of the past. The Soviet past in Mukhin's photographs plays the role of a trigger, which makes us think about vestiges of the Soviet heritage in today's life and culture. This is the main difference between Rodchenko's and Mukhin's photographed

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[3]Unattainable simply because people rarely if ever would climb a monument in order to see the surroundings from that perspective
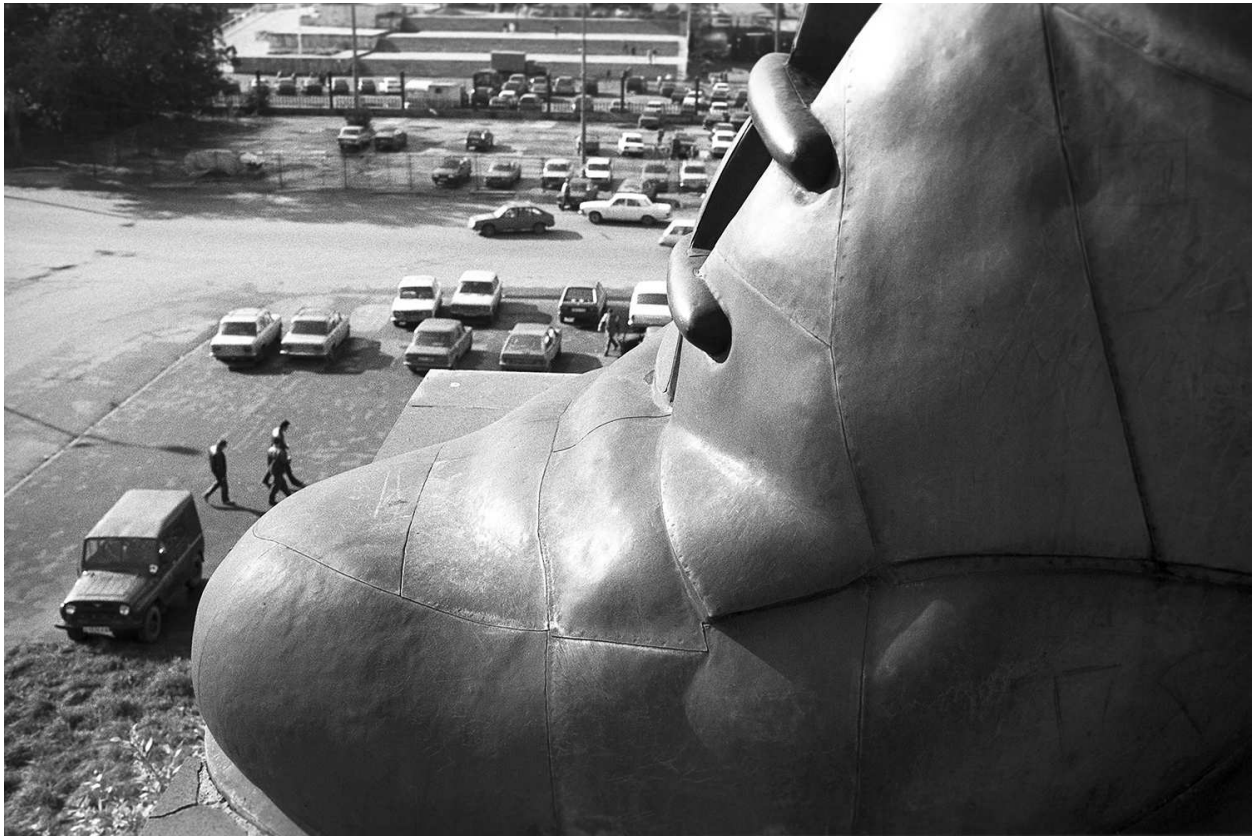
Figure 2.3: Igor Mukhin, *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman Monument in Moscow* from the series *Soviet Monuments*, 1988-2000. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. Private collection. Copyright Igor Mukhin, used with permission.

realities: the former considers the future and the latter looks into the past. In Mukhin's photographs the Soviet past acquires another meaning—it does not appear glorious, but instead haunts present-day citizens in their everyday lives.

In another photograph of the same series (see Figure 2.3), Mukhin depicts a giant monument's boot, which occupies more than a half of the photographic frame, against the background of a parking lot with multiple Soviet-era cars. The heaviness and clumsiness of the boot visually oppresses the image, as it appears to squash buildings and peacefully walking people. The old cars and bystanders appear small and helpless compared to the boot's volume and symbolic burden. The proximity of the photographer to the monument makes it look bigger than it really is. Although the depicted monument is well preserved, the photograph insinuates that something was ruined, as testified by a big crack on the monument's plinth. The monument in question was surely completed in the socialist realist style—a rough finishing of 'leather,' without any aesthetic quality or fine material—these elements on the photograph tell us that something bulky stepped on Russian soil. Mukhin chooses the angle which transmits this bulkiness and fatality the best. On one hand, there is a humorous play of scale between the boot and the cars, and on the other hand, the entire right side of the image is shadowed, so that viewers understand that the boot's arrival is not associated with light and happiness. Once again, we are dealing with the representation of the ruined past, a literal "posthumous shock."

Alexander Rodchenko and Igor Mukhin's photographic realisms differ in that while Rodchenko's images can be considered propagandistic, Mukhin's cannot, although both photographers are concerned with the documentation of reality, both use close-up to show the details, and both

produce monumental bodies through particular framing.[4] Ideological implication, which comes

into play in *The Pioneer with a Horn*, as well as in other shots of pioneers by Rodchenko, trans-

forms photographic truth into socialist realist mythology. Images of pioneers become political, as

they depict the manifestation of communism in a positive way, offering the prospect of a happy

socialist future. Mukhin's photographs are just as political, but they interrupt the mythological

tradition of socialist realism, as they represent the remains of Soviet glory, in a negative way,

pointing at the burden of the past. Mukhin's politics reflect the new cultural direction—the result

of perestroika and glasnost—that accepted critical views on the Soviet heritage. Mukhin's realism,

consequently, is critical, aiming at showing an alternative picture of the everyday reality.

As I claimed in chapter one, photographers in the 1980s and 1990s aimed at a different

kind of photographic truth—one that is defined by the authenticity of the authorial approach, the

abolishment of socialist ideology, and a critical vision of reality. This leads me to suggest that criti-

cal realism became a predominant trend in Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photography during

these years. I use the notion of realism in the sense that it confronts an idealised representation

of reality, as exemplified by socialist realist visual culture during the Soviet Union. It gravitates

around individual self-expression, the emergence of multiple styles and multiple ideologies, which

came with the photographers' acknowledgement that photographic truth is multifaceted and not

unconditional. I use the term 'critical realism' to mark the difference between the tradition of so-

cialist realism and other photographic styles that challenge the relationship between reality and its

representation, such as surrealism, hyperrealism, magic realism, and staged realism. The objective

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[4]Rodchenko's photographed pioneers became virtually monumental as an incarnation of the young communist country, as the generation born in the USSR that will realise all Lenin's plans.

of this chapter is to define the type of realism that emerged in late and post-Soviet photography. I argue that critical realism is defined by peculiar aesthetic features: this photography is sincere, direct, daring, uncomfortable, rude; it opens a whole spectrum of emotions and ideas, as it acts in the margins of thematic and aesthetic conventions.

As I pointed out in chapter one, photography holds a certain amount of truth due to its 'mechanical objectivity.' This term, coined by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison and studied in detail in their book *Objectivity* (2010), refers to a photographic method that implies the production of a mimetic copy of reality with minimal intervention of the artist-photographer. However, this characteristic of photography does not render images truthful or more realist. It is also important to note that the concept of pictorial and photographic truth is understood differently in different times and places. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison claim, before the advent of photography, the images used in scientific catalogues and atlases represented a certain idealised image of the average.[5] Professional artists who worked for scientists aimed at 'objective' depiction of plants, animals, human body, and so forth, to achieve the so-called truth-to-nature (Daston and Galison). Similarly, the concepts of objective and subjective representation differed from their present-day understanding, as for instance, an idealised drawing of a plant was considered objective because it reflected a typical image of this plant with its typical characteristics and not a mere example of the species. However, with the instrumentalization of photography in scientific institutions at the end of the nineteenth century, the understanding of objectivity and truth gradually changed: henceforth, artists' depictions lost their authority, as they represented a subjective vision of studied objects,

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[5]The same process happened in photography, when Francis Galton made composite portraits to generate, by superimposing different photographs, an average picture of the portrayed group of people. This method was particularly used in criminology to identify the main physical characteristics of criminals.

contrary to photographic prints that mechanically reflected nature. Thus, 'mechanical objectivity' appeared more truthful since the camera minimised artists' intervention. Despite this, photographic realism has never been taken as ultimate truth, because even in the cases when photography was treated as the most objective and veracious medium, the temptation to alter images always existed.

Evidently, there are different degrees of realism and truth in photography, all of which vary depending on formal and contextual factors. Regardless of the level of realism, photographic images always represent an artificial construction. Next, I will demonstrate that even the most 'realist' works of late and post-Soviet photographers defined as documentary photographs produce a visual construct that offers a particular, critical vision of reality. Analysing the notion of realism from several different perspectives ranging from art history to literary criticism can shed light upon the problem of photography's definition as a realist medium. Drawing on the writings of Linda Nochlin, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Boris Röhrl, and Viktor Shklovsky among others, I will try to uncover how this type of realism, found in the photography under study and called 'critical,' functions, considering the historical and cultural circumstances of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

2.2   Realist representation in the visual arts

According to the British scholar Christopher Williams, there are many types of realism: "emotional, pragmatic, philosophical and scientific, as well as the artistic kind" (Williams 277). In the present chapter, I am looking at an artistic kind of realism that in turn can be subdivided into many categories. What interests me is how photographic realism functions under different historical cir-

cumstances and in different genres, such as socialist realism and critical realism. The discussion of other mediums as well as their critical analysis will help outline the specificity of photographic realism. Photography's closest art form is film, as they both create visual material using the recording possibilities of the camera. However, photography does not produce moving images; rather, it represents a still picture containing everything that the viewer must know about the subject matter, which brings it closer to painting. Also, photography possesses limited narrative capacities, unlike film and literature, and I believe that this characteristic also influences the nature of photographic realism, making it precise and piercing.

This section looks at a few varieties of realism that relate to and help to shed light on the 'critical realism' treated in the dissertation. Tracing the history of realism in the visual arts, it becomes evident that there exist various kinds of realism. Indeed, the realist approach can be found in both Hellenistic Greek sculptures and seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings, as they offer a detailed portrayal of nature. Theoretically, art is a form of imitation of life, or mimesis; therefore, realism (in different degrees though) can be present in every artwork, even the earliest cave painting that dates to 10000 BP.[6] However, Realism as an aesthetic trend is primarily associated with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European painting, literature and theatre. This movement was a response to the development and propagation of positivist philosophy in Europe, Darwin's theory of evolution, and Marxist views, placing man at the centre of human knowledge (Nochlin). New nineteenth-century systems of thought in sociology and on the nature of the human put the accent on a scientific approach to understanding the world, on equal distribution of wealth among

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[6]For example, rock paintings from Libya, Algeria, Spain and France contain remarkably realistic representations of the animals.

the population, and negation of divine intervention in the civilizational progress. Thanks to quickly developing photographic and cinematic technical innovations at the beginning of the twentieth century, realism found its ultimate incarnation through the camera lens. The capacity of the apparatus to automatically register reality with minimal author's intervention offered all grounds to consider these two art genres as the most realist to date. However, as I demonstrated in chapter one, the reality which is reproduced on photographic film does not constitute an ultimate truthful representation; it is for this reason that there never was (and still there is not) a clear and unanimous vision of realism. Instead there are realisms which differ from each other by time and space, context and history, social or political implication.

Talking about pictorial Realism, Linda Nochlin defines its aim as producing a "truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life" (13). Realist painters broke free of existing schemata in artistic representation due to their "epistemological agnosticism" (45), as they believed in the external, tangible reality of actual life and of the present moment. In her definition, Nochlin insists on contemporary life: the realist movement did not privilege paintings about historical and fictional subjects, but about the things that existed in reality and could be observable here and now. This vision of realist painting entailed a new spectrum of depicted themes and subjects. Nochlin argues that Realism greatly democratised the subject matter: "The Realists placed a positive value on the depiction of the low, the humble and the commonplace, the socially dispossessed or marginal" (34), which is why famous Realist works of art include paintings of peasants, workers, servants, bar-tenders, dancers, etc—the subjects that historically had played a secondary role in art. With the advent of Realism,

an art that was reserved for the elite became everyone's domain. This aspect is key in understanding the nature of Realism: this movement did not acquire its name because of a particularly realistic portrayal of the subjects,[7] but because of the treatment of everyday reality as it truly was.

Linda Nochlin states that Realist art values were adopted by Modernism, as far as painting was concerned, with a slight difference. Instead of advocating 'truth to nature,' Modernists advocated 'truth to the nature of the materials,' or staying true "to the nature of the flat surface—and/or to the demands of one's inner 'subjective' feelings or imagination rather than to some external reality" (236). In Modernism, the truthful representation of the social and natural world gives way to emphasis on the qualities of the surface, visible in abstract and decorative art. Despite this transvaluation, Modernism remained greatly influenced by Realism's concern for contemporaneity. The essence of realism, for Nochlin, is incarnated in the phrase 'il faut être de son temps' by French caricaturist Honoré Daumier (later promulgated by Édouard Manet), which can be translated as 'you must be of your time.' From this point of view, Pop Artists of the mid-twentieth century with their Campbell Soup cans and pin-up girls can also be viewed as realists in so far as they represented the image of their time, informed by consumerism, marketing and the growing art industry.

The notion of realism that evolves around truth and objectivity should be regarded through the prism of the global art context that greatly nuances what can be defined as realist representation. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Edward Weston, along with other photographers such as Berenice Abbott and Walker Evans, embraced 'straight' photography. Berenice Abbott defined straight photography as "precision in the rendering and definition of detail and materials,

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[7]On the contrary: sometimes Realist paintings were accused of the non-realistic execution; for instance, Courbet's *The Stone Breakers* was criticised for "the 'flatness' of his composition," and Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, for "coarseness of paint handling" ("Realism Movement Overview and Analysis").

surfaces and textures; instantaneity of observation; acute and faithful presentation of what has actually existed in the external world at a particular time and place" (Abbott 157). Nevertheless, straight photography did not always imply a high degree of documentation. In his review of the Photo-Secession exhibit at the Carnegie Institute, Sadakichi Hartmann suggested that photographers need to "compose the picture which you intend to take so well that the negative will be absolutely perfect and in need of no or but slight manipulation" (Hartmann). Therefore, despite retouching, straight photography was considered direct, objective, and a straightforward means of artistic expression, as opposed to painting and drawing, as well as pictorialist photography—an approach that privileges the manipulation of a photographic print to achieve a painter-like quality rather than the documentation of reality. The renowned Group f/64, which included eleven American photographers, also emerged in opposition to Pictorialism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their style was distinguished by a simple and direct representation they deemed 'pure,' and they aspired to create work independent of any ideological and aesthetic conventions (Heyman). Modernism gave photographers more agency, leading them to experiment with selected frames, mise-en-scène, angles, and so forth.

Similarly to the Modernists, who invented a new style in response to pictorialist tradition, the late and post-Soviet photographers broke with the conventions of Socialist Realism, no longer accentuating Soviet ideology, and developed their own individual expression—a new realism, characterised by a critical vision of reality and exploration of the limits of photography, both thematic and aesthetic. Many of them, such as Igor Mukhin, Sergey Leontiev, Yuri Rybchinsky, Valery Shchekoldin, and Triva group, work in the documentary style[8] that became to a certain

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[8]Others, such as Vladimir Kupriyanov, Igor Savchenko, Boris Mikhailov, Evgeny Pavlov, among others, combine

extent synonymous of truthful and objective representation. However, documentary photographs are just as constructed as any other image, and they must all transmit a particular rhetoric that the author-photographer aimed to express.

Sergey Leontiev, for example, in his *Study in Hard Photography* (1987-1991), documented people walking down a famous Moscow street called the Arbat at very close range and at night, using direct flash. Due to this technique, the photographer achieved the effect of hardness (hence the name of the series). Followed by a spotlight, Leontiev's subjects look like the victims of an investigation, their bodies and faces hidden from view. The contrasting background, usually dark, accentuates their facial expressions which often transmits bewilderment or even fear. *Study in Hard Photography* is sometimes considered to be part of a dialogue with Igor Mukhin, whose images of underground rockers and punks (see Figure 4.7) depended almost entirely on composition and decisive moment. Contrary to this approach, Sergey Leontiev wanted to capture the energy that emanates from the photographed subjects, because, according to him, even without paying attention to the composition and authorial expression, the photograph can still be intense (Leontiev and Vanina). His method also comprised choosing people who do not consider the photographic process as an artistic act.

For instance, in the photograph where a young lady is hiding behind a man's arm (the upper photograph in Figure 2.4), she covers almost half her face while looking directly at the camera with mistrust, as if it were a weapon. At the centre of the photograph there are her eyes, black as night, with two white dots—a reflection of the flash. Parallel to them on the right there are two white dots in the darkness, probably left by car lights. These white dots add a sentimental

documentation with experimental techniques. I will examine these in the following chapters.
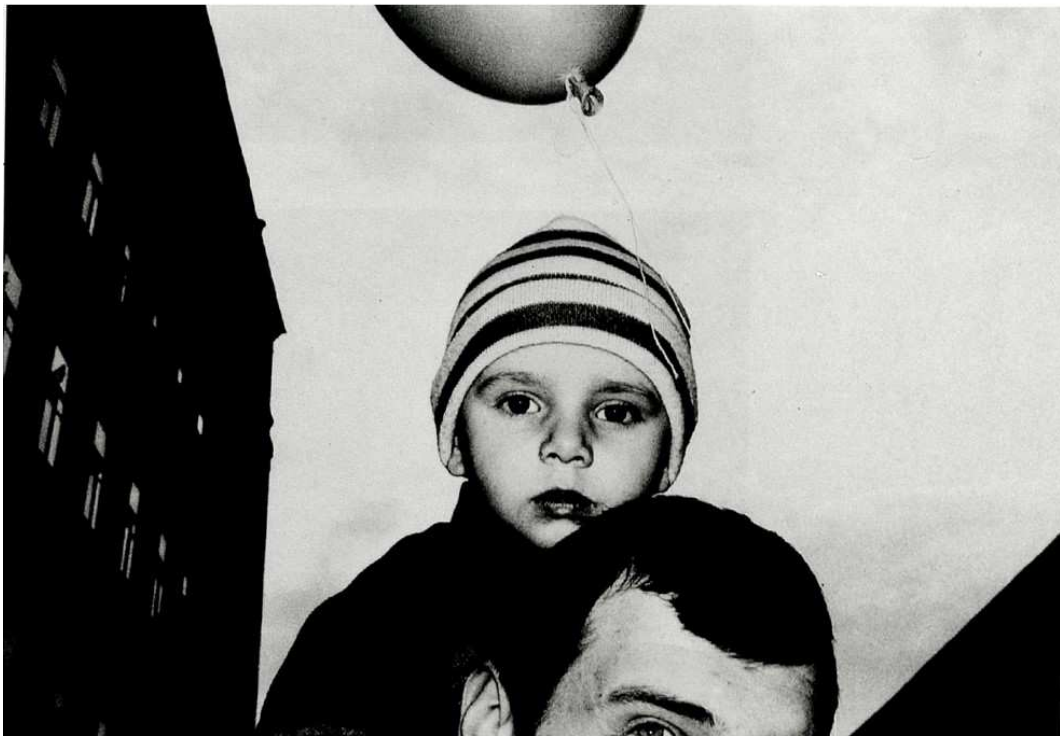
Figure 2.4: Sergey Leontiev, untitled from the series *Study in Hard Photography*, 1991. Gelatin silver prints using a point source enlarger, 57 x 38.5 cm each. Location unknown. Copyright Sergey Leontiev, used with permission.

meaning to the photograph, representing little lights of hope in the midst of 'hard' obscurity. The photograph is divided into sections by oblique lines of man's coat, the girl's coat, some buildings seen in the majority of photos in the series *Study in Hard Photography*, and other objects. The photograph with a boy sitting on his father's shoulders (the lower photograph in Figure 2.4) is also divided into triangles: apartment buildings on the left and on the right and the triangle of man and boy. The lower part of the father's face is cut by the frame of the photograph, and the balloon which the boy is holding continues the shape of his head. Despite the balloon and boy's elevated position, his look is serious, as if affected by the hardness of the photograph. The series strikes with the daring proximity of the camera and flash to the portrayed subjects, the precision and reflection of all tiny details, such as wrinkles on the skin, texture of hair, fabric of clothes, etc. Thanks to this technique, Sergey Leontiev treated ordinary unknown people like celebrities, and elevated the marginal subjects to the level of artistic characters.

In an attempt to define documentary photography, James Guimond talks about a "neutral" manner separated from any values which distinguishes the representation of subjects (Guimond 8). This means that before the camera, every subject is equally important and that their image does not offer any judgement. Thus, the poor and the sick became just as interesting for photographers in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, as other trivial objects. In the early '80s, unusual objects such as TV-sets, kitchen utensils, furniture, and others began appearing in photographic art. As I will show in the following examples, a modest still life, an odd form of objects, and a contrast of light and shadow on the wall acquired the same level of relevance and significance for the nonconformist photographers as portraits of communist leaders for the socialist realist painters.

For instance, Alexander Sliussarev who called himself an 'analytical' photographer, used various kinds of domestic objects, such as lamps, glass jars, plastic bags, water pipes, tables and chairs (see Figure 2.5). The spatial arrangement of the photographed objects alludes to abstract paintings in the tradition of Piet Mondrian or Kazimir Malevich, where forms and colours generate a sort of geometrical dictatorship. As far as Sliussarev's images are concerned, the colour aspect is absent, as he worked exclusively with black and white photography, so his geometry is highlighted even more by the contrast of light and shadow, and by the objects' *faktura*. Thus, the visual abstraction is attained thanks to concrete objects that surround every one of us every single day. This method opens a dialogue between two opposite notions, that of 'high art' and 'low, everyday art,' lowering abstraction to the level of kitchen utensils and vice versa elevating the trivial to the level of artistic sophistication. These two spheres must co-exist in Sliussarev's images, as they are connected by the inescapable photographic realism. Still life, according to Sliussarev, acquires a new meaning, neither corresponding to the traditional description of still life in classic art nor representing the commercial still life used in contemporary advertising. Instead, it expresses "the real life around us yet to be discovered" (Sliussarev). The attachment to concrete objects does not allow abstraction completely to invade the photographs, and the visual geometry is constantly brought back to reality due to the presence of a referent. Realism in these photographs plays the role of an anchor, which reminds that the real is the basis of all, even the most abstract, art.[9]

The same principle of elevating the status of mundane objects to the level of artwork is

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[9]I could not find any information whether his aforementioned images were exhibited and published other than on internet. His personal website states that Alexander Sliussarev had rather difficult relationships with the viewer because of incomprehension that he encountered during some exhibitions. This is the reason why he preferred to show his photographs by himself in more intimate environment, and tried to avoid big exhibitions and publications. After long investigations, the actual size and location of these images remain unknown to me.
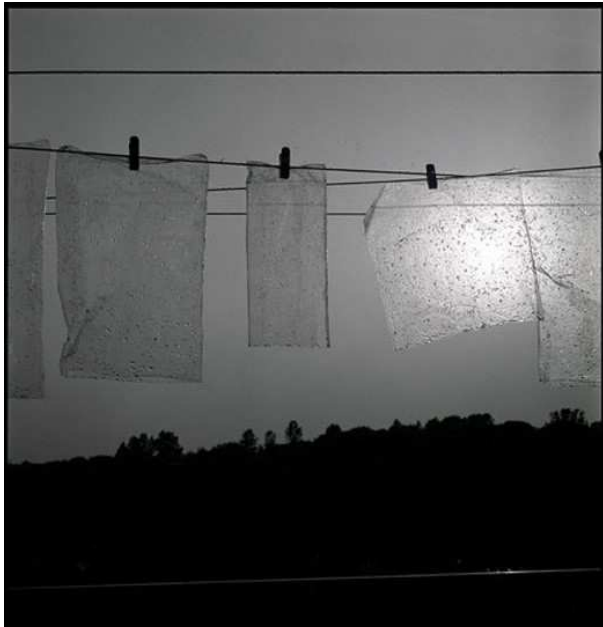
Figure 2.5: Alexander Sliussarev, untitled from the series *Fili*, 1982. Gelatin silver prints. Location unknown. Copyright Maxim Sliussarev, used with permission.

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evident in Edward Weston's photography, already mentioned above. When he photographed kelp, cabbage leaves or toilets, his primary concern was the aesthetic quality of the depicted objects. Weston's work emphasises the play of forms and shadows, or geometry in the photographic space. He achieves almost mathematical precision by revealing the contrast of lines and shapes, organised in a system of visual codes. In his famous work *Excusado*, Weston's objective is to reach a point where a simple toilet can be compared to a classic work of art, such as Michelangelo's *David*: the toilet occupies almost all the space of the photographic frame, and impresses by its "frontality, stasis, clarity, monumentality, and a certain aloof porcelain coldness" (Aikin 397). Such a privilege of form over content in Edward Weston's photographs testifies to an acknowledgement that photographic realism can annul objectivity, instead it is subject to a unique artist's vision and a historical context.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau states that in addition to historical circumstances framing the production and reception of documentary photography, photographic language is itself a product of certain political and social agendas, and thus its meaning is made thanks to the codes that the entire society shares and understands (Solomon-Godeau). As I explicitly pointed out in chapter one, the mechanisms that participate in the construction of photographic meaning also include the author, the institutions, and the audience. Besides these, documentary photography, despite its seeming truth-value, is affected by historical context more than any other genre. Moreover, according to Martha Rosler, "demands for 'straight information' without interpretation are unrealistic, for there is no voice from outside particular human communities" (Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001* 230). Considering that most documentary photographs treat anthro-

pological themes, they can never be neutral, or transparent, and this demonstrates once again that realism does not necessarily mean realistic representation, but its primary focus on social reality.

The absence of neutrality in photographic realism challenges photography's ethical aspect. When a photographer treats the topics of poverty, precarious living conditions and social marginality, a dilemma always emerges regarding whether he or she has a moral right to document people's misery, since the breakdown of taboos and broadening of social norms put artists in the situation of almost all-permittedness, offering extraordinary possibilities for art creation. Moreover, contemporary culture is dominated by consumerism and profit, both of which guide towards their artistic choices. Therefore, the question of photographic ethics (and when taking a photograph is appropriate) continues to be the subject of debates today.[10] For example, Boris Mikhailov is often accused of being immoral, because he photographed nude homeless people in the streets of Kharkov in exchange for money or food.[11] Or consider Valery Shchekoldin's series from the Soviet drunk tank and prison—how to judge whether the photographer had the right to take pictures of incarcerated and unconscious people who are under the effect of alcohol or drugs, as it touches upon the questions not only of moral responsibility that the photographer takes but also of future dissemination.

It is in the period of the late 1980s and 1990s that the West discovered Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian nonconformist photographers, which boosted the number of foreign publications.[12] What attracted the Western critics and publishers was a new kind of photographic truth that differed

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[10]On this topic, read W.J.T. Mitchell's "The Ethics of Form in the Photographic Essay," M. Rosler's "Post-Documentary, Post-Photography"? (2001), S. Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), to name but a few.

[11]Matthias Christen argued that Mikhailov's "paying poor people for photographs of their naked bodies ... amounts to exploitation, if not pornography or prostitution" (Christen 56).

[12]I enumerated some of them in the introduction.

from the canonical socialist realist representation. According to some photographers' testimonies, at that time it was extremely easy to exhibit and publish photographs in Western magazines and books, as art curators and publishers were interested in any kind of photographic prints that directly responded to the Soviet or socialist realist era (Pyatkovka, "Fotograf Roman Pyatkovka: "Nado liubit' vsekh, dazhe plokhikh fotografov". Interv'iu. Ukrainskaia fotografiia"). Thus, photographic realism served to demonstrate that the Soviet Union had turned out to be a failed experiment. Documentation of its marginal sides became the guarantee of obtaining public acclaim in the West, as the new kind of photographic truth challenged the legacy of the socialist realist doctrine. Before I closely analyse the difference between socialist realist and critical realist photography, I will address the question of a realist representation from the perspective of literary critics who have engaged in political and epistemological problematization of the term.

2.3 Definition of realism in literary criticism

When thinking about realism in photography, a comparison with painting seems inevitable, since both are examples of spatial art representing a certain scene on a two-dimensional surface inside a frame. The principles of composition and the way viewers experience time and space depicted in photography and painting are identical. However, photography can be treated as a form of writing—writing with light—since etymologically the word 'photography' means, from Greek, light ('*photo*') and writing or drawing ('*graphos*'). From this perspective, photography is akin to literature. In literary theory, discussions of realism are numerous, as it was the subject of long debates among European and north-American thinkers during the 1920s and 1930s. Defenders of realist

literature, such as Georg Lukács, claimed the superiority of this style due to its direct engagement with current societal issues. On the other hand, the defenders of Modernism and particularly Lukács's opponents in the discussion of expressionism, such as Theodor Adorno, considered that realism limits the stylistic richness of literary creation, which is not beneficial for the development of world literature.[13] Regardless of their point of view, critics who developed theoretical models of realism belonged mainly to the Marxist school, which meant they regarded realism through the prism of class struggle. In this chapter, this approach will help to outline the features of realist and socialist realist representation. The objective is to define the differences between realist movements, including classic realism as exemplified by realist bourgeois literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, socialist realism in the Soviet (especially Stalinist) era, and, lastly, the contemporary realism revitalised by late and post-Soviet photographers. Tracing the path of realism through these movements will allow an understanding of the subversive character of the studied photography and its establishment as an artistic medium in modern-day Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

Georg Lukács argued that realism is the most important literary style, as it gives an objective and complete historical picture of reality. For Lukács, modernist literature is primarily associated with a subjective and expressive relation to reality, which equals to "attenuation of actuality" (Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* 25), while realism describes it in full objectivity. The most important feature for modernist writers is absolutization of form. Lukács criticized modernist writers for their usage of stylistic novelties as the goal of literature, since in modernist novels, as a rule, the accent is placed more upon inventing literary styles and techniques

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[13]See the collection of essays on realism and modernism in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Verso, 1980.

than conceiving well-thought content, which results in poor story lines. According to Lukács, modernism's view of the world is "static and sensational," but realism's view of the world is "dynamic and developmental" (19), thus realist literature is more useful to society as it represents a platform of reflection of everyday life by offering a narrative with mimetic description of reality. In realism, Lukács argued, content determines form and not vice versa, meaning that it develops a rich and well-thought out story line.

Lukács's writings reflect his concerns regarding form and content in literature, the main reasons for his criticism. Debates over form and content in Soviet photography took place almost instantaneously in the 1930s, when Lukács was accused of formalism. As I mentioned already, Soviet authorities accused artists and photographers such as Dziga Vertov and Alexander Rodchenko of paying more attention to formal solutions rather than content in their art. Because of the battle against formalism in the 1930s, images or series of images that narrated stories prevailed in Soviet photography, with the visible accent on photographic content. However, already in the 1960s, Soviet photographers, both official and underground, start to experiment with form, which is due to a partial democratisation of art, and this time the debates over form and content did not repeat themselves. Formalism in photography, which is expressed through so-called absolutization of form, can be found in Modernism, Surrealism and Pictorialism[14]—three styles where visual and aesthetic qualities dominate much more over the subject matter. As for the rest of photographic practices, formal and thematic qualities are always present, although often it is difficult to distinguish which one preponderates, due to the double nature of photography as evidence and aestheticisation of

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[14]Berenice Abbott defined Surrealism and Pictorialism as two anti-realist photographic styles which could not be identified with objectivity and truth (Weissman).

reality.

Because of its special attitude toward human interactions with the world, realist literature, according to Lukács, treats themes that are existential for people:

> Great realism, therefore, does not portray an immediately obvious aspect of reality but one which is permanent and objectively more significant, namely man with the whole range of his relations to the real world, above all those which outlast mere fashion. Over and above that, it captures tendencies of development that only exist incipiently and so have not yet had the opportunity to unfold their entire human and social potential. (Lukács, Realism in the Balance 48)

Realist literature, following from this, is concerned primarily with socially and historically conditioned human relations, by putting man and his environment at the centre of the narrative. Due to its objective and meticulous attention to detail, realism can portray even concealed aspects of society that lay under the surface of the social world. Lukács focuses on the invisible things that realist writers uncover without describing them; this "deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society" (45) is the purpose of realist literature as it provides answers to the questions that readers ask about life and reality.

The camera records all details belonging to the photographed scene, but besides the *studium* that a photograph displays along with historical and social context, it also captures invisible things such as the psychological profile of people as seen through their photographic portraits. Just like the physical description of a man in a book tells the reader about his character, a photograph can transmit inner qualities and feelings that do not necessarily appear in the general setting of the photograph. In the series *Games Children Play* (1991-2010), Evgeny Mokhorev documented adolescents from St Petersburg revealing their childish psychology in an adult world. The photograph *Smoking Adolescents* (see Figure 2.6) depicts two young boys standing and looking directly

at the camera. This gesture, along with the cigarettes that they do not even try to hide, tells about their courage and audacity. These boys who are probably growing up under the influence of the street more than their parents, want to appear ready to face adulthood. Yet, their meagre bodies look fragile and their faces naive, when juxtaposed with the wall in the background. There is recognisable aggressive and rebellious graffiti on this wall: "Sex Pistols [forever]," "smash your brain out bastard," "who could guess," among others. This wall with written words, as Valery Savchuk claims, represents "the underside of what contemporary children imagine" (Savchuk 185). At the same time, the wall is positioned as the central object, especially because the boy on the left is slightly out of focus. This positioning gives the impression that the wall plays the principal role in the photograph and predetermines the fate of its other subjects. The relationship between corporeal fragility and concrete construction creates an invisible hierarchy testifying to the helplessness of adolescent self before the dictatorship of institutions.

It is interesting to notice a slight difference in the Eastern European and Western perceptions of Mokhorev's images. In one interview, the photographer said that in Russia, his photographs are documentary, as they represent a familiar atmosphere and recognisable everyday life. However, Western critics tend to think of Mokhorev's images are staged, and that his subjects are professional actors in successfully reconstructed interiors à la Italian new realism (Mokhorev and Dubrovin). This confirms the idea that photographic realism is approached and evaluated differently depending on the cultural context of the location in which photographs are exhibited.

If Lukács's approach to realism is documentary and sociological, considering the importance that he attached to content and social significance of realist works, then Bertolt Brecht's

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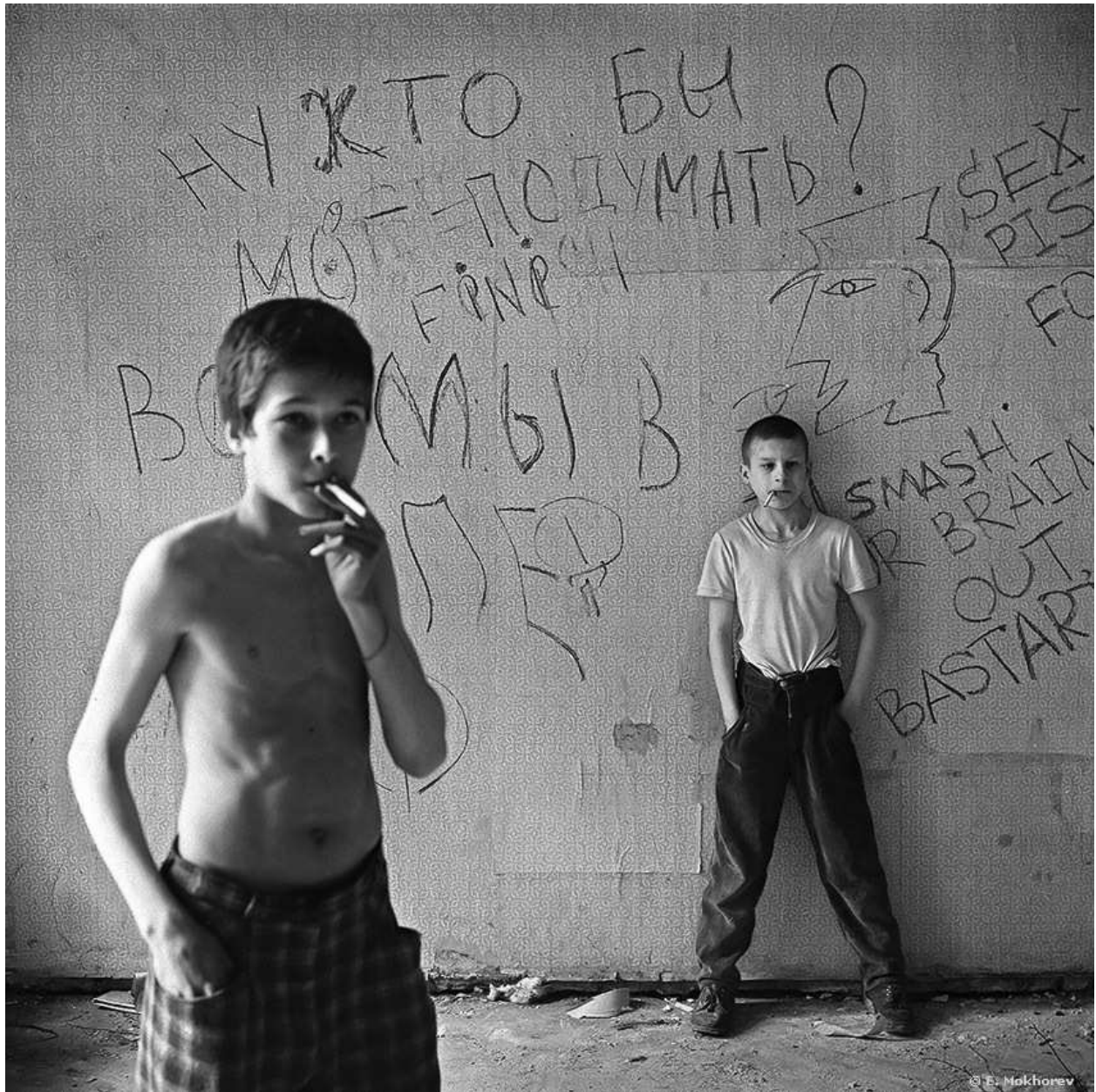
Figure 2.6: Evgeny Mokhorev, *Smoking Adolescents*, 1991. Gelatin silver print, 40 x 40 cm. Nailya Alexander Gallery, New York. Copyright Evgeny Mokhorev, used with permission.

approach is scientific, as what counted most for him was realism's ability to showcase societal development and keep pace with its own time. Brecht emphasised that the notion of realism should not be limited to the question of form, but that it should offer a variety of methodological criteria:

> Realistic means: discovering the casual complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction of it. (Brecht 82)

This definition is rather broad, and somewhat echoes Roman Jakobson's differentiation of the meanings that the concept of realism can have.[15] Realism, as Bertolt Brecht saw it, can be expressed in many ways, both objectively and imaginatively; thus, what defines realism is not the similarity with the realist works of classic authors, such as Balzac and Tolstoy, but its own time, which means that realism not only reflects the characters and social structures of a particular time and space (where the story takes place/was written), but that it uses narrative methods proper to its historical and literary contexts. For example, Brecht considered his works such as the novel *The Business Affairs of Mr Julius Caesar* and the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* to be realist, all the while admitting that they were not written in a classic realist way, but that they integrated diaristic writing and montage (which are typical techniques of modernist literature) in order to provide a "firm grasp of reality," making them in Brecht's eyes realist works.

Photography from this point of view represents a perfectly realist style, as it offers an image of its own actuality, of a unique time and space in which the camera's shutter was opened. However, a photograph reveals as much as it hides, and the extent of realism in photography de-

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[15]In his essay "On Realism in Art," Jakobson distinguished four traditions in defining realism which depended on author's and reader's subjective attitude to stylistic solutions of a literary work (Jakobson, *Language in Literature*).

pends on the amount of revealed and hidden nuances that are controlled by all the above-mentioned mechanisms. For example, socialist realist photography reveals human interactions in relation to the communist agenda, such as the development or establishment of socialism, struggles with ideological enemies, the glorification of Soviet leaders, etc. In so much as it emphasises these things, socialist realism equally censures the sides of the society that are not desirable for the positive image of the Soviet Union, such as disability, poverty, disaster, and so on. In late and post-Soviet photography, the emphasis has shifted to the depiction of the silenced and marginal subjects, of the human life that exists in parallel to the Soviet discourse.

For instance, in the works of Vladimir Sokolaev, Vladimir Vorobiëv, and Aleksandr Trofimov who form the group Triva, Soviet discourse threads through all their photographs. However, it is not overtly present through communist symbols and visual codes like in the socialist realist photographs or *sots-art* movement, which used them to satirise the Soviet cultural policy. Instead, in Triva's images the Soviet discourse is invisible, yet everything shows that it is there. The photograph of three women sitting on a platform for political and social campaigns depicts how human lives are inscribed into the discursive framework of the Soviet state (see Figure 2.7), like theatre actors are put on the stage. Indeed, the platform represents a stage with oval edging that emphasises the women's role in the 'show.' On the left and right sides of the construction "[We] will realize the decisions of the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union" and "[We] support and approve the program of peace" are both written. These phrases, although commonly plastered upon building walls, billboards, and newspapers and transmitting similar messages, look rather irrelevant beside the sitting ladies. The three women appear very distant from the political

Figure 2.7: Vladimir Sokolaev, *The Agitprop Platform on Khitarov Street in Novokuznetsk*, 1983. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow. Copyright Khristina Sokolaeva, used with permission.

agenda and socialist education; their postures and faces expressing total indifference to the Soviet ideological struggle, as they have already supported and realised everything they could during their youth.

Triva's photographs, when taken together, constitute a multifaceted body of work comparable to an epic novel. They treat a vast variety of topics: youth and oldness, leisure and labour, ideology and art; they give, or at least pretend to give a full objective image of the Russian society. It is nothing other than a manifestation of realism, an image of a described reality characterised by its totality. Writing about Tolstoy's novels, particularly *War and Peace*, Georg Lukács uses the expression "totality of objects" which means immediate, spontaneous and palpable form of narrative

offering a realist representation of reality (Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* 154). This totality of objects is present in Triva's photographs through the striking variety of their topics, as if they wanted to cover all aspects of Soviet reality in the city of Novokuznetsk with no exceptions. Photographers such as Valery Shchekoldin claim that Triva's works had an invaluable influence on the conception of photographic truth, because the reality they photographed did not correspond to the socialist realist staged happiness, and thus appeared more sincere and more life-like (Shchekoldin, "Nekrolog prekrasnoi epokhe: Na smert' Vladimira Sokolaeva"). Due to the Party control and censorship that Triva group became subject to in the 1980s, it is impossible to trace the history of their photographs during this period. Sometimes their works were exhibited abroad, even without the awareness of the authors, which also complicates the traceability.

Triva's manifesto states that their objective consisted in "reportage and creation of an art photo-document of the epoch from the humanist perspective" (Sokolaev). In practice, Sokolaev, Vorobiëv, and Trofimov worked in the style of social documentary: they refused to stage and manipulate images, prioritizing the spontaneous authentic snapshot.[16] All their photographs are taken from a certain distance from the subjects, neither approaching too close nor moving away too far, offering in this way a detached vision of the subject, the vision of a stranger in a new country. This manner of taking pictures echoes the technique of estrangement, or otherwise called defamiliarisation, defined by Viktor Shklovsky in his seminal article "Art as Technique." Leo Tolstoy, as a real master of estrangement, Shkolvsky writes, "does not call a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it was perceived for the first time, while an incident is described as if it were happening for

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[16]It is for this reason that the Party judged their photographs anti-communist, despite the fact that in the official Triva manifesto, the group's objective is claimed to be propaganda of socialist life style, reflection in high art form of Soviet people's achievements in the construction of communist society, documentation of labour and everyday life of the Soviet man (Sokolaev).

the first time" (Shklovsky 6). Thus, according to Shklovsky, Tolstoy's realism is achieved due to an estranged vision of things, due to introduction of each and every object as something unfamiliar. The same principle is found in Triva's photographs: people, objects, streets are depicted in a way as if the authors want to introduce, to present them for the first time to an uninformed viewer.

The group of people sitting in a hall before a TV-set is portrayed with the same technique of estrangement (see Figure 2.8). What interests the photographers here is the act of watching television, as if they are unacquainted with this activity. It is true that often, while watching a performance or a movie in a public place, we are not aware of expressions that people around us have, because we are sitting among other spectators and our sight is directed toward the performance on the stage or screen. In this Triva photograph, this order is reversed, and we, the viewers, can discover the spectators' faces while watching TV. The TV-set itself is photographed from behind, which is also an unusual point of view, as we are accustomed to seeing the front of the screen and not its back. Such a perspective makes it so that the viewers of the photograph ignore what is shown on TV,[17] giving them the opportunity to concentrate on the audience. Thus, the photographer offers an estranged or defamiliarised image of people and TV-set, in order to look at them with new eyes, as if for the first time, which suggests a realist approach, but the one which does not neglect its aesthetic side.

Realism represents an approach that combines at the same time a rich content line with developed formal solutions. As Fredric Jameson puts it, "the ideal of realism presupposes a form of aesthetic experience which yet lays claim to a binding relationship to the real itself, that is to say, to

[17]In reality, it is the transmission of Yuri Andropov's funeral, the information that the viewers only learn from the caption

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Figure 2.8: Vladimir Sokolaev, *Transmission of Yuri Andropov's Funeral*, 1984. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow. Copyright Khristina Sokolaeva, used with permission.

those realms of knowledge and praxis which had traditionally been differentiated from the realm of the aesthetic, with its disinterested judgements and its constitution as sheer appearance" (Jameson 198). The Triva group achieved such a "disinterested judgement" recording their surroundings like observers whose goal is to objectively reflect what they see with a certain degree of aestheticisation proper to the artistic photographic image. However, in the history of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, realism has not always had these characteristics. During the Soviet Union, realism acquired the epithet "socialist" that slightly modified the definition of realistic representation.

In 1934, at the Soviet Writers' Congress, leaders in Soviet literature and art established that socialist realism would henceforth be the official doctrine in art of the Soviet Union, as it offered the system of representation which correlated the most with current needs of the Soviet society: to portray reality through the perspective of class struggle. The literature of the Soviet Union, Maxim Gorky proclaimed, must educate socialist individuality and showcase the liberation of the workers from the "man-deforming power of capitalism" (Gorky). Thus, socialist education became the first and foremost mission of art and replaced the values of objectivity and truth in realism, offering instead a didactic image of society, taken from life but always with an ideological (or ideal) message. For instance, Gorky's *Mother* which was written before the introduction of socialist realism in 1909, already has its key features. In this novel, the main character Pavel, political activist, involves his mother in the underground communist struggle. Their activity first causes Pavel's arrest and then supposedly the mother's death. The novel became programmatic in all Soviet schools as it tells the story of a mother's personal transformation, from a religious, uneducated, and limited woman into a real fighter for justice and good of oppressed people. The

mother's death for the sake of her son and their common struggle is the example of sincere devotion to socialist ideas that every citizen of the Soviet Union must have followed. Gorky's realism at the beginning of the twentieth century anticipated the character of socialist realism that official Soviet literature adopted later, this character being a realistic representation of myth:

> Myth is invention. To invent means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery, that is how we got realism. But if to the idea extracted from the given reality we add—completing the idea, by the logic of hypothesis—the desired, the possible, and thus supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is at the basis of myth and is highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way. (Gorky)

Such was socialist realist realism, if I can allow myself this tautology, in Soviet literature—romantic, mythological, designed to continue the socialist revolution and change the world for the better. The representation of reality in socialist realist photography could not be the same, as the medium possesses a mechanic apparatus of recording that is bound to the real. Thanks to its indexical quality, photography does not produce fiction, like literature. In the following section I will try to comprehend the nature of photographic realism in the socialist realist tradition that in the academic community is considered to deny the truth value and indeed be fictive (Rohrl; M. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph*). This discussion will allow to reveal how differed the representation of reality in Soviet and post-Soviet photography.

2.4   Socialist realism and reality

There is a firmly established opinion among art historians and critics that socialist realist photography of the Soviet Union had a rather difficult relationship with realism.[18] Boris Röhrl even writes that "Soviet photography has *no documentary character*, but rather propagates an ideal" and that "It can be understood as a *highly artificial* media which transmitted the perfect ideological picture to the public"[19] (Röhrl 287,288). However, I claim that these accusations are exaggerated and contradict the very nature of the photographic medium. As I determined earlier, a photograph's truth-value is influenced by the author-photographer, audience, institutions, and historical circumstances, and in case of socialist realism, the institutional power framed artistic expression more than any other factor. However, this does not make photography more artificial than other photographic styles and genres. To prove this, I will compare images taken by Soviet and foreign photographers. This will allow us to distinguish photographs of an engaged and involved accomplice of the Soviet system from an impartial and detached vision of the country, and to see how the word 'socialist' affects photographic realism.

In 1947, Robert Capa, an acclaimed American photographer, extensively documented his trip to the Soviet Union. Collected and published in the book *A Russian Journal* (Steinbeck), Capa's photographs depict a variety of themes, from everyday life to portraits of Soviet citizens, village landscapes, urban monuments and many others. This diversity struck the eye of anyone studying Soviet photography, simply because its thematic horizon was seen as limited. Capa's photographs prove his foreign outlook. Capa was interested in every single facet of Soviet life

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[18]See Boris Röhrl's *World History of Realism in Visual Arts* and Margarita Tupitsyn's *The Soviet Photograph*, to name but a few.

[19]My italics.
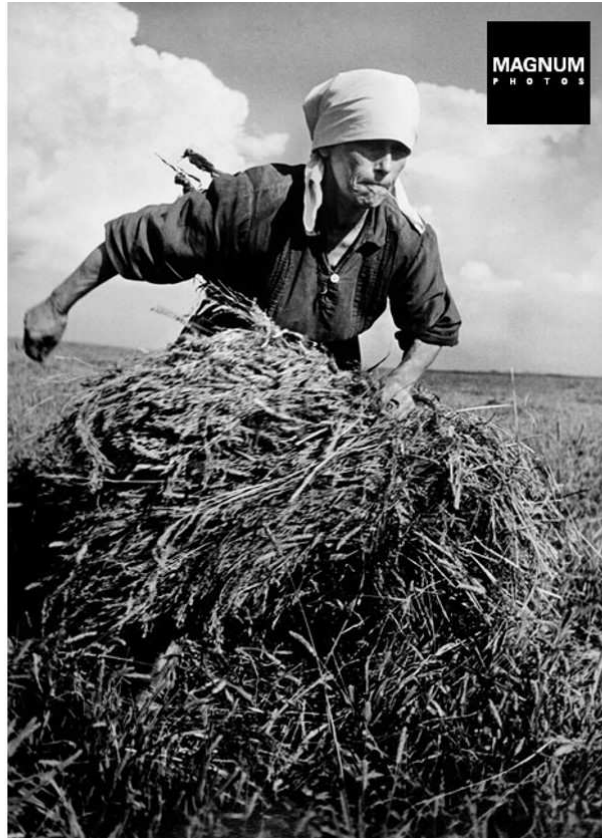
Figure 2.9: Robert Capa, *Woman Gathering a Bundle of Hay on a Collective Farm* and untitled from photographer's travel to the USSR, 1947. Gelatin silver prints. International Center of Photography, Magnum Photos, New York. Copyright Robert Capa/International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos, used with permission.

because of its exoticism, taking as many photos of various subjects as possible. Nevertheless, if we were not aware of photographer's origin, we could hardly notice the photographs belonged to someone from outside the Soviet Union. These so-called documentary photographs are subject to the author's manipulation and visual construction, as they are reminiscent of already existing particular photographic styles and movements, such as FSA and social landscape photography. The photograph of the woman with wheat ears (left, Figure 2.9) echoes Jean-François Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857): the woman is depicted as a hero of labour, with her strong hands holding the bundle of hay, her body expressing force and determination. In another photograph, two women are dancing at a public holiday (right, Figure 2.9); one of them is looking directly at the photographer, as if the entire scene is being staged.[20]

The same subjects and techniques are present in both Robert Capa's works and the works of Soviet realist photographers, except one: the theme of decay or destruction. Capa does not hesitate to photograph ruined buildings and military barricades which still remained untouched after the Second World War; he captures the trauma of the war as any curious documentary photographer would do, except the Soviet one, as the latter was supposed to portray only the positive side of life. If Robert Capa's approach is to portray individual fates against the socio-political backdrop, then Henri Cartier-Bresson focuses on the role of the collective in the Soviet life. Cartier-Bresson travelled to the Soviet Union several times, in the 1950s and 1970s. The photographs from his first trip were published in the French weekly *Paris Match* as the first photo-reportage from a country "shrouded in secrecy." Despite the documentary style, his images seem less neutral and

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[20]It is worth mentioning that there is discussion about Robert Capa's staging of his famous photographs, particularly *Death of a loyalist militiaman* (1936), which greatly undermines the veracity of his documentary works.

more constructed than Capa's. As Jean-Pierre Montier claimed, many of them even appear as examples of socialist realism (Montier). Cartier-Bresson documented sport parades, workers at the plants, customers at the department store, the Moscow subway, parks and museums, as well as people in the streets—the most traditional themes in the Soviet photography (maybe he was afraid to deviate from these topics so he could not participate in the anti-communist propaganda?). And his photographs look very similar to the photographs taken in the Soviet Union by the Soviet photographers, which means that the same principles of photographic construction were used.

For example, the photograph of the agricultural fair (see Figure 2.10) depicts people standing and looking forward, some of them directly at the camera. These are primarily farmers or workers of the collective farms, or *kolkhoz*, who came to Moscow to showcase their achievements and report back about productivity. The two women and the man in the foreground who wear medals on the chest are war heroes, their tired faces are forever marked by the hardships of the war. The woman in the third row, trying to see something upward, lacks some teeth in her mouth. On her right stands an officer wearing a cap whose eyes are directed at someone from the mob instead of straight ahead; is he a spy or KGB agent? The two men on the left hand side of the image are well-dressed and look like politicians; one of them has a sheet of paper under his arm; will he deliver a speech? All these different people who yesterday were simple villagers, today are united at the agricultural fair in Moscow. Their work is celebrated, praised, rewarded, and this is what attracts Cartier-Bresson—yesterday's unknown soldier becomes today's hero, and consequently, the protagonist of the photograph. In Soviet photography, the same principle is used: the depiction of masses and collectives is privileged, in order to emphasise equal participation of each

Figure 2.10: Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Agricultural Fair* from his trip to the Soviet Union, 1954. Gelatin silver print. Copyright Henri Cartier-Bresson Estate/Magnum Photos, used with permission.

individual in the process of construction of the communist state. Like socialist realist photography, Cartier-Bresson's works function as a big social portrait that transmits the ideological aspect of Soviet life.

The examples of socialist realist photography below communicate the same feeling of constructedness around an ideological agenda. Staging and posing represented widely spread practices in Soviet photography, which helped construct images, appropriate for publication. However, some aspects of life did not necessitate additional setting and posing, such as sport parades, scientific laboratories, labour at factories or collective farms, etc. Sport parades took place every

summer in order to promote a healthy lifestyle among citizens. From the time of Rodchenko's experiments and throughout all the period of the Soviet reign, these sport parades attracted photographers because of their mass character, the movement, the sophisticated geometry of forms and the participants' athletic bodies. The parades were thoroughly rehearsed and accurately planned, resembling a big theatrical show, allowing for impromptu photographs. Alexander Batanov's photograph of the physical culture parade performance by the team from Belarusian Republic is one of thousands of similar photographs of sport parades taken by different photographers including Henri Cartier-Bresson. It depicts the apogee of the event—a giant pyramid made of athletes (see Figure 2.12). The pyramid strikes by its geometrical complexity and precision of figural execution; it is evident that such a performance demanded a long preparation and multiple rehearsals. All the athletes are dressed in the same way, the similarity being the synonym of social equality. With the pyramid in the centre, this photograph does not possess any original technique. Its function is the documentation of human physical genius.

The photograph of children sitting at the school desk and writing a collective letter is another example of a staged scene in the socialist realist tradition (see Figure 2.11). The children are thinking about the content of their letter, two of the boys are looking at their leader who probably dictates or gives ideas. Behind them on the wall, there is a painting of Lenin helping a young girl do her homework for school. In this way, the photographed children at the foreground represent the illustration of Lenin's fight against illiteracy, which remains present in the background. The topic of education is repeated twice in this photograph in the form of direct language and metalanguage. Both the thinking children and the smiling portrayal of Lenin demonstrate how important it is to

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Figure 2.11: Unidentified Photographer, A New Children's Home for Orphans of the Men Killed in the Last War, August 1946. Gelatin silver print. Sovfoto Archive, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie. Image courtesy the Sovfoto Archive at the MacLaren Art Centre.

be well-educated to build an ideal Soviet society. Although this photograph is likely staged, it does not represent a false document. The Soviet leaders introduced a system of compulsory education for children in all of the Soviet republics, and also adult Sunday schools, which greatly reduced the illiteracy rate, so the photograph under discussion does not treat an unreal theme. It is not objective in the sense that it does not capture a unique spontaneous moment in the life of these children, instead it depicts an organised yet natural scene at school. Staging adds to the image an extra level of representation; the photographic realism is used in order to convey a didactic picture. The Soviet photograph depicts a staged moment, but it does not mean that this moment did not occur.

Judging from Robert Capa's and Henri Cartier-Bresson's photographs of the Soviet Union, there is no difference in realism when comparing Soviet and foreign photography. Instead, the perception of real as realist or idealist depends on the subject matter. Socialist realist photography is born out of the awareness of the class struggle; therefore, it is concerned primarily with the depiction of the manifestations of socialism.[21] It cannot be considered fake because it shows the socialist reality. Photographs of parades, public places, cultural institutions, and construction sites do not add an extra-artificiality, however, and can only be regarded as propaganda because they depict the positive sides, the development, and the way towards socialist future. Photographs cannot be propagandistic by nature; they become so only when they are used in a specific context, often accompanied by text. On the other hand, officialdom did not want to see the discourse of destruction and ruin caused by war, political prisoners in the Gulag, Stalin's terror, subjects which

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[21]The guarantee to publish a photograph in the press or to make it enter an archive was the reproduction of Party sanctioned themes and subjects. The thematic restriction became the problem of socialist realist photography, which made the viewer believe in its propagandistic nature.

Figure 2.12: Alexander Batanov, *USSR Physical Culture Parade Performance by Byelorussian Republic*, 1954. Gelatin silver print. Sovfoto Archive, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie. Image courtesy the Sovfoto Archive at the MacLaren Art Centre.

may potentially be shameful for the society, as they do not give positive image of the Soviet Union. This is the reason why the Party-sanctioned photographers omitted these themes, but it does not mean that they did not exist in reality.

The aforementioned and other Soviet photographs exemplify an approach that creates a distance between representation and reality. With all involved rehearsals, staging, and posing, photography turns into a mimetic copy of a mimetic copy of reality.[22] This incites the viewer to question not only the veracity of documentation of reality, but also the reality itself, because if the depicted life is full of myths, then photography reflects these myths like a mirror. As Boris Röhrl writes, according to socialist realism, "'Reality' has to be interpreted by the artist in relation to class struggle, for it represents the main motivating force behind history" (Röhrl 257). Thus, the image translates the photographer's vision and interpretation of reality. Class struggle became the second lens of the photographer through which he or she had to depict the *socialist* reality. This thought echoes Georg Lukács's writings: "Socialist realism differs from critical realism, not only in being based on a concrete socialist perspective, but also in using this perspective to describe the forces working towards socialism *from the inside*" (Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* 93). Soviet photography is, therefore, a portraiture of socialism in a socialist way for socialist peoples.

It is then perfectly possible to claim that socialist realist photographers aspired to depict reality as truthfully as they could, simply because the truth they believed in was ideologically conditioned. If we compare the photographic 'objectivity' of what is considered to be documentary

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[22]This inscribes into the tradition of hyperrealist or photorealist art, where images constitute the representation of reality's copy.

photographers from the West such as Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson to the ideological constructed 'subjectivity' of Soviet photographers, regarded as non-documentary, we can notice that both photographic approaches are concerned with documenting actuality in the sense that they depict real people in their natural environment. As Jean-François Chevrier claimed, documentary "denotes a value of *actuality*, which first refers to the simple fact that the virtual image has been actualised (put down, printed, fixed), then to the fact that it renders visual data which is contemporary with the shooting of the picture" (Chevrier 47). From this point of view, the posing and staging of photographs does not prevent them of being documents of their time, i.e. having documentary nature.

The main reason for the general opinion about the artificiality of socialist realist photography seems to be based in their constructedness. However, the question of staging which has existed since the invention of photography was never really taboo for documentary photographers. According to the principles of documentary that critic Beaumont Newhall established in the 1930s, a photograph should represent a pure and direct record of reality, but that does not imply the absence of preliminary work to set up a photograph (Newhall). Various photographers, besides those already mentioned above, who are recognised as documentarians, systematically resort to staging (e.g. Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Berenice Abbott, to name but a few), simultaneously trusting in the objective quality of their photographs. Transforming a photograph into a 'tableau,' Jeff Wall arrived at the culminating point of this practice, as his work *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* was staged and redone hundreds of times in order to achieve, out of chosen and superimposed elements, the final 'perfect' picture with a documentary claim. When a photograph assumes a bigger

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role, as in the case of Jeff Wall's work, it ceases to be a photograph—it transforms into a hybrid. Socialist realist photography also has this hybrid character, being on one hand, documentation of socialist state, and a construction of the 'perfect' picture on the other.

This is evident in the photograph *Moldova Harvest* by the Soviet photographer Sergey Shimansky from the Moldovan Socialist Republic (see Figure 2.13), which depicts a woman standing in the fields. The composition of this image, foregrounding the kolkhoz woman with a jar, looks perfectly constructed, like a well-elaborated painting. The photo's geometry emphasises her slim and healthy body and her smiling face, while workers toil behind haystacks in the field. Although transmitting the feeling of happiness, peace, and prosperity, this photograph was taken in 1937—the year when Stalin's Great Purges started. Shimansky's photograph confirms the historical narrative of the socialist realist doctrine, where happy people are working together to build a socialist state, but also where the true events of the Stalinist politics are omitted. Nevertheless, *Moldova Harvest* is an undeniable document of its time: it depicts the agricultural development produced by the Soviet 'machine,' despite other historical circumstances.

Soviet officialdom established the doctrine of Socialist realism in 1934, primarily in relation to literary methodology. However, Boris Röhrl argues that the visual conception of socialist realist photography was already present in the 1920s in the works of Boris Ignatovich, Max Alpert, Semyon Fridlyand and Arkady Shaikhet (Röhrl 288), which is to say before the enunciation of Socialist realism itself. This gives me grounds to believe that the notion of socialist realist photography does not necessarily refer to the thematic direction and constructedness of the image. Soviet photography was identified as socialist realist (with this negative connotation that critics usually

Figure 2.13: Sergey Shimansky, *Moldova Harvest*, 1937. Gelatin silver print, 39.7 x 58.7 cm. Nailya Alexander Gallery, New York. Image courtesy Nailya Alexander Gallery.

ascribe to it) because it depicted the socialist country, and because it represented the socialist development that took place in reality before the camera. The notion of socialist realist photography, therefore, is a construct itself, as its *raison d'être* was nothing more than the documentation of the Soviet Union's reality. Any photographer, be it Alexander Rodchenko, Max Alpert, Robert Capa or Henri Cartier-Bresson, could produce socialist realist photography, because as long as the photographer took pictures on the Soviet soil, his or her photographs would have been a reflection of socialist reality.

Yet, in the 1980s, while the Soviet rule was still in power, photographs were no longer as overtly socialist as before, especially those taken by nonconformist photographers. Thematic and aesthetic changes, such as portraiture of the everyday, humble and ordinary people, taboo topics, recorded in a direct and unbiased way, emerged in photography, pointing out the reaffirmation of realism. On the other hand, photographed reality itself becomes subject to considerable transformations, mostly with the advent of perestroika and dissolution of the Soviet Union. After 1991, photographic works recorded socialism not as the ideological ruling machine, but as the remains of a ruined past. The series *Soviet Monuments* by Igor Mukhin that I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter is a telling example of this phenomenon. Also, the sudden establishment of the capitalist system that pushed people to quickly adapt to new living conditions, and made the first victims of the socio-political shifts, appears in photographs as a foreign element which infiltrated the post-Soviet countries in order to destroy them from the inside. Such are the characteristics of realism that the studied photographers demonstrated in their art. This type of realism, contrary to the socialist realism, depicts the reality from a critical point of view, questioning the representa-

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tion of ideology and its impact on everyday life. This type of realism—critical realism—offers a different picture of late and post-Soviet reality that is based on personal authorial vision and not on any socialist agenda. This critical realism widens thematic horizons of photography, including in the imagery the marginal and taboo subjects. In this type of realism, even if photographers use staging and posing, they do it not to create a 'perfect' image, but to destroy the myth of beauty and of the ideal. In the following section, I further explore the tendencies and techniques of realism that were revitalised in late and post-Soviet photography, ultimately defining its approach.

2.5   Critical realism of late and post-Soviet photographers

Critical realism, as I claimed earlier, emerged as a direct response to socialist realism. This photography cannot be analysed without considering the legacy of the socialist realism, as it is constructed, thematically and aesthetically, on the negation and reaffirmation of previous visual codes. The politics of this photography is to depict life as it is, neither judging problematic subjects nor idealising good ones. In the 1980s and 1990s, photographers not only criticized the ideological approach to art, they become ardent proponents of an authentic representation of reality that is not informed by the institutions of power. Socialist realist photography, according to this approach, lacked realism, because it depicted exclusively the positive sides of society, creating an ideal image of the state. Critical realism of late and post-Soviet photography ceases to address socialism from the inside, using Lukács's language, but turns to the documentation from an estranged point of view.

The opening of thematic frontiers, evident in the photography of the 1980s and 1990s,

Figure 2.14: Valery Shchekoldin, untitled from the series *Boarding School for Disabled Children*, mid-1990s. Silver bromide print, 20 x 30 cm. Location unknown. Copyright Valery Shchekoldin, used with permission.

is a manifestation of critical realism. The subjects that beforehand were hidden from society, become the new characters of photographs. For instance, Valery Shchekoldin's series about boarding schools for disabled children revealed the inner lives of invalids—a topic which, during the years of the Soviet Union, was never uncovered by the media and thus remained unknown to the public. The general health of the Soviet state (the body politic) reflected off onto the Soviet body, which was supposed to be strong and perfect. Popular Soviet films such as *Tsirk* (Grigorii Aleksandrov, 1936) and others ended with the *de rigeur* parade on Red Square of happy, healthy Soviet bodies. The other kinds of bodies—unhealthy, unhappy—were never represented in popular visual culture which was part of the body politic.

Shchekoldin's photographs transmit the solitude of a child's existence in a world that will never adapt to their disability. Shchekoldin takes pictures from above, which creates a patronising effect, the attitude of a society which will always look at invalids from above, like inferior or subaltern persons. This strategy produces an uncomfortable feeling, as it exposes the cruelty and selfishness of the society I belong to, which rejects the weak and humiliated, not being able to provide them with decent living conditions. The untitled photograph in Figure 2.14 is taken in this way; here the children are gathered around an empty table, probably waiting for their upcoming meal. Some of them look at the camera with curiosity and indifference at the same time, knowing that the photographer with his camera will not bring them salvation and healing. Their small bodies, additionally emphasised by the camera's top position, would not appear disabled, if not the child in a wheel chair. This wheel chair reminds the viewer once again that these young boys and girls are and always will be victims of their condition and of the system that does not support them.
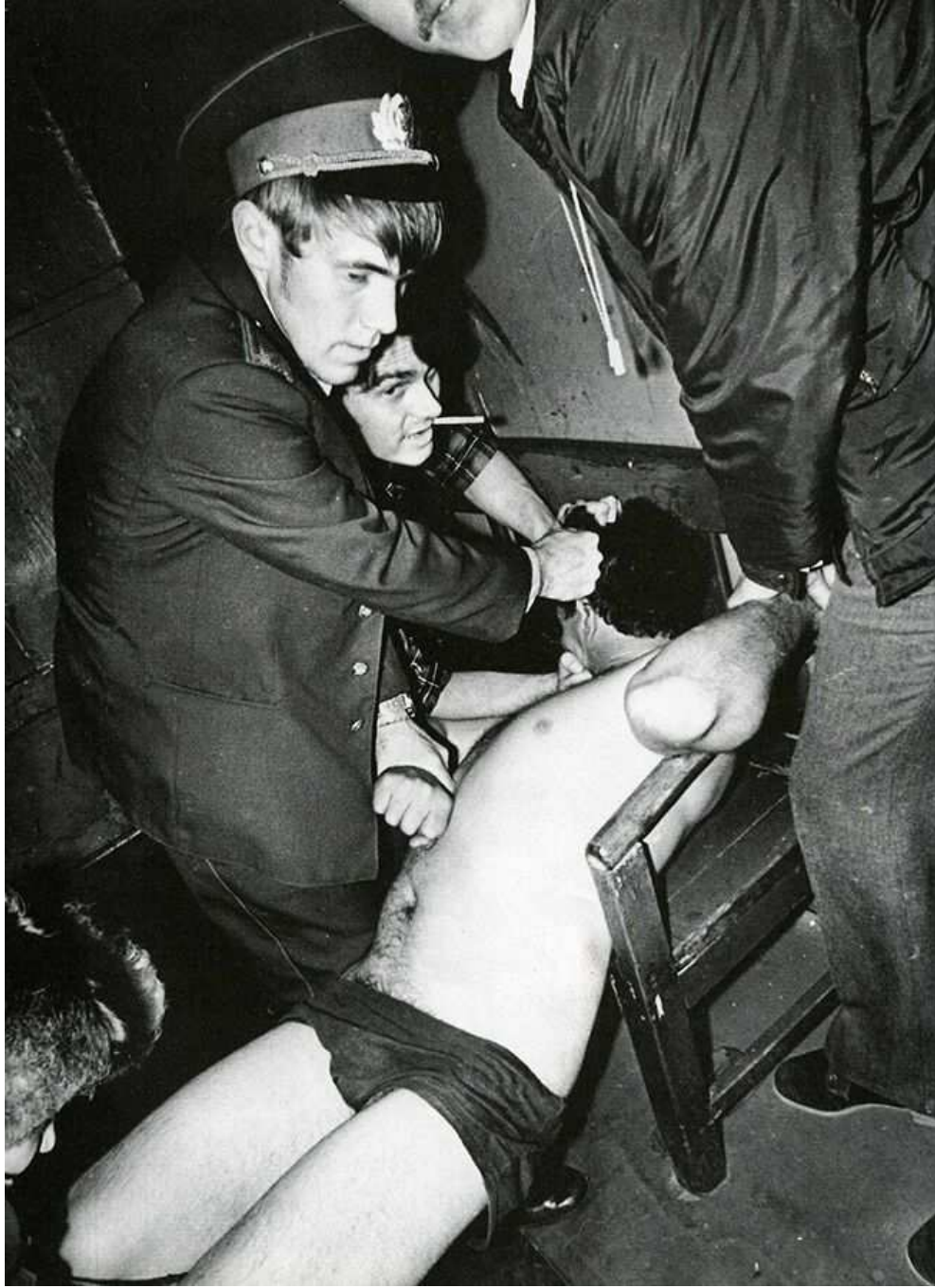
Figure 2.15: Yuri Rybchinsky, untitled from the series *Drunk Tank*, 1978-1990s. Gelatin silver print, 47 x 32 cm. Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow. Copyright Yuri Rybchinsky, used with permission.

Yuri Rybchinsky, a photographer from Moscow, uses the same technique of shooting from above in his untitled photograph from the series *Drunk Tank* (see Figure 2.15). The snapshot depicts people with a police officer among them holding a semi-naked man. The zeal with which they try to hold or carry the drunk man tells about his exuberant behaviour. Viewers understand that this person has had too much alcohol and was brought to the drunk tank to sober up. The black and white contrast between man's white body and his dark clothes, and the dynamic angle and composition of the image are reminiscent of Weegee's New York crime photographs. The drunkard surrounded by other men really looks like a wild animal caught by hunters. They hold his hair, push his head and stomach to the couch so their prey does not run away. Such a humiliating position of the drunk man simultaneously captured by strong 'guardians of order' and forever existing in the photographer's camera, reflects the negative official attitude toward alcoholism and indecent conduct in the society where every citizen must be an exemplary socialist. The act of photographing the state of drunkenness, instead of silencing it as usual, testifies to the photographer's desire to document another truth, which existed parallel to the official discourse. At that time, however, the representation of this truth interested neither the greater public nor art institutions, and photographing taboo themes, such as alcoholic intoxication, the lives of homeless or unemployed people and invalids was even forbidden.[23] This is why some prohibited photographs, such as Shchekoldin's, were never exhibited or published in the print media, and their public life existed (and continues to exist) exclusively on the internet. Rybchinsky's photograph, however, was published in many Western books and catalogues, such as *Toisinnakijat* (from Finnish, "those who see differently")

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[23]Until the times of Perestroika, when the critique of everyday life was finally permitted and took a distinct form in the art of *chernukha* (Rybchinsky and Meglinskaia).

by Taneli Escola and Hannu Eerikainen (1988); *Die zeitgenossische Photographie in der Sowje-tunion* by Viktor Misiano (1988); *«Say Cheese!», Soviet Photography 1968–1988* by Editions du Comptoir de la Photographie (1988); and *Changing Reality. Recent Soviet Photography* by Leah Bendavid-Val (1991), among others.

The theme of drunkenness repeats itself in the series *Alcoholic psychosis* by Evgeny Pavlov. Taking place in a hospital of Kharkov, the photograph features a man in the state of extreme alcoholic intoxication struggling with delirium or hallucinations (see Figure 2.16). This time, the drunk man is obviously sick; the nurses hold his naked body, while binding his limbs to the couch. The man is unconscious, his eyes are closed, body motionless, mouth semi-open. A thick rope around the chest holds his upper body tight, in view of violent movements that might emerge in the process of sobering up. Like previous photographers, Pavlov takes his photograph from above, depicting the lying man vertically, as if standing. This approach mitigates the hardness of the situation, making the drunkard appear more human than animal. Unlike in Rybchinsky's photograph, we do not see the expressions of the people holding the sick man, which creates confusion about their role: are they holding him to attach, to punish, to heal or to worship? The image has something Biblical about it; the white pillow around the man's head is reminiscent of a saint's halo in Christian icons, the sheet around his pelvis represents the drapery covering the nudity in mythological Renaissance paintings, even the ropes around his chest and limbs remind of Christ attached to the cross.

The three images discussed above explore thematic margins that were uncommon in Soviet photography. The appearance of taboo topics such as alcoholism, intoxication, and disability

Figure 2.16: Evgeny Pavlov, untitled from the series *Alcoholic Psychosis*, 1983. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 18 cm. Author's collection. Copyright Evgeny Pavlov, used with permission.

in photography points to the elevation of the low to the level of art, which historically always was a characteristic of realism. The photographers mentioned take their pictures from the same angle—from above. This position of the camera visually brings the subjects down, exposing their meagre social status. The thematic margins, therefore, are emphasised even more by the formal solutions chosen by the photographers, transmitting society's attitude towards the subjects. Yet, such a technique does not prevent the representation to be aestheticized and, by consequence, to be controversial. Thus, the aestheticization of marginal subjects and places gradually became common in photography during the 1980s and 1990s.

A different angle in the depiction of marginal subjects is used by Sergey Maximishin from St Petersburg. For the photograph *KVN in Kresty Prison*[24] (see Figure 2.17), Maximishin places his camera at eye level with his subjects, capturing their laughing faces from below and exposing the satirical drawings attached to the ceiling. Overall the image bears a positive message because of a humorous correspondence between the real and drawn faces with their toothless smiles. This demonstrates how, as the representation of social marginals was transformed from negative (as it was in the 1980s) into, if not positive, but at least not condemned (in the late 1990s),[25] so did the related discourses. This transformation also happened due to the colour that brings into earlier black-and-white photographs of prisoners a variety of nuances, not only from an aesthetic point of view but also on the level of content and social meaning.[26] Colour in this photograph plays

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[24]KVN is an abbreviation of *Klub Vesëlykh i Nakhodchivykh*, Club of the Funny and Inventive People; a popular humour TV show.

[25]The movement of legitimation of social marginals was especially prominent in humanist photography of the 1930-1960s, particularly in France. The photographers such as Robert Doisneau, Brassaï, Henri Cartier-Bresson, among others, documented everyday life of city vagrants, homeless children, and invalids, showing that despite their marginality, they had the same human interests and problems as the rest of the society.

[26]Colour photography became common relatively late, compared to Western countries. If in Western Europe and North America, colour was introduced into mass and professional photography in the 1970s, in the Soviet Union, it

Figure 2.17: Sergey Maximishin, *KVN in Kresty Prison*, 1999. Colour photograph, 20 x 30 cm. Author's collection. Copyright Sergey Maximishin, used with permission.

the role of the prisoners' legitimiser; if we compare Yuri Rybchinsky's and other photographers' snapshots from prisons in the 1980s, the monochromatic finish leaves a feeling of oppression and despair, while Maximishin's image, besides its humorous topic, signifies that life can be colourful even in prisons. In the 1990s, prison ceased to be a taboo topic due to a drastic increase of crime rates in post-Soviet countries and open coverage of criminal activities in mass media (Kim and Pridemore).

To achieve an objective picture of society it is not sufficient to rely only on photographic

existed on a limited scale only in official photo studios and was unavailable to the majority of independent and amateur photographers.

realism. Socialist realist imagery proves that the truth value proper to photography can be used to show what is needed and to hide what is unnecessary for the discourse. Following the several decades of socialist realist imprint which compromised the photographic truth-value, photography in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus started its return to the methods of documentary photography and photojournalism, and clubs and groups, such as Immediate photography (*Neposredstvennaia fotografiia*), Triva and others, began to emerge even in the late 1970s, thereby promoting a direct snapshot without manipulation and distortion, continuing throughout the 1980s. In the 1990s, with the advent of new politico-economic realities, these clubs fell apart giving way to the individual self-realisation of the photographers. The social changes that were provoked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union also encouraged an unbiased approach to photography. After the disappearance of the socialist ideal there emerged a new myth of the capitalist paradise, i.e. a new virtual reality, which became the subject of criticism of the post-Soviet artists and photographers. To counter the imagery of this non-existent prosperous capitalism, the photographers, capturing the misery, precarity, and illnesses of the post-Soviet society, tried to express that there is another life that stays underrepresented and silenced, but is more real than any other constructed reality.

The difference between the photography of the 1980s and 1990s studied here, on one hand, and the officially sanctioned mass-media photography of the socialist realist doctrine, on the other, lies in the former's apparent refusal to fit into any discourse. Certainly, I cannot claim that this photography is to no extent affected by discourse (we know that this is impossible and that every photograph reflects at least one type of discourse, be it socio-political, museological, thematic, to name but a few); however, its aim is not to transmit the voice of institutions, but to

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emphasise the individual voice of the photographer.[27] This photography opposes socialist realist imagery because the latter is created by the discourse of the Party and contains little personal expression of the photographer, a fact which compromises its objective value. Critical realist photography changes the vision of objectivity itself, pointing to the necessity to include the individual knowledge of the photographer into the question of objective documentation. Indeed, despite its objectivity and truthfulness, the style of nonconformist photographers became more distinct and recognizable, attracting the attention of local and foreign critics and art-lovers.

For instance, during the 1990s, Boris Mikhailov's photo series acquired world fame as an objective and unembellished view of post-Soviet Ukraine. *By the Ground* (1991) and *At Dusk* (1993), or the brown and blue series (since they are toned in these colours), represent a reflection of one theme—social decay. Mikhailov took them similarly, using a wide-angle lens and keeping the camera at waist level. The streets of Mikhailov's Kharkov are full of garbage and dirt; roads and houses are in a pitiful state; people look downwards, if not lie on the ground, like in the photograph 2.18 (top image) from *At Dusk*. This man is most likely a drunkard who fell asleep in the street; and the total indifference of the people walking beside him speaks of the triviality of the situation. Overall, the faces of people in the two series are rarely discernible. What interests the photographer is rather the city's face, its environment and atmosphere after the collapse of the empire. Mikhailov's technique of 'harsh' documentation, where framing is not properly done, where no staging and aesthetic pleasure are sought, makes it hard to determine what exactly is photographed—the city that oppresses its inhabitants or vice versa, people who, due to poverty,

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[27]Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding point out that objectivity is impossible to achieve without taking into account personal lived experience of the human being. See Harding's book *The Science Question in Feminism* (1987) and Haraway's essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988).

are obliged to exploit their city.

A similar feeling of oppression is created in an untitled photograph from *By the Ground* (bottom image in Figure 2.18), in which the wide angle produces a panoramic effect transmitting boredom. It depicts two men: one is lying on the side of the street below a white fence, the other carrying a trolley. Because of the sharp contrast, their bodies are dark, and they seem like shadows or ghosts of themselves. The long format of the photograph emphasises the white fence, which appears never-ending. The city and the two subjects breath the same air of loneliness and despair. This type of documentation is concerned with the state of being, and not with events, and is reminiscent of Eugene Atget's recording of Paris. Mikhailov's photographs of Kharkov would be a direct dialogue with Atget, if only were there no people. The presence of the subjects in the two above-mentioned series brings an additional level of realism, because the presence of human beings keeps the urban landscapes depicted bound to everyday Ukrainian life.

Photographic realism consists, then, of an immediate relation between reality and its representation, as the photographer sneakily takes his photos, purposely hiding his camera from his subjects so that he does not disturb the natural flow of the situation. Reality, in Mikhailov's eyes, is already a picturesque theatre piece, so straightforward documentation is sufficient to realise the author's idea. Blue and sepia toning is used to accentuate the transformation of the everyday life following the breakup of the USSR. If Boris Mikhailov created his *Red series*[28] to show the dominance of the colour red in Soviet cities and its symbolic influence on people's life and appearances pre-breakup, then the nineties for him were marked by blue and brown colours, which characterised post-Soviet reality as depressing and even dangerous. Thanks to this documentary technique and

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[28]I referred to it in chapter one; see Figure 1.11.

Figure 2.18: Boris Mikhailov. Top: untitled from the series *At Dusk*, 1993. Blue hand toned gelatin silver print, 13 x 29.5 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Bottom: untitled from the series *By the Ground*, 1991. Sepia toned gelatin silver print, 14 x 30 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Copyright Boris Mikhailov, used with permission.

exaggerated gloominess, the series *By the Ground* and *At Dusk* produced the effect of *chernukha*: society is shown as suffering from the consequences of political games that directly and indirectly affect everyday reality.

Thus, critical realism in late and post-Soviet photography can be described firstly by the specific thematic directions including the depiction of a lower social strata, or marginal and sub-altern characters, and secondly by an interest in simple and mundane subjects and objects, which constitute the everyday. This certainly gives evidence of the democratisation of art and photography. However, aestheticizing objects of minor importance and positioning them as self-sufficient objects for art photography also means that the standards regarding what is worth and is not worth capturing had considerably changed. 'Accepted' or cliché subjects, such as war and labour heroes, collective farms and scientific achievements, became replaced by everyday objects, turning from the sacred to the mundane, the ideal to the material. By this gesture photographers not only re-fused to produce ideological or political images, they sought beauty in simple things. Secondly, the socialist realist construction of happiness and heroic representations shifted towards a critical depiction of everyday life. The photographic examples in this chapter also show that the concep-tions of objective and subjective changed with time: under Soviet rule, an objective documentation of socialist reality meant a construction of a socialist realist photograph that reinforces the effect of 'sovietness'; while late and post-Soviet photographers aimed at creating 'objective' or 'realist' picture of reality, which did not exclude a particular (or subjective) authorial style, as opposed to 'idealist' Soviet photography. Their photographs became constructs of a different ideology—that of the margin.

The manifestations of critical realism in late and post-Soviet photography are visible in the work with photographs' margins, the representation of subaltern characters, and use of minor languages. In the next chapter, I will study the notions of 'marginal,' 'minor,' and 'subaltern' as opposed to 'central,' 'major,' and 'dominant' in the theoretical writings of Jacques Derrida, Antonio Gramsci, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in order to understand the phenomenon of this displacement. Using several photographic works, I will show that the margin is centre, the subaltern is dominant, and the minor is major, and that they are de-localised because of, or thanks to différance, or dissemination, or hegemony of the masses, or intellectuals, or process of variations inside the language. Just like the margin constantly interacts with the centre, the subaltern determines the politics of the hegemonic ruling class, and minor forms the characteristics of the major. Vice versa, the central, dominant and major cultures can influence the development of the subcultures. For example, the active engagement with the marginal themes and aesthetics is an artistic response to the weakening of the central cultural and political paradigms of the Soviet Union that started to become evident in the 1980s. This is due to the heterogeneous nature of any structure which is constantly affected by its de-localised periphery: "You will never find a homogeneous system that is not still or already affected by a regulated, continuous, immanent process of variation" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 103). In late and post-Soviet countries, this process of cultural heterogenization dramatically grew into the creation of a new language and borrowing of some aspects from the Western capitalist world.

Chapter 3

Framing Marginality

3.1 *Unfinished dissertation*, or playing with the margins

When Boris Mikhailov created his *Unfinished Dissertation* in 1984, it was yet another of the *samizdat* publications that abundantly circulated in the underground circles of artists and critics. This album, however, was unusual in the sense that it was one of the first works in Soviet Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus that combined photographs and text, representing the so-called *livre d'artiste* genre.[1] The potentially pretentious title "dissertation," although unfinished, was Mikhailov's way of challenging the intellectualism and seriousness of the Soviet scientific discourse that prevailed at that time. But instead of following the 'rules' of discourse, Mikhailov juxtaposed the content and aesthetics of his *Unfinished Dissertation* with the canons of Soviet art and science. The album consisted of a hundred pages of worn-out yellow paper with glued-in black-and-white pho-

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[1]The first Soviet artist who produced books combining text and photographs was Ilya Kabakov. His conceptual works of the 1970s greatly influenced Boris Mikhailov and other Soviet photographers and artists.
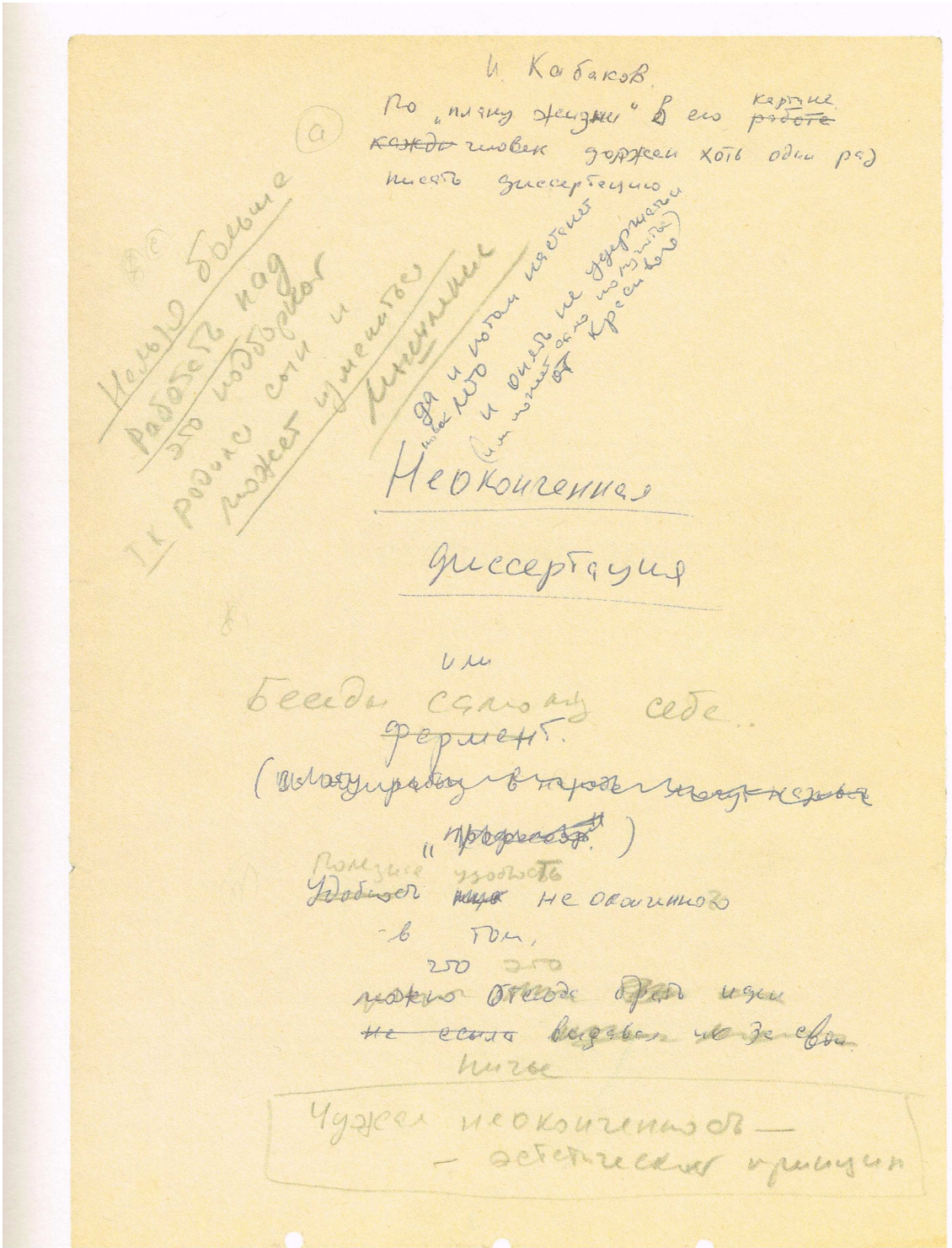
Figure 3.1: Boris Mikhailov, cover of the book *Unfinished Dissertation*, Scalo, 1998. Copyright Boris Mikhailov, used with permission.

tographs, featuring hand-written notes about beauty, art, literature, everyday life, and other abstract topics on the margins. Mikhailov purposefully uses inferior quality paper and carelessly printed his photographs, depriving his photography of any classical aesthetic. His messages cannot be taken seriously as important scholarly contributions, because he crosses out his own writing here and there, changes the colour of his pens and pencils, and strangely organises the notes on the page. Thus, the book resembles not a real dissertation but rather a diaristic self-exploration of an artist-amateur, which is confirmed by a subtitle on the opening page—"Unfinished dissertation, or discussions with oneself" (see Figure 3.1).

The photographs in *Unfinished Dissertation* are bleak and grey. The first image of the book (see Figure 3.2) represents a small brick construction reminiscent of a house but without windows and doors, surrounded by bare tree trunks. There are no people in the photograph, just dirty snow and high-rise buildings in the background. The text above the photograph is a quotation from Walter Benjamin's *Traumkitsch*: "The dream no longer reveals the blue horizon. Everything is gray now. The dreams have evolved into the road towards banality," and below are Mikhailov's own words repeating the same quote: "Everything is gray now" (Mikhailov 6). The same method is adopted throughout the book—each page containing on average two photographs that sometimes feature landscapes, sometimes portraits or people in the interior, while the written text does not develop a consistent narrative but instead reveals the author's random thoughts concerning the images.

Several pages further another pair of photographs document people following morning gymnastics routine on TV (see Figure 3.3). In the text accompanying these images the author re-

Figure 3.2: Boris Mikhailov, untitled from the series *Unfinished Dissertation*, 1984. Reprinted from the book *Unfinished Dissertation*. Scalo, 1998. P.7. Copyright Boris Mikhailov, used with permission.

flects upon the role of the decisive moment in photography, and after quoting Henri Cartier-Bresson and Sergey Morozov who at that time was an influential art critic, Mikhailov concludes that moments are unimportant: "A contribution to 'knowledge' is more important than a contribution to photography. With the appearance of automatic cameras the 'decisive moment' has become devalued by the frequent use of film stills in film and television—it is easily accessible, its duration is prolonged, and now we want to play something different" (46). This message reflects the approach of late and post-Soviet nonconformist artists and photographers who wanted to play with their media, transgressing the conventional notion of art and photography; they wanted to contribute to the general 'knowledge' about the functioning of their country and society. On several pages Mikhailov writes about a "new artistry" (*novaia khudozhestvennost'*) defined as art practices based on intention and not on creativity; this new artistry demands less creative effort but more aesthetic pleasure. This principle was often used by nonconformist artists and photographers in late and post-Soviet Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus who worked with inferior quality material, exploiting marginal topics and combining contrasting elements in an unexpected way.

The visual/verbal dichotomy in *Unfinished Dissertation* reflects the opposition between spatial and temporal artistic modes, and the conflict between reality and its representation. The text written by Mikhailov on the margins of the page constantly interferes and disturbs the visual field, begging the question of which field—visual or verbal—dominates the piece. In the words of the photographer, text gave a new life to "boring pictures" and united randomly taken photographs in one thematic and aesthetic product (Mikhailov and Vikulina).[2] Thus, the text in the margins

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[2]The full citation is: "I understood that image by itself was worth nothing—when I put two images together they both died, the connections hindered. Text gave them meaning, it conveyed an inner life to a boring picture." My translation.
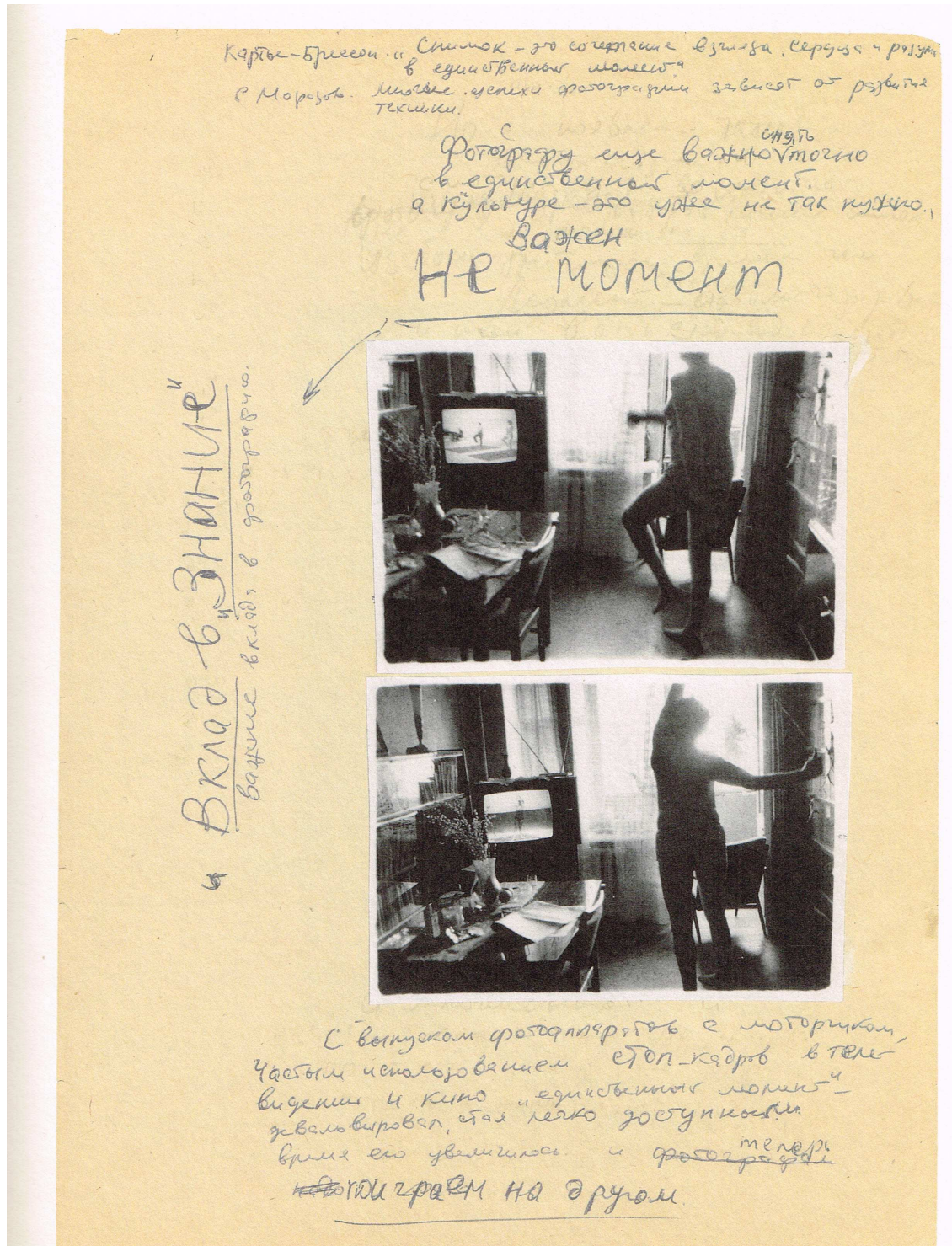
Figure 3.3: Boris Mikhailov, untitled from the series *Unfinished Dissertation*, 1984. Reprinted from the book *Unfinished Dissertation*. Scalo, 1998. P.46. Copyright Boris Mikhailov, used with permission.

plays a crucial role in establishing the meaning of the visual message situated in the centre of the page. The central visual text with its poor content, low aesthetic quality and lack of meaning gets revitalised and substituted by the verbal text in the margins. The reference to, or usage of margins in such works is one of the characteristics of late and post-Soviet movement of deconstruction in art which apparently became (Margarita Tupitsyn, Victor Tupitsyn, Boris Groys) common among Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian artists.

In a conversation with Jacques Derrida during his visit to Moscow in 1990, a group of Soviet philosophers claimed that following the Stalinist era, visual culture in the Soviet Union was damaged and erased via the domination of a forced perceptive culture, to the extent that nowadays, Soviet artists had to reconstruct some of the lost possibilities of seeing. In order to be able to deconstruct, they had to reconstruct the very possibility of deconstruction (Podoroga et al. 164). The desire in the late 1980s and early 1990s of Soviet intellectuals and artists to philosophise, theorise, and apply deconstruction, which Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstruction, regarded with skepticism, was an attempt to fill the gap present in philosophy and art created by closed-minded Soviets, and thus re-establish a dialogue with Western thinkers. The movements of perestroika and glasnost, according to Derrida, were considered by his Soviet interlocutors to be deconstruction itself (51). Such a radical statement is also a manifestation of the general perestroika tendency to apply Western theories and practices to the Soviet context.

Beginning in the 1950s, the unofficial art of the Soviet Union challenged the established canons of representation by distancing itself from the conventional rules of *partiinost'*, *narodnost'*, and *ideinost'*. In the '70s and '80s, with the emergence of conceptualism, *sots-art*, installation and

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performance, Soviet alternative art undermined official imagery even further, this time by introducing elements of absurdity, satire and estrangement. Describing alternative art tendencies in the late Soviet Union, Victor Tupitsyn deemed them 'deconstruction,' since they strived "toward a break with the familiar tradition of recontextualising visual clichés of the early Russian avant-garde or Western modernism" (V. Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)modernism in Russia.* 60). Discussing the characteristics of these art works, Tupitsyn uses 'deconstructive' vocabulary—"erasure" in opposition to "construction," "negatively anxious pictures" in contrast with "positively anxious images," "reaffirmation" instead of "affirmation," and so on (63). I claim that the dominant cultural paradigm of the final years of the Soviet Union and the first decade after its breakdown was challenged by artists, photographers, and film-makers who displaced official codes by working within the margins of artistic establishment—firstly from the authority of the socialist realist doctrine to the 'unpopular' practices of unofficial artists (e.g. performance, independent photography, postmodern writing, art-house cinema to name a few); secondly from the sanctioned themes sustaining the grand Soviet myth to the exploration of the mundane, taboo, silenced topics and for-bidden subjects; thirdly from the accepted positive representation of communism and capitalism to the realist, dark and negative aesthetics.

In her book *Margins of Soviet Art* (1989) Margarita Tupitsyn defines in this way the artistic movements and tendencies that constituted a critical opposition to the sanctioned or ideological art of the Soviet Union. The expression "margins of Soviet art" makes a direct reference to Derridean "margins of philosophy." The term 'margin' was widely used by Derrida in his work to indicate the limits or boundaries of the page. The book *Margins of Philosophy* (1982) is an exploration of

several philosophical texts by Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche and others. According to Derrida, these texts are "marginal to some of the great texts in the history of philosophy" (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* xxiii), i.e. are not primary, dominant and referential. Therefore, *Margins of Philosophy* aims to explore this limit that marks the 'main' (or central) text and the marginal one. Similarly to Derrida and Tupitsyn, the photographic works examined in this dissertation are referred to as 'margins of photography,' since they compete, both thematically and aesthetically, with the central visual culture of the 1980s and 1990s.

In this chapter, the term margin is studied through the prisms of philosophical thought and the literary criticism of Jacques Derrida who worked within the framework of the post-structuralist theory. From this perspective, the concept of marginality can be applied to photography through a visual or structural analysis of studied works, which is crucial in my study of late and post-Soviet photography in order to explain various experimental techniques and their meanings.[3] The theoretical model will also include the comparison of 'margin' with its analogous terms 'subaltern' and 'minor' which originate in Marxist theory and literary criticism respectively, as they help scrutinise the development of photography with the consideration of class and medium specificity intersecting with the photographic movement under study. By attempting to understand and apply the terms 'margin,' 'subaltern,' and 'minor' in the analysis of late and post-Soviet photography, I aim to open a new perspective on the 'central' culture of reference and its 'margins,' i.e. ideological and embellished representation (of communism and capitalism) and an opposite, raw everyday reality with tabooed or underrepresented aspects explored by the studied photographers.

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[3]It is worth mentioning that the concept of margin is extensively used in feminist and post-colonial theories, mainly to designate various sexual, racial and ethnic minorities that are vulnerable due to an oppressive majority. This perspective is also necessary for my analysis, and I elaborate on it in the subsection which examines subaltern characters of photography.

Thus, the marginal characteristics of late and post-Soviet photography that I am seeking to examine stem from several different phenomena. Firstly, from its 'nonconformist' label (as well as the widely used synonyms: dissident, unofficial, oppositional, underground, etc.) that designates deviance from an established norm. These labels were attributed to the studied photographers based on their unorthodox techniques. Secondly, from the exploration of controversial subject matter and the representation of marginal subjects. Thirdly, from the ambiguous status of the photographic medium that underwent a certain degree of oppression during the Soviet Union. In such a context, analysing visual material through these different but overlapping concepts, that of margin, subaltern and minor, will allow me to explore the nature of the late and post-Soviet photography and comprehend its relationship with truth, realism, and the everyday. Derrida's term 'margin' will allow me to analyse the aesthetic and formal solutions that the photographers addressed here have chosen in their art, such as verbal components, use of frames and any other supplementary material added to the photographs. The Gramscian term 'subaltern' will help undercover the subversive nature of the photographed characters, exploring how the portrayal of the collective vs individuals influences the viewer's perception of the photography. Finally, Deleuze and Guattari's term 'minor' will serve to further explore questions of the photographic medium, scrutinising its political dimension and visual language peculiarities. By applying this theoretical approach, I hope to understand the phenomenon of decentering which happened regarding late and post-Soviet photography's aesthetics and content. Ultimately, I will investigate the connection between conceptual and surrealist art practices, and will determine the role of other art forms, such as literature and film, in the development of photography in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

3.2   The margins of photography

The process of deconstruction consists of breaking ideologically dominant discourses both from the outside and the inside. The first method implies looking at phenomena that were left out of this dominant discourse, for example, studying history not only through the genealogy of the events but also through what this history could prohibit, "becoming history through this somewhere interested suppression" (*Positions* 13). It is *in* and *at the limits* of the main philosophical texts that Derrida explored the non-philosophical *per se* concepts, such as writing, origins, history, and differ*a*nce, bringing them into the category of phenomenology, i.e. philosophy. According to Derrida, one can only deconstruct metaphysics from within since one cannot transcend metaphysics as such; therefore this project seems impossible, but it is precisely within this impossibility that lies the "possibility of deconstructing the philosophical tradition from within" (Patton and Protevi 48). Thus, the second method is expressed in the transcendence inherent to the central meaning of every concept. Derrida defines this 'undecidability' of the meaning as dissemination: "one of the theses [...] inscribed within dissemination is precisely the impossibility of reducing a text as such to its effects of meaning, content, thesis, or theme" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 7). The effect of dissemination is the merging of margins within the main text, the precipitation or anticipation of the margin defines the tonality of what is in the centre.

The book which opened this chapter, *Unfinished Dissertation*, demonstrates how the margins, which are empowered by the added text, dislocate the accent put on the dominant visual message. This process, using Derrida's terminology, can be referred to as deconstruction from the inside, when the mix of verbal and visual texts disseminates the meaning of the work, subverting

habitual modes of perception. Through other examples provided below, I will attempt to show how late and post-Soviet photographers used different techniques to deconstruct their work from the inside out. The manipulation of margins within the image is the first case which lies in the basis of more complex constructs (such as parergon, frame, and trace), and necessitates a close reading of the theory.

Derrida developed the term 'margin' in the domains of ontology, semiology and linguistics. For him, it is a concept that unifies a limit and its transgression, proper and its other, within and without. 'Centre' and 'margin' are two constructs that limit our understanding of reality and values, as any other binary opposition. Centre, as an antipode of margin, has been considered in society to be the base of any structure. However, Derrida's margin is empowered to constitute the centre. As he writes in "Tympan," the preface to *Margins of Philosophy*, every limit (or margin) should be perceived as "*being* and as being its own *proper*. To exceed it, by the same token, and therefore to preserve it in itself" (*Margins of Philosophy* xix). "Tympan" is divided in two parts: the text on the left represents Derridean thoughts on the closed nature of philosophical discourse that includes its own outside and the strategies of breaking this closed structure; the text on the right is the quotation of Michel Leiris's memoirs, particularly the chapter entitled *Persephone*[4] which appeals to the sense of hearing. Although Derrida does not refer to the quotation directly, it constantly permeates the 'main' text on the left and explains why Derrida writes about the apparatus of an ear, comparing it with philosophy. In this way, Derrida asks the question "how to pierce this ear from outside without rendering it simply useless" (Kamuf 147), which is fundamentally

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[4]In this excerpt Michel Leiris alludes to all sorts of piercing and spiral objects, including an insect called in French *perce-oreille*, earwig, to refer to the act of hearing and listening.

the question of deconstruction. Michel Leiris's marginal text, as well as extensive footnotes where Derrida expresses some important points, both undermine the superiority of the central text and are themselves "no longer a secondary virginity but an inexhaustible reserve, the stereographic activity of an entirely other ear" (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* xxiii). Thus, "Tympan" is an exemplary text that demonstrates how the boundaries between the centre and its margins blur and become unstable. Being simultaneously inside and outside the margin challenges the dominance, or the centrality of the main text. The very deconstruction happens at the margins of the opposition 'inside/outside.'[5]

The play between inside and outside is present in late and post-Soviet art and photography. Working with photograph margins, and specifically putting typed or hand-written texts on the margins, constituted one of the most common trends starting from the 1970s. In various series by Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photographers and photo-artists, such as Igor Mukhin, Victoria Buivid, Vadim Zakharov, Afrika (Sergey Bugaev), to name but a few, the margins of photographs are used to represent another text beside the photographic one, to juxtapose two spheres—visual and verbal—and to create a third sphere, this time conceptual. Putting text on the margins of an image was a widespread practice used in Soviet posters and sometimes even socialist realist paintings. In that case, the verbal text was thematically in agreement with the image, it played the role of reinforcing the visual message. In the case of late and post-Soviet art practices, verbal and visual texts were completely disconnected not only thematically but often aesthetically as well, to create a cognitive disjuncture between the two.

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[5]In his texts Derrida often plays with the semantic and phonetic resemblances of mark, margin and march—the three words signify a threshold, limit, or border—something that is a part of both inside and outside, interior and exterior. See for example page 270 in *Dissemination*.

In the 1980s, Vladimir Kupriyanov created several conceptual photographic works that feature both verbal and visual texts. In his *In Memory of Pushkin* (1979-1985), two kinds of public discourse are mixed together—the photographs destined to be exhibited on 'boards of honour'[6] and excerpts from canonical Alexander Pushkin's poems (see Figure 3.4). The split between the images and words happens because of the displaced artistic usage of official photographs/documents, as well as the discrepancy between them and the extremely romantic verses of the greatest Russian poet of the nineteenth century. As Victor Tupitsyn claims, the present falls into the past, and the past emerges in the present, thus "an act of deconstruction takes place that unmasks the extratemporal ambitions of Soviet cultural thinking, full of the 'metaphysics of presence'" (V. Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)modernism in Russia.* 165). In the faces of the photographed women, there is nothing but fatigue, indifference and triteness, which is opposed to the image conventionally attributed to Pushkin's heroine. The Soviet woman, or rather her collective image represented in Kupriyanov's work, is decidedly unromantic. She can be a heroine of labour, of war, of socialism, but not of Pushkin's verses. Thus, the verbal text on the margins of these photographs disturbs the primary meaning of the visual text, and vice versa, due to the cognitive juxtaposition, but Kupriyanov also demonstrates the necessity of both the visual and verbal (of central and marginal) in order to make a new meaning of his work of art.

The intention of a discourse to control its margin is unrealistic. Derrida's strategy for demonstrating this argument is based on the notion of *différance*, which illustrates the interdependence between the central [inside text] and the marginal [outside text]. *Différance* can mean both

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[6]Such boards were a popular practice in the Soviet Union, as every factory, plant, organisation or institution had to have a 'board of honour' to spotlight their heroes of labour.

I see the distant shore / The magical realms of Southern land / I head there with feeling and anguish / Thrilled by recollection

Я вижу берег отдаленный, — Земли полуденной волшебные края; — С волненьем и тоской туда стремлюся я, — Воспоминаньем упоенный...

И всё, чем я страдал, и всё, что сердцу мило, — Желаний и надежд томительный обман... — Шуми, шуми, послушное ветрило, — Волнуйся подо мной, угрюмый океан.

И чувствую: в очах родились слезы вновь; — Душа кипит и замирает; — Мечта знакомая вокруг меня летает; — Я вспомнил прежних лет безумную любовь.

Погасло дневное светило; — На море синее вечерний пал туман. — Шуми, шуми, послушное ветрило, — Волнуйся подо мной, угрюмый океан.

Figure 3.4: Vladimir Kupriyanov (Russian, 1954-2011), from left to right and top to bottom *I see the distant shore* (D10064.14), *The magical realms of Southern land* (D10064.13), *I head there with feeling and anguish* (D10064.07), *Thrilled by recollection* (D10064.04), *All that I suffered, and all that was dear to my heart* (D10064.10), *The wearying illusion of desires and hopes…* (D10064.06), *Sound, sound, obedient sail* (D10064.05), *Stir beneath me, sullen ocean* (D10064.15), *The orb of day has set* (D10064.09), *On the azure sea an evening fog has fallen* (D10064.02), *Sound, sound, obedient sail* (D10064.01), *Stir beneath me, sullen ocean* (D10064.08), *And I feel how tears come to my eyes again* (D10064.03), *My soul churns and thrills* (D10064.16), *Around me a familiar fancy flies* (D10064.12), *I've remembered the mad love of previous years* (D10064.11) from the series *In Memory of Pushkin*, 1979. Gelatin silver prints on paper, 24 x 30.5 cm (9 7/16 x 12 in.). Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union. Copyright Marina Dumanyan, used with permission.

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defer and differ, but also "to be not identical, to be other, discernible" (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 8) and refers to temporary and spatial modifications of the 'present' element. Thanks to these modifications, one can constitute "what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not" (13). *Différance* thus identifies the main text and its margin but also reveals the infinite interaction and synergy between them.

In Derrida's writing, margin is one of a series of synonyms that include border, limit, frame, edge, and parergon. In *The Truth in Painting* (1987), Derrida examines different kinds of parergonal—frames of paintings, columns around temples, garment on statues—which represent an accessory to the main work or subject. He shows how these objects undermine the superiority of the main work without directly interfering with it. In the preface to *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida writes about the peculiar role of the passe-partout, usually made of cardboard cut in the middle to let the work appear. Being neither inside nor outside the work, the passe-partout underlines simultaneously the external edge of the work and internal edge of the frame. Moreover, the work itself can eventually be removed and replaced by another one, which makes the passe-partout a "structure with a movable base" (*The Truth in Painting* 12). Thanks to the passe-partout, the work is put forward, the colors get emphasised, the structure of the picture foregrounded.

Parergon, as Derrida claims, is what the main work should *not* become, it is designed to remain without attracting attention, and for this reason it is generally ignored by discourses. The translation of parergon from Greek gives us "hors-d'oeuvre," "accessory," "foreign," "secondary," "supplement," "aside," "remainder" (54), but it also means "the exceptional, the strange, the extraordinary" (58). Being visibly and etymologically inferior to the work of art, parergon nev-

ertheless emphasises that the inside is lacking, i.e. there is something missing in the main work: "It is lacking *in* something and it is lacking *from itself*. Because reason is 'conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral need,' it has recourse to the *parergon*, to grace, to mystery, to miracles. It needs the supplementary work" (56). It is this lack in the work of art that generates the necessity to have a parergon—a frame, a title, a preface, a legend, a signature, a cartouche, etc.—something that helps to describe, to finish, to explain and to identify the work of art, but also to veil its lack. Thus, parergon is this bridge between the apprehension and comprehension of the work.

The way the parergon interacts with the inside and outside of the work is structural: "the parergonal frame stands out against two grounds [*fonds*], but with respect to each of those two grounds, it merges [*se fond*] into the other. With respect to the work which can serve as a ground for it, it merges into the wall, and then, gradually, into the text. With respect to the background which the general text is, it merges into the work which stands out against the general background" (61). The parergon, once it takes place, is part of both the inside and the outside of the work, thus it dismantles the opposition between the work and the general text, between the central and the marginal. This is the reason why the limits of centre and margin are not always evident. Derrida acknowledges that it is difficult to determine the boundaries between the centre and the margins:

> I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a work. And above all I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper, and that Kant calls *parergon*, for example the frame. Where does the frame take place? Does it take place. Where does it begin. Where does it end. What is its internal limit. Its external limit. And its surface between two limits. I do not know whether the passage in the third *Critique* where the *parergon* is defined is itself a *parergon*. Before deciding what is parergonal in a text which poses the question of the *parergon*, one has to know what a *parergon* is—at least, if there is any such thing. (63)

The impossibility of determining the limits of the main work and parergon is what makes the centre unstable, and what empowers the margin. It is in this moment that the margin interferes with and fills in the lack inherent to the main work. It is also what differentiates the margin/centre dichotomy from discourse—every discourse reflects its limits, its inside and outside, while the limits of a centre and its margins are always blurred.

The notion of parergon in photographic work initially might seem contradictory as a photograph by itself is a final art product, it includes the totality of its defining elements inside the shot: the composition, the contrast between light and shadow, the subject, the colours, etc. Nevertheless, there are examples of photographic projects using parergonal elements that are external by nature but still belong to the photographic work. In the 1980s and 1990s, some Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photographers, such as Roman Pyatkovka, Vladimir Kupriyanov, Maria Serebriakova, Igor Savchenko, to name but a few, practised parergon in two ways: first by producing a physical manipulation of the developed photograph altering its internal appearance—hand-colouring of the photographic image, erasing of its integral parts via scratching or cutting; secondly by adding 'supplements,' i.e. extra elements to the developed photograph—pieces of paper or cardboard glued to the image, artificial frames from diverse material, covering of the image with semi-transparent film, among others.

The first type of parergonal in the case of late and post-Soviet photographers was common in the Kharkov and Minsk schools of photography. Igor Savchenko, for example, re-photographs the fragments of his own or found photographs to add extra graphicness to the images. His series *Faceless* (see Figure 3.5), was made in this way, the parergon situated not only in the form of

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Figure 3.5: Igor Savchenko. Top: 9.89-16.1 from the series *Faceless*, 1989. Gelatin silver print, tin chloride toner, watercolour, 11.5 x 21.5 cm. Museet for Fotokunst Brandts, Odense. Bottom: 4.90-22 from the series *Faceless*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, tin chloride toner after copper sulphate toner, watercolour, 11 x 19.5 cm. The Royal Library, Copenhagen. Copyright Igor Savchenko, used with permission.

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erased faces and a hand-painted red line but also in his very technique. The parergon, initially, is the first photograph that becomes a re-photographed fragment. Thanks to this unusual way of picture-making, which creates an atmosphere of predetermination and fatality, during the 1990s Igor Savchenko's works were exhibited and published in multiple East European and Western museums and catalogues. However, the use of parergon (scratched faces and red lines) created an erroneous belief among Western viewers and critics that the series was a direct response to the Stalinist Purges of 1937 (Savchenko). The parallel that the public made between the facial (by the photographer) and social (by the power mechanism) erasures suggests that the parergon works in Savchenko's photographs like a defining element that imposes such a peculiar interpretation. It also reveals that the truth, found by the critics in the series, was no more than their fantasy.

A different type of parergon became an indispensable part of Roman Pyatkovka's photographic works. For the series *Golodomor. Phantoms of the '30s* (1989) Pyatkovka used his personal archival photographs of 1930s starvation victims,[7] re-cropped them, dyed them and literally scratched the subjects shown (see Figure 3.6). The scratching of the subjects' eyes, teeth and hair to the extent that the faces are almost no longer recognisable, creates an artificial effect, a 'supplement' to the main work. Yet this supplement completely transforms the images, making the subjects look like phantoms, and by producing out of documentary photographs a visual construction of terror and atrocity. The scratched facial features emphasise the anonymity of this catastrophe, as its massiveness prevents researchers from establishing the exact numbers and data concerning the victims. In this way, the supplement becomes for the author the necessary element

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[7]A massive famine expanded over different territories of the Soviet Union, such as Ukraine, Kazakhstan, as well as the Kuban, the Middle Volga and Central Chernozem Regions in Russia, in 1932-1933, the estimated number of victims is, according to Nicolas Werth, some 6.5 to 7 million people (Werth). In Ukraine, the Great Famine is more known under the term Holodomor (from Ukrainian, *moryty holodom* "to kill by starvation").

Figure 3.6: Roman Pyatkovka, untitled from the series *Golodomor. Phantoms of the '30s*, 1989. Gelatin silver prints, top left 59.7 x 49 cm; top right 59 x 48.9 cm; bottom left 59.7 x 48.7 cm; bottom right 59.2 x 49.5 cm. National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow. Copyright Roman Pyatkovka, used with permission.

transmitting the horror of famine, something that the documentary photograph alone cannot offer. As Roman Pyatkovka claims, "[a] photo for me is a semi-finished product. Using a complex system of photo treatment, I transform a real fact captured image into an epic canvas" (Pyatkovka, "Golodomor. Phantoms of the '30s"), thus the lack inherent to the documentary image is filled by the supplementary, parergonal manipulations.[8]

What is also remarkable is the marginality of the subject matter itself: Roman Pyatkovka made *Golodomor. Phantoms of the '30s* after he read a samizdat book devoted to this tragedy. Back then, in 1989, the theme of famine was yet silenced, since the scholarly research investigating the causes and results of starvation started to develop in Ukraine and Russia only in the 2000s, after the declassification of the archives (Kondrashin and Tiurina). Thus, when the series was first exhibited at Fotograficentrum in Stockholm in the framework of the *Zapretnyje* (*Forbidden*) exhibition featuring two Ukrainian photographers—Roman Pyatkovka and Mikhail Pedan—in 1990, it generated much interest; the public, which included Swedish intellectuals and Sovietologists, was aware of the famine in the 1930s, but had not ever seen such quasi-surrealist documentary images. The series then travelled to Rotterdam to participate in the second International Biennial of Photography (1990); then to Oslo (Gallery UKS, 1991); to Gothenburg (Fotohuset, 1991) and finished its tour in the prestigious photo festival of Arles (Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie, 1998), each time provoking vivid discussions of the photographer's technique and historical context.

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[8]It is important to note that in his original text of *Camera Lucida* in French Roland Barthes called punctum a "supplement." In its English translation by Richard Howard French "supplément" became "addition;" however, the Barthes precise wording is not insignificant. The supplementary quality of punctum undermines the order of photographic perception, it is what one adds but what is already there. This meditation echoes Derridean "supplementary reading" that destroys the logic of binary oppositions. To read more on punctum as 'supplement' see Geoffrey Batchen's essay "*Camera Lucida*: Another Little History of Photography."

The second type of parergonal is featured in Maria Serebriakova's landscapes supplemented with pieces of bandage (see Figure 3.7). Landscape in the Russian tradition (both pre-revolutionary and Soviet) was often associated with patriotic imagery depicting the grandeur of the Motherland. Serebriakova disrupts this established practice by questioning the self-sufficiency of the photographic representation of 'grand' landscapes. She uses textual inscriptions or other 'accessories' (gauze, paper strips) to show that the photographic document alone can no longer be trusted due to its lack of truth. For instance, in her untitled works from 1988, bandage is added to the photographs as a frame or a background. Margarita Tupitsyn writes that in Serebriakova's works "[g]auze framing or backing the views and landscapes functions as a means of healing photography's multiple wounds" (M. Tupitsyn, "Against the Camera, for the Photographic Archive" 61). These wounds and voids were formed through relative neglect of the photographic medium in the Soviet Union, which caused its instability and unsatisfiability; but these very photographic wounds also suggest a wounded history and a wounded people who experienced a great deal of hardships throughout the twentieth century. The ultimate manifestation of these works' marginal character is their story: they were exhibited in Tacoma Art Museum (in the framework of the exhibition *Between Spring and Summer*, 1990), Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, and Des Moines Art Center. They were reproduced in the 1994 *Art Journal* article "Against the Camera, for the Photographic Archive" by Margarita Tupitsyn, where I discovered them. Afterwards their traces get lost.

The two types of parerga described above belong to the external sphere of the image, they originate from the author's physical intrusion into the photograph after its development. Another
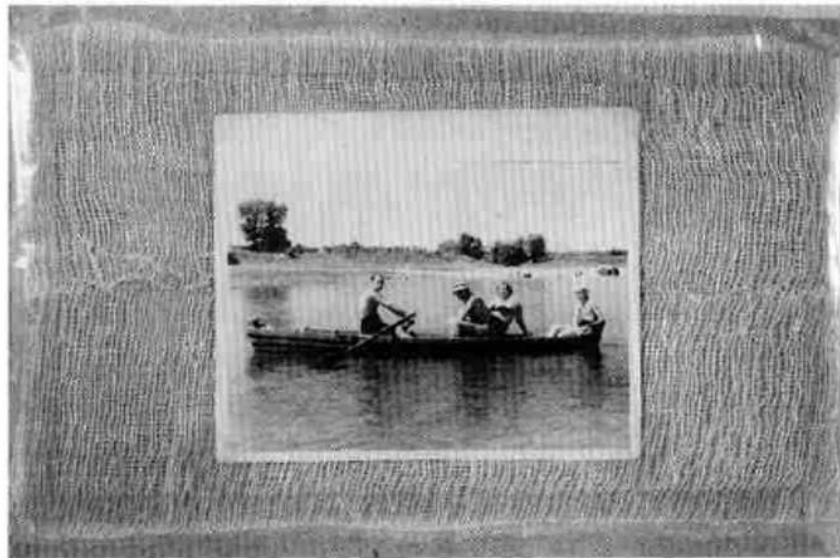
Figure 3.7: Maria Serebriakova, untitled, 1988. Top: gelatin silver print, bandage, cardboard, 15.2 x 16.5 cm. Bottom: photograph on paper, bandage, cardboard, 21.6 x 29.2 cm. Author's collection. Copyright Maria Serebriakova, used with permission.

parergon of an entirely different order exists inside the image and participates in its internal com-position. In *Right of Inspection* (1998), Derrida singled out two types of parerga found in[side] the works of Belgian photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart: the first is related to the body, for example rings, earrings, makeup, clothing, hairstyles, painted nails, etc.; the second is not related to the body, e.g. mirrors, glasses, stairs, checkerboard, and the like (Derrida, *Right of Inspection; with photographs by Marie-Françoise Plissart*). The first parergon of this type, i.e. ornaments of the body, is used in the Plissart photo series as marks of mobile sexual difference and gender. The second—parts of the interior or decoration—serves to reveal the abyssal movements of the characters, like in the checkers game. These parergonal elements are the "parts that pretend to stand in for the whole [...] but in fact they never manage it" (no pagination), and notwithstanding their secondary role, they represent those marks of mystery and suspense that help to unfold the story. Derrida calls this Plissart's series "photo-novel," and he claims that its parerga provide a commentary to the visual narrative, verbal text of which is absent.

Several series of Russian photographer Nikolay Bakharev can also be read as photo-novels without any verbal text, where elements of interior and ornaments of the body, i.e. parergonal parts, play a crucial role in perception and comprehension of the photographs (see Figure 3.8). For example, in the series *Pastime* (1993-1998) and *Sofa*, sometimes translated as *Couch* (1991-1997), the subjects are photographed against, in the words of Ekaterina Degot, "a flagrantly motley setting" (Degot, "Amateurs and Lovers: Nikolay Bakharev's Gaze"). The elements of this "motley" interior include: usually dark sofas, patterned rugs and wallpaper, pictures on the walls, tables covered with oilcloth, on top of which loom the remains of food, bottles of alcohol, books and

magazines, and other objects. The models' nude white bodies stick out and seem isolated in such a wide variety of decoration. The interior, it seems, weighs upon them and ultimately oppresses. The Bakharev subjects surrender themselves to their environment and appear subordinate to it. The ease with which they pose for the photographer makes these images look almost amateur, as if these people are playing an intimate game with their friend or lover without fearing the camera, but also as if they consider the picture-taking process of little or no importance (photography as a secondary practice). In reality, the subjects of these series are Bakharev's clients, ordinary working-class people who requested a portrait in a home setting (Bakharev and Artamonova). By the end of a five- to six-hour photo session, the photographer would say that the photographs they had taken were boring and trivial, and would persuade his clients to take off their clothes. Usually, clients responded favourably to this request, as they were making a sort of a deal—the photographer would give them 'decent' images and would keep the 'indecent' ones for himself. Bakharev collected these photographs from the late 1970s, hoping that one day he would be able to exhibit or publish them in an art journal. However, it was only in the late 1980s that he could show the series *Sofa* in public. It is interesting to note that the reception of Bakharev's photographs was always mixed: in the Soviet Union (and in Russia of the early 1990s), the theme of eroticism was considered distasteful (Bakharev and Artamonova), while in the countries of Western Europe and North America, the public looked at the depiction of such candour with suspicion.

The second type of parerga in these photographs is related to the ornaments of the body, for example, jewellery, hairstyles, bandanna, neckerchiefs, scarce clothing, and underwear. These elements appear foreign to the models' bodies as their effortless nudity and posing suggest the sim-

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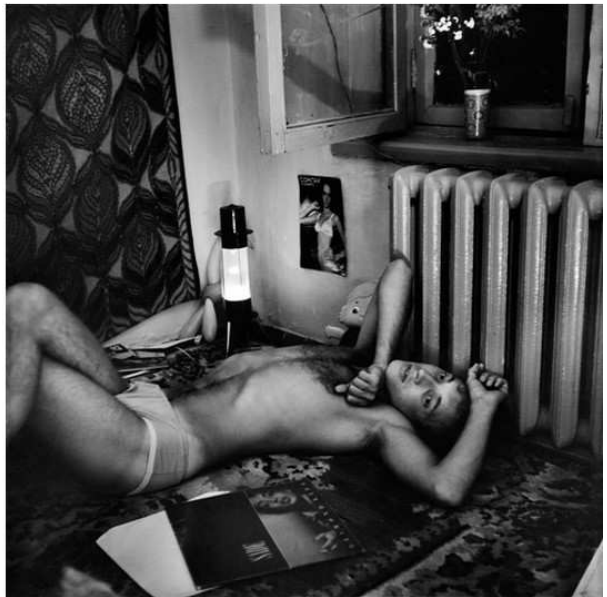
Figure 3.8: Nikolay Bakharev, untitled from the series *Sofa*, 1991-1997. Gelatin silver prints, 30 x 30 cm each. Grinberg Gallery, Moscow. Copyright Nikolay Bakharev, used with permission.

plicity and minimalism of their garments, if not their complete absence. However, the photographer and his models seem persuaded of the necessity to add decorations to the body, which to my mind indicates its oppressed state. The desire to hide the body behind items of clothing or accessories, be it just an open shirt, panties, or necklace, conveys the feeling of vulnerability and powerlessness before the overwhelmingly private (and potentially public as well) atmosphere the subjects live in. Thus, the parergonal elements do not only participate in the creation of the aesthetic component of the photographs, they also help reveal the characters of the series and the body politics. The nude body, adorned with parergonal decorations, is shameless and joyful, which is why even in 1991, when nudity was no longer shocking, Bakharev was accused of immorality by other acclaimed and respected artists during his Moscow exhibition. They wanted to beat the photographer after he replied to them: "You all are my potential clients. The culture of my models is my culture too, and your culture is exactly the same" (Shchekoldin, "Ot Rodchenko do Bakhareva").

The medium of photography can be perceived as parergonal in the sense that the camera is what Derrida calls a 'prosthesis'—a supplement, an accessory, an external device that participates in the process of image production. Although deconstruction was not developed and practised in the domains of visual culture and specifically photography, Derrida devoted several works to visual art that tackled important points in the theory of margin/centre.[9] Derrida considered photographs non-discursive, thus potentially as those that can explode discourse. Otherwise the photographic medium has contradictory features, such as activity of the photographer (in choosing the frame, the light, the angle, etc.) and passivity of the *technê* (the camera's automatic recording mechanism), the

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[9]These are primarily *The Truth in Painting* (1987), *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993), *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography* (2010) and *Athens, Still Remains: The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme* (2010).

production of a new image and capturing of the existing reality, the act and gaze, the performance and archivisation. These contradictions inherent to photography contribute to the impossibility of determining its limits and classifying it, and demand an approach to photography as a medium that exceeds art and *technê*.

Deconstruction in photography starts with the image taking process. The initiatives, such as framing, points of view, calculation of light, adjustment of the exposure, and others, create flexibility and even instability in the process of image production. Since the classic analogue photography implies the opening of a shutter for a certain amount of time, which can vary depending on the will of the photographer or daylight, the camera records a unique moment in history that will never be reproduced again, and

> this supposes a differing/deferring and differentiated duration: in a split second the light can change, and we're dealing with a divisibility of the first time. Reference is complex; it is no longer simple, and in that time subevents can occur, differentiations, micrological modifications giving rise to possible compositions, dissociations, and recompositions, to "effects," if you like, to artifices that definitively break with the presumed phenomenological naturalism that would see in photographic technology the miracle of a technology that effaces itself in order to give us a natural purity, time itself, the unalterable and uniterable experience of a pretechnical perception. (Derrida et al. 8-9)

The uniqueness of the recorded moment reflects the uniqueness of its photograph—there can never be the same moment again, as there can never be the same image. Since the duration of the shutter's opening can vary, it offers endless possibilities. Because of ever-changing reality and these possible pluralities of photographic experience, the produced image appears with the modified reference and introduces "multiplicity, divisibility, substitutivity, replaceability" (7). Seen in this perspective photography exposes the subject's "nonself-identity," "dispersal" and "internal self-differentiation"

(Richter xxvii-xxi).

This idea can be retraced in the series *Reminiscences of Childhood* (1989-1998) by Galina Moskaleva, a photographer of Belarusian origin (see Figure 3.9). Here, by using different chemicals on old negatives from her father's personal archive, as well as by duplicating some parts of the image, Moskaleva shows how reality and its memory change with time. The "referencial"[10] is neither present in Moskaleva's images, as it is modified through chemical and optical manipulations while developing photographs, nor does it exist in reality in its previous documented form. This series not only attests to the self-differentiation of the referent but also reconstructs the movement of memory. Sepia and blue toning help bring a hint of nostalgia to the photographs. The multiple superimpositions of the same or similar negatives remind the viewer of moving images from an old film whose quality has deteriorated. Similarly, Moskaleva also illustrates memory deterioration, as the subjects on her photographs are shown incomplete, cut off from their initial negatives, and thus quasi-erased. Sometimes their bodies are layered on top of each other, which makes it impossible to distinguish them and determine their surroundings. This creates an overall impression of instability, both in terms of the photographic representation of reality and the experience of memory.[11] The referent (or reference) in Moskaleva's work becomes the parergon—something that shifts from the essential photographic feature to a secondary supplement that the image encompasses. This offers yet another approach to undermining the classic understanding of a photographic image as that which is closely tied to a referent.

The series *Reminiscences of Childhood* did not receive as much public acclaim in Belarus

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[10]"Referencial" is a neologism created by Derrida in order to avoid choosing between the words "referent" and "reference" regarding the photographic image.

[11]Both memory and photography are treated as unstable and dynamic in the book *Double Exposure: Memory and Photography* (2014) edited by Olga Shevchenko.
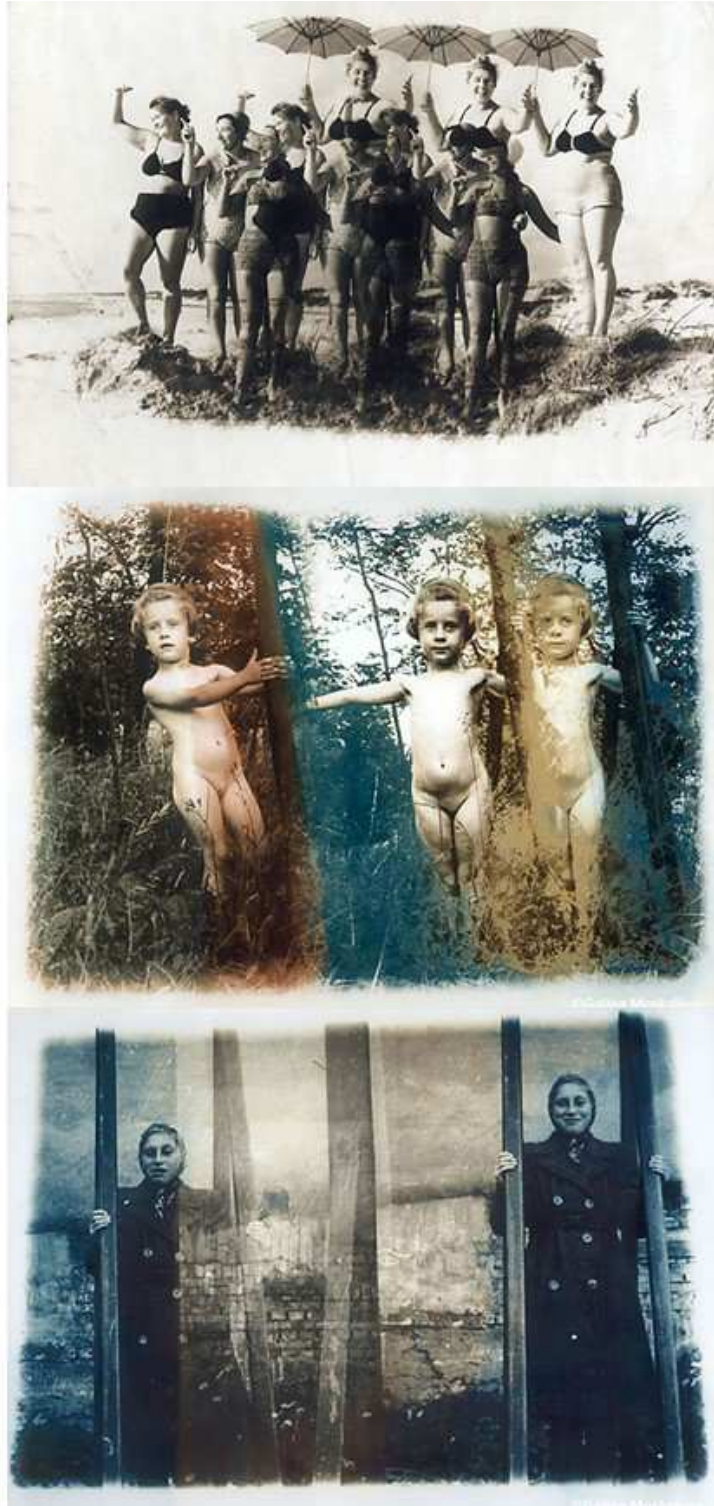
Figure 3.9: Galina Moskaleva, untitled from the series *Reminiscences of Childhood*, 1989-1998. Toned gelatin silver prints. Top: 30 x 40 cm; Museum Ken Damy, Brescia. Middle and bottom: 24 x 30 cm; artist's collection. Copyright Galina Moskaleva, used with permission.

and Russia as it did in Western countries, where it was exhibited multiple times (*Les Expériences Photographiques Russes* in Paris, 1992; *Behind walls. Eastern Europe before and beyond 1989* in Leeuwarden, 2007; *Fotofest* in Houston, 2012, to name but a few). Maybe it was the series' accent on damaged personal memory, which also reflects collective memory and is mediated by images, which was incomprehensible or uncomfortable for Eastern European viewers. However, during one exhibition in Minsk, Bulat Okudzhava—a famous Soviet and Russian singer-songwriter, poet and writer—mistook the woman with the umbrella in the Moskaleva photograph (who was in reality her mother) for his ex-wife who had died, wondering how Moskaleva had taken it. According to Moskaleva, this signifies that her series could "transmit the spirit of that epoch and make it recognisable" (Moskaleva and Ergaeva 27).

The parergon of the photographic work, be it added materials, or elements incorporated in the image, participates in the process when centre and margin merge with one another and blur the boundaries of what could be determined as central and marginal parts. The movement towards deconstruction happens when it is no longer possible to establish which component of the image is the most meaningful—the central or the marginal. The example of *Unfinished Dissertation* cited above demonstrates that for Boris Mikhailov, clear limits between visual and verbal dissolve; the text added in the margins of the page plays an equally important role as do the images in the centre. Moreover, the verbal text creates another meaning which would be impossible to achieve with the visual text only. The text enlarges the field of perception shifting the viewers' sight beyond the image in the centre, and thus becomes a part of the visual text as well. And vice versa, the images become a 'readable' text as they transcend the visual field and merge with the verbal messages.

Mikhailov experiments in this way with both formal and thematic levels in various series. Such a structural decentering is present not only in Mikhailov's work but in most late and post-Soviet photography, and this might be one of the reasons why it received the label nonconformist. As we saw in the aforementioned examples, the studied photographers focused and built their works around the exploration of aesthetic and thematic margins. Interestingly, the photographers' lust for deconstruction is evident not only in the dismantling of visual structures. In the following subsection I will explore the binary centre/margin in a different kind of structure—the social structure. The Marxist perspective on social structures offers a dichotomy close to the centre and margins, that of dominant and subaltern classes.

Using Antonio Gramsci's theoretical writings, I will examine the notions of 'subaltern' and 'dominant' to look at the social status of late and post-Soviet photography subjects. People at the periphery of society who were underrepresented in the media became one of the most important topics for the photographers of the 1980s and 1990s, and this is the reason why their photographs appeared 'new' to art critics. However, I argue that these social types always existed in photography and art, and what actually changed was their representation: from positive as collective to negative as individual, from censure and blame to aestheticization of marginality. The photographs discussed here show the downsides of the Soviet and post-Soviet world, which greatly contradicted the existing image of society in Soviet public discourse. The subversiveness of such photographs lay in the truthful and unembellished portraiture of subaltern subjects. Photography was one step ahead of other art forms, as it documented social changes in the country while they were happening.

3.3   Subaltern characters of photography

In the essay "Russian Photography in the Textual Context," Boris Groys claimed that the main heroes of photographic art in the late Soviet Union were the "little" people obsessed by big ideas, which refers to the tradition of nineteenth-century Russian literature: Gogol, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky (Groys, Russian Photography in the Textual Context 123). In the major literary works of the above-mentioned authors, characters usually come from the 'simple' milieu: they can be petty bourgeois, merchants, peasants, manual workers, etc. The notion "little" people has nothing to do with ethnicity, nationality or social class; what it implies instead is their meagre social status and passive acceptance of history. These simple heroes, according to Groys, think they cannot change their lives, in contrast to the intelligentsia who constantly look for change.

The main subjects of photography during the 1980s and 1990s indeed resemble the literary characters of Gogol, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky because of their dubious social positions. Society in the Soviet Union was officially viewed as homogeneous, or 'classless' (Zajda 3). In reality, however, the Soviet authorities acknowledged the existence of tripartite division: the political elite like white-collar functionaries and intelligentsia, the working class, and the peasantry (Yanowitch, Introduction viii). With time, however, Soviet and Western sociologists corrected this simplistic vision by studying the subdivisions of these three major classes. They distinguished up to ten 'socio-occupational groups' which could be divided into 'higher' and 'lower' strata.[12] Consequently, 'lower' social groups described those who could not properly "contribute to the de-

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[12]This categorisation, however, highly depends on scholars' and Soviet leaders' terminology, as well as the period and methodology of sociological scrutiny. A number of scholars define the peasantry as the lower and superseded stratum (Susan Buck-Moss, Joseph Zajda). In the opinion of Yanowitch, the real lower strata were those who suffered from inequalities in income, cultural levels and prestige, which did not necessarily mean peasants.

velopment of social production."[13] Such groups included those who could not work or fulfil their societal function, i.e. the unemployed and pensioners, sick and people with disabilities, prisoners, drug addicts, etc. In the 1980s, these marginals were featured in various photographic series, such as *Study in Hard Photography* (1987-1991) by Sergey Leontiev, who captured people living on the periphery of society, *Church*, *Prison* and *Drunk Tank* (1970s-1990s) by Yuri Rybchinsky documenting the unlucky ones who happened to get into these three problematic places,[14] *Boarding school for disabled children* (1981) by Valery Shchekoldin as well as his other series featuring primarily villagers, the elderly, and sick people.[15]

In the 1990s, after the collapse of communism and the advent of 'wild' capitalism, new class stratifications came about. Besides the large middle class, society saw the extremes of both living conditions. On the one hand, there emerged a 'new Russian' (*novyi Russkiy*) type of people who made their fortune during the short period of total chaos immediately following the collapse of the USSR (Kotkin 115). On the other hand, there was a growing number of underprivileged people—orphans, homeless, the poor who could not afford proper living standards (Simonyan). Problem children, sexual minorities, prostitutes and criminals also appeared in public discourse with the sudden abolishment of propaganda, censorship and social control. Although the taboo around these subjects was broken, there still existed a certain sensitivity, especially when they

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[13]Ovshii Shkaratan quoted by Murray Yanowitch in *Social and Economic Inequality in the Soviet Union: Six Studies*, M E Sharpe, 1977, p. 13.

[14]In the collective-oriented Soviet society, it was considered a big shame to go through such places. Indecent behaviour was regarded as treason and was persecuted not only by the power but also by the fellow citizens, forming in this way a model of Foucauldian panopticon. As Mikhail Sidlin writes, "[p]rison, church and drunk tank were the places that people tried not to talk about. To get into the drunk tank meant to become a negative hero of the wall newspaper. To attend a church meant to be marked by the KGB. To find oneself in prison meant to receive a lifelong mark of an outcast" (Sidlin, "Iurii Rybchinskii: "Krivaia kamera"").

[15]I discussed some photographs from these series in chapter two. See Figures 2.4, 2.14 and 2.15.

were backed by glamorised images of the Western-style *dolce vita* popularised by advertisement, television and glossy magazines (Condee 131-132, 151-152). The quintessence of this period was the photographic series *Case History* (1994-1997) by Boris Mikhailov, picturing miserable vagrants in the city of Kharkov, *Games Children Play* (1991-2010) by Evgeny Mokhorev, where he captured Petersburgian orphans and kids of the street, and *Everyday Life* (1994-1995) by Sergey Chilikov, which documented the decadent state of Russian villages.

Thus, the theme of the marginal in late and post-Soviet photographs exists not only in their formal solutions (demonstrated in the previous subsection) but also, often simultaneously, on the level of depicted characters. I claim that in the 1980s, the heroes of photographic series appear as subaltern (despite the visible absence of class stratification), while in the 1990s they more often represent the individuals not belonging to the dominant class. To describe the characteristics of this photographic decentering I use Antonio Gramsci's term 'subaltern,' which in Marxist discourse indicates the lower strata of society subjugated by the ruling class (Schwarz 306). The inherent characteristic of a subaltern population is the lack of an ideological direction and revolutionary representatives, which is why it gets oppressed by the hegemonic rulers. "The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'State:' their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States" (Gramsci et al. 52). The unity of the State, on the other hand, manifests itself in the differentiation of powers (legislative, judiciary and executive) and consequent established hegemony. For Gramsci, "hegemony is 'manufactured consent,' created through the articulation of intellectuals in a public sphere in which contending articulations are also voiced" (Leitch 1000).

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Subaltern groups are passive; therefore they accept the hegemony of the ruling class, as they consent to the political decisions of the 'intellectuals,' i.e. those who work with ideas and participate in the formation, articulation, and dissemination of hegemonic rule. These intellectuals play the role of mediators between the State and subaltern people.

Initially Gramsci used the word subaltern to designate the lower ranks of military personnel who are subordinate to captains. Later, in his writings he referred to Engels as the subaltern to Marx, and finally he expanded this term to include the working class, peasants, slaves, religious groups, women, and racial groups (Ives 78).[16] These social groups are excluded from the 'respectful' society; however, Gramsci ultimately believed that they have a potential to subvert a ruling power and become themselves a source of political and cultural hegemony. Henry Schwarz asserts that Gramsci used the term subaltern interchangeably with 'popular classes' or 'masses' and described "the inferior social positions of a small industrial and agricultural proletariat subsisting alongside a massive peasantry" (Schwarz 306-307).

In the Soviet Union, the mass proletariat represented a subaltern class in that they accepted the hegemony of the Communist Party. However, it is important to consider that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bolshevik revolution that brought the establishment of the USSR was only possible due to spontaneous peasant and working-class movements.[17] Additionally, in Lenin's and Plekhanov's writings and politics, hegemony signified the proletariat's alliance with the peasantry (Ives 67). Thus, the power taken over by the proletariat can be described as the hege-

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[16]Stephanie Cronin asserts that Gramsci used the term subaltern as a codeword for 'proletariat' in order to escape sensorship in prison (Cronin 19 n.5).

[17]The question whether the working class held power via its control of the state or whether it was the political elite that exploited the workers and thus controlled the state, has provoked multiple debates. See Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR*, Routledge, 2002, p.110.

mony of the proletariat (the hegemony of the subaltern), which "transcends bourgeois hegemony" (Shandro 28). Therefore, the masses of the proletariat, peasants and working class cannot simply be designated as subaltern, as they were concurrently the subject of hegemony led by the leader at the origin of revolution, and later, to some extent, exercised power themselves by establishing trade unions, *kolkhoz*, and other associations. However, according to Gramsci, the dominant group always seeks to incorporate these forms of proletarian autonomy within the state, which makes it totalitarian.

Thus, the case of the Soviet Union in the theory and history of hegemony is unique. Moreover, because of the development of Marxist, Feminist and Post-colonial criticism during the late twentieth-century, which designated under subaltern not only class-specific groups but also people that represent the deviation from ideal (or from elite), poor, women, non-Caucasian races, and colonised states, this term acquired much broader sense. Therefore, in the present dissertation I focus on the most vulnerable and powerless subjects of late and post-Soviet photography—abandoned children and adolescents, those intoxicated by drugs and alcohol, the homeless and poor, the disabled and the sick, the incarcerated and the oppressed, ethnic and religious minorities—those who lived on the periphery of the society. They neither conformed to the aestheticized image of ideal Soviet citizens shown in the communist propaganda nor participated in the consumer culture introduced after the dissolution of the USSR. These subjects were excluded from the dominant discourse initially by Soviet censorship and later by the omnipresent mythical imagery of capitalism.[18]

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[18]Similarly, in the collection *Subalterns and social protest* edited by Stephanie Cronin, the term subaltern is used to describe the urban poor, the emerging working class, the peasantry, slum dwellers and the unemployed (2).

Although the types of subaltern subjects evolved and changed with all the political, economic and cultural transformations which happened throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the subversive nature of these photographs remained the same. The key issues problematized by the photographers, either in the Soviet Union or after its breakdown, dealt with the system's corruption, massive propaganda (if we compare post-Soviet capitalist imagery with advertising, which functions like propaganda), and exploitation of masses by the ruling class. In this case, the resistance and critique manifested in late and post-Soviet photography is directed against elite hegemony in general, regardless of the system.

The theme of social exclusion has in addition to being prominent in late and post-Soviet photography, existed in Russian literature since the eighteenth century. In the Russian literary tradition, a character called the 'superfluous' man typically has a principal role in the work, although his odd personality usually prevents him from fully integrating into society. This character is usually male and often lonely and deeply frustrated with life. However, thanks to his wit, nonconformism or perspicacity, the superfluous character reveals the complexity of the political and social spheres, their corruption, misconceptions and hypocrisy. The most famous characters embodying the superfluous man are Evgeny Onegin (from the same-name novel in verse by Alexander Pushkin), Chatsky (from Alexander Griboyedov's comedy in verse *Woe from Wit*), Pechorin (the principal character of *A Hero of our Time* by Mikhail Lermontov), the Underground Man (from Fedor Dostoyevsky's novel *Notes from Underground*), many of Turgenev's characters, including Chulkaturin, in *The Diary of a Superfluous Man*, among others. The estrangement of these characters from their environment allows them to stay true to themselves, albeit remaining on the margins

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of society.

In the late and post-Soviet era, the superfluous man was frequently featured in film, especially in the genre *chernukha*. In several movies (such as *Little Vera* by Vasilii Pichul, *The Aesthenic Syndrome* by Kira Muratova, *Taxi Blues* by Pavel Lungin, and others), the characters, be they main or secondary, struggle to adapt to a changing reality and are consequently submerged into a world of violence, madness, and social isolation. The main character of the movie *Brother* by Alexei Balabanov became an icon of the epoch, almost a new national hero, as he incarnated a 'positive' criminal fighting with corrupted society and mafia. Such characters, balancing on the edge of law, justice, crime, and vengeance became dominant in Russian cinema of perestroika and early 1990s.

Similarly, late Soviet photographers increasingly documented subjects who represented an opposition to the conventional image of happy people living in the community and working together to construct the USSR. Traditionally in Russian society the notion of *sobornost'*[19] played a key role in establishing social norms and morals. For many centuries, due to the Orthodox Christian mentality that reigned in the tsarist Russia, "human beings [were] viewed more as an integral part of a larger community rather than as individuals. The collective is emphasized. Salvation is attained by remaining within the community rather than by individual effort" (Chances 112). In the secular Soviet Union too, public discourse highlighted the importance of collective work in building the communist state. However, multiple examples (like the superfluous man) in Russian culture revealed an ambiguous attitude toward *sobornost'* and community which equated confor-

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[19]In the Explanatory dictionary of Russian language, *sobornost* is explained as spiritual community of many jointly living people (Ozhegov).

Figure 3.10: Evgeny Yufit. Top: untitled from the series *Composition no. 2*, 1991. Bottom: *Men in the Forest* from the series *Composition no. 2*, 1991. Gelatin silver prints, 64 x 86 cm each. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Copyright State Russian Museum, St Petersburg, used with permission.

mity and the suppression of individuality. The theme of the 'outsider' that emerged in late Soviet art countered the representation of happy society propagated by the socialist realist doctrine and its mythological heroes of Soviet life.[20]

Moscow photographer and film-maker Evgeny Yufit, known as the father of the so-called 'necrorealist' trend[21] in late and post-Soviet art, expresses this idea of isolation and marginality in his work (see Figure 3.10). Yufit's untitled 1991 photograph depicts a man lying on wooden logs which run parallel to his body. His eyes are closed, mouth half-open, and his hands stick out unnaturally, as though riveted to the ground. There is a rifle beside him, which suggests that the man was likely shot or killed himself.[22] The man's body, in an oversized dirty coat, replicates the shape of dry logs on which he lies. The overall look of this man and his environment hints that he does not represent the elite; he was probably a poor drunkard or simply someone who finally found salvation in death. In the series *Transparent Grove* of the same year, Yufit depicts several men walking among leafless trees. They are well-dressed and look like office clerks, but they hardly belong to one happy community. They are depicted together, walking all in the same direction, yet they are separated from each other, like those trees that grow in the same field but are eternally separated by nature. This kind of structural solution of the photograph could signify the disintegration of the collective body of the Soviet Union after its collapse. Both snapshots

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[20]Maria Bulanova asserts that Socialist Realism sought to create the representation of the New Man who "was characterised above all by his collectivist outlook. He was to be completely identified with the revolutionary cause, maintain a correct working-class consciousness, assimilate with the masses, and wholly adapt his interests and goals to those of the Soviet state" (Bulanova 11).

[21]Necrorealism is an art movement that emerged in Leningrad of the early 1980s. Necrorealism sees art as the combination of death (necro) and life (realism), and explores the biological cycles of a man, which represent an ever-continuing death.

[22]Knowing that Evgeny Yufit worked in necrorealist style, it is unlikely that the subject of this photograph is a hunter who is having a rest after a long and tiresome chase.

Figure 3.11: Georgi Ryazhski. Left: *Party Delegate*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 99 x 61 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Right: *Chairwoman*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 109 x 73 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Courtesy State Tretyakov Gallery.

have a similar perspective: the camera is directed down and across, which suggests a separation of the body from the official system. Once again, what is highlighted is the theme of the isolated individual who does not fit into the social norms and is unable to communicate with others.

Late and post-Soviet photography is subversive because it depicts the subaltern not as a collective but as often isolated individuals. Previously, the image of subaltern masses in the Soviet Union conveyed a positive and affirmative message, due to the socialist realist tradition manifested in painting, poster, and photography, where subjects—subaltern proletarians—were

portrayed in a collective setting or as heroes (of revolution, war, labour, communism, etc). In the most notable examples of socialist realist painting, such as *Party Delegate* (1927) and *Chairwoman* (1928) by Georgi Ryazhski (see Figure 3.11), the depicted women embody the typical ideals of the newly-founded Soviet society: politically and socially active, determinant and autonomous.[23] These women are already the heroes of the Soviet Union, if only because they carry a perfect image of the Communist Party representative. As Wolfgang Holz argues, men and women who became the heroes of Socialist Realist painting "created a 'body-culture' that sought to develop standardised heroic bodies for each particular production-class" (Holz 75). On the other hand, in the paintings depicting a collective, such as *Our Heroes (Shock Worker)* (1930) by Samuel Adlivankin, or *Students: The Workers' Faculty is Marching On* (1928) by Boris Ioganson (see Figure 3.12), the people represent happy Soviet citizens moving, literally or figuratively, towards progress.

This ideological and future-oriented imagery maintained the myth of the hegemony of the proletariat (the hegemony of the subaltern). In the Soviet Union, like in every dictatorial state, propagandists and disseminators of ideology cultivated a positive representation of the subaltern. Up until the mid-1960s no matter how hard things were, there was still a general sense (fostered and accentuated by propaganda) that the country was goal oriented and moving towards a radiant future. Although the majority of Soviet population felt proud of being proletarian, according to Peter Sloterdijk, proletarian existence is defined negatively, as it is "excluded from better chances and the riches of life" (Sloterdijk 70). He asserts that the only moment in history when there

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[23]In the 1920s and 1930s, there was a utopian belief that society would see the birth of a New Soviet Man—an individual who perfectly fits into the Soviet way of life. The 'New Man' became the main hero of multiple paintings, movies and novels describing this individual as the ideal that every man and woman in the Soviet Union should strive for.
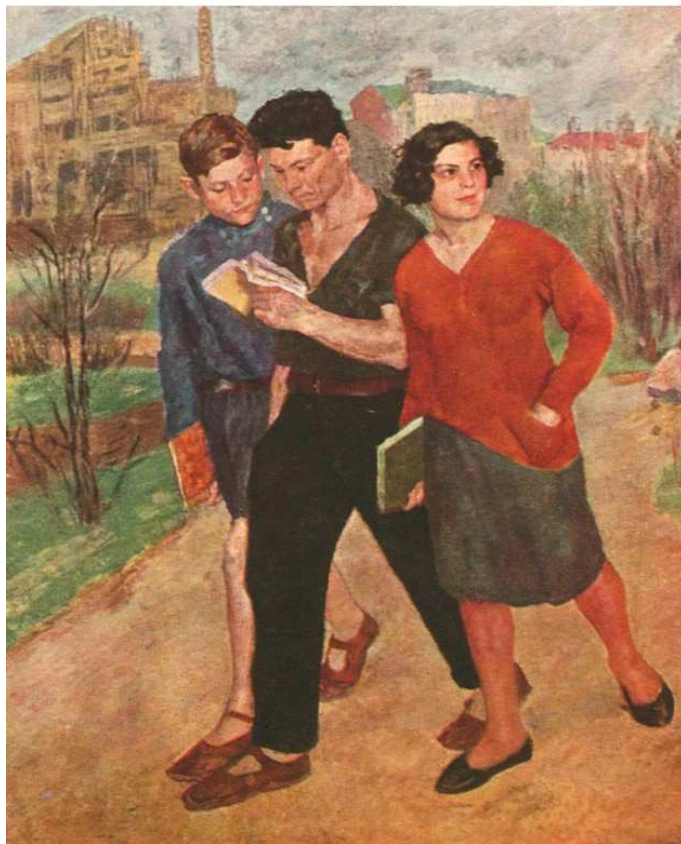
Figure 3.12: Top: Samuel Adlivankin, *Our Heroes (Shock Worker)*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 100 x 130 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Bottom: Boris Ioganson, *Students: The Workers' Faculty Is Marching On*, 1928. Paper on canvas, oil, 132 x 109 cm. Kiev National Picture Gallery, Kiev.

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was a genuine pleasure in being a proletarian was in Russia shortly after the October Revolution. Soviets' pride in being proletarian waned with time and was replaced by the feeling of subalternity. In the 1980s and 1990s images of the subaltern became overtly negative, as they showed lonesome subjects living in poverty, isolation and precarious conditions. Therefore, it can be said that the theme of subalternity in Soviet and post-Soviet art is not new, but that the way it is presented has changed.

Generally, late and post-Soviet photography depicts the subaltern without embellishments, in dark and dirty aesthetics, to transmit social injustice and the subjects' pain. However, in some cases, the image of the subaltern gets aestheticized and romanticised, like in the series *Gypsies* by Russian photographer Lyalya Kuznetsova. She started the massive series in the late 1970s out of a desire to record the romantic part of Gypsies' lives, continuing the project throughout several decades, simultaneously enlarging the territory of documentation. In these photographs, gypsy encampments in the fields are portrayed as places of freedom and personal salvation. Being deprived of many civil rights due to their nomadic lifestyle, gypsies were subject to political, social, cultural and economic marginalisation not only in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus but in almost all European countries (Barany 2). The subaltern status of Gypsies is exceptional as their situation was different from other ethnic minorities that were culturally acceptable in multinational states, like the Soviet Union. Contrary to traditional diasporas, Gypsies do not have a homeland or a state they originally come from, which excludes them from society. However, Kuznetsova's photographs transmit something completely different—a people insubordinate to the power apparatus and thus masters of their destiny. The life of a gypsy, full of dance, music and eternal feast, is

Figure 3.13: Lyalya Kuznetsova, untitled from the series *Gypsies*, gelatin silver prints, 30 x 40 cm each. Top: 1979. Middle: 1979. Bottom: 1987. Private collections. Copyright Lyalya Kuznetsova, used with permission.
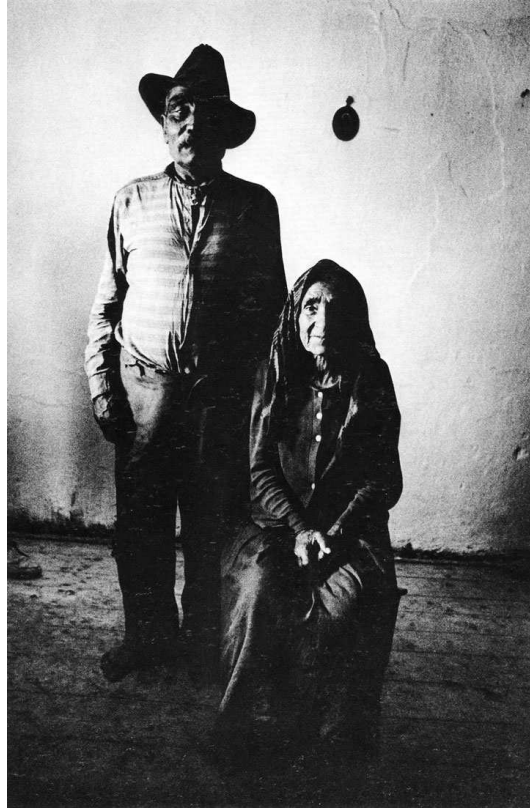
Figure 3.14: Josef Koudelka, untitled from the series *Gypsies*, 1966. Gelatin silver print. Copyright Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos, used with permission.

compared to that of a bird in free flight.

Czech-French photographer Josef Koudelka also captured the Roma people while travelling through Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. His and Kuznetsova's series are similar in the way that they both depict the poverty and simplicity which defined gypsies' lives and they both convey the subaltern status of this ethnic group that lives isolated from the rest of society. However, there are significant differences which support my claim that Kuznetsova's images positively depict subaltern gypsies. Her series is playful and light and she portrays her subjects as people who teeter between nomadic and settled life. Her photographs in Figure 3.13, for example, are full of movement and dynamism: walking or even running people, a flying bird, a playing accordionist;

the bottom photograph is especially distinguished by a zigzag perspective of sitting and moving people. Kuznetsova's gypsies live in deep harmony with nature, and their clans appear solidary and tight-knit.

On the other hand, Koudelka's images are more static and heavy, caused by an intensified black-and-white balance. They also differ from Kuznetsova's in the depiction of existential topics, such as death, ageing, and loneliness. Koudelka is more concerned with composition and the structural form of the images: he often plays with contrast between light and shadow, as well as geometry, positioning his subjects in a way that their bodies form concrete figures. For instance, in Figure 3.14 the key form is the triangle formed between a small icon on the wall, and two (man's and woman's) faces. The sharp contrast of light and shadow completely darkens the couple's right side, suggesting visible ups and downs of their life and switching between light and dark moments. Lyalya Kuznetsova instead uses another approach, giving herself and her subjects complete freedom, which creates more space in her photographs. This, to my mind, is the key element that brings into her series a sense of joy and optimism, despite her subjects representing a marginalised stratum of society. Lyalya Kuznetsova's *Gypsies* has been exhibited and published in the U.S. and Europe, and the prints are kept in the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, the Museum of Art Photography in Philadelphia, Kunstbibliothek of Berlin, the Museum of Russian Photography in Kolomna, and the Hotel de Ville Photo Museum in Paris.

Various scholars in the late 1980s and early 1990s perceived the theme of social marginalisation in Soviet Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as new (as acknowledged in multiple publications, such as *Another Russia: Through the Eyes of the New Soviet Photographers* (1986), *Photo Mani-*

festo: Contemporary Photography in the USSR (1991), to name but a few), but this was engendered by the silencing of the marginal/subaltern subjects in public discourse and art. Scholars often argue that subaltern is by definition a silenced social type: Gramsci argues that the history of the subaltern is "fragmented and episodic" (Gramsci et al. 54), since it is written by the dominant class. Stephanie Cronin asserts that the history of the subaltern "has been largely forgotten, and even sometimes deliberately erased" (Cronin 19). Another issue of the subaltern forgotten history of subaltern peoples comes not from the outside silencing but from within the subaltern group itself. In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak claims that "the true and differential subaltern" neither can speak nor can he/she be adequately represented in the Western discourse. Western knowledge and theory usually confuse two senses of representation: "representation as 'speaking for,' as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation,' as in art or philosophy" (Spivak 275). The intellectuals who speak for the subalterns are unable to adequately represent them (in political sense) as they do not belong to the oppressed group; therefore the image they attribute to it is erroneous.[24] In art and philosophy, the representation of the subaltern is also problematic, as "the subject is not seen as a representative consciousness" (275). To some extent, late and post-Soviet photography is the writing of subaltern history and filling the lacunae existing in the public discourse. I think that the representation of subaltern groups turned out objective and adequate because it was made by the subaltern as well—the marginal circles of nonconformist photographers.[25]

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[24]I believe that this statement is valid both for Western and Eastern discourses. In the totalitarian Soviet Union, for example, the monopoly on decision making belonged to the Communist Party: "Although class and strata divisions are acknowledged to exist in the Soviet Union, the various social groups have no means of directly expressing and defending their own collective interests, of independently organizing to promote these interests. The Party has reserved for itself the right to speak for all" (Yanowitch, *Social and Economic Inequality in the Soviet Union: Six Studies*).

[25]Although they did not belong to any specific marginalised group, the history of photography in Eastern Europe is

As I showed in chapter one, the status of photography in the Soviet Union was lower than other art forms (except for a brief period of photographic and technological outburst throughout the late 1910s and early 1930s). Photography's 'subaltern' position was maintained during perestroika because of Soviet photographers' unorthodox conceptual solutions, which greatly deviated from the established norms of visual culture. Some critics argue that the novelty of its visual language "marginalized" photography during the 1990s as well (Chmyreva et al. 121). Photographers in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have often struggled to gain recognition as visual artists; most of them had other professions and practised photographic art as a leisure activity.[26] The unrecognised status of late Soviet artistic photography and its amateur character determined the subaltern role of photographers, therefore the history that they wrote (or rather photographed) was the history 'from below.'[27]

The language they used also differed from the language used in major visual culture: besides the parerga of the image in the form of various added material or verbal text already discussed above, as well as exploration of subaltern social strata, photographers worked with more radical techniques and in difficult conditions. Looking at the history, circumstances and socio-political contexts that affected the development of the photographic medium in Eastern Europe, I tend to think that the studied photographers worked despite, and contrary to the current in visual culture which revealed the political dimension of photography in the 1980s and 1990s. During the Soviet

the history of marginalised art whose executers were not considered as professional artists.

[26]Boris Mikhailov was a mechanical engineer, Vladimir Kupriyanov was a theatre director, Sergey Chilikov was a professor of philosophy, to give a few examples. In the Soviet Union the profession of art photographer did not exist, as photography had more utilitarian mission, and besides photojournalism there was no other means to have an official photography job.

[27]Sometimes this history writing 'from below' is taken in a literal sense: Boris Mikhailov's acclaimed series *By the Ground* (see Figure 2.18), already mentioned in chapter two, was shot with the camera held at hip height and exhibited below the usual level of gaze, which made the viewer look downward.

rule, their daring themes and techniques opposed the thematic and aesthetic canons of socialist realism, while after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the images portraying decaying living standards also contained a political message when compared to the mythical imagery of the capitalist paradise. To put it differently, deviation from the mainstream photographic practices which existed in the Soviet Union and after its dissolution meant that a photographer would be marginalised, which certainly represented a political decision *per se*. When, in the early 2000s, photography was institutionalised, these photographers became mainstream, but before that their pronounced individual style did not subscribe to accepted visual codes and thus conveyed a political statement of disagreement with the system. The gap between the language of nonconformist photography and conventional visual material in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus suggests a political aspect which became evident in the 1980s and 1990s. These politics of photographic language bring forward another notion to the present discussion, that of the 'minor.' Similarly to the terms 'margin' and 'subaltern,' minor designates the opposite of central, dominant, and hegemonic cultures. The following subsection introduces and translates the concept of minor literature into the visual field to allow the further examination of language and politics present in late and post-Soviet photography.

3.4   Photography as minor art

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explore the oeuvre of Franz Kafka, a German-speaking Jewish writer living in Prague. The authors develop the term of 'minor literature' as "that which a minority constructs within a major language" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 16), for instance Jewish literature (written in German)

in a 'major' Czechoslovakian context. The three characteristics of minor literature are "a high coefficient of deterritorialization," a political dimension prevailing over social or individual concerns, and finally a collective value of enunciation. However, according to Deleuze and Guattari, in a larger framework 'minor' no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions under which every kind of literature emerges within a major or established culture.

The concept of minor literature is tied to the question of language. For Deleuze and Guattari, language becomes minor when it manifests the qualities of underdevelopment; when it is used incorrectly on purpose, when it is intensified and exclamatory, when it "cries" and "gasps," when it is "appropriate for strange and minor uses," and to sum things up, when it is brought to its extremes (17-27). For example, Kafka describes the strange sounds that the hero of *Transformation* produces while turning into a bug. The objective is to disrupt the standard language's system and open a passage into an unknown territory where language ceases to function according to its habitual codes. Major and minor can be two conditions of one language, and one of the two manifests itself depending on the context and manner of its usage: "[r]ecourse to a minor language puts the major language into flight. Minoritarian authors are those who are foreigners in their own tongue" (Parr 167). To be foreign in one's own tongue means to operate in it from a distance, from a defamiliarised point, from an estranged position in order to allow for new manifestations of the language. Experimentation is the inherent characteristic of a minor language, it holds a rupture with the representation, and produces what Simon O'Sullivan calls a 'glitch.'

Applying the concept of minor in the context of late Soviet and post-Soviet art, I claim that the works of the photographers addressed here are representative of a minor photography

that evolved against the backdrop of an official cultural paradigm framed by the communist ideology and later capitalist mainstream culture. The community of nonconformist photographers indeed 'speaks' a minor language defined by the "power (*puissance*) of variation;" it is constructed within a major language of socialist realism and communist ideology whose language is defined by the "power (*pouvoir*) of constants" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 101). The minor language of this photography is conceptual, formalist, ironic, and sometimes absurd, which proves its high level of deterritorialisation, because it is based on concepts amongst material culture, on form while art is supposed to produce content, on irony or absurdity in a world of serious ideas, order, and logic. This minor language is without doubt political as the production of nonconformist works is by definition political (or at least it is perceived as such). This minor language has a collective enunciation as it speaks on behalf of those who are marginalised and silenced. The studied photographers are minoritarian as they resorted to various techniques and developed their own expressive style that was in a way 'foreign' within the established codes of representation. The choice of the nonconformist photographers to bring forward underrepresented social types and themes bears witness to the revolutionary conditions for art in the 1980s and 1990s Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. But before looking at the 'glitches' of late and post-Soviet photography, I want to investigate the three characteristics of minor, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari, more closely.

The first component of a minor art, that is deterritorialisation, marks the impossibility of an artist to speak a common (or major) art language. In the general framework of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian art, late and post-Soviet photography is dislocated from the hegemonic

norms of form and content established by the communist and later capitalist systems. On one level, the medium of photography was still not recognised as a 'noble' art form. This is due to the continuous influence of Soviet visual culture, which gave priority to different art forms, such as painting and cinema. "There is, then, no photography in the Soviet Union, but there are photographers here—a lot of them" Viktor Misiano once famously stated (Misiano 66).[28] The authority of painting, on the one hand, dictated the canons of the classical approach; the film industry, on the other hand, reflected the rules of popular art. Photography was situated somewhere in between them, which was a major obstacle for this medium to find its niche in the conservative and bureaucratized society. The official attitude toward photographic art in the Soviet Union can be summarized in a statement by Pierre Bourdieu: "Unlike more demanding cultural activities such as drawing, painting or playing a musical instrument, unlike even going to museums or concerts, photography presupposes neither academically communicated culture nor the apprenticeships and the 'profession' which confer their value on the cultural consumptions and practices ordinarily held to be the most noble, by withholding them from the man in the street" (Bourdieu 5). Despite the political and cultural shifts, followed by the rapid democratisation of art and the abolishment of censorship and communist propaganda, there were no significant changes in the photographic sphere in the 1990s: the medium remained generally unacknowledged, which to my mind reflects the economic and political crises in the newly independent countries.[29] In this secondary position

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[28]Neil Matheson argues that photography's marginal position existed in North America too, mainly until the late 1970s. After the landmark *Pictures* exhibition in 1977, the medium gained popularity and official recognition by the art institutions. See his essay "*Fear of Reflections*: The Photoworks of Paul McCarthy" in the collection *Minor Photography: Connecting Deleuze and Guattari to Photography Theory* (2012). In Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus the photography's devalorised status lasted until the late 1990s. The growing need for an institutionalised photographic education which was literally absent until the late 1990s was primarily due to the augmented demand for commercial photography.

[29]It is, however, necessary to mention that some important photographic events occurred in Russia during the 1990s,

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I see the deterritorialisation of the photographic medium.

On the other level, photographic practices of the 1980s and 1990s are deterritorialised because of divergences from the official or mainstream visual codes in terms of content. This is manifested in the exploration of ambiguous or even taboo territories: "The term *deterritorialization* is related to the larger poststructuralist project of *decentering* and refers to the process of escaping from inhibiting or coercive social and intellectual structures, which are understood geographically as territory" (Childers and Hentzi 78). As I previously pointed out, the photographic themes of the photographers studied here as well as their aesthetic solutions can be described as focused on marginal and subaltern subjects. The thematic and formal 'decentering' of the photo works, which started back in the 1960s and 1970s but acquired even more pronounced tonality in the 1980s and 1990s, was the artists' way of criticizing Soviet and post-Soviet systems. During the Soviet period, due to the doctrine of socialist realism and ideological orientation of art, artistic production was monopolised in a way that accepted or sanctioned themes and practices constituted the major language in art and media. With the dissolution of the USSR emerged new visual material, such as glamorised images of advertisement, erotic and pornographic content in the mass-media, representation of Western 'successful' life advocated by the liberal press, to name a few. Against this backdrop, photography featuring poverty, misery, marginality or any deviation from the norm, appeared inadequate, inappropriate and belonging to different territory, and by consequence, minor. Escaping the hegemonic discourse under both communist and capitalist regimes, the studied pho-

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e.g. the international festivals of photography in 1993 and 1994, the establishment of the Photographic Collections Museum in 1993 and Multimedia Art Museum in 1996, the opening of the first school of photography in Russia—The Academy of Photography—in 1997. All these and many other achievements were concentrated in Moscow and a few other Russian cities. In Ukraine and Belarus, the development of photographic institutions started later, towards the 2000s.

tographers managed to create their own style of expression becoming "an oppressive minority that speaks a language cut off from the masses" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 16). The marginal status of minor photographers which was especially perceptible during the Soviet era consisted in their exclusion from official and sanctioned art circles. This meant never being able to exhibit their works in public spaces, publish in state-run media, and have other privileges enjoyed by socialist realist artists. In the 1990s, when the Party's monopoly on art ceased to exist, and official discourse shifted from unipolar to multifaceted, photography remained cut off from the masses because of multiple factors. Firstly, the change in regime entailed a crisis of self-identification, because nonconformist artists had to switch from a state of resistance into a state of free creation. Secondly, it took a while for the population to comprehend the role of photography in art. Thirdly, as far as truth value is concerned, photography could not compete with television, which in the 1990s became the leading medium in the post-Soviet countries to give a quick and objective representation of reality.

The series *Study in Hard Photography* that I discussed in chapter two and briefly mentioned in the previous section wholly illustrates this point. Sergey Leontiev would spend days upon days looking for good film, because at the time it was hard to find a high-quality film made in the Soviet Union. For Leontiev, the subjects he chose to photograph corresponded to stereotypical literary characters: the poor student, the abandoned woman, the freezing beggar, and so on. Thinking in a literary language and using serial photography instead of individual snapshots testifies to the insufficiency of the photographic medium to express an author's intentions behind his image. A series offers an almost literary narrative, which is impossible to achieve with a single photograph.

The process of creating *Study in Hard Photography* involved the fabrication of a hand-made point source enlarger that allowed the photographer to achieve an extraordinary sharpness, all along revealing the defects present in the snapshot, such as dust, film imperfections, etc—to challenge the idea of the perfect image. *Study in Hard Photography* participated in a very few exhibitions in Russia (in Moscow House of Photography, Guelman Gallery and other small provincial galleries), and received limited (if not to say no) criticism and public response. Moreover, the location of the original photographer's prints is mostly unknown nowadays, except for one photograph that is kept in The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. All this suggests that minor photographic language existed already in the very conception of the series, in the way that the images were treated, and in the oblivion they underwent.

The political aspect, which is the second feature of minor literature, following Deleuze and Guattari's theory, represents without doubt another characteristic of the studied photography. Having been greatly influenced by the conceptual and nonconformist art of the 1960s and 1970s, the photography of the 1980s and 1990s inherits its ardent social criticism, satire and questioning of the established art practices. These photographs can represent political activism, an act of resistance to the system (or rather to the systems, i.e. both communist and capitalist), as often they express a political statement. In the Soviet Union, nonconformist art and photography were considered political acts of resistance: "Even when unofficial artists thought that as far as iconography was concerned they were involved in creating apolitical art, they were wrong, since officialdom viewed their work as an overtly political act" (M. Tupitsyn, "Against the Camera, for the Photographic Archive" 62). The movement of nonconformist art was closely tied to the activ-

ity of Soviet dissidents: the unofficial artworks circulated in the *samizdat*, and certain artists (Ilya Kabakov, Nikita Alexeev) organised exhibitions in private apartments. Raids of nonconformist gatherings became famous far beyond the Soviet Union and provoked continuous overt support of censured artists from their Western colleagues and amateurs.

Starting during the perestroika period, artists and photographers did not have any visible reason to express resistance to the ideology, censorship and power (Stigneev, *Vek fotografii. 1894-1994: Ocherki istorii otechestvennoi fotografii* 278). However, with the transformation of the system in the early 1990s came an ideological crisis related to the collapse of old myths and values. The depiction of its negative sides, such as poverty, precarious living conditions, and unhealthy bodies, was also politically charged, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the glossy advertisement imagery, eroticism, consumerism and idyllic lifestyles which became major visual codes in the 1990s. Capitalism introduced new forms of hegemony, where visual standards were dictated by commercial and popular cultures that represented a new mythical reality. It is precisely these aspects that became the subjects of political opposition for photographers.

As for the third and final characteristic of minor literature—the collective rather than individual enunciation—it is seen in how photographers reflect the influence of either the communist state apparatus (during the Soviet period) or the liberalised capitalist regime (during the 1990s) on life and people. Certain photographers (like Alexei Shulgin, Roman Pyatkovka, Maria Serebriakova, Vladimir Kupriyanov, Ilya Piganov, to name a few) resort to images acquired from institutions of power, such as shots of the television screens, mass-printed materials, textbooks, etc; others (Boris Mikhailov, Galina Moskaleva) use images from personal archives; yet other pho-

tographers (Sergey Leontiev, Sergey Bratkov, Sergey Chilikov and others) take their own shots in the streets. Their photographs provide the representation of collective experiences, where a man is a pawn whose individual concerns do not matter compared to bigger ideas and values of the entire system, just like "an agent that becomes all the more collective because an individual is locked into it in his or her solitude" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 18). In various photographic series already cited above, such as Mikhailov's *Unfinished Dissertation*, Kupriyanov's *In memory of Pushkin*, Savchenko's *Faceless*, Pyatkovka's *Golodomor. Phantoms of the '30s*, Leontiev's *Study in hard photography*, Rybchinsky's *Drunk Tank* and many others, the state appears as an invisible but omni-present machine that shapes reality, people's mentality and everyday life. Although it is argued (Leah Bendavid-Val, Diane Neumaier) that the photographers of the 1980s and 1990s developed their pronounced individual styles and aesthetics (as opposed to earlier Soviet photographers who all worked according to the same socialist realist canons), the images they produce tell about the collective past which remains in the present.

For instance, in the series *Colorisms* by Sergey Chilikov (see Figure 3.15), the environment in which people are portrayed plays as important of a role as the subjects themselves. The characters of this series are villagers who in the recent past were probably workers on collective farms. However, their actual situation does not look promising, as conveyed by a somber filter which darkens the photographs. The villagers walk on muddy roads, sit on logs, wear rustic clothes, and despite their visible optimism, appear lost and forgotten, due to the blurriness of their faces and bodies. It looks like the space itself oppresses them: a small village with brick and wooden houses, wild nature and cultivated soil. There is a feeling in these photographs that the

Figure 3.15: Sergey Chilikov, untitled from the series *Colorisms*, 1990s. Colour photographs, 59 x 59 cm each. Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow. Copyright Sergey Chilikov, used with permission.

life of these people was better back then, while now it is falling apart along with the remains of the fallen communist system. The portrayed villagers hold a collective memory of the past calamities, which unites them. There is a visible difference between the older and younger generations, the former being melancholy and wistful, while the latter are joyous and playful.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) Deleuze and Guattari write that the notions of majority and minority are not defined quantitatively but rather by the presence of a constant that assumes the standard measure, or its absence. Therefore, a phenomenon different from the constant is minoritarian regardless of number, a "subsystem" (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 105). The hero of the majority is Nobody since it embodies an abstract standard, while the character of the minority is "the becoming of everybody, one's potential becoming to the extent that one deviates from the model" (105). This perfectly illustrates the collective majoritarian nature of the Soviet mentality according to which everybody was Nobody, the standard, the measure, the constant, equal to each other, and integral parts of the big common idea, just like "K" in Kafka's novels who "no longer designates a narrator or a character but an assemblage that becomes all the more machine-like" (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 18). The deviation from that standard, on the other hand, represented an undesired minority dangerous for the rest of the society, which was the case of dissidents and nonconformists.[30]

The theory of minor literature has acquired recognition in the scholarly milieu and was applied not only in the literary criticism but also in visual culture studies. Thus, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, the scholar Mieke Bleyen recently elaborated the concept of a minor photography,

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[30]Nonconformist photography often depicts a character-assemblage who embodies the Soviet system, juxtaposing him with a minor character, or a different minor context. Several examples of such photography can be found in chapter four (Figures 4.7, 4.13, 4.14, 4.18, 4.21).

which:

> ... could then be considered as photography that experiments with the medium, bringing it towards its borders, and along the way deterritorializing the dominant codes of representation by operating directly in society, instead of merely representing it. It does not as much seek to develop a unique voice or style than to both address and speak for a future community. It causes short circuits within the dominant codes of photographic representation and as such creates a 'glitch.' In short, it is a photography that shifts and mutates the standardized way of practicing photography (Bleyen xi).

This definition helps to outline the 'major' aspect of photography. Bleyen, for instance, designates as major the 'cliché' nature of the photographic image, the still, the snapshot which immobilises the instant, opposing it to cinematic moving images (xii). Under the major photographic language are thus united the inherent concepts of photography, such as the truth value and realistic representation of the subject, evidence of history, existence of a referent, interruption of time, mechanical apparatus that is involved in the picture-taking process, as well as various formal solutions (e.g. framing, angle, light) chosen by the author-photographer. Major photography is not only documentary or applied, which usually suggests photo-journalism and more utilitarian usage of the medium, it is also pictorial, yet still tends to be taken for granted as truthful and exists as a finished product. Examples of major photography are infinite, and can be found since the invention of the medium up to the present day. In the Soviet Union, the major photographic language is present in the documentation of the USSR construction, Great Patriotic War, scientific and military achievements, and many other spheres which were covered by the photojournalists. Obviously, major photographic language served for official documents, propaganda, in all kinds of public discourses (print media, boards of honour, posters, to name a few), and was tightly linked to the methods of Socialist Realism. The examples that I discussed in chapter one, such as Gustav Klutsis's *Raising*

the Qualifications of the Female Worker (Figure 1.2), Arkady Shaikhet and Max Alpert's *Twenty-four Hours in the Life of the Filippov Family* (Figure 1.5), Stalin's images (Figure 1.6), Evgeny Khaldei's *Raising the Red Flag over the Reichstag* (Figure 1.8) are all representations of major language, since they transmit an ideologically correct message. Photographs, such as *Triplets* (1950s) by Yakov Riumkin (top Figure 3.16), *In Exchange for Working Days* (1950s) by Arkady Shishkin (bottom Figure 3.16)[31] or *Moldova Harvest* (1937) by Sergey Shimansky (Figure 2.13), *Komsomol Member at the Wheel* (1929) by Arkady Shaikhet, (Figure 4.15), among others, exemplify this illustrative method that utilised photography as a means of evidence. All these photographs contain a narrative and tell a story of an extraordinary birth in the first case, of a successful harvest in the second case, and of an industrial progress in the third case. These photographs are highly informative and straight-forward: their role is to provide a visual proof of the events.[32]

In contrast, a minor language of photography can be defined as that which in any way deviates from the established characteristics of the photographic medium, just cited above. According to Deleuze and Guattari, a language is minor when authors make it stammer "or make it 'wail,' stretch tensors through all of language, even written language, and draw from it cries, shouts, pitches, durations, timbres, accents, intensities" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 104). Photographic language stammers and cries when it involves a challenge to its objective quality, a lack of convergence with the referent, an intervention in the mechanical/optical/chemical process of the picture-making, and the usage of photography in a

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[31]The photographs by Yakov Riumkin and Arkady Shishkin are reproduced in this dissertation without permission, as I was unable to locate rightsholders.

[32]It is interesting to note that the Soviet usage of photography as evidence does not necessarily imply a purely documentary form. As I showed in chapter one, staged photography was widely practised and praised by the officialdom, if the images corresponded exactly to *what* and *how* the Party wanted to be described.

Figure 3.16: Top: Yakov Riumkin (Ukrainian, 1913-1986), *Triplets*, 1950s. Gelatin silver print, 30.4 x 35.7 cm (11 15/16 x 14 1/16 in.), 2004.0710/22141. Bottom: Arkady Shishkin (Russian, 1899-1985), *In Exchange For Working Days*, early 1950s. Type-C print, 28.5 x 22.6 cm (11 1/4 x 8 7/8 in.), 2004.0708/22139. Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union.

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temporal dimension rather than in just a snapshot, among others. In late and post-Soviet photography, there are multiple examples of such experiments. For instance, in the already mentioned series *Colorisms* by Sergey Chilikov, photographic major language is undermined by the blurriness of the moving subjects; thus, the photographs can no longer serve as evidence or as affirmative political statements, instead they bring an air of uncertainty.

One of the reasons why I claim that late and post-Soviet photography is minor, is because it was treated as such by the photographers themselves. Many photographers, such as Roman Pyatkovka, Sergey Chilikov, Sergey Leontiev, Maria Serebriakova, among others, are famous for accentuating the 'poor quality,' crudeness and inadequacy in the image-making process. Brigitte Kölle, for instance, wrote about Boris Mikhailov's *Unfinished Dissertation*: "It is the experimental method of an amateur who wants to develop and print all his films at night in the toilet" (Kölle 18).[33] Critics do not hesitate to qualify Mikhailov's photographs as "bad" or "imperfect" (Victor Tupitsyn, Brigitte Kölle), considering all the distortions they are subject to.[34] 'Minor' photographic language is also seen in the usage of photographs by performance and visual artists. In late and post-Soviet Russia, the activities of Andrei Monastyrsky, the Collective Actions group, Rimma and Valery Gerlovins, the Nest group, the Mukhomor (Toadstools) group, the Medical Hermeneutics, Vadim Zakharov and others played a key role allowing for the documentation, dissemination, and archiving of their performances and installations which, for the sake of secrecy from the authorities, were often held either in private apartments or in remote areas of the Moscow region

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[33]Without forgetting Roman Pyatkovka's statement, already cited above, that the photo is a "semi-finished product." The Kharkov school of photography, where Mikhailov and Pyatkovka are from, is prominent in using all kinds of 'supplements,' such as hand-colouring, cutting, superimposition, to name a few, which reassert the insufficient quality of photographic representation.

[34]It is also worth mentioning that the low quality of the cameras the Soviet photographers were using greatly contributed to the imperfect images' production.

(Bobrinskaya).[35] The 'minor' is reflected as well in the fragmentation and superimposition employed by Vladimir Kupriyanov, Galina Moskaleva, Igor Makarevich and many others, for whom a photograph serves as half-stock that needs to be processed and treated with additional complicated techniques. All these examples testify to the photographers' desire to go beyond the technical capacities of the camera and explore the limits of the medium, playing with the 'glitches,' 'cries' and 'shouts' of images.

Cases where photography switches to its minor mode also include playing with intensities in various manners, be they thematic, aesthetic or formal. For instance, the usage of bright colours by the photographers from Kharkov and Minsk, when black-and-white photographs are hand-coloured with pungent dye that makes an image sarcastic or absurd. Or also the exploitation of, if not taboo, then provocative (ambiguous) topics, such as sexuality, eccentricity, poverty, disability and everyday life, constitutes a part of this method, too. The second method is the transformation of the visual into verbal text, when photographs are placed beside hand-written or typed sentences, which causes the meanings to clash, as we saw it in the examples of Boris Mikhailov's *Unfinished Dissertation* or Vladimir Kupriyanov's *In Memory of Pushkin*. Finally, the third method—the juxtaposition of conflicting elements within a photographic image—was mainly used by conceptual or experimental artists, such as Igor and Svetlana Kopystiansky, Igor Makarevich, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid whose photographic works are distinguished by the elements of absurdity, aesthetic and thematic clashes.

Photography was the "minor and subsidiary art" in the "film-led mass culture" (J. Roberts,

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[35]See also other essays in the collection *Beyond Memory*, such as "Naked in the Grass: Absurdity and Play in the Ideological Field" (Manovich and Muellner) and Victor Tupitsyn's books and articles.

On the Ruins of Photographic Culture: The Politics of Photographic Form Today 166) of late Soviet and post-Soviet culture. For a long time, photography remained exclusively instrumental even for the photographers themselves. For some of them it was an instrument of propaganda, for others—of political resistance; still others used photography to participate in commercial development (through advertisement and popular print culture). Perhaps this indicates once again that socio-political factors largely predetermine the medium's function. This is the reason why it is important to analyse the evolution of photography under different political orders, economic situations and cultural tendencies to see how all societal transformations influenced photographers' themes and techniques, or borrowing from John Tagg's vocabulary, to evaluate the 'currency' and 'value' of photography, which "arise in certain distinct and historically specific social practices" (Tagg 188).

3.5 Marginal, subaltern and minor in late and post-Soviet photography

In my study of Eastern European photography, 'marginal' may designate the limit that separates, on the one hand, the positive and glamorised representation of reality constituting the central or dominant culture, and, on the other hand, nonconformist trends portraying the negative sides of late and post-Soviet society. However, in the course of the 1990s and 2000s, photographers who were considered nonconformist and marginal in the Soviet Union became renowned artists not only in

their home countries but also abroad.[36] The extensive work in images' margins, the subaltern people who became the main photographic characters, and the medium's minor language translating political messages, appeared less radical with time. Indeed, these photographers' choices were the reasons why Western viewers became interested again in Eastern European photography, calling it 'new.' The realist documentation of late and post-Soviet life played a crucial role in photography's recognition as an objective medium, after many years of photographic falsification, propaganda and illustration. Photography's return to post-Soviet space from a marginal position to a leading one means that authentic artistic expression testifies to the interconnectedness of dominant and alternative cultures, and/or to the realisation of Antonio Gramsci's dream of the "periphery moving in on the center and dissolving it into itself" (Germino 24).

It would be erroneous to claim that nonconformist photography emerged and existed exclusively within the margins of late and post-Soviet art. Nonconformist photography not only framed the dominant imagery, it greatly contributed to the further development of visual culture in the post-Soviet space. Sneja Gunew, in her study of Australian literature, states that "Being marginalised cannot be reduced simply to a struggle between oppressor and oppressed in which the latter remains utterly passive. In their spatially conceived representation of exclusionary gestures, margins have always been ambiguous signs which have served to frame the centre in terms of indictment as well as approbation" (Gunew 27). The relationship between the Soviet state and

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[36]In 1998, Boris Mikhailov's *Case History* was exhibited in New York's MoMA; during the 2000s Igor Mukhin made several books with European publishing houses; such examples are abundant. Certainly, this situation can be explained partly by the artists' emigration, but especially by the growing influence of the internet, which greatly facilitated communication between post-Soviet photographers and Western art institutions. Moreover, the status of photography was finally rehabilitated: in 2000, the Moscow House of Photography held the first Photo Biennial, which marks the point of ultimate acknowledgement (on Eastern European soil) of the medium as a self-sufficient art form.

its people cannot simply be reduced to that of the oppressor and the oppressed. There is no doubt that a significant part of Soviet history was marked by totalitarian rule. However, as Hannah Arendt reminds us, one needs to use the word totalitarian "sparingly and prudently" (Arendt xii), since nowadays the understanding of this term is often linked to tyranny, terror and oppression, yet the seventy years of communism cannot be characterised as strictly tyrannical. To be precise, the years between the two world wars can be characterised as totalitarian, while the period during 1945-1991 in East European countries was marked by a political pluralism, although limited. Of course, the absolutism and hegemony of communist rule always restricted some of the population's liberties and choices. However, to claim that the Soviet people have never had any liberty and right of choice would be incorrect, especially considering the two-sided politics of the Soviet leaders, starting with Nikita Khrushchev who advocated "the coexistence of two systems—capitalist and socialist" (Mikhailov and Efimova 265), let alone Gorbachev's attempts to liberalise communism. Thus, in the context of complex political and social developments which happened in the late and post-Soviet space, the margin, subaltern, and minor art should be studied as integral if not crucial part of the cultural scene.

The trait that unites these three terms—margin, subaltern, and minor—is their deterritorialisation. The margin of the photographs dislocates the central meaning of the image through parergon, supplement or added text. Subaltern characters become an oppressive minority that moves from the periphery to the centre(s), destabilising the ruling social class. Minor practices of photography with their political language dictate new rules of art displacing the dominance of existing artistic conventions. In these three designations there is a movement toward decentering

and displacing the elements of the structure. In the second half of the twentieth century, various examples of decentering emerged in the realms of literature and visual art. In her book on postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon claims that "[t]he centre no longer completely holds. And, from the decentered perspective, the "marginal" and [...] the "ex-centric" take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed." (Hutcheon 12). According to Hutcheon, marginal is not a new centre for postmodernism; however, cultural decentering is one of the main postmodernist characteristics. There is an important body of scholarly discourse about postmodernism in late and post-Soviet countries, for example Mikhail Epstein's *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (1995), Vitaly Chernetsky's *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (2007), to name but a few, which explores the key paradigms in literature and art; however, they neglect to discuss photography as a postmodernist movement.[37]

In late and post-Soviet Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, which were all affected by political, economic and social transformations, photographic works become marginalised. As some examples in this dissertation show, a photograph is not treated as a work of art by the public, critics, and artists. During my personal conversations with photographers, Sergey Leontiev and Sergey Kozhemyakin admitted that professional criticism of photography in their countries (Russia and Belarus

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[37]Mikhail Epstein argues that conceptual painting and writing represented by the work of Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Dmitrii Prigov, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Lev Rubinshtein, and Vladimir Sorokin, are the first manifestations of Soviet postmodern art, which emerged in the 1970s. Similarly, Chernetsky identifies *sots-art* as the first postmodernist movement in the early 1970s Russia. Even though conceptual nonconformist photography started to flourish at approximately the same time and under the influence of the art practices and artists just cited above, so far the scholars did not seek to analyse it through the prism of postmodernism. The characteristics of conceptual photography correspond to what I define as 'marginal,' 'subaltern' and 'minor' in the present dissertation, which brings me to claim that the studied photography is one of the postmodernist manifestations in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

respectively) simply did not exist in the 1980s and early 1990s. Therefore, critical material is quasi absent regarding many series, except for the most renowned.[38] Photography was primarily a means of communication among the photographers themselves. Once their needs of communication were satisfied, a photograph ceased to play its role and was forgotten. For this reason, information about some photographs is rather obscure, which is the case of Maria Serebriakova's untitled works with gauze (Figure 3.7). In some cases, like for example, Sergey Leontiev's series *Study of Hard Photography* (Figure 2.4), Valery Shchekoldin's *Boarding School for Disabled Children* (Figure 2.14), the photographers are not aware of their prints' exact location, whether they are kept in a gallery, museum, or private collection.

Moreover, a work of art is viewed as insufficient by itself and thus needs a supplement, parergon, internal shift, experiment with language or exploration of its limits. This is why the art of 1980s and 1990s witnessed the flourishing of various non-orthodox forms of expression, such as performance and happening. These 'minor' practices were directed toward social critique as they allowed for spontaneous exhibition in public places and therefore were harder to be silenced. Photography follows the same path because, as opposed to painting, sculpture and film, photographic images mechanically capture reality, do not demand time-consuming and inaccessible technology to develop, and ultimately are easier to circulate and archive. In spite of the accessibility and ubiquity of photography, it maintained its minor characteristics because of the nonconformist movement which brought the medium to the extremes: combined images with text, body with concept, and political with aesthetic. The revolutionary conditions of art in the shifting socio-political

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[38]It is interesting to note that in Western Europe and North America, critics manifested a vivid interest in East European photographers right at the same time.

systems gave birth to photographs which transcended simply mimetic representations to create a new alternative reality[39] and a new form of photographic truth. As I argued in chapter one, this truth differed from all earlier conceptions of photographic imagery as it was no longer based on socialist ideology, but on considerations of authenticity and individual authorial expression.

With the marginalisation of artwork in late and post-Soviet countries, the figure of the artist appears marginalised as well. The photographers' self-portraits often reflect this idea: they depict men and women manifesting identity crises and attempting to find a new self. Vadim Zakharov, for instance, accompanies his photographic portraits with text, often during performances or actions directed towards his body. The text on his images is usually related with the visual representation, but the slippage of meaning happens when the viewer reads both texts that suddenly turn out absurd and ridiculous. For example, in the series *The Papuans* (1982) the artist climbs a tree imitating a Papuan, while stories written about the Papuan tribe feature on the while canvas situated under the tree (see Figure 3.17). The exoticism of this theme and its complete disconnectedness from the Soviet cultural horizons contribute to the marginalisation of such nonconformist performances and photographs. The eccentricity of the artist's behaviour is furthermore underlined due to the usage of his semi-naked body in the early 1990s.

Similar corporeality is found in photographs by Alexander Kosolapov, where he investigates old myths and transforms them into conceptual games. Whether alluding to Christian saints or early Soviet avant-garde legends, Kosolapov personifies these icons within the late Soviet con-

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[39]For instance, in the interview with Alla Efimova, describing his first photograph of a smoking woman Boris Mikhailov said: "I believed I had created another being. The actual woman with the cigarette was different from her image. [...] It's like bringing forth a new being—the image existed as an alternative reality. It was this reality that probably struck me, this reality that I had created—although I didn't think I created it; I believed I only reflected it" (Mikhailov and Efimova 262). The creation of a new reality was the premise of surrealism and conceptualism, two features which were present in late and post-Soviet art.

Figure 3.17: Vadim Zakharov, untitled from the series *Papuans*, 1982. Gelatin silver prints, 104.5 x 78 cm each. National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow. Copyright Vadim Zakharov, used with permission.

Figure 3.18: Alexander Kosolapov, (Russian, b. 1943). Top: *Caviar*, 1990. Gelatin silver print on paper, image: 24.1 x 17.4 cm (9 1/2 x 6 7/8 in.), 2003.0200.001-002. Bottom: *St. Sebastian*, nd. Gelatin silver print on paper, image: 22.5 x 15.3 cm (8 7/8 x 6 in.), sheet: 25.2 x 20.2 cm (9 15/16 x 7 15/16 in.), 2003.0199.001. Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, gift of the artist. Copyright Alexander Kosolapov, used with permission.

text and deconstructs their familiar meanings by adding some unexpected elements into his images, such as a can of caviar, arrows, etc (see Figure 3.18). Boris Mikhailov in the series *I am not I* (1993) exposes his nude body as a symbol of the anti-hero which was actively mediatised in the 1990s. The series tackles the issues raised after the Soviet Union collapse, that of model masculinity, self-identity and body of the artist. In the period when old cultural myths were destroyed, such questions reflected the crisis not only of artistic expression but also of lost identity among the population. Mikhailov's body is awkward and contradicts the eroticised perfect masculine bodies that appeared in the mass-media.

It is also important to keep in mind that national art can be considered as minor in relation to Soviet ideological art. The Soviet officialdom always privileged works of art that fit into the traditional scheme of *narodnost'*, *partiinost'* and *ideinost'* rather than ethnic art which transcended ideology. Thus, even if a work of art did not treat taboo subjects and was executed in a sanctioned manner, the distancing from *narodnost'*, *partiinost'* and *ideinost'* signified lesser success and lower status. This is the reason why the Party usually did not praise nonconformist artists, as they diminished or even annulled the ideological dimension in their works. The national artwork of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus did not have the same significance as Soviet Communist art, and was even looked down upon since all peoples living in the USSR were supposed to have a primarily Soviet identity (instead of their national or ethnic). Similarly, Ukrainian, and Belarusian art could also be thought of as minor when compared to Russian art, because of Russia's centuries-old cultural dominance in the region. Russia, as the country of origin of Communist rule, and therefore its leader with headquarters in Moscow's Kremlin, is often treated by scholarly and me-

dia discourses as the colonial state which imposed and dictated politics across the Soviet Union and its satellites. Nowadays, in countries like Ukraine and Georgia, this post-colonial perspective dominates discourses and frames the local political, economic and cultural tendencies.[40] However, other countries, such as Belarus and Kazakhstan, do not manifest hostility towards all things Soviet and Russian, primarily because of their different political development after the dissolution of the USSR. The question of national identity that became pertinent in the late 1980s and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union is reflected in the activities of certain artists. For instance, in an attempt to define what is truly Ukrainian culture, painters Alexander Roitburd and Mikhail Rashkovetsky from Odessa wrote an essay titled "On Spiritual in Art," where they drew parallels between Ukraine and Italy (Roitburd and Rashkovetsky). Viktor Sydorenko states that Ukrainians had to deal with more problems of self-identification than any other citizens of other post-Soviet countries, and that the 1990s can therefore be characterised by a movement towards a "national renaissance" (Sydorenko 102), which included multiple exhibitions and different cultural events on the national and international levels.

The question of self-identity became one of the major themes in late and post-Soviet photography. For instance, the self-portraits of the 1980s deal with Soviet social issues, while in the 1990s they focused rather on self-exploration under new living conditions. The iconic representation of the 1990s that encompassed both the personal crisis of the artist's figure and unexpected collapse of system, values, myths, and beliefs, became Oleg Kulik's "Russian dog." This was a series of performances starting in 1994 where the artist assumed a role of a dog walking naked on

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[40]There, the Soviet rule is referred to as 'oppression,' because the national art, language and culture were not prioritised, while Russian language was mandatory in schools and governmental institutions. Ukrainian people with high degree of nationalism lament its subaltern position, which sometimes results in unfriendly attitude toward Russians.

Figure 3.19: Oleg Kulik, untitled from the performance *Mad Dog, or Last Taboo Guarded by Alone Cerberus*, 1994. Gelatin silver prints, 120 x 160 cm each. Centre Pompidou, Paris. Copyright Oleg Kulik, used with permission.

all fours, barking and attacking people (see Figure 3.19).[41] These performances quickly acquired

popularity in the West as visual proof of the popular myth about Russian aggressiveness and brutal-

ity. However, for Kulik, the dog-like behaviour signified not only the representation of the Russian

character in Western eyes but also the search for self-identity in a period of political disturbances

and cultural shock after the disintegration of the USSR. Against this backdrop, Kulik's perfor-

mances made a statement that humans failed to adapt to civilisation and, in order to comprehend it,

needed to find balance in the wild animal world. Oleg Kulik continued the theme of 'zoophrenia'

in his later performances as well as photographic projects without restricting himself to a canine

role.

The issues raised by Oleg Kulik are argued to be symptomatic of the post-Soviet world

which can be characterised by "the tensions and conflicts between East and West, and the new

concern with self-definition" (Bryzgel, *Performing the East: Performance Art in Russia, Latvia

and Poland since 1980* 93). Oleg Kulik's embodiment of an animal echoes Kafka's characters

transformation into a bug or a dog. Exploring Kafka's short stories where characters become

insects or animals, Deuleuze and Guattari developed the concept of a 'becoming-inhuman' or

'becoming-animal,' which they explained in terms of bodily 'intensities:' "To become animal is to

participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold,

to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure

intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to

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[41]In 1968, two Austrian artists Valie Export and Peter Weibel made a similar performance, walking through Vienna streets with a lash attached to his neck. It is unclear whether Oleg Kulik was inspired by or referenced this Austrian performance, but their contexts are different: Valie Export and Peter Weibel reflected the state of ordinary youth in the European society of the 1960s. Peter Weibel's dog resembles an obedient, calm and cute pet. Instead, Oleg Kulik's dog is almost violent and savage animal—prototype of a new Russian man—trying to survive in the wild 1990s.

the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 13). Becoming-inhuman is one of the main principles in surrealist art and photography which evolves around the expression of all kinds of intensities: in colour, shape, light, movement, psyche etc. As Katharine Conley puts it, surrealist art was based on "receptivity to the intensity of the experience of the present moment" (Conley 229). It is not a coincidence that elements of Surrealism, such as double exposure, combination printing, montage, rotation, distortion, and solarisation, were present in Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photography. Photographers used these experimental techniques in order to represent the shifting atmosphere of the 1980s and 1990s, the instability of the present moment, and identity loss. Their works, which suggest a union of dream and reality, are thus reminiscent of the European Surrealism of the 1920s and 1930s, even though these two movements are separated in time and space. First, the sophisticated approach to the photograph-making process, secondly the content which tackles the questions of dream, madness and eroticism, and lastly the active engagement present in both Surrealist and Eastern European photography with the historical and political contexts in which they evolved.

I argue that often the form and content of contemporary Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photography echoes Surrealist photography, which is the result of particular socio-political situations: the collapse of the Soviet Union for the former and the First World War for the latter. For surrealist artists, the traumatic experience of war became the starting point of exploration and deepening into the questions of life and death, immortality and mortality, conscious and unconscious. The play around human and non-human nature is present in the photography by Claude

Cahun, Man Ray, Raoul Ubac, Hans Bellmer, among others, as they tried to demonstrate through their art "the interchangeability between humans and things" (229). Due to the formal experiments with the framing, montage, and chemical development of photographs, the aforementioned artists transform bodies and objects in the images into ghosts of the past and the projections of the future. Surrealist photography, despite its formal dynamism, appears sinister and apocalyptic, which can be read as a state of simultaneous mourning and resurrection after a major crisis.

Similarly, innovations within political and economic systems during the 1980s along with perestroika, the dissolution of the USSR, and the hasty arrival of capitalism in the 1990s, brought various transformations in Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian societies. Hence, late and post-Soviet photographers' questioned reality as unstable, irrational and uncertain. There was an awareness within artistic circles of a thin line between the reality of their surroundings and the 'new truth,' or surrealism that appeared on their photographs. In the photographic projects of many artists already cited above, such as Boris Mikhailov, Roman Pyatkovka, Oleg Kulik, Galina Moskaleva and Igor Savchenko, the metamorphosis of the real into its ghost is sometimes striking: faces or body parts get erased, cut and deformed, while the objects around people seem exotic. Their photographs are testimonies not only of a literal transformation of the depicted body but also of a transformation of the reality in which the society lived, and can be perceived as the reflections of collective trauma.[42] The nature of photographic representation henceforth became one of the major questions among late and post-Soviet photographers who wanted to embrace the traumato-genic social changes that happened in everyday life.

In the 1990s, the works of formerly nonconformist photographers were exhibited to-

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[42]Certain scholars describe the Soviet Union breakdown as a trauma (Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya, Piotr Sztompka).

gether with mainstream or journalist photographers, who bore witness to the popularisation and democratisation of photographic art. Photography in all its manifestations started to shift from a marginal position towards the centre of dominant culture. This also signified that the people who were formerly considered marginal, merged with the population and became commonplace. Lowering from the heights of ideal proper to Soviet socialist realist and post-Soviet commercial photography, to the earth, quotidian and every day is one of the methods that the studied photographers used in their art. Exploration of the city and human interactions in it; societal habits and behaviour; everyday activities and objects that fill in people's life—these are the subjects that henceforth intrigued late and post-Soviet photographers. Critical realism, as I claimed in the previous chapter, is bound to reality and everyday life; therefore the following final chapter will study the term 'everyday' and its representation in photography. I argue that the image of the everyday, which is tightly connected with the 'now' and 'here'—with the real—in late and post-Soviet photography, appears marginalised, because its main characters, such as eccentrics, Homo Sovieticus, labour heroes, and people busy with everyday activities, appear dislocated from the discourse and isolated from the society. Therefore, it is crucial for the present research to theoretically tie together the notions of truth, margin, realism, and everyday,[43] as well as to see their combination in practice, in photographic examples. The link between marginality and everyday life can be traced in the work of Henri Lefebvre who defined the everyday life by "'what is left over' after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis" (Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* 97). In this statement, the scholar clearly highlights the hierarchy of the dominant topics of research and everyday life which remains on the margins of the social sciences. However,

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[43]This is also what Linda Nochlin did in her work on Realism, cited in the previous chapter.

since the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of the everyday has become a focus of theories stemming from major disciplines such as Psychoanalysis, Anthropological Ethnography, History, Sociology and so forth, but the exploration of its representation in late and post-Soviet photography is still missing.

Chapter 4

Representing the everyday

4.1 *City of Shadows*, or foreign everyday

St Petersburg is a city that has always inspired artists and photographers to portray its picturesque streets and inhabitants. Alexey Titarenko, for instance, created numerous photo series featuring his home town. One of them is particularly interesting because it was shot right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when St Petersburg turned into a "city of shadows." The series' title reflects the strange atmosphere which emerged at that time, as if the city itself was struck down by the sudden fall of the regime. And indeed it was, as in 1991, after almost seven decades the city regained its historical name—Leningrad became Sankt-Peterburg. This formal transformation echoed in the everyday life of St Petersburg dwellers; as Alexey Titarenko says, he saw "unattractively dressed men and women with eyes full of sorrow and desperation, tottering on their routine dreary routes with their last ounce of strength, in search of some food which could prolong their lives and the lives of their families" (Titarenko). A sudden destabilisation of the economic situation in

Figure 4.1: Alexey Titarenko, *Three Women Selling Cigarettes* from the series *City of Shadows*, 1993. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 30 cm. Nailya Alexander gallery, New York. Copyright Alexey Titarenko, Courtesy of Nailya Alexander Gallery.

Russia following the breakdown of socialism found its reflection in the series: common actions like shopping and commuting appear dangerous. *City of Shadows* (1992-1994), thus, records the changes that occurred in the everyday life of Petersburgers who, in Titarenko's lens, turned from Soviet Leningrad citizens into ghosts or shells of their former selves.

Everyday life in the series *City of Shadows* seems like a foreign entity that oppresses the people of St Petersburg, as something that the city itself is trying to get rid of. The subjects are possessed by an 'everyday madness' that transforms them from human beings into an unidentifiable smoky mass, where corporeal indexicality loses its power. This is the case of *Three Women Selling Cigarettes*, where people in the form of transparent shades are situated between three female street traders in the foreground and a trolleybus in the background (see Figure 4.1). The body as such ceases to exist; it is actually dissolving in the air under the pressure of mundane hardships. The city's power is emphasised: the photographer represents St Petersburg as an eternal, although dark and sinister, space that controls its inhabitants and imposes its own rules. The markers of the political regime are absent, meaning that the series does not represent a direct criticism of the regime. However, the cold black-and-white aesthetics with shadows instead of people suggests the theme of psychological oppression and suffering, which is provoked by sudden toughening of everyday life.

In the photograph *Grandmother with Grandchild* (1992), the street where the subjects are standing is outlined until the last brick and the smallest detail (see Figure 4.2). This creates the impression that regardless of regime change, the city will remain forever intact and nothing will ever disturb its immovable existence. Due to the ghostly appearance of the blurry subjects,

Figure 4.2: Alexey Titarenko, *Grandmother with Grandchild* from the series *City of Shadows*, 1992. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 30 cm. Nailya Alexander gallery, New York. Copyright Alexey Titarenko, Courtesy of Nailya Alexander Gallery.

like in this photograph, the series is reminiscent of the surrealist photography of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly Brassaï's *Paris de nuit* series where he documented the special atmosphere of Parisian streets at night. Surrealism insisted that the borderline between the real and surreal is thin; therefore, surrealist artists believed they could raise the everyday to the realm of dreams, because "the eruption of the irrational and the unconscious" (Short 83) happens precisely on the level of everyday. Instead, Alexey Titarenko uses surrealist blurriness to emphasise the instability and fragility of the everyday, his reality turning not into a dream but into a nightmare.

In the image *Entrance, Vasileostrovskaya Metro Station* (1992), the trace of the human body almost completely disappears (see Figure 4.3), becoming instead a smoky cloud. Here and there we can still recognise heads of those who entered the metro station. Besides these heads there is nothing discernible, just a grey mist that moves upstairs in the darkness. The photographer's use of these frames that do not provide much information about the depicted place and subjects testifies to the experience of alienation between the city and its inhabitants. Being a result of new capitalist realities, alienation in the *City of Shadows* translated into a feeling of non-belonging, or foreignness to that space and time and a feeling of disruption between the Soviet past and post-Soviet future. The photography from the 1980s and 1990s which directly depicted everyday life revealed this alienation like a litmus test.

The concept of alienation occupies a central place in Henri Lefebvre's seminal book *Critique of Everyday Life*. Having its roots in German idealist philosophy, alienation, for Hegel, signified objectification and the distancing from self-consciousness caused by capitalism (Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*); for Lukács—inauthentic life and "'reification of conscious-

Figure 4.3: Alexey Titarenko, *Entrance, Vasileostrovskaya Metro Station, St. Petersburg (Heads)* from the series *City of Shadows*, 1992. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 30 cm. Nailya Alexander gallery, New York. Copyright Alexey Titarenko, Courtesy of Nailya Alexander Gallery.

ness' produced by the fetishism of commodities, which only proletarian class consciousness will be able to overcome" (Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* xvii). In Lefebvre's writings, alienation developed into a key concept with a basis in everyday life; it does not only imply the economic sphere but all domains of life, when man is incapable of comprehending the *other*, when bourgeois thought is distanced from the real.

The photographic examples shown in this chapter will show a rupture with the real, the separation of the individual from its self, and the fragmentation of life. All these features contribute to alienation, and are characteristic, I would argue, of the period under study (1980-2000), which corresponds to late socialism and the first decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Also, this period is characterised by the emergence of realist ideas and sometimes by pessimism about the quotidian, despite the utopian character of everyday life that existed in the Soviet official discourse. This is why, in Soviet and post-Soviet culture, everyday life has rather ambiguous meaning. The following will demonstrate the new photographic truth that was born in the depiction of everyday life: inspiring the feeling of alienation, it had a pronounced negative (i.e. pessimistic, gloomy, featuring social decay) aesthetics, firstly, due to the visual isolation of the individual, secondly, due to the dark tonality and 'inferior quality' of photographs, and finally, due to the added parergonal elements that displace the meaning of the work. Considering the variety of original methods that the photographers used, such as toning and hand-colouring, attaching different material, portraying subaltern subjects, typing or writing text on the photographs, among others, I claim that their representation of everyday life is marginal.

Thus, using the theme of everyday life, I will analyse examples of margins in photography

that create yet another truth about the realities of the late and post-Soviet world. This truth shows that Homo Sovieticus continued to live in the post-Soviet era, but that his identity was no longer defined by labour and the collective. The Homo Sovieticus of the 1990s looks like an ancient species who could adapt, despite his solitude, to his new capitalist environment. He continues to carry on his messy *byt* without complaining about difficult living conditions, yet manages to find joy in everyday life. The marginalisation of the everyday in late and post-Soviet photography occurs on multiple levels: the turn from collective optics to personal visions (the everyday as a sphere of individual self-expression); the special treatment of photographs (hand-colouring, montage, collage, added scratches, blurriness, to name but a few); last but not least, the juxtaposition inside one photograph of contrasting characters or elements that create a cognitive tension (Homo Sovieticus vs. eccentrics, nudity in the communal space, children in toxic environment, among others). This tension is further emphasised by the photographic realism revealing that there cannot be one correct image, or one viable way of seeing, but many ways and many truths.

Besides reaching the point of unification of the principal concepts of this dissertation, that of truth, realism, margin, and everyday, I will look at strategies of marginalisation of everyday life. For this, we will problematize first the term 'everyday,' drawing on theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Ben Highmore who in the second half of the twentieth century, came up with a solid conceptualisation of everyday life. This concept of everyday life, as I will reveal in the following, incorporates numerous different practices, and for this reason the present chapter will take a multifaceted form. For instance, besides looking at the everyday theory, I will discuss photographic examples of specific fields that, according to the scholars, constitute everyday

life, such as space (Michel de Certeau) and leisure (Henri Lefebvre) to name but a few. For example, the space of work and domestic space, as the main locus of everyday activities, attracted late and post-Soviet photographers due to their potential of thematic and aesthetic experiments.

Considering the peculiar Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian construction of the everyday discourse, it is important to study the notions and phenomena that characterise everyday life in the Eastern European tradition. For this end, scholars such as Iuri Lotman, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Svetlana Boym, among others, will shed light on the untranslatable and unique notion of '*byt*' and sovietness, among others. The main bearer of everyday life in the studied countries is Homo Sovieticus—a representative of the 'ordinary man' who was born in the Soviet Union, and continued to exist in the post-Soviet period. This character's particular representation in Soviet and post-Soviet photography reveals the ambiguities surrounding everyday life in the Soviet Union. The ultimate space of Homo Sovieticus's everyday life—the communal apartment—informs, for example, about the material side of the Soviet society and its controversial relationship with the state. Since Homo Sovieticus' everyday existence is tightly linked to labour (and ultimately, work is the place where Homo Sovieticus can fully realise himself), the analysis of labour and industrial photography will reveal how the representation of work and workplace changed in the studied photography, from collective-oriented towards individualistic and ambivalent.[1] The discussion of all these features will allow to see how the concept of margin permeates the theme of everyday life in late and post-Soviet photography. I claim that everyday life is the theme in which the photographers studied here achieve critical realism that not only offers an analytical view of the late

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[1]In this chapter, I adopt a broad concept of 'labour' including into discussion not only white and blue collars, skilled, and unqualified workers but also peasants.

and post-Soviet realities but also represents another approach to photographic practices broadening and further defining the concept of photographic truths in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

4.2   The marginalisation of the everyday

The modern everyday theory has its roots in *Alltagsgeschichte*, a German school of everyday life studies led by Alf Lüdtke, according to whom the study of everyday life starts with the decentralisation of analysis and interpretation, or otherwise through the microhistory—the history of ordinary people (Lüdtke). Thus, thanks to the examination of minor quotidian actions, it becomes possible to comprehend complex historical processes.[2] The marginalisation of the everyday echoes in the analysis of the everyday 'from below' that the scholars such as Alf Lüdtke, Michel de Certeau and Ben Highmore acknowledged. The photography examined in this dissertation without a doubt belongs to history 'from below.' In the 1980s and 1990s the medium of photography had yet the status of a minor art, being generally perceived, in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus (as discussed in the previous chapters), as an amateur practice, an instrument of propaganda, or a means of commercial profit. Due to this, photographers, as a rule, were not recognised by the cultural establishment as authentic artists.[3] They positioned themselves as independent (and often amateur) artists, or otherwise, as artists 'from below.' Similarly, the subjects of their photography represented the subaltern—simultaneously voiceless and silenced characters who were historically left outside the major academic and artistic practices. The depiction of such subjects was indeed the real study of

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[2]Leo Tolstoy used the same method of narration in his *War and Piece*, whence the claim that his realism is achieved by the attention to detail and ordinary day-to-day actions.

[3]Apart from Boris Mikhailov who entered into nonconformist art circles in the 1980s.

everyday life, offering a visual documentation of ordinary people and spaces.

The first academic analysis of the everyday appeared in the writings of Walter Benjamin who, inspired by the figure of *flâneur* in Charles Baudelaire's poetry, studied the phenomenon of Parisian arcades that broke down the notions of private and public (Benjamin, Little History of Photography). Sigmund Freud, scrutinising the life and rituals of aboriginal tribes in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), along with anthropologists from around the world, laid the foundation of the theory of the 'everyday' by offering a methodological approach in studying people's quotidian actions and their symbolism. However, the contemporary understanding of the term 'everyday' essentially developed with the Marxist school, which itself can be considered a critique of the everyday in so far as it offers a study of social classes' way of life (Klare). More recent studies encompassing previous critical theories offer a variety of definitions of everyday life, which can be problematic, as the term appears either too broad or too narrow. Rita Felski defines everyday life as "the routine act of conducting one's day-to-day existence without making it an object of conscious attention" (Felski 27). The same feature of unconscious and boring passivity is present in the definition of Ben Highmore, who argues that the notion of everyday is ambivalent, for it signifies both something close and familiar, but also monotonous and lifeless:

> On the one hand it points to those most repeated actions, those most travelled journeys, those most inhabited spaces that make up, literally, the day to day [...] But with this quantifiable meaning creeps another, never far behind: the everyday as value and quality—everydayness. Here the most travelled journey can become the dead weight of boredom, the most inhabited space a prison, the most repeated action an oppressive routine. (Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* 1)

Highmore emphasises the negative meaning of the triviality that constitutes all everyday practices. He asserts, however, that there is some strangeness at the heart of the everyday, and it is precisely

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this strangeness that he puts in the centre of his research. Highmore acknowledges that in the academic discourses of social historians, the concept of everyday life became shorthand for "voices from 'below': women, children, migrants and so on" (1). From this point of view, the study of everyday life implies looking at the most ordinary and habitual actions commonly undertaken by people on a day-to-day basis. However, both the familiar and unusual are parts of the everyday, as, for example, Highmore finds the theory of estrangement to be a perfect tool to study the everyday. Henri Lefebvre who greatly influenced Highmore's definition sees everyday life as the totality of three spheres of social activity: work or labour, family or private life, and leisure time. These three aspects are inseparable from each other and imply alienation, which means being "torn from his self, from nature, from his own nature, from his consciousness, dragged down and dehumanised by his own social products" (Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* 180). Alienation also signifies being manipulated, exploited, and objectified by the mechanisms of the everyday life, be it by the working hierarchy, private life obligations, or the instrumentalization of individual interests. Being primarily a critique of bourgeois lifestyle, Lefebvre's writing also questioned Soviet everyday practices, claiming that they simply represent new—or different from capitalist—means of economic, ideological and political alienation.

Among the three aspects of the everyday, Lefebvre distinguished one—leisure—which, according to him, represented an activity both outside and inside everyday life. Leisure is supposed to provide a break from the routine at work and at home, offering entertainment, relaxation, distraction and in some cases knowledge. However, it is a fundamental part of habitual everyday practices and it is never completely isolated from them: leisure is framed by work, and as Lefebvre

Figure 4.4: Nikolay Bakharev, untitled from the series *Relationship*, 1978-1995. Gelatin silver prints, 30 x 30 cm each. Grinberg gallery, Moscow. Copyright Nikolay Bakharev, used with permission.

wrote "Leisure [...] cannot be separated from work" (29), being in this way similar to the concept of margin, a secondary activity that challenges the main everyday practices, like work and home tasks.

Nikolay Bakharev, Russian photographer, in the series *Relationship* (1978-1995) produces a representation of countryside leisure which, although serving as a form of escape from the everyday world, brings along another facet of everyday life—family and friendship bonds—and thus does not make a break in everyday existence (see Figure 4.4). Bakharev produced this series while he worked as an official photographer in 'public and household services' (he photographed children at schools and kindergartens), which left him plenty of time for private projects. He found that during the summer, people resting on the beach were interested in getting their photo taken, both alone or with their friends and families, by a professional photographer as a keepsake of their vacation. Thus, Bakharev found clients who paid him for single shots, and even participated in other photo sessions at home. These photographs were exhibited for the first time in Moscow during a 1987 group exhibition—the first of its kind featuring social documentary—to mark the 70th anniversary of the Soviet Union. Although Bakharev's beach series was well received at that time, he later lamented that the Russian 'public' did not take his photographs seriously (Bakharev). Bakharev believes that the Russian people only began giving him recognition after he was well received in the West.

The photographs from this series often depict bored people who seem to be attempting to forget about their daily routines at a river bank. Wearing only bathing suits, Bakharev's subjects pose before the camera in nature. Half-naked and half-surrounded by tree and bush leaves, they lie

or sit on the ground embracing their friends, children and partners. Their repose is not interrupted by what Lefebvre called 'leisure machines,' aka radio or television, but is focused on both nature and social relationships. Their leisure marks a breakdown of public/private life, which is reinforced by the photographer's intimate shots. In this series, the everyday life as a tiresome routine is not instantly visible due to the natural stress-free setting; however, it is hidden in the gestures and facial expressions of the portrayed people, who, when looked at closely, appear bored and fatigued. Work as an everyday category is absent from Bakharev's photographs, but private life remains, and can be considered the main theme of the series. The private lives of the subjects hinder their leisure activity from being purely independent and fulfilling its genuine recreational role, separated from other everyday spheres. This perhaps explains why the faces of the photographed people show dissatisfaction. In spite of their escape into nature, they did not manage to get rid themselves of the haunting everyday spirit.

The space implied in Nikolay Bakharev's series is not the typical space of everyday life. Nature suggests a certain liberation from quotidian tasks and locations such as apartment interiors, offices, city streets, markets, etc, which today represent markers of the everyday due to extensive urbanisation. Mountain, rivers, and fields are not included in what Michel de Certeau called 'strategy,' i.e. "a place that can be circumscribed as proper (propre) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it" (de Certeau xix), because these places do not participate in the political, economic and scientific rationality.[4] The real places-strategies, e.g. an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution, are designed and established by elites, and frame the panoptic surveillance. Instead, the 'tactics' do not obey the law of the place and can only use, ma-

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[4]Or, if they participate, then only as objects and tools of rationality, but not as its determinative factors.

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nipulate, and divert these spaces, which is why de Certeau identifies them as 'ways of operating' (de Certeau). The tactics are those practices or behaviours that people use in everyday life to evade the control provided by 'strategies.'

One such tactic would be the art of walking, which for de Certeau is a spatial practice. Walking suggests a series of turns and detours that people make while composing their path to reach their destination, thus the 'weak' makes use of the 'strong'—the urban organisation of space—by taking advantage of spatial opportunities. Photography too can be considered a spatial practice whose tactics consist in manipulating space for the sake of aesthetic intentions. Similar to walking, photography implies a tactical analysis of space called framing, considering the opportunities that it offers: contrast of light and shadow or game of colours present at that particular space, mise en scène, angle, perspective, geometry of objects, etc. Often photography implies movement or more specifically walking. For example, in the case of street photography, urban landscapes, architectural and geographic photography, among others. Photography can visually modify the space by using unusual angles, it can highlight certain aspects of spatial organisation as well as hide others. Photography, thus, like walking, represents a rhetorical practice, as it proposes diverse ways to manipulate space. Alexander Rodchenko, by creating vanguard close-ups and angles, produced a revolutionary Soviet state rhetoric (through the idea of photography as a revolutionary medium). European Surrealism, appropriating the techniques of photomontage, solarisation, cutting, superimposition, to name but a few, had a rhetoric of space ruled by ghosts and dreams. FSA photographers, recording miserable conditions of American farms in the 1930s, produced a rhetoric of the great depression. The rhetoric of socialist realist photography constructed images

according to sanctioned themes and methods.[5]

In the 1980s and 1990s, Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian photography reached another level of spatial practice. Photography from this period, in the context of late and post-Soviet space, represents the unprecedented incarnation of de Certeau's tactics—as an everyday practice in opposition to the mechanisms of power—because it escapes the dogmas of socialist realism and post-socialist visual culture based on consumerism and commercial profit. Oppositional photographers, due to their aspirations towards critical realism, operated cameras in such a way that their photographic spatial manipulations demythologised reality. The rhetoric of this photography, therefore, reflects the changes happening in the everyday lives of late and post-Soviet citizens. It is worth mentioning that by the 'manipulation of space' I do not mean a special technique of visual operation that supplements an image with a level of fiction, but a camera maneuver that helps highlight and realise the author's idea behind an image. For example, thanks to spatial manipulation, Nikolay Bakharev's images, already mentioned above, emphasise ordinariness and even boredom of leisure, contrary to the representations of happy active pastime during the Soviet Union. The girl's legs in the bottom left photograph (Figure 4.4) appear too long, just like that day on the beach. The top right photograph captures a sleeping woman, while her man with a cigarette is left alone. In the bottom right photograph, two men look isolated from the rest of the society, as they are standing in the shadows of a tree, a stark difference to other, sunbathing subjects. Due to this particular framing and composition, the photographer makes the representation of leisure look like a tiresome routine.

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[5]Both walking and photographing are also gendered: the figures of *flâneur* and photographer are mostly associated with male gender, which suggests looking at things with male gaze.

Figure 4.5: Alexander Lapin (Russian, 1945-2012), *Pravda*, 1981. Gelatin silver print on paper, sheet: 28.6 x 35 cm (11 1/4 x 13 3/4 in.), image: 23.7 x 27.3 cm (9 5/16 x 10 3/4 in.). Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, D14944. Copyright Elena Lapina, used with permission.

A different example of spatial manipulation is Alexander Lapin's photograph *Pravda* depicting a man absorbed in reading who stands behind the principal Soviet newspaper displayed in the alley (see Figure 4.5). The man is photographed so that the newspaper hides the upper part of his body, blocking everything but his black suit and a briefcase under his arm. This is the main focus of the photographer, to show the visual contradiction of different fields—the Soviet discourse incarnated in the newspaper, the reading man, and the rest of the space. The man's shabby-looking suit contrasts with the white and well-aligned paper, which maintains a visual subordination of the body to power: the reader is not only a consumer of Soviet discourse and culture, he is also the victim of a power exercise. This effect is achieved by the photographer thanks to his "manipulation" of space, i.e. the specific mise en scène that highlights the newspaper's size and domination over the human being. Everyday life is depicted in this photograph as a practice which is completely immersed in, and moulded by, the dominant discourse. Lapin could have photographed the same scene from the other side—so that the viewer could see the man's entire body, but the order of things would certainly be reversed. Such a photograph would appear less critical, more humanised and maybe even propagandistic, as the relationship between the newspaper (or the Party) and the man would be, if not equal, definitely more neutral.

It is curious to see how Henri Cartier-Bresson interpreted the same scene of Soviet everyday life, but achieved a different effect (see Figure 4.6). In a photograph from his trip to the Soviet Union in 1954, two people reading a poster are in the foreground. Although they are absorbed by the information in the poster, it does not have visual dominance over them, like in Lapin's image. The Soviet discourse is speaking to them from the poster—here it is, laughing at the problems of the

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Figure 4.6: Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Panels on Which the Government Criticises Some Defects of the Soviet Society*, 1954. Gelatin silver print. Copyright Henri Cartier-Bresson Estate/Magnum Photos, used with permission.

Soviet society, but the readers are not subordinate to it. They are consumers of the Soviet culture as much as they are its producers. The relationship between the poster (or the Party) and the couple is equalised by a simple gesture of the photographer who preferred, unlike Lapin, not to cut their bodies with the poster—and thereby emphasise the ruthless power of the Soviet system—but to record both the poster and the readers from the point of view of any passer-by. The everyday scene in Cartier-Bresson's image transmits a rather positive message: look at how people get educated in the Soviet Union. Alexander Lapin's image is more questioning than informative; the everyday has an unnatural negative dimension that is affected by the ubiquitous socialist discourse. Thus a transformation of an almost identical scene takes place, due to the photographer's manipulation of space, which is used to construct an affirmative image that reinforces the Soviet discourse (in the case of Henri Cartier-Bresson) and to criticize everyday life (in the case of Alexander Lapin).

I believe that late and post-Soviet photography represents a critique of everyday life in the sphere of visual culture. Generally speaking, the photographer is a contemporary *flâneur* in the sense that he[6] wanders the streets of the city, simultaneously engaged in a form of intellectual work—visual analysis.[7] Talking specifically about the late and post-Soviet case, the everyday became a subject of photography because it was one of the main indicators of social, economic and political changes that hit the country in the mid 1980s. The first decade after the breakup of the Soviet Union was unique in the sense that it contained markers from both systems—communist and capitalist, and a juxtaposition between the two is reflected in the photographs. During the

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[6]Traditionally, *flâneur* is mostly male, a bearer of the male gaze. Similarly, the late and post-Soviet photographers are mostly male.

[7]The connection between street photographer and *flâneur* is also traced in Astrid Ihle's essay "Wandering the Streets of Socialism: A Discussion of the Street Photography of Arno Fischer and Ursula Arnold" in the book *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* edited by David Crowley and Susan E. Reid.

Figure 4.7: Igor Mukhin, *Pauk, Vorobei and Co* from the series *Young People in the Big City*, 1985. Gelatin silver print, 18 x 24 cm. Triumph gallery, Moscow. Copyright Igor Mukhin, used with permission.

last decade of the Soviet Union, the imminent arrival of capitalism manifested itself through the emergence of things and subjects that were 'foreign' to the habitual atmosphere, such as Western goods (jeans, watches), punk and rock bands, underground youth, etc.

For example, Igor Mukhin transmits the foreignness of the Russian underground to the Soviet everyday by picturing the clash of an ordinary Soviet setting with extraordinary anti-Soviet elements. In his photograph *Pauk, Vorobei and Co*[8] (see Figure 4.7), two opposite cultures are represented side by side—the official, on the left, and underground, on the right. Because of their

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[8]The title corresponds to the nicknames of portrayed musicians which mean Spider, Sparrow and company.

pronounced sophisticated outfit which is not typical for an average Soviet man, the photographed musicians look like Western rock stars (or rather they try to look like Western rock stars). The crowd in the background is reminiscent of the bleak socialist everyday, as it merges into a dark and indistinct collective body. The collective—a symbol of communist mentality—is depicted here in a negative way, which contrasts with the rock stars who, although form a band, are individually distinct to both the photographer and the viewer. The ordinary Soviet people on the left carry bags—the very embodiment of tired, boring everyday life, while the rock stars on the right are *bag-less*.

Igor Mukhin's series *Young People in the Big City* became the symbol of Russian movement of nonconformists (in Russian, '*neformaly*') in the late 1980s and early 1990s. When Alexander Lapin opened the first solo exhibition featuring Mukhin's *Young People in the Big City* in 1987 in the House of Culture that belonged to the Moscow State University, the photographed punks and rockers came to see their portraits. As Alexander Lapin wrote in his autobiography, the authorities did not appreciate their indecent behaviour (they sat on the floor and used obscene language) (Lapin), and decided to fire Lapin from the House of Culture, where he worked as an administrator, and to close the photo studio he had organised. In the following years, Mukhin's photographs from this series would be featured in a number of local and foreign publications as a representation of 'another' Russia: for Western Europe and North America, it served as the evidence of the downside of socialism; for Russia, it supported nostalgic feelings about perestroika—the epoch of democratisation and liberalisation of society. Igor Mukhin particularly suffered from uncontrolled publications on the web, as copyrights on photographs did not yet exist in Russia. *Young People*

in the Big City was reproduced hundreds of times in many internet magazines and blogs, which although a sign of remarkable success, made it impossible to trace his works as they started to live their own digital lives.

The everyday in all the above mentioned late and post-Soviet photographs does not transmit happiness and bliss. Even Nikolay Bakharev's series treating the topic of leisure time reflects the impossibility of escaping quotidian practices and attachments. To further explore this phenomenon, we need to understand the specificity of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian notion of the everyday. The necessity to define and analyse the significance of the term 'everyday' in the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian context is conditioned by the transformation of everyday life which occurred following the establishment of the Soviet Union and persisted right until the perestroika period. The new ways of social organisation, such as collective farms, compulsory education, accelerated industrialisation, to name but a few, greatly affected the everyday life of every Soviet citizen who henceforth incarnated the idea of a 'new man.'

4.3   The everyday as "*byt*"

The official discourse of the USSR, especially in the 1930s, as Sheila Fitzpatrick asserts, contained a comparison between the Soviet way of life—exemplary, ideal, the way it should be—and that of *ancien régime*, which was associated with backwardness, social injustice, illiteracy, and the exploitation of workers by the gentry (Fitzpatrick). Therefore, everyday life in Soviet media and sanctioned art had an exclusively positive representation to demonstrate how the Bolshevik revo-

lution had improved the workers' living conditions.[9] At the beginning of the Soviet experiment, everyday life constituted the domain where the revolution had manifested itself the most. Leon Trotsky wrote that socialism in the Soviet republics brought "the complete change of morals—the emancipation of woman from household slavery, the social education of children, the emancipation of marriage from all economic compulsion, etc" (Trotsky 89). However, Stalin's rule, which can be considered anti-revolutionary, both strengthened this emancipation and introduced the elements of terror, violence and utopia into everyday life.

Besides the change of regime, the quotidian was tightly linked to the notion of *byt*. The modern understanding of the word *byt* has its roots in the nineteenth century and since then comprises a number of negative connotations (Hutchings 7). From the ethnological point of view that predominated before the revolution, *byt* is simply defined as 'way of life' and includes the material culture that characterises an ethnic group. In popular language, *byt* means a tiresome domestic routine and is primarily connected to women, comprised of inescapable repetitive actions devoid of creativity that are able to transform the beauty of life into the most prosaic existence.[10] As Benjamin Sutcliffe argues, "*[b]yt* not only refers to daily life but also to a corrosive banality threatening the higher aspirations of *bytie* (spiritual or intellectual life)—a quality that distinguishes *byt* from more optimistic Western conceptions of the quotidian" (Sutcliffe 4-5). The negative connotation that everyday life acquired due to *byt* caused a certain marginalisation of this topic in literature

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[9]For example, Dziga Vertov's celebrated work *The Man with a Movie Camera* that I mentioned earlier in chapter one depicts everyday routine as an extraordinary experience that all the Soviet nation lives through, as it offers a million of opportunities to achieve happiness in movement, work, socialisation, and other everyday practices.

[10]Following Vladimir Mayakovsky's expression from his farewell poem *Past One O'clock* "Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind," there emerged a popular saying that *byt* kills feelings and love, in a sense that couples' emotional well-being is compromised by trivial day-to-day duties. It is interesting to note that the theme of internal struggle against *byt* permeated Mayakovsky's poetry to a great extent.

and art in favour of more 'noble' themes. According to Svetlana Boym, "Russian, and later Soviet, cultural identity depended on the heroic opposition to everyday life" (Boym 3). After the Union's collapse, as Olga Shevchenko claims, the everyday was greatly trivialised, as people became more concerned with how to make ends meet in such a difficult time of politico-economic and social crises (Shevchenko). Therefore, a positive tonality that characterised the representation of quotidian scenes and *byt* in the socialist realist doctrine gave way to dark and sinister palette especially expressed by *chernukha* film and literature of the 1980s and 1990s.

Byt is situated in the realm of domestic life, the household, and the material world. The communal apartment incarnated a temple of *byt*: the space was divided between families (usually, one room for each family), with shared kitchen and bathroom. The communal dwelling space, or *kommunalka*, was introduced at the beginning of the Soviet Union because of an increased urbanisation and communist aspirations towards life with shared goods and no private property. Communal apartments transmitted the so-called 'communal optics' that characterised Soviet totalitarian culture.[11] According to Victor Tupitsyn, collective monologue and collective seeing allowed for translating images or even brush strokes into words (V. Tupitsyn, *The Museological Unconscious: Communal (Post)modernism in Russia.* 2), or to put it differently, art became an absolute reflection of Soviet discourse that all people could easily decipher. This tradition started to break down in the 1970s and 1980s, when nonconformist artists aimed to conceptualise and not glorify communal optics, putting forward individual rather than collective consciousness.

Communal life became one of the most controversial themes in late and post-Soviet art

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[11]Nicolas Berdyaev, in *The Origin of Russian Communism* (1937), argued that collective optics did not come with the establishment of communist regime, but constituted an inherent characteristic of Russian people inherited from Orthodox Christianity and the idea that Russian people have a messianic task.

Figure 4.8: Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, two photographs from the installation *The Voices Behind the Door*, Leipzig, 1996. Gelatin silver prints. Copyright Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, used with permission.

and photography: the official discourse celebrated shared living as the best means of realising so-cial equality, and represented *kommunalka* as a space of mutual help and shared concerns.[12] In its place, nonconformist art depicted communal dwellers as intolerant and lonely people whose individuality disappears into a painfully shared *byt*. Kabakov's installation *The Voices Behind the Door*, for instance, constitutes a collection of photographs, objects, posters, and furniture repre-senting ten people of different backgrounds, education levels, and cultures residing in one commu-nal apartment (see Figure 4.8). The individual voice of each character is clearly pronounced in the installation, but it quickly becomes lost in other neighbours' voices. For Kabakov, the words in the framework of the communal speech lose their cognitive charge, because what is said does not mat-ter any more. In the communal optics, all people are equal; therefore, their individualities have the same almost non-existent value, they can be substituted with any different ones and it will change nothing. Ilya Kabakov is mostly concerned with the discrepancy between language and contents which appeared in the everyday life of the Soviet Union: "I see this fundamental contrast, a lan-guage without meaning and a meaning not shaped by language, all around me, and mostly within myself" (Kabakov 7-8). The characters of Kabakov's installation are the agents of the communal speech that appears insignificant before the quantity of household stuff accumulated in the shared apartment. This is what Roman Jakobson called "*obrastanie kosnym khlamom*" (literally, gradual accretion of rigid junk) that makes life resemble a stagnant slime and defines *byt* (Jakobson, O pokolenii rastrativshem svoikh poetov 13). The items which acquired a certain significance in the communal apartment prevent the dwellers from living at peace with each other and saving their

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[12]For example, in the film *The Pokrovsky Gate* (Mikhail Kozakov, 1982), the communal dwellers have their pecu-liarities which are perceived by the neighbours as something positive, and the individual weirdness of each character plays a role of a humorous context.

individual voices from becoming lost in the everyday routine.

The communal apartment as a space deprived of any privacy is portrayed in the series of the same name by Roman Pyatkovka. Here, the communal optics are raised to the point of complete disappearance of frontiers among the apartment dwellers who do not even bother to wear clothes (see Figure 4.9). They are not intimidated by their nudity, on the contrary, they seem to be accustomed to living constantly on display. Their apartment represents a typical shared space, where leisure, work, and *byt* are mixed together and where every activity is visible, leaving no room for private life. Although the relationship between the communal dwellers appears harmonious, overpainting disturbs the photographic realism by exaggerating the colours and thereby bringing a feeling of artificiality. The use of hand-colouring by the photographer not only brings about questions of his status but also the nature of communal living, in which living space was more like a decorated theatre. *Kommunalka* in Pyatkovka's images looks like a staged performance where the domestic realm of intimacy is annulled by the presence and interference into it of social realm and the Party power, since everything belongs to the everyone and simultaneously to the state. Everything—furniture, patterned curtains, everyday objects on the table, even the subjects' bodies—is communal, and it is precisely the nudity of the photographed subjects which functions as a glitch, suggesting that the state owns not only the communal space but also the dwellers' bodies. The body, thus, becomes a matter of the state. Pyatkovka's series *Communal Apartment* is subversive because it questions the ownership of communal spaces, and also because it adds the concept of the body into the commonplace and into the notion of *byt*.

Communal apartments were an effortless way for the Soviet state to control society. The

Figure 4.9: Roman Pyatkovka, untitled from the series *Communal Apartment*, 1997. Gelatin silver prints, hand-colouring with aniline dyes, 24 x 30 cm each. Private collection. Copyright Roman Pyatkovka, used with permission.

official media produced didactic regulations of *byt* ranging from the most basic, for example, how to keep a household, to the most sophisticated ones, e.g. a textbook for pregnant women. Such an intervention into the everyday reality of Soviet citizens resulted in the dislocation of private and public spheres. Deborah Field argues that the mere notions of private and public were "tangible and variable" due to the contradictory policies of the Party aiming at simultaneous merging and separation of these two spheres (Field 164). *Byt*, therefore, also belonged to both public and private realms, to the official and personal, and was, by consequence, visible and invisible. Scholars such as Iuri Lotman acknowledge on the one hand *byt*'s real and practical nature and, on the other, its invisibility. Lotman's definition combines an older anthropological meaning with a newer, sociological one:

> *Byt* is the ordinary flow of life in its real and practical forms. It is the things that surround us, our habits and everyday behaviour. *Byt* surrounds us like air and, like air, is only noticed when it is spoiled or in short supply. We notice the peculiarities of others' *byt*, but our own escapes us—we are inclined to consider it 'just life,' the natural norm of practical existence [*bytie*]. *Byt* is thus always located in the realm of practice; it is above all the world of things. (Lotman 10)

Byt's ordinariness, for Lotman, consists in its pervasive presence, in its natural immediacy. *Byt* lies both on the surface (represented by the objects of everyday life) and deep inside the human existence (meaning the habitual quotidian activities that are characteristic of entire classes, nations, regions, etc). However, this very fact creates its extraordinariness: *byt's* ubiquitousness makes it unnoticeable.[13]

    Photography renders *byt* noticeable in so far that it documents the entirety of each scene.

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[13]Similarly, Henri Lefebvre writes: "The everyday is like a screen, [...] it both shows and hides; it reveals both what has and has not changed" (Lefebvre, Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics: Remarks Occasioned by the Centenary of Marx's Death 78).

Nothing can escape the mechanic apparatus of the camera, even the invisible everyday life takes a distinct shape in photographs. Photography reveals what might stay hidden in the everyday and makes space readable like a book. The space of *byt* in late and post-Soviet photography is the embodiment of a real material world. Photographs of the interiors of communal and private apartments contain myriads of everyday objects that are left here and there in disorder. Various photo series such as Boris Mikhailov's *Unfinished Dissertation* (Figures 3.1, 3.2, 3.3), Nikolay Bakharev's *Sofa* (Figure 3.8), as well as aforementioned Ilya Kabakov's *The Voices Behind the Door* and Roman Pyatkovka's *Communal Apartment* depict interiors full of kitchen utensils, clothes, rugs, books, cheap decorative things, and so on. Their rooms are small, excessively furnished, and disorganised. *Byt* is not hidden, on the contrary, it seems to be put forward deliberately in order to be read and comprehended by the viewers. It tells not only about the lifestyle of people who inhabit these apartments, but also about the country they live in. The changes in the politico-economic regime are reflected in *byt* which plays a role, especially in photography, of the most important contextualisation.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some images of interiors started to transmit misery and social decay. Such is the effect in *Moonshiners* (*Samogonshchiki*), a series by Sergey Solonsky who lives and works in Kharkov. This series, besides documenting a real human tragedy, sheds light on the *byt* of a marginal group of people who illicitly distil alcohol. Judging from Solonsky's snapshots which were taken during one of their typical days, they are producers and the first consumers of their spirits. To take such intimate photographs, Solonsky had to establish a trusting relationship with these people, and indeed, according to his interview, he asked one of his

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neighbours for permission to photograph his home and the process of distilling (Solonsky). These images leave a bitter feeling, not only because of the drama of dependency that the viewers are invited to witness, but especially because the young generation participates in it and will most likely carry the same patterns of behaviour as the older, most experienced generation of moonshiners. The topic of alcohol addiction, illegal activity and drunkenness exploited in *Samogonshchiki* can be qualified as pure *chernukha*—the style which became solicited during the last years of the Soviet Union, with the representation of dreadful living conditions and moral degradation. However, the series is not made in the traditions of *chernukha* because of its colourful palette and joyful subjects who seem to be under the effect of alcohol intoxication. The portrayed addiction puts joy into question, and grotesque subjects' bodies inspire more pity than admiration.

Solonsky's images consist of colour spots that vivify the depressing atmosphere. For example, in the photograph with a couple sitting on a chair in the kitchen (see upper image in Figure 4.10), the interior with its ugly wall tile, table oilcloth and dirty oven testifies to the absence of any aspiration to cosiness or propriety. The objects on the table reflect the couple's *byt*: there are an open bottle of moonshine and jars of fruit juice (to wash down the former). Regardless of such an unpleasant view, the couple who lives there seems happy. They are about to kiss, but the viewer understands that the source of the man's happiness lies both in the presence of the woman on his lap and the glass in his hand. Solonsky depicts the man's two loves: woman and alcohol; tenderly, the man holding the woman and his glass close to his face. The same tenderness is emphasised by the photograph's colour. On the man's left, the robe and coat of the utterly dishevelled woman appear bright and merry in the chaos of the kitchen, and on his right, the bottle and jars form

Figure 4.10: Sergey Solonsky, untitled from the series *Moonshiners*, 1998. Colour photographs, 30 x 45 cm each. Artist's collection. Copyright Sergey Solonsky, used with permission.

another colourful spot. The rest of the space merges into one rosy-beige background.

A similar colour-scheme exists in another photograph from *Moonshiners* (see lower image in Figure 4.10). Here, a man stands beside his distilling apparatus, happily smiling at the camera. His body in a burgundy sweater is placed right in front of the condenser in a way that he is inclined towards it, and the condenser is inclined towards the man. Judging from the tile, this space belongs to the kitchen from the previous photograph, but here the anaesthetic view is underlined even more, by the dirty apparatus, the holey curtain on the window, the old chairs that hold the distilling system, and the different objects suspended on the wall. The colourful spots in this photograph have a different dimension—they acquire a form of small golden dots that correspond to the pattern on the inverted pot, man's teeth, and orange peel. They indicate the direction of the cherished liquid, passing from the apparatus to the man's mouth. Here too, the feeling of love is transmitted, through the man's evident inclination towards the subject of his admiration, through his sincere open smile, and through the orange peel that he lovingly put in the moonshine jar to embellish its look and taste.

Similarly, the series *Moonshiners* depicts two boys living in this house and observing the elder generation's lifestyle (see Figure 4.11). Their innocence is expressed by the way they stand half-naked and pose before the photographer, as if were all a game, but their smiles echoes the smiles of their adult relatives. It is this smile that betrays their innocent bodies and alludes to moonshine, which will be consumed by the two boys sooner or later. Because of our knowledge of this context, they already appear drunk. The children in the photograph are not the only fruits of love; beside them there is a big dirty metal pot similar to that of the functioning distilling

Figure 4.11: Sergey Solonsky, untitled from the series *Moonshiners*, 1998. Colour photograph, 30 x 45 cm. Artist's collection. Copyright Sergey Solonsky, used with permission.

apparatus, which probably contains mash for future distillation. The messy room and especially the erotic pictures that cover the door behind the boys' backs confirm the disorder and vulgarity in which they live, with the accent put not on their education but on a merry and easygoing life. The boys are abandoned in this house, just like a lonesome shoe depicted in the left-hand corner.

For Sergey Solonsky, these subjects are part of one image, but another important part is their *byt* in Lotman's sense of the word. It is the material world that the photographer seeks to document, it reflects the addiction through the multitude of scattered things, through the dirtiness and disorder. At the same time, the photographer captures the family's ordinary flow of life, their natural environment, and the way they live every day. The people in the photographs do not seem to notice their *byt*; moreover, their practical existence, or their tactics (in de Certeau's understanding) *is* dependency; alcohol here plays the role of the practice which allows them to escape the power discourse. However, by infiltrating the family and exposing their illicit activity, the documentary camera serves as a surveillance tool that, if ever to fall into the wrong hands, would be used by the State.[14] Thus, in the *Moonshiners* series, the order is reversed: from the practice that escapes the power, photography transforms into the means of State control and commercial profit, because of the moonshiners' illicit character.

In late and post-Soviet photography, such a reverse happens multiple times on multiple levels: everyday life, with its low and ordinary things, becomes a topic worth photographing; consequently, the status of the photographic medium rises to that of a self-sufficient art form. The representation of the everyday and its Eastern European definition *byt* differs from the optimism

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[14]It is interesting to note that one of the characters of this series approached the photographer later on accusing him for earning money with the photographs of his house (Solonsky).

seen in socialist realist and commercial photography, and has a distinct negative tonality. *Byt*'s interpreter and incarnator, the 'ordinary man' or 'common hero,' also changes the look. During the communist era, his name was Homo Sovieticus—the real Soviet man. This man has built the socialist state, embodied socialist culture, but this same man also participated in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the late and post-Soviet photography, as I will argue, the representation of Homo Sovieticus is different from the Soviet one. He is no longer depicted as glorious, heroic, and brave. Instead, he carries the burden of Soviet decay; he has simultaneously lost his country and his identity, but Homo Sovieticus continues to live as a species in the post-Soviet space, although his image appears dislocated and belonging to a different time and place.

4.4   The ordinary Soviet man, "Homo Sovieticus"

The name Homo Sovieticus was coined in the 1980s by the Soviet writer Alexander Zinoviev who described the so-called species in his novels. The mentality of the Soviet ordinary man is the product of the Marxist-Leninist discourse established in 1917. The formation of the Soviet identity mostly took place during the 1920s, when the Soviet officialdom proclaimed the principles of a 'new man.' When Stalin took power, he greatly contributed to the identity of Homo Sovieticus by imposing the conditions of rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, collectivisation, and other extreme measures that caused a great deal of social hardships. This is the reason why Sheila Fitzpatrick claims that Homo Sovieticus's "most highly developed skills involved the hunting and gathering of scarce goods in an urban environment" (Fitzpatrick 2). Thus, Homo Sovieticus cannot be dissociated from his *byt* and material culture. Being born in the socialist system, the ordinary Soviet

man is its child and executor at the same time. His everyday life is a natural reflection of the Soviet discourse, including all related things, objects, thoughts, and utterances: his image, both public and private, is supposed to be a continuation of the communist power.

Scholars like Robert Porter (1998) and Graham Roberts (2002) identify Homo Sovieticus with the male gender and attribute to him pronounced masculine traits, virility and power. Indeed, after looking at the representation of Soviet men in the socialist realist tradition, we can understand that most male characters of film, painting, and other art forms incarnate ultimate masculinity; they are determined, resourceful, and strong yet have high moral values. For example, in classic Soviet films, such as *Chapaev* (Vasiliev and Vasiliev, 1934), *Circus* (Aleksandrov, 1936), *Tractor Drivers* (Pyriev, 1939), to name but a few, Homo Sovieticus is the ardent defender of Soviet ideals and has a model masculine character. If we take a closer look at women in Soviet paintings and film, they replicate this masculine character: they prove to have a strong sense of determination, self-control, and are ready to sacrifice their personal interests for the sake of the Party. Even their physicality is not particularly feminine, as we can see on the examples of socialist realist paintings and posters from previous chapters (Figures 1.2, 1.7, 3.11 and 3.12): their bodies seem to be tall and wide, and their faces angular.[15] This defeminisation might be the result of an imposed class-consciousness that equals the sexes and sees human beings as potential workers.

However, I believe that the division of Soviet people by gender is not an approach that will allow for an understanding of all aspects of Homo Sovieticus; both men and women equally participated in the formation and realisation of Soviet ideas, and women subscribe to the identity of

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[15]This might be caused by the dominance of the masculine order and male perspective in the official Soviet culture, as Graham Roberts claims (G. Roberts 114).

Homo Sovieticus to the same extent as men do. Among numerous definitions of Homo Sovieticus, I prefer the one articulated by Cécile Vaissié. Being greatly influenced by the writer Zinoviev, this definition by Vaissié encompasses all characteristics of Homo Sovieticus without focusing on gender or any other aspect of personality:

> This *Homo sovieticus* is a man convinced of the rightness of Marxist-Leninist ideals. He devotes all his forces to the construction of communism and is at the same time an ardent patriot and internationalist. He approves a Soviet lifestyle and behaves according to established norms. [...] he is characterised by obedience to his bosses' orders, capacity to live in rather bad conditions without complaining, sycophancy vis-à-vis the authorities, solidarity with the dominant forms of behaviour, political conditioning, feeling of responsibility toward his country, readiness to accept sacrifices and to convict others to them. Furthermore, he necessarily is a man belonging to the collective.[16] (Vaissié 268)

From this definition, as from many others, Homo Sovieticus's attitude toward his own personality and outer world is clearly framed by the communist rhetoric. He (or she) is a part of the mass working class (the proletariat) which consists of people similar, or even identical, to him. This conformity with others does not bother him; it is rather the opposite—non-conformity—that seems suspicious.[17] Belonging to a collective, sharing the same ideas (experiencing the so-called communal optics) and, especially, being a subject of the State, like everyone else, were the qualities that united Homo Sovieticus, regardless of sex, age, and origin.

Despite the negative connotation that Homo Sovieticus acquired, with the sarcasm embedded already in the name, this species had many positive features. Edward O'Boyle argues that the creature is "an intelligent being who is entirely social" (O'Boyle 9). Struchenkov and Romanukha write that the establishment of 'sovietness' signified integration into the modern society,

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[16]My translation.
[17]This is where the negative attitude of the Soviet people toward dissidents and nonconformists stems from.

as opposed to archaic pre-revolutionary monarchy, and acquisition of new characteristics and skills such as individuality, personal biography, ability for self-reflection, understanding the possibility of choice, specialisation in a particular domain, usage of abstract notions, etc. (Struchenkov and Romanukha 242). The framework not only encouraged economic, industrial, technological, and social progress but also personal growth from the Soviet people: high moral values, cultural and physical development. Thus, Homo Sovieticus, as a 'new man,' was supposed to have model look and behaviour which ideologically differed from capitalist people, all the while contributing to construction of the communist state.

Such was the official image of Homo Sovieticus—a construct created by the totalitarian state that was popularised in art, literature and mass media during the 1930s and existed until the end of the USSR. However, with the advent of unofficial art and amateur photographic practices which re-introduced the idea of author's vision existing independently from power discourse, the ordinary Soviet man started to lose his determination and strength. Often, in late and post-Soviet photography, the representation of Homo Sovieticus undermines his traditional characteristics, and foregrounds instead weakness, doubt, failure to fit into the existing social norms, among others. The same can be said about the literary works that do not subscribe to the socialist realist method: the principal male characters in Yuri Olesha's *Envy*, Evgeny Zamiatin's *We*, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* are the opposite of Homo Sovieticus, as their ideas and aspirations lie far from the class consciousness, construction of socialist state and collective optics. Robert Porter even argues that they represent twentieth-century examples of the typical character in Russian literature—superfluous man (Porter 219) who fundamen-

tally differs from Homo Sovieticus due to his passive attitude towards the socio-political processes in the country.

The image by Belarusian photographer Vladimir Shakhlevich echoes this deviation in its representation of Soviet collective mentality (see Figure 4.12). This photograph was meant to be displayed on a board of honour, and all field conditions had to be consequently eliminated thanks to the photographer's formatting. However, Shakhlevich decided to keep the original format for his art project, thus showing the process of picture-taking, and not the result that was supposed to go on the board. It captures the 'behind the scenes,' i.e. the participants of this photo shooting assisting to the photographer; they hold the background of the photograph—a wooden frame with a piece of fabric inside. This simple fact makes the viewer recognize the constructedness of both the situation at hand and the entire Soviet system: just like these assistants are holding the fabric to make an appropriate photograph, other officials are making the political background to rule Homo Sovieticus. Due to the unveiled truth of the photographic process, the photographed man neither appears heroic nor honoured. He is standing with a serious even resentful expression, mouth shut, frowning brows, and although he is Homo Sovieticus, he does not look proud of it. The unfinished nature of the documented scene annuls the traditional meaning of the Soviet experience, bringing into discussion critical views of official policies, social clichés and visual culture.

The concept of Homo Sovieticus in its positive interpretation can mainly be found in socialist realist art, literature and film. The negative image which predominates in alternative art suggests the tiresome existence of the ordinary Soviet man hinting at his inevitable future disappearance. Nevertheless, after 1991, the Soviet identity persisted ("The Long Life of Homo

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Figure 4.12: Vladimir Shakhlevich, untitled from the series *Portrait for the Kolkhoz's Board of Honour*, 1980-1989. Gelatin silver print, 30 x 40 cm. Private collection. Copyright Vladimir Shakhlevich, used with permission.

Sovieticus"). The secret of Homo Sovieticus's survival after the Soviet Union's collapse lies in his adaptability to new living conditions. The post-Soviet man carries his Soviet heritage while simultaneously adapting to capitalism. Iurii Levada defines him as Homo Post-Sovieticus, referring both to new principles of post-Soviet existence and to old patterns of mentality deeply rooted in the population by the socialist ideology (Levada). Nevertheless, fundamentally, the regime change did not affect the mentalities of most post-Soviet citizens, since, according to Lev Gudkov, most official institutions remained totalitarian in the way they functioned, continuing to exercise their power over the new 'democratic' society (Gudkov). This is why Homo Sovieticus feels comfortable even when the past *de jure* is ruined, since *de facto* he brings his Soviet past into the post-Soviet everyday.

The ordinary Soviet man would not be represented so brightly in art, film and literature if he was not contrasted with his arch-enemy: the eccentric. Being also a product of the totalitarian system, but with the opposite effect, the eccentric was a man who deviated in his world view from the Homo Sovieticus, choosing instead eccentric counter-behaviours. Instead of tolerating power like Homo Sovieticus, the eccentric actively protests and rebels for better rights. Although his fight can have different forms that are often innocent and non-violent, the eccentric never stays unnoticed as he does not follow the official structure of Soviet public conventions. In the photography of the 1980s, the eccentric became one of the most popular figures: this could be someone taking a satirical posture, making inappropriate gestures, or posing in an unexpected place. For various photographers, such as Boris Mikhailov, Sergey Bratkov, Igor Mukhin, Sergey Chilikov, and Galina Moskaleva, amongst others, the eccentric played a key role in their photo

Figure 4.13: Viktor Shchurov, *In the Street*, 1990. Reprinted from *Photo Manifesto: Contemporary Photography in the USSR*, edited by Joseph Walker et al. Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1991, p. 179. Copyright Maria Shchurova, used with permission.

series, as he could counterbalance a conventional and reserved mode of conduct in public places.

Georg Lukács claims that the polarity of the eccentric and the socially-average in traditional realism, "serves to increase our understanding of social normality" (Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* 31). The same is true for photographic realism; a photograph of an eccentric helps to better understand the character of Homo Sovieticus, especially when the two are juxtaposed. For instance, the image *In the Street* by Russian photographer Viktor Shchurov shows the eccentric in a provocative outfit (see Figure 4.13). Maybe this person is a circus worker or an artist who is performing in the street, but in this photograph he plays the role of an eccentric,

because, judging from the public bewilderment, he happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The man's behaviour and outfit appear shocking to passersby as he interrupts their habitual patterns of everyday discourse: he is standing half-naked in the street, whereas he is supposed to wear a coat and to walk obediently in some direction, just like the woman on his left. This woman is a perfect Homo Sovieticus: she uses the street as intended—to walk towards a destination; she is well-dressed, like the others, and she carries a bag. The bag once again stands for the object that attaches her to the earth, to the quotidian, to the low (even visually her bag is pulling down towards the asphalt). Instead, the eccentric's position is oscillating: he seems to be spinning and moving up, having no attachments with the earth, no proper cloth, and especially no bag. The contrast between the woman's heavy and wide white body, on one side, and the eccentric's slim and light body, on the other, constitutes the image's symbolic meaning which exposes, firstly, the ideological differences between conformity of Homo Sovieticus with his dependence from *byt*, and secondly, the 'eccentricity' of various minorities that are less restricted by everyday routines.

The image of Homo Sovieticus, in the 1980s and 1990s, implies a clash of cultures—Soviet (being the natural environment of Homo Sovieticus) and alternative (emerging in the critical realist photography). This alternative culture, which is embodied in eccentrics and all other 'subaltern' subjects, including artists and photographers, that we explored in chapter three, exposes the flows of Homo Sovieticus: his obedience and blind subordination to the system, his fear of change, and refusal to take initiative. The same representation exists in labour photography which emphasises the complex character of Homo Sovieticus. Labour is the field that similarly to *byt* defines Homo Sovieticus. The space of work as a genuine environment of Homo Sovieticus has

a particular look in the socialist realist photography: it represents an ideal space where the Soviet worker can showcase his power and skills. However, starting from the early 1980s, images of workplaces become deserted and ambiguous, interrupting the link between the worker and the state. Homo Sovieticus appears more isolated and less heroic, and the working environment seems overwhelming, displacing the worker from the central position towards the edges. This allows me claim that labour, for the late and post-Soviet Homo Sovieticus, became a marginal space that lost its habitual meaning. In labour photography from the 1980s and 1990s, as the examples below will show, the margins become the field of visual experiments, contrary to the traditional Soviet imagery that leaves the margin to perform its habitual role. Indeed, in late and post-Soviet photography, the worker is treated as a secondary, or subaltern, character. Instead, the formal construction of images is emphasised, due to what minor elements that previously were unnoticed acquire a new significance, and the process of deconstruction takes place.

4.5   Labour and industrial photography

For Mikhail Epstein, Homo Sovieticus is expressed in his relationship with labour: "His love [for labour] is lustful, too quickly bestowed and insufficiently selective, rarely developing into a solid marital union" (Epstein 165). This comes not only from the industrialisation and bureaucratisation of the country but also from an ideological shift: the Soviet society was defined as a *working* class. The examples of socialist realist painting, literature, and film show that for Soviets, hard labour was seen as the only way to realize full self-expression and better the state. The spirit of labour is present in all the Soviet paintings described in the previous chapter. Georgy Ryazhsky's

Party Delegate and *Chairwoman* (Figure 3.11) are static portraits; nevertheless, the women's facial expression in both paintings is almost identical, communicating the determination and readiness to fulfil their duties.[18] Samuel Adlivankin's *Our Heroes* (Figure 3.12, top image) depicts a celebration of industrial achievements, realised by a shock worker; here, someone puts a red scarf around the worker's neck, symbolising that he henceforth bears the image of an ideal Soviet citizen, or Homo Sovieticus, thanks to his unprecedented efforts in labour. Boris Ioganson's *Students: the Workers' Faculty is Marching On* (Figure 3.12, bottom image) features another type of labour—intellectual work. Interestingly, the students are depicted not only in the process of studying (reading a book, for instance) but also walking, which also transmits the idea of constant movement and progress.

The Homo Sovieticus cannot possibly idle, as he is, imperatively, a workaholic,[19] seeing in his job the way of paying back his debt to the state which does everything for the Soviet citizens, from goods' distribution to regulation of everyday life. The image of Homo Sovieticus that fully transmits his personality and emphasises tight relationships with the State ideally shows Homo Sovieticus at work, or in the working atmosphere.

The photograph *Cast Me Not (Away) from Your Presence* by Vladimir Kupriyanov, for example, is a collective portrait of Homo Sovieticus in the labour environment (see Figure 4.14). Made in 1990, a year before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this work bears the imprint of perestroika, by representing each worker in a collective, yet separately. The photographer cut the image and distanced the workers from each other, suggesting that henceforth the musketeers'

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[18]Ultimately, their working status is also indicated in the paintings' title.

[19]This statement is based on the representation of Homo Sovieticus in art. The research of Jouko Nikula, for instance, proves the opposite to be true in reality. He argues that "workers did not feel it necessary to devote themselves to their work or production in general, especially since there was no particular means to punish them" (Nikula 102). However, Jouko Nikula does not refer to the identity of Homo Sovieticus, but to workers in general.

Figure 4.14: Vladimir Kupriyanov (Russian, 1954-2011), *Cast Me Not Away From Your Presence*, 1990. Gelatin silver print mounted on aluminum 180 x 430 cm (70 7/8 x 169 5/16 in.). Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, 2010.014.001A-N. Copyright Marina Dumanyan, used with permission.

phrase "one for all, and all for one" does not work any more: the state's policy proclaimed the

direction towards liberty, truth, democracy, and openness, which signified more opportunities for

individual self-realisation. The workers are aware that they are living in the epoch of change,

but they do not know what changes the future will bring. This is the reason why their faces are

serious and express hope and concern at the same time. The character Homo Sovieticus is evident

in the photograph through the factory clothing, through something profoundly Russian in the look

of these workers. The inscription below the image (also appears in the title) comes from Psalm

51—the psalm which is used in Orthodox Christianity the most. The structure of the photograph—

overlapping panels that showcase individual workers—reminds of a church iconostasis. Thus, the

image of the worker, Homo Sovieticus, becomes an icon of the Soviet past and, inevitably, of the

post-Soviet future.

Although the workers' profile in the sociological and historical academic studies is controversial due to the closed nature of Soviet politics which prevented comprehensive research to be done in the field of labour studies (Koenker 265-266), it is still possible to define the image of working Homo Sovieticus based on photographic documents. Indeed, starting from the outset of the Soviet period, photography served as a way to not only document industrial, agricultural, technological, and scientific progress in the country but also propagate the identity of the 'new' Soviet man who belonged to the working class. In the late 1920s, special newspapers and journals, such as *SSSR na stroike* (USSR in Construction), *Ogonëk* (Little Flame), *Rabotnitsa* (Female Worker), were created to cover the latest news from production and construction sites in the entire Soviet Union. Alexander Rodchenko, Boris Ignatovich, and Arkady Shaikhet, to name but a few, published prominent photo series in these periodicals about the achievements of science and technology leading to the construction of the Socialist state. Industrial imagery became one of the most widespread practices for the official photographers, since this field allowed for minimum authorial expression and formal experimentation that the photographers often sought, without compromising the principles of socialist realism.

The labour photography of the 1930s-1960s can also be characterised by the collective body, as photographs and paintings often portrayed several people interacting or working together. Industrial images from factories are primarily done in the socialist realist manner, as they, besides depicting shock workers and Stakhanovites, capture communist slogans that were fixed on factory walls.[20] These photographs are partly formalist, often the bodies and heavy factory equipment

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[20]The examples of such slogans would be "Thanks comrade Stalin for a joyful and happy life" (*Spasibo tov. Stalinu*

Figure 4.15: Arkady Shaikhet, *Komsomol Member at the Wheel*, 1929. Gelatin silver print, 60 x 45 cm. Nailya Alexander Gallery, New York. Copyright Arkady Shaikhet Estate, Courtesy Nailya Alexander Gallery.

appear harmoniously intertwined as if they constitute one entity. For example, Arkady Shaikhet's photograph *Komsomol Member at the Wheel* shows a man standing on a huge machine and turning the wheel (see Figure 4.15). The worker is shown as a master of machinery: his movements are confident and his hands strong. He is placed at the top of the image not only to show his superiority over the world of technology but also to emphasise man's triumph over less advanced pre-revolutionary era; henceforth only the mutual work of the man and machine could bring progress and contribute to the construction of the new Soviet society.

However, this construction (or building of the socialist state), which was accompanied by propagandistic photographic and pictorial illustrations, represented in reality, a controversial matter. New research in the history of the Soviet Union reveals details of socialist opposition to the Soviet regime, the divisions inside the seemingly homogeneous working class, shortage, and material hardships of workers and peasants, as well as many other facts that free the Soviet worker from any illusion. After the establishment of the Bolshevik dictatorship, officials imposed the militarisation of labour which consisted of "converting military units into labor armies, and 'mobilizing' industrial workers to carry out particular tasks under quasi-military supervision" (Siegelbaum). The endorsement of compulsory labour by the Soviet power in the 1920s, signified both the suppression of civil liberties and the transformation of human labour into the "property of the state" (Hewes 775). Thus, various strategic and often secret sites such as the White Sea–Baltic canal, were constructed and conducted using forced labour. Even though labour conditions in these sites caused workers' injury and death, their photographic documentation, popularised in the media,

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za radostnuiu schastlivuiu zhizn'), "The Order of Lenin obliges each shock worker to fight for everyday execution of industrial and financial plans" (*Orden Lenina obiazuet kazhdogo udarnika drat'sya za kazhdodnevnoe vypolnenie promfinplana*), etc. (Lozinskaya et al. 168-169).

Figure 4.16: Alexander Rodchenko, *Orchestra, White Sea Canal*, 1933. Gelatin silver print, 15.2 x 22.2 cm. Private collection. Copyright Alexander Lavrentiev, used with permission.

was optimistic.

For example, in the 1930s, Alexander Rodchenko photographed the White Sea–Baltic canal knowing that thousands of people were dying there. These photographs that he published in the magazine *USSR in Construction* in December 1933[21] reflected only the labour achievements of Soviet workers, exclusively related to the building process, and consequently were used for propaganda (Klimov). Moreover, as the research of Oleg Klimov proves, such photographs, chosen for publication, transmitted the idea of labour as a celebration, while photographs that stayed classified

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[21]Rodchenko himself designed the special issue of *USSR in Construction* devoted to the White Sea–Baltic canal.

in the NKVD archives showed the true nature of the construction of the White Sea–Baltic canal. If we compare an archival photo (see Figure 4.16) to some magazine spreads (see Figure 4.17), it becomes clear that Rodchenko published highly manipulated images that mythologised and distorted the reality of labour. On the other hand, the image from the archives, although being similarly constructed in the traditions of photographic Constructivism, offers a more authentic representation of labour—as an exhausting activity and not entertainment. It also clearly demonstrates the division among the workers and a certain hierarchy—those who work hard, bending their backs, stay below, while those who play in the orchestra are shown higher up. The shot is taken from above, which also emphasises an elevated position of the photographer.

One of the dominant themes of industrial photography was the factory portrait, which featured hard-working people in industrial and construction sites. These photographs were mostly exhibited on boards of honour in front of factory gates or on central city squares, so that people could get to know their labour heroes. As illustrated in the book *Industrial Realism: Labor in Soviet Painting and Photography* (2006), the genre of industrial portrait strikes with its resemblance to icons—the tradition especially prominent in the socialist realist painting which "started with an imitation of photography and ended up with an icon" (Sidlin, The Soviet Industrial Myth 6). The iconicity of such works was related to a special light that emanated from the portrayed worker and illuminated all the space around him. However, the image of the worker and his workplace started to change in the 1960s. Gradually, the space of labour acquired a pessimistic and even oppressive tonality, and becomes apparent the atomisation of working collective.[22] Photographers focused

[22]This is particularly visible in the book *Industrial realism* cited above. The photograph *The Ordzhonikidze Factory, Minsk. Turning and testing the Minsk computer* (1971) by V. Savostianov (pp.292-293) illustrates this fact: a computer engineer is sitting amongst big blocs of the computer, surrounded by cords and buttons, turning his back to another

Figure 4.17: Two-page spreads in the magazine *USSR in Construction*, issue 12 (1933). Journal with photogravure and lithograph cover and photogravure illustrations by Alexander Rodchenko, 41.7 x 29.7 cm (page). Photo: Oleg Klimov / Russian State National Library, St. Petersburg. Copyright Alexander Lavrentiev, used with permission.

more and more on the individuality of the worker and his personal feelings instead of on the collective consciousness. Vsevolod Tarasevich, for instance, clearly makes a shift to 'labour' portraits and produces photo series in the Academy of sciences and Moscow university featuring leading engineers, physicists and mathematicians in their working environment, yet always solitary.

The discussion of collective vs. individual is present in Evgeny Pavlov's series *Life of a Factory*. Here, each worker is portrayed against the backdrop of factory photographs that are assembled in a collage (see Figure 4.18). The portrayed worker's figure stands apart from the collective images behind, and his or her body is put forward in a tangible distance. The traces of manipulation are visible as the photographer cuts and glues individual portraits on top of the collage, creating an awkward ambiguity as to whether or not these individuals really belong to the collective; whether or not they are satisfied with their job; and whether or not they play an important role in their factory. Cutting out the figures' contour and attaching them to the collage alludes to the ideological shaping of Homo Sovieticus's identity through the rhetoric of building socialism, working collectively and having class consciousness. However, the fact that these characters stand apart arouses doubts in both the photographer and his viewers that this political conditioning has ever succeeded. Evgeny Pavlov made the collages for *Life of a Factory* using the photographs his brother took while working as a factory photographer (Pavlova). Considering that Pavlov's brother lost his job after perestroika, the series reveals the juxtaposition of a factory world and individual life that appear incompatible with each other.

If we take a closer look at the background pictures it becomes clear that the photographer

worker of the factory. Another photograph, *The Urengoi-Pomary pipeline. Welding the next segment of the pipeline* (1980) by I. Sapozhkov depicts two workers in masks and coats bending over a huge pipeline. This pipeline visually separates them, and grey snow contrasting with their dark bodies makes the image rather sinister and obscure.

Figure 4.18: Evgeny Pavlov, untitled from the series *Life of a Factory*, 1992. Gelatin silver prints, optical montage, 30 x 40 cm each. Author's collection. Copyright Evgeny Pavlov, used with permission.

has a rather satirical and inconsistent approach to the depiction of factory life. We can find there photographs of workers doing their job (similar to genuine industrial labour imagery), but also workers' leisure time (when they play soccer and participate in amateur art concerts), and even get into a police station. The labour space does not seem as affirmative as in socialist realist photographs, where factories are depicted as an environment where man and machine collaborate (like in Arkady Shaikhet's image, cited above (Figure 4.15), or where a friendly working atmosphere reigns, like in Arkady Shishkin's image cited in chapter three (Figure 3.16). Instead, the space in Evgeny Pavlov's series appears unstable, since the representation of the factory no longer constitutes a logical narrative but is interrupted by the documentation of practices that have nothing to do with labour, and shows a shameful image of the workers (as in the case of police station). These are obviously the images that the Party would never allow to be published in official periodicals or displayed on the boards of honour. Moreover, the quality of these photographs leaves much to be desired, as various flaws, like scratches, bad lighting, aggressive flash, and unprofessional framing, strike the viewer's eye. The subversive character of factory workers' representation, which is thematically and aesthetically far from traditional socialist realist canons, makes it impossible for the *Life of a Factory* series to be treated as high art. However, this was precisely the photographer's objective—the refusal to follow any canons, opting for inferior quality, the suspension of art laws, and working with the margins.

Thus, in the 1980s labour and industrial photography became the domain of formal experiments and criticism for the photographers. The reasons for this criticism varied from the hellish nature of Soviet compulsory work, especially during the Stalin rule, to the non-disclosure of labour

victims at strategic construction sites. The truth about conditions in labour camps, executions of anti-Soviet activists, the number of 'dekulakised' farmers,[23] and political prisoners was gradually revealed thanks to the opening of archives, the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, and journalistic enquiries, causing the myth of the 'perfect Soviet worker's life' to fade away. Another reason of an ambiguous worker's image comes from the fact that before 1980s, any public form of criticism of the Soviet system was prohibited,[24] but perestroika and glasnost' broke this taboo, due to the fact that Soviet artists and photographers could finally express the pain that the entire society suppressed for decades.

The photography of the 1980s and 1990s is thus a response to both the trauma of the Soviet population and the brutalities of the revolution and civil war, Stalin's terror, and other hidden realities of the workers' life. The photographers documented these wounds in diverse ways, some of them, like Triva group, by marginalising the worker; some of them, like Sergey Kozhemyakin, by emphasising a lack inside a photograph; and others, like Vladimir Kupriyanov, by creating a tension between the visual and verbal texts. Some of them, however, go further and depict the workplace as a space of traumatic experience. One example of this is the series *Other People's Photographs* (*Chuzhie fotografii*) by Russian photographer Alexei Shulgin, which was originally made during the 1950s and 1960s by workers of factories across the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, when Alexei Shulgin was hired as an official photographer of the factory *Giproneftespetsmontazh*, he found these photographs in some archives and was struck by the beauty and cold awe-inspiring

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[23]*Kulak* refers to an affluent independent farmer who owned land and cattle. In the late 1920s, began the process of dekulakisation which meant confiscation of private property and goods, relocation of kulak's families in other territories or, in case of resistance, to Gulag.

[24]Leonard Shapiro claims that the origin of such politics dates back to 1920s, in times of the civil war and Lenin's introduction of New Economic Policy (Shapiro).

Figure 4.19: Alexei Shulgin, untitled from the series *Other People's Photographs*, 1987. Gelatin silver print, 59.5 x 49.5 cm. National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow. Copyright Alexei Shulgin, used with permission.

atmosphere that they captured. The series was pivotal in the history of Russian photography and attracted the attention of many viewers and critics since it constituted the first *curated* photographic project. Alexei Shulgin, by performing the role of selector and editor instead of photographer, became, thanks to *Other People's Photographs*, one of the leading art curators in the following years. The success that this series had[25] proved Shulgin's opinion that the golden age of photography was already over, giving place to the crisis of photographic art, as according to him, everything that could be photographed was already recorded by his predecessors from all sides and in all variants (Shulgin). In the following years, Shulgin would completely abandon photography and work on media and web art projects.

In *Other People's Photographs*, the worker does not have any power: he is depicted as an insignificant element amid concrete factory constructions; he is no longer master of the machinery, like during the era of Stalinist industrial photography. A worker's tiny body is contrasted with large blocks of walls and pipes that overwhelm the entire space of the photographs, like, for example, in Figure 4.19 where workers appear stuck in an abyss formed by seemingly never-ending walls. The workers' faces are rarely discernible, either because of blurriness or because of the high contrast which excessively darkens the men's figures. The photographs' dark side that comprises the workers' bodies along with factory constructions is often juxtaposed with light: the earth and the air. This juxtaposition reveals the workers' complicity with, or dependence from factory laws (and consequently the State), but also the existence of an elusive non-material world, the world of *bytie* and not that of *byt*, which is unattainable by factory workers. The harmony between the

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[25]Shulgin made extensive solo exhibitions featuring the series in Ukhta photoclub (1988), in Moscow Central House of Artist (1994), and in Moscow House of Photography (2002).

Figure 4.20: Alexei Shulgin, *Plate 18* from the series *Other People's Photographs*, 1987. Gelatin silver print, 50 x 59.5 cm. National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow. Copyright Alexei Shulgin, used with permission.

industrial equipment and the worker is not present in the series, like in earlier Soviet labour photography. Instead, the factory space appears a separate and independent sphere where workers must coexist. Figure 4.20 emphasises this, by showing the difference in dimensions of the man and the pipe. Here, the man is helplessly standing under the threateningly tilted pipe, he is again captured between two spheres—factory (space of *byt*) and white space of *bytie*.

The appropriation of anonymous photographers' work by Alexei Shulgin, besides questioning the ethics of the author, brings about a discussion of 'found photography.' Traditionally it

refers to vernacular photography—amateur (or sometimes professional) snapshots devoid of any artistic claim that treat the topic of the everyday and vary from family albums to advertising and pin-up images—implying an element of chance thanks to what images are found and recuperated by others. But in the case of Shulgin's series, the found photographs are industrial and come from a factory archive. Even though they still represent the theme of everyday—labour—the use of archival material in a different context evokes the simultaneous loss and attribution of meaning.[26] The photographic archive that was intended to provide evidence or to serve as an illustration of the industrial progress (but in no way to be treated as artistic work) offers a new perspective when exposed to the environment outside the factory. Memory and reference get erased and substituted by the consideration of aesthetic quality and reflections over the past as a historical process. Beyond what is seen, the exact photographer, subjects, and especially the purpose of documentation are unknown, besides the fact that they represent a specific factory. The first displacement happens on a photographic level, when industrial photographs that are usually viewed "in a spirit of calculation and rationality" shift into the field of "romantic aesthetics" (Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital 450-451). The second—through the denial of authorship that Shulgin points out, transforming the nature of labour itself: from the anonymous sphere that belonged to the State, labour acquires an author, an executor, an actual worker who performs it.

Through such photographic documentation the viewer can witness how labour during the 1980s and 1990s gradually got rid of State discourses and became the property of the worker. As in the artistic sphere, where collective optics gave way to author's individual self-expression, the

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[26] Allan Sekula argues that photographs in an archive lose their meaning because they are "'liberated' from the actual contingencies of use" (Sekula, Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital 444).

sphere of labour also underwent the change of collective vs. personal considerations. After 1991, new politico-economic realities that were particularly defined by the rise of unemployment and rapid inflation, pushed people not only to find ways how to make ends meet but also to take full responsibility of their professional careers as the State ceased to be the exclusive guarantor and provider of jobs (Afontsev). Homo Sovieticus could no longer be defined as a labourer, as the collective consciousness which permeated his relationship to work, as well as the work itself, passed into the domain of individual inquiry. In late and post-Soviet photography, labour is marginalised: the above-mentioned series put in evidence the element of parergonal treatment, such as scratches, low quality print, cut and pasted figures, collage, among others. These techniques (most of them we reviewed in chapter three) point to the lack inherent in the photographic images due to a new ambiguous status of labour, workers and the everyday.

Another example is the series *Blue Butterflies* (1992) by Belarusian photographer Sergey Kozhemyakin that was created using an archive of amateur snapshots taken by him and his father in the early 1960s. The series translates the feelings of instability and precarity which emerged in society after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (see Figure 4.21). Despite their playful character, the images contain several displacements, or glitches, that disturb the original meaning of the photographic snapshot, questioning the nature of photography and the status of the portrayed characters. First, the photographer added an element to each image that defines the series' name—a blue butterfly. This gesture clearly represents the technique of montage that allowed the photographer to enlarge and place the butterflies in unexpected spots. Secondly, the hand-colouring of originally black-and-white photographs once again undermines the function of the photographic

Figure 4.21: Sergey Kozhemyakin, untitled from the series *Blue Butterflies*, 1992. Silver bromide print, photomontage, hand-colouring with synthetic dyes, 17.3 x 23.5 cm. Rosphoto collection, St Petersburg. Copyright Sergey Kozhemyakin, used with permission.

document and brings it closer to the sphere of pictorial art. The hand-colouring is deliberately done in a careless way to emphasise the unfinishedness of the series. The images, thus, are situated in an unidentified territory between photography and another pictorial medium (painting?). This can also point to the unclear position of the subjects themselves who, after 1991, ceased to be a part of the collective and were suddenly responsible for their own future.

Thus, the regime's propagandistic discourse that created the image of Homo Sovieticus was criticized, firstly because of the movement of nonconformist photographers who wanted to render to the Soviet worker a human look and secondly because of the new politico-economic policies of glasnost and perestroika which emphasized openness, liberalisation and transparency, beginning to modify the nature of labour itself (as category of everyday life). The workplace, henceforth, acquired an ambiguous meaning as a space of controversy, trauma, and hidden history. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, labour, as well as everyday life in general, was depicted primarily as an individual practice, balancing between the routine and absurdity. The photographers' critical realist methods that consisted of documentary techniques and the use of colour like in Sergey Solonsky's work, are meant to reflect the unembellished reality of late and post-Soviet space. Spontaneous non-staged snapshots using monochrome film, like in Alexei Shulgin, Alexander Lapin, and Victor Sh(ch)urov, reveal the more conceptual side of photography. The staged realism of Nikolay Bakharev, Igor Mukhin, and Vladimir Shakhlevich demonstrate in a way society's vision of itself, the way people wanted to be seen. Ultimately, the most vanguard approach, like in photographs by Alexey Titarenko, Vladimir Kupriyanov, Roman Pyatkovka, Evgeny Pavlov, and Sergey Kozhemyakin, literally challenges the image of everyday life, offering an alternative

vision of spaces and quotidian practices. All these photographs play with the margins of representation, as they manipulate space to show various limits: the limits of society, of photography, and of everyday life.

In this chapter, I showed the unusual photographic representation of everyday life that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s. The thematic shift in late and post-Soviet photography, from the ideological illustrations of Homo Sovieticus to the portrayal of everyday life and the 'ordinary man' was where critical realism realised its true potential. By analysing visual space and manipulating the camera, late and post-Soviet photographers offered a critical view of reality which could not prior be manifested because of socialist realist doctrine. Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photography definitely ceased, in the 1980s and 1990s, to mimic painting and illustrate high socialist ideals, exposing realities that no one dared represent. By showing the true nature of Homo Sovieticus, photographers marked a new era in Eastern European photographic art, defined by the revitalisation of experimental methods, a quest of authentic imagery, and, especially, by the establishment of photography as an independent art form. The concept of everyday, and its Eastern European equivalent *byt*, played a crucial role in this process, as it, by lowering from high ideological myths to the quotidian realities, helped to question the meaning of photographic truth. In the end, every photographer discussed in this dissertation, through the development of an individual artistic style, proves that the category of photographic truth is highly subjective, that it can be modified by many different factors, varying from the type of camera and photographer's vision, to the institutions and ideologies that control photography and society. What they achieved was this recognition of multifaceted representation that photography offers, which can be read as

an act of liberation of the photographic medium from its marginal status.

Conclusion

"Most of the meanings of any picture reside in its relationships to other and earlier pictures—to tradition" (Szarkowski 9). This applies to the case of late and post-Soviet photography which was informed by, and reflected upon the culture of the Soviet Union, not only as expressed in official painting, poster, film, and photography but also in the way that it was embodied by citizens, urban and industrial environments, home and work places, among other elements of everyday life. This dissertation, besides acknowledging the politico-economic and socio-cultural factors that influenced the development of visual art, also analysed the role of individual photographers in creating a photographic portrait of late and post-Soviet society.

In the first chapter, I demonstrated how images are affected by: the photographer's interventions, the viewer's sight, the requirements of art institutions, as well as by the economic and political situations in the state. Theorists in the field of photography like Roland Barthes, Rosalind Krauss, Susan Sontag, and John Tagg, among others, helped me establish that the relationship between the image and the referent is never transparent. The practical example of this theoretical statement was the history of photography in the Soviet Union that I traced throughout the chapter, looking at the ever-changing concept of truth.

In the second chapter, in order to problematize the definition of photography as a realist medium, I analysed the notion of realism from several different perspectives ranging from art history to literary criticism. Drawing on writings by Linda Nochlin, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Boris Röhrl, and Viktor Shklovsky I tried to reveal how realism, found in the studied photography and called 'critical,' functions, considering the historical and cultural circumstances of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

In the third chapter, I attempted to uncover the phenomenon of decentering which occurred in regard to the aesthetics and content of late and post-Soviet photography with the help of three overlapping terms: margin, subaltern, and minor. The term margin, coined by Jacques Derrida, allowed me to analyse the formal solutions that the studied photographers have chosen in their art, such as verbal components, the use of frames, and any other supplementary material added to the photographs. Antonio Gramsci's term subaltern explained the subversive nature of photographic characters, exploring how the portrayal of 'collective' and 'individual' influences the viewer's perception of the studied photography. Finally, the term minor, coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, served to dig deeper into the questions of the photographic medium, scrutinising its political dimension and the peculiarities of the visual language.

In the fourth chapter, I problematized the term 'everyday,' drawing on Western and Slavic theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Ben Highmore, Iuri Lotman, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Svetlana Boym, accordingly. I discovered that the marginalisation of everyday life in late and post-Soviet photography occurred on multiple levels: the turn from collective optics to personal vision; the special treatment of photographs; last but not least, the juxtaposition inside

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one photograph of contrasting characters or elements that create a cognitive tension.

I defined the photographers' style as critical realism, since they do not take photographic realism for granted. On the contrary, Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian photographers are very much aware of the constructedness of an image, and of a new reality that the process of photographing produces. This is probably why publications from the late 1980s and early 1990s proclaimed that the new aim of East European photographers was search for truth. These photographers addressed photographic representation from a critical realist point of view, that is analytically, conceptually, and sometimes even theoretically,[27] comprising the knowledge of their predecessors and re-establishing the traditions of representation. This is what critical realism of late and post-Soviet photographers really means.

Critical realism originates in the understanding of the fact that photographic truth is multifaceted. Truth and objectivity as aesthetic categories ceased to matter, and notions such as authenticity and sincerity permeated late and post-Soviet photography. The so-called objectivity of socialist realist photography gave place to subjective authorial visions of reality that seem fundamentally more objective in so far as they do not follow the propagandistic discourse of the state but reflect real issues permeating in society and how photographers viewed them. Thus, critical realism also implies critical objectivity, since photographers eagerly demonstrated the impossibility of attaining a truly objective representation of reality by means of the camera. We see it in their experiments with images' margins: through parergon, subaltern characters, and minor language. We see it in the depiction of everyday life that becomes the ultimate locus of alienation. And if I were to

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[27]The examples of theoretical approach to photography are numerous: Alexander Lapin's book *Photography as...* (2003) analysing the principles of composition, vision of the photographed reality, and techniques; Boris Mikhailov's writing on the margins of pages in *Unfinished Dissertation* (1985); Alexei Shulgin's curatorial practices, to name but a few.

reformulate the critics' words, I would say that the new aim of late and post-Soviet photographers was to liberate photography from old clichés imposed by both the official Soviet artistic doctrine and the Western Modernist tradition, all while liberating themselves from ideological burden. Did they achieve this aim? An easy answer is yes, since nowadays they are recognised as classics of Soviet and post-Soviet photography, and they exhibit old and new works in major galleries and museums in the home countries as well as abroad. However, the mystery that surrounds certain series suggests the absence of systematic scholarship and research supporting the photographers.

The photographic movement studied here substantiates Marshall McLuhan's phrase that the "medium is the message" (McLuhan). Late and post-Soviet photographers worked at the time when photography was not taken seriously—by art institutions, public, and sometimes even by the photographers themselves—being primarily a means of *amateur* self-expression and communication between the artists. In this regard, the present dissertation is important because it brings to light art that was virtually not studied before. Certainly, *Towards Critical Realism* cannot be exhaustive, as it does not touch upon all the aspects of East European photography. Instead, it constitutes a beginning of academic work exploring the artistic tendencies in photography of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the impact that the shifts in economic, political, social, and cultural spheres of the three countries produced and continue to produce on art in general and photography in particular. Thus, by contextualising and problematizing photography from the 1980s and 1990s around the concepts of critical realism, marginality, and everyday life, this dissertation has opened up an entire field of questions that still remain undiscovered. For instance, one potential direction of further research is the thematic and aesthetic significance of images, intended to be

used by or in public institutions (Alexei Shulgin, Vladimir Kupriyanov, Boris Mikhailov, Vladimir Shakhlevich) or images from family archives (Sergey Kozhemyakin, Roman Pyatkovka, Galina Moskaleva, Igor Savchenko). The first scenario represents the appropriation of official discourse and its deterritorialisation in the artistic sphere. The second scenario reflects the idea that personal memory becomes collective. Beyond that, both cases can interestingly elaborate on how images are interwoven into the political and social life of the country, realising the exchange between public and private domains. The connection of the studied photographic movement with everyday subjects, bad quality prints and an emphasis on amateurish character of snapshots also suggests the exploration of vernacular photography that transcended the notion of high and low art.

Moreover, one of potential lines of research represents the two decades that follow the temporal frames of the present dissertation—the 2000s and 2010s. This period of de-communisation and liberation from Soviet heritage which can also be identified as the 'Putin era' marks a new phase in the development of photographic art. In Russia, for instance, the establishment of The Moscow House of Photography and The Multimedia Art Museum in 1996, helped 'normalise' photography, inscribing it in the horizon of contemporary art. In 2006, this museum opened the Moscow School of Photography and Multimedia named after Alexander Rodchenko, this being the first educational institution in photography and contemporary art. Many photographers, studied in the present dissertation, like Sergey Bratkov, Igor Mukhin, Alexei Shulgin, to name but a few, teach there today. At present, such institutions do not exist in Ukraine and Belarus. In these countries, photography is taught only in training courses, usually organised in big cities by one or several successful photographers. However, international centres for contemporary art such

as the Pinchuk Art Centre in Kiev (opened in 2006) and The National Centre for Contemporary Art in Minsk (opened in 2004) fulfil a museological role, exhibiting and collecting photographic works. Despite this, professional research and criticism of photography in Ukraine and Belarus leave much to be desired, which upholds the status of photography as means of commercial profit rather than high art.

The period after 2000 also leads me to question how aesthetic and thematic tendencies of the studied photographers have evolved. What are the phenomena that provoke photographers' criticism? What aspects of everyday life, if any, are treated using marginal/minor language? How are new characters of photography looked at? And more generally, what is photography's place in the contemporary society of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus? With all the political and economic shifts occurring in these countries, an entirely new generation of photographers emerged during the 2000s and 2010s. Their art, by definition, cannot be compared to that of their predecessors, studied in this dissertation, as this new generation was nourished by different socio-cultural realities, caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the development of new digital technologies. The themes that inspire them henceforth stem not only from the multifaceted truth and slippery meaning that images convey but also from the typical problems of postmodern society: intercultural dialogue, individualism, clash between nature and urban life, conceptions of gender, to name but a few. All these and other questions demonstrate how the field of inquiry can be substantially enlarged. The present dissertation might offer insights for future researchers regarding the context in which post-Soviet photography developed and the main aesthetic trends that were typical for the photographic works of the 1980s and 1990s.

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